

Western Oregon University

Digital Commons@WOU

Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History)

Department of History

3-8-2004

Baseball in Latin America: Creating a Culture Around a Game

Aaron Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his>



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Latin American History Commons](#)

Baseball in Latin America:
Creating a Culture Around a Game

Aaron Davis

History 351
Professor Rector
March 8, 2004

The influence of baseball has been present in the Latin Americas since the end of the 19th century. Latinos have embraced America's national pastime and made it their own, creating new outlooks on the game of baseball rarely seen here in the United States. Many great players have come from all island nations with the Dominican Republic and Cuba producing some of the greatest. These people have had to over come many obstacles in their lives but the one constant throughout these times was baseball. The game has been prevalent in the Caribbean for over 130 years and has become a staple for Latin culture.

When was baseball introduced to Latin America?

"According to oral history, the game was brought back to Cuba from the United States by a Cuban student, Nemesio Guillot, in 1866."¹ Since this time, baseball in the Caribbean nations has exploded. The first sign of baseball in the Dominican Republic was in 1891 by the Aloma brothers, two Cubans who worked on the island. "It was easy to adopt the game of baseball because they were so culturally close to the Cubans and in part because

baseball was the game invented by and played by the Americans, the symbols of power who were increasingly present. During the next few years the Cubans taught the game to their neighbors; even forming two teams-the Cervceria (brewery) and the Cauto (named after a river in Cuba)-which would play each other throughout Santo Domingo."²

Baseball in the earlier years was very different than we view it today. All baseball diamonds were open fields; there were no home-run fences. The baseball was hand made and poorly constructed. As the game progressed, the ball would become increasingly softer and misshapen, therefore making it very difficult to hit the ball a far distance. There were no specifications on bats until 1893, the current four-ball, three-strike rule did not take effect until 1888. The most odd figure is that gloves were not even worn until the 1880's and even with the introductions of these gloves, some hardened veterans refused to wear these hand-covers, making themselves seem tougher than those who did. Up until 1883, pitchers had to throw underhand, like that of a softball pitcher. In 1884, it was allowed for them to throw overhand like pitchers

today throw. With all of these rules being implemented to the game, baseball was beginning to take on a modern look as we see it today.

Throughout the early 20th century, amateur baseball teams were formed around the cities of Santo Domingo, Santiago and San Pedro de Macrois. There were only three formal teams and they would compete in tournaments all over the country performing in front on large venues all over the island. Even though there were only three official baseball teams, there were many young men that would begin to start their own non-organized teams in every city in the Dominican Republic. Throughout the first part of the 1900's baseball would become a part of life that all Dominicans would participate in, so begins the rise of professional baseball in Latin America.

When was the beginning of intra-Caribbean competition?

"In 1920 Puerto Rican and Cuban professional teams visited the Dominican Republic for a series of exhibition games. In playing teams from the other Caribbean islands the Dominican Republic found a way to demonstrate excellence."³ These contests by each country were a

demonstration on how far the game of baseball had progressed. In only thirty years since the game had been introduced to the Caribbean nations, the competition had grown to such a high level. Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico felt as though they could compete with any of the American teams, and they would prove that in the following years to come. "In 1914 the entire country took notice when Enrique Hernandez pitched a no-hit, no-run game against a team of Americans from the U.S. Navy cruiser *Washington*."⁴ This particular game would later gain great importance when the Dominican Republic was invaded by the U.S. Marines.

In 1936, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo gained control of the Dominican Republic by force. He became a major fan of the game when the Dominican Baseball League had been created. Knowing his people had a great love for the game of baseball, he dedicated the 1937 Dominican Baseball League to his re-election. He renamed one of the teams "Ciudad Trujillo Dragons" after himself and the city of Santo Domingo. Trujillo wanted that season to be memorable so he purchased the best players money could buy; such players as Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell and the all-time

great Satchel Paige. "Many would remember that 1937 baseball league. Baseball was played at its best and it would be the "Ciudad Trujillo Dragons" who would prevail and win the series, but it would come with much sacrifice to the country."⁹ Due to the financial toll purchasing these high priced ballplayers, professional baseball would come to an end for the next fourteen years. Many thought of this as a blessing because it restricted the tight grasp and great pressure of professional baseball and allowed amateurs to grow into to great players on their own terms. Professional baseball returned in 1951 with the help of wealthy citizens and a need to show their stature among international competition. The Dominican Republic, along with Cuba, Venezuela and Puerto Rico, would compete in highly competitive tournaments to determine who had the best teams that year.

How did baseball arise in Puerto Rico?

By the time the Spanish-American War had begun, baseball was very prevalent on the island of Puerto Rico. "It had been brought to Puerto Rico in 1890 by a Spanish diplomat who was introduced to the game in Cuba."⁵ Baseball

became very appealing to sugar plantation owners who would have their workers participate in the game to keep them out of trouble and keep the men's spirits high when they were not working in the sugar fields. Shortly after the introduction of the game to the island, so-called "sugar leagues" were popping up all over Puerto Rico. "Government agencies, schools, and other industrial groups organized baseball teams as well."⁶

Baseball began to explode in Puerto Rico after World War I. Teams from the United States, Cuba and the Dominican Republic were all invited to play during the winter months when the weather was too harsh in the states. It was a great opportunity for Americans to travel and see the world, as well as play baseball. Major leaguers such as Leon Cadore and Heinie Zimmerman were among the first Americans to play baseball in Puerto Rico. This was very important to the people of the Caribbean because they felt as though they were not inferior to the Americans and if they could compete with them on the playing field, maybe they could compete in the world issues surrounding them. This was a giant step in right direction in relationships with the United States.

How did the revolution of 1960 affect Cuban Baseball?

From 1871 to 1960, baseball flourished on the island of Cuba. Some of the greatest players in the Caribbean and even the world grew up playing baseball in Cuba. Up until 1959, Cuba would hold massive winter baseball tournaments for all players around the world to participate in. Players such as Babe Ruth, Ted Williams and Sandy Koufax were usually in attendance. These professional leagues dissipated when Fidel Castro gained control over the government. "Castro agreed that Communist ideals dictate that many of the aspects most Americans find distasteful about baseball - agents, high salaries, labor conflicts, team owners, and, above all, greed - no longer exist in Cuban baseball."¹⁰ Everything that Americans have come to expect in Major League ball parks is everything that Cubans dislike about the American version of how the game is played. The baseball stadiums named after multinational corporations, the ridiculously high salaries of players. Cubans have a great passion for the game and feel as though Americanization has tarnished the integrity of the game.

What does baseball mean to Latin America?

"If you ask any Dominican what he is proudest of, he will read you a list of ballplayers. This country doesn't have much, but we know we are the best in the world at one thing [baseball]. That's not bragging, because it's true. And we plan to continue being the best in the world at it."⁷ To the average Dominican, baseball is a major source of cultural pride. The instance a young boy is able to walk he is exposed to the game of baseball. His entire life is built around the idea that someday he may be one of the greatest players the world has ever seen. In the Dominican Republic, baseball is a way to escape a life of poverty. Baseball brings a sense of freedom to the Dominicans. When they are on the baseball diamond, they get to show their love for the game, not always seen here in America.

What is baseball like in the Dominican Republic today?

Everywhere you go on the island of the Dominican Republic you will find a baseball stadium or park, even in the poorest of towns. Today more than one in every six players in Major League Baseball is from Latin America, with the majority of these people coming from towns located

on the southeastern coast of the island. "The recruiting of young baseball players has become a year round job on the island. More than twenty major league teams now have baseball-training camps and prospective players."⁸ The scouts from these teams are to hold tryouts throughout the island. The people who are lucky enough to make one of the teams are usually boys ranging from seventeen to eighteen years of age. From this point, they will be put on a team that travels throughout the Caribbean competing with other teams on surrounding island nations. If these players show promise throughout the summer league, they may then be signed by a Major League team and sent to the minor leagues in hopes of one day making it the professionals. It is a very long road, but many players have shown that they have the skills necessary to compete with those of American ball players. One out of every six players in the Majors today is Latino and that number will increase without a doubt in the years to come.

Baseball has been present in the Caribbean for over 130 years. When thinking about all of the major occurrences the world has seen; Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Cuban Revolution and the Cold War,

it is astonishing that the integrity of the game of baseball in Latin American has stayed the same. Many people have made sure that the game had stayed true to form. There is no need for 60,000 seat stadiums that are built by multi-million dollar companies with players earning salaries that could compete with the amount of money many Third World countries earn. Latinos feel that all you need to play the game of baseball is a bat, ball and players. These values are what have made playing the game in the Caribbean a way of life. Without having much to look forward to in life, there was always baseball.

End Notes

1. William F. McNeil, Baseball's Other All-Stars: The Greatest Players from the Winter Leagues in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (New York, 2000)91.

2. Alan M. Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, The Dominican Dream. (Yale University Press, 1991) 16

3. Ibid., 17.

4. Ibid., 19.

5. McNeil, Baseball's Other All-Stars, 136.

6. Ibid., 136.

7. Klein, Sugarball, 1.

8. Horn, Rebecca. *Baseball in the Dominican Today.*
September 2001.

www.dominicanrepinfo.com/baseball.htm

9. Ibid.

10. Eric Enders, The Game of Ball: An Anthology of baseball writing (Triple E, 2002)

Bibliography

- Bjarkman, Peter C. Baseball with a Latin Beat: A History of the Latin American Game
Jefferson, NC: McFarland, c1994
- Emders, Eric. The Game of Ball: An Anthology of Baseball Writings
New York: Triple E, c2002
- Klein, Alan M. Sugarball: The American Game, The Dominican Dream
Yale University Press, c1991
- McNeil, William F. Baseball's Other All-Stars: The Greatest Players from the Winter Leagues of Cuba, Puerto Rica and the Dominican Republic
Jefferson, NC: McFarland, c2000
- Regalgo, Samuel. Viva Baseball!: Latin Major Leaguers and Their Special Hunger
Urbana: University of Illinois Press, c1998
- Rucker, Mark & Bjarkman, Peter c. "Smoke: The Romance and Lore of Cuban Baseball" *Total Sports Illustrated*
Kingston, NY, 2000
- Windell, Tim: The New Face of Baseball: The One-Hundred Year Rise and Triumph of Latinos in America's Favorite Sport
New York: Rayo, c2002
- Winter, Jonah: Beisbol!: Latino Baseball Pioneers and Legends
New York: Lee and Low Books, c2001