



Dominican Republic Baseball has been part of the island of Hispaniola for over 100 years.

The Dominican Republic comprises the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispanola. Measuring approximately 18,700 miles, the country is about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined, and has a population of approximately 10.09 million. Its imports and exports with the United States include, among other things, petroleum, durable consumer goods, cacao, sugar, and tobacco. Absent from this traditional import/export list, however, is the Dominican Republic's contribution to baseball--a game widely identified as America's pastime--but every bit a part of Dominican culture and life, especially for those youth who see baseball as a way out of poverty.

Baseball has been part of the Dominican Republic for over 100 years. The first baseball teams in the Dominican Republic were formed in the 1890's. By the 1920's and 30's, those teams played against other nations, and recruited players from the Negro Leagues, such as Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, to play in tournaments. Baseball was so popular that corporations, such as the Grenada Company, a division of the United Fruit Company, scouted young talent and offered them jobs simply to play on company sponsored teams. In 1955, the Dominican Republic tightened its grip on the game when former dictator, Rafael Trujillo, a rabid baseball fan, built the first major league baseball stadium. One year later, infielder, Ozzie Virgil, became the first Dominican player in the major leagues debuting for the San Francisco Giants.

The tsunami that followed Virgil includes some of the best players to ever wear a major league uniform. To name a few, Hall of Fame pitcher, Juan Marichal, three-time Cy Young Award winner, Pedro Martinez, 1979 and 2001 Rookie of the Year winners, Alfredo Griffin and Albert Pujols, 1981 and 1990 World Series Most Valuable Players, Pedro Guerrero and Jose Rijo, 1987 American League MVP, George Bell, 1998 National League MVP, Sammy Sosa, and other active All-Stars such as David Ortiz and Robinson Cano. In 2012, the Dominican Republic boasted 95 major league players on opening day rosters, more than any other country and second only to its 99 players in 2007.

The Dominican contribution, however, extends beyond the field. The first Dominican manager was former player, Felipe Alou, who managed the Montreal Expos from 1992-2001 and later managed the San Francisco Giants from 2003-2006. Other managers, include, former Pittsburgh Pirate catcher, Tony Pena, who led the Kansas City Royals from 2002-2005, and Manny Acta, who managed the Washington Nationals from 2007-2009. In the front office, Omar Minaya, who was born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Queens, has been the General Manager of the New York Mets and the Montreal Expos, and is currently Senior Vice President of Operations for the San Diego Padres.

In total, the Dominican Republic has produced roughly 542 major leaguers and the future shows no signs of slowing down. Today, all the major league ball clubs maintain a presence in the Dominican Republic and have made huge financial investments by developing state of the art training academies all over the country to scout and nurture young prospects. These facilities are complete with baseball fields, batting cages, housing, eating, and classroom facilities. Prospects have a full day and a typical schedule may consist of 7 am breakfast, 7:30 am early workout with specific player drills and training, 8:30 am stretching with the rest of the team, 9 am fundamentals such as batting or infield practice, a 10:30 am game, 1 pm lunch, 5 pm weight room work, and 6 pm English courses.

Prospects are recruited as young as 10 or 11 years old by unregulated trainers. The trainers will support and nurture the prospect until the prospect is 16, when he is eligible to sign with a team. Because players from the Dominican Republic are not subject to MLB's draft, they are considered free agents and can sign contracts for bonuses worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, with the trainer usually getting a large portion of the bonus. The economics are staggering. In fact, Baseball America reported that excluding Cuban defectors and Japanese professionals, in 2010, teams spent \$76 million in international amateur bonuses and increased that spending to \$89 million in 2011. The majority of that money went to amateurs in the Dominican Republic with \$44 million being spent in 2010 and \$50 million in 2011.

With the sheer amount of money at stake and only a limited amount of time to prove their worth, the prospects have, in some cases, taken drastic measures pursuing their dreams. In a September 2009 article in the Los Angeles Times, entitled "Dominican Baseball Prospects Frequently Play Fast and Loose with the Rules," writer Kevin Baxter observed that the lure of riches in the United States is sufficiently compelling for these young kids who often are raised in poverty to (1) use performance enhancing drugs; and (2) engage in identity and document fraud, assuming different names and claiming they are younger than they really are in the hopes of a payday.

To address these issues, MLB has implemented a drug testing program and is now permitted to sanction players for positive results. To combat identity and document fraud, MLB and some teams are asking that players undergo DNA exams and hire private investigators. Since 2008, players discovered to have lied about their age or identity may be suspended for a year. Although no system is fool-proof, there are organizations whose goals are to help remedy these issues and restore and continue the positive contributions that the Dominican Republic has made.

One non-profit organization, the Dominican Prospect League (DPL), co-founded by Brian Mejia and Ulises Cabrera in late 2009, allows Dominican youngsters an opportunity to showcase their skills to major league baseball teams in the hopes of one day signing a contract. Mejia and Cabrera have strong roots in baseball, with Mejia having started out in the Florida Marlins mailroom and later becoming a Scouting Director for the Cincinnati Reds. Cabrera meanwhile played shortstop at Vanderbilt University and spent time in the Texas Rangers minor league farm system. They met in 2002 while working for Louisville Slugger as pro baseball representatives responsible for signing players to endorsement deals, with Mejia covering the east coast and Cabrera, the west coast. They later worked as agents for the Creative Artists Agency, more commonly referred to as CAA, under the direction of agent Casey Close, who represents players such as Derek Jeter and Ryan Howard.

These credentials and sensitivity to the issues of performance enhancing drugs and age and identity fraud led Mejia and Cabrera to form the DPL. The DPL provides MLB teams with an effective vehicle through which to evaluate, develop, and prepare prospects, both physically and mentally, for the responsibilities and demands of playing professional baseball. It also improves the quality of instruction given to players by their trainers, organizes the historically fragmented stakeholders of the Latin American baseball community (MLB, MLB Teams, Scouts, and Trainers), and repairs the image of the entire Dominican baseball community. The cities represented by the four DPL teams are San Pedro de Macoris, Bani, Santo Domingo, and San Cristobal. Teams play each other weekly to allow players to showcase their talents. As part of its program, the DPL conducts background and age checks on all players as well as drug testing, psychological evaluations, and money-management and culture-assimilation seminars. In this way, MLB teams will feel more secure in their investments.

This year, the DPL has had several of its prospects sign significant deals. The top-end deals included, Gustavo Cabrera, who signed for \$1.3 million with the San Francisco Giants and Amaurys Minier, who signed for \$1.4 million with the Minnesota Twins. Other DPL prospects, Frandy Delarosa (Chicago Cubs), Richard Urena (Toronto Blue Jays), Luis Barrera (Oakland Athletics), and Wendall Rijo (Boston Red Sox), signed deals ranging from \$425,000 to \$725,000.

Baseball is often described as American as apple pie and justifiably so. However, baseball's history in the Dominican Republic, combined with the contributions and records made and held by Dominican players, coupled with the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in the Dominican Republic by MLB, support the notion that baseball is as Dominican as merengue. Baseball is at the heart and soul of the Dominican Republic and, while not perfect by any stretch, baseball in the Dominican Republic and Dominicans in baseball will only continue to grow.

Words by TBA