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Grade 10

### Resolve, Risk, and Reward: Latin America's Role in Developing Ballplayers

Since its creation in the nineteenth century, baseball has been known as a uniquely American sport. However, as times have changed and the game has spread across the globe, a significant foothold has been developed in Latin America. As the sport globalizes, a unique synergy of talent and ambition has created a crucial bond between Major League Baseball and the nations of Latin America. The region is steadily producing athletes with exceptional ability who are becoming professional players, with the development of high-potential youth accelerated by baseball academies. In addition, players may go to any extent to escape the island poverty they were born into, even if doing so means embroiling themselves in controversy. What is clear, however, is that Latin America and Major League Baseball continue to build on an interaction providing dual benefits to both the organization and the area.

In April 2007, Major League Baseball reported that 208 active players on the 30 professional teams hailed from Latin America and the Caribbean ("Record"). When considering all 849 players in the league ("Record"), this comes out to approximately one-in-four players from the region. These numbers are bolstered when players of Hispanic heritage are considered. Many of these athletes, especially from the Dominican Republic are products of baseball academies, training camp-school hybrids designed to prepare prospective Major Leaguers for their professional careers.

Scouts are focusing their efforts increasingly on this hotbed of baseball talent. Every American major league club except for the Milwaukee Brewers operates a Latin American facility (McCalvy 5). Baseball academies are further developing the already strong pipeline of Latin American talent into the United States and Major League Baseball. One of the premier baseball academies, Puerto Rico Baseball Academy and High School (hereafter referenced as

“PRBAHS”), located on the grounds of Universidad del Turabo, recruits athletes seeking a road to professional baseball, generally in the United States (Hermoso 1). Schools are either day-boarding, such as the San Diego Padres’ complex (detailed in Padres’ Dominican Baseball Academy) or have long days like PRBAHS (Hermoso 2). Students at PRBAHS follow a curriculum similar to most American public high schools, including staples such as mathematics, foreign language (English skills are stressed, due in part to Puerto Rico being an American territory as well as the aspiration for many students to play in the United States), Spanish Language Arts, History (of Latin America, Puerto Rico, and the United States), plus sciences (“Currículo Académico”). As explained by Padres representative Cesar Rizik in Padres’ Dominican Baseball Academy, the focus is on skills (including basic financial, home economic, computer, and in some programs, trade-related) that can assist players in their transition to the United States, where many will play professionally or attend college.

Academies have specialized athletic curriculums as well. As opposed to a standard American physical education requirement, virtually all classes revolve around training for baseball (“Currículo Deportivo”). Positional fundamentals and fitness are emphasized (“Currículo Deportivo”). The sports component of the learning program is rounded out with classes in fields such as sports psychology and health, as Rizik notes in Padres’ Dominican Baseball Academy.

PRBAHS Founder Edwin Correa, a former Major League pitcher whose career was ended by an arm injury, hoped to provide an opportunity to play professionally to the dedicated youth of Puerto Rico. Many industry professionals, including Correa and MLB pitcher Javier Vasquez feel Puerto Ricans are too often being overlooked by professional franchises in favor of Dominicans spawned from numerous Major League academies. This is attributed to the fact that

Dominicans are not restricted by American policies, whereas Puerto Ricans are forced to abide by the rules of the United States preventing them from entering baseball before the age of eighteen (Hermoso 1). Dominicans may sign at sixteen with a Major League franchise, when they generally enroll in the team's academy (Farrey 10). Scouts identify and sign the most promising prospects as soon as possible, launching the careers of student-athletes (Maguire and Bale 194). This allows them an extended career in the Major Leagues before retirement, earning money from signing bonuses, contracts, and hopefully enough to benefit their family and community (Mosher "Hotbed" 23-28).

Often, MLB players are happy to encourage the academy system that brought them fame. Baseball schools receive donations and guest lectures from professional athletes. For example, PRBAHS is supported by prolific current and former players, including All-Stars Carlos Delgado and Javier Vasquez, as well as two-time American League MVP Juan Gonzalez (Hermoso 2). Numerous former Major Leaguers now operate baseball schools, particularly in the Dominican Republic, where they may affiliate with a team to prepare the next generation of MLB athletes (Wendel 187).

Perhaps former Puerto Rico Baseball Academy and High School star Ibrahim Lopez summed up the baseball academy system best when he stated that the schools "[prepare students for Major League Baseball] but also prepares [them] if [they] don't get there" (qtd. in Hermoso 2).

Major League Baseball is buying into the profitability of the academy system. In 2003, Puerto Rico Baseball Academy and High School received a \$200,000 sponsorship from Major League Baseball (Hermoso 1). In Compton, California, Major League Baseball opened an American academy inspired by the Latin American model in 2006 ("MLB"). The primary goal

is to introduce baseball to underprivileged, inner-city youth, but scouts will have a role at the new facility (“MLB”). The academy method’s success in cultivating high-caliber talent has led to other modified adoptions of the system. Asian teams such as Japan’s Hiroshima Tokyo Carp have built academies to lure skilled Hispanics into the eastern hemisphere (Ruck 200).

Evidently, the academy method of recruiting future professionals is a benefit to franchises scouting talent globally. In addition, through baseball academies, many underprivileged yet athletically gifted youth are able to achieve an education, and, if they are lucky, a career, that would otherwise be out of reach.

Regardless of whether or not they came up through academies, Latin Americans have consistently dominated baseball at its highest levels. In the inaugural World Baseball Classic (with stricter drug testing policies than the MLB), a 2006 international tournament of players from around the globe, six of the sixteen teams were from Latin America, with all except for Panama advancing to the quarterfinals (“World”). In the Olympics, Cuba has won five medals, three of them gold, since the sport’s addition to the Olympic program in the 1992 Barcelona Games (“Olympic”). Therefore, throughout history, Latin American players have risen to the pinnacle of the competition both in the United States and around the world.

However, some critics of the explosions of Latino talent consider the relative ease of acquiring performing-enhancing drugs in these developing nations and the territory of Puerto Rico. Approximately half of the players suspended to date for doping offenses were born in Latin America, mostly from the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, the former having the distinction of more baseball academies than any other Spanish-speaking nation (Farrey 18). It is unclear whether the steroid use is from miscommunication over supplement legality (Stark 8) or a result of the “cheat or lose” mentality haunting Major League Baseball (Fainaru-Wada and

Williams 18). As testing standards are raised and flaws are eliminated, these numbers should become lower.

Steroids are incredibly easy to acquire in the Dominican Republic; finding them juxtaposed on shelves with vitamins and nutritional supplements at pharmacies is common. In the nation, testosterone and other performance enhancers can be purchased legally, and the supposedly-restricted anabolic substances are left in plain view of customers (Pesca 8). The laissez-faire approach to regulating substances in the Dominican Republic has resulted in trainers from the nation associated with MLB players being implicated in steroid scandals. Major League Baseball has held Angel Presinal, trainer to dozens of professional players, including recently revealed steroid user Alex Rodriguez, at arm's length for his apparent role in supplying drugs legal in his home country of the Dominican Republic, but frowned upon in America (Fish 12).

Similarly accessible are amphetamines, commonly called "greenies" (Sokolove 78). Players desperate to escape the island's poverty will go to great lengths, and these stimulants are not disapproved of nearly as much as anabolic performance enhancers. In baseball since their inception, amphetamines were anything but rare in the clubhouses of American professional teams (Sokolove 78-79) until they were banned in 2006 (Crasnick 16). Rampant abuse in Latin America (Klein 84), where they are legally available over-the-counter (Frias 12) is a concern. An Atlanta Braves executive, Dario Paulino, "estimates that forty percent of the Dominican players signed by major league teams have used amphetamines (Frias 75) to endure schedules similar to the grueling 162 game MLB season. To prevent Latin American players both from failing drug tests and exposing themselves to harmful side effects, recent initiatives are targeted at educating players (Frias 74). For example, players can check supplement legality by calling a

hotline set up by Major League Baseball (Stark 1). If the MLB effort to combat drugs permeating the game in Latin America is successful, the profit opportunities in the region will only continue to abound.

Another criticized fact is that some players, such as former MLB All-Star Adrian Beltre, have lied about their age in order to join a Major League franchise faster, circumventing age limits (“Baseball” 16). In 2001, even a Little Leaguer-tuned MLB prospect, Danny Almonte admitted doing so to better his chances of playing professional baseball (Mosher “Innocence” 4). However, when the socioeconomic background of these individuals is examined, it is evident why they make this decision.

A family of four in the Dominican Republic has an average annual per capita income of \$2,000 USD (“Re: Latin America and Baseball). When a young Latin American with baseball talent makes the decision to play at an elite level, the result of career shapes his entire community. As Dr. Stephen Mosher of Ithaca College, a leading professor of sport studies wrote,

[Latin American prospects] dream of being able to afford food for their extended family and shoes for their feet and maybe, if they're lucky, a cinderblock house. Fame and glory or even an elementary school education would be extras (Mosher, “Innocence” 26).

Signing bonuses and professional contracts provide these athletic boys from poverty-stricken families with a windfall while pursuing an opportunity to make a living in the United States playing baseball. Players hoping to follow in the footsteps of NL MVP Roberto Clemente , who died in a plane crash bringing supplies to impoverished regions of Nicaragua (Maraniss 292, 331) are too often willing to take any risk, bodily or career-wise in order to reach the Major

Leagues sooner and provide for their extended families, and if possible their community at large. Too often, these players are blamed by the media for participating in controversy-inciting behavior (“Re: Latin America and Baseball”), when their decisions were, in a way, made for them. If anyone was told one lie or a single injection, coupled with unbelievable athletic talent and training, could launch their family, and, if they are lucky, their community, out of poverty, who would not jump at such an opportunity? It is this ultimatum that drives many Latin American players to baseball, which has become embedded in their culture as a pseudo-savior.

Years ago, baseball was only America’s game. Today, the sport is played internationally. Latin America, however, is set apart as an enclave of talent where players have much more than their egos on the line. For many of these players, it is their ambition and aptitude that, if they make it professionally, represents the future of their family and community. Through globalization, Major League Baseball has generated profit through the systematic scouting and development of the region’s many capable athletes. As players enter baseball academies, learn life skills, and battle the temptations of drugs and deceit, a unique cultural tapestry is generated. In their rush to “escape the island,” players hope by sliding into home plate in America they can slide their families out of poverty and into security back home. As Latin Americans use the sport to stay in their homes, Major League Baseball is able to use Latin America to stay in the black. It is this give-and-take that connects the region with the sport of baseball to create a relationship based on resolve, risk, and reward.

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