



DRSEA INFORMER

Volume V, Issue 2: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

Cambiador De Juego (Game Changer) – The Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy has always been about making a difference in the Dominican Republic, so it was only fitting that the DRSEA honored a major game changer at its recent second annual ***“Making A Difference In The Dominican Republic”*** event in New York City.

Lou Melendez, who has held the position of Senior Advisor to the International Baseball Operations Department in the Office of the Commissioner for Major League Baseball since January, is planning on retiring at the end of the year after 29 years with MLB. The DRSEA paid tribute to him at the 809 Lounge, a landmark in the Dominican community; the event was co-hosted by the Juan Pablo Duarte Foundation and the New York Dominican Officers Organization. Chivas Regal was the official sponsor.

Prior to assuming his current role, Melendez was Vice President of International Operations, responsible for oversight of Major League Baseball’s satellite office in the Dominican Republic that he established in December of 2000.



Lou Melendez at tribute

He also administered the Winter League Agreement between Major League Baseball and four countries that make up the professional winter baseball leagues, regulated Major League Baseball teams' activities outside the United States, and assisted in assembling teams of Major League Baseball players that participate in international events including the Olympics.

Throughout his career, Melendez has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to player education and community outreach programs, and was the first person at Major League Baseball to publicly support and advocate for the DRSEA. "This is a good idea," he told the media who inquired, and from good ideas grow good reality.



Melendez receives commemorative plaque from DRSEA Board Vice Chair Samuel Brooks

The tribute to Melendez was an intimate affair, with several members of his immediate family and his MLB family in attendance, including Kim Ng, Senior Vice-President for Baseball Operations with Major League Baseball, who spoke of her admiration for Melendez.



Kim Ng offers her take on Lou Melendez' contributions

The event included a panel discussion on baseball and education in the Dominican Republic and Melendez commented on the positive changes he has seen over the years, many of which he has been directly involved in. I was also on the panel, along with Julio Pabon, founder of the Latino Sports Writers & Broadcasters Association (LSWBA) and also founder of Latino Sports Ventures, Inc., one of the nation's fastest growing Latino sports marketing firms, who also paid tribute to Melendez.



Left to right, Charles Farrell, Lou Melendez and Julio Pabon

In addition, Melendez received a special presentation from Howard Krupa from his photo exhibit "*Where Baseball Is Born.*"



Howard Krupa makes presentation to Lou Melendez

Melendez continues to encourage the development of the DRSEA, and has always taken the time to give advice and feedback, to foster introductions to key people, even though his busy schedule had him sending e-mails from Venezuela, from Panama, Mexico, from virtually all over Latin America and the world, responding to questions and providing sound advice, never sugarcoating.

I can recall early on he would say that he couldn't recommend something, but if we insisted on a certain path, here were the people we should talk to, the direction to follow. I learned very quickly that when he didn't recommend something there was a reason behind it and I now tend to quickly heed his advice, which continues today. Not long ago, I asked him something in passing, and as usual I got an e-mail back the same day with an answer that included he would also look into the issue further. That is the kind of person Melendez is.

But he has never been flashy, never one to pat himself on the back. Indeed, there have been more than a few instances where I discovered Melendez has been hard at work on issues that the DRSEA had pointed out as needing to be addressed. When I opined that fingerprinting was one method of curbing age and identity fraud, I got messages from several people explaining that Melendez had quietly, behind the scenes, been advocating such measures.

Melendez has been in the forefront, again quietly, on the need for educating young Dominican baseball players. When the DRSEA called for a mandate on education a couple of years ago, a mandate that has since been adopted, it was by no small measure due to the efforts of Melendez. He has also helped me, personally and professionally, to develop and fine-tune my own education about and understanding of Dominican baseball. It has made all the difference in the development of the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy.

All in all, Melendez has made a difference in the Dominican Republic with his efforts for almost 30 years. There is certainly still more to do, but the foundation for a positive future is in great part due to his contributions. And while he is retiring, I have a feeling his efforts on behalf of Dominican baseball players will not end. I just hope that we at the DRSEA can still count on him for advice and direction.



DRSEA Board members Tim Halloran, Harold Mendez, Charles Farrell, Sam Brooks and Peter Cohen

Photos by Emery Graham

Regresando al Juego (Back In The Game) – Two Dominican baseball players who were caught falsifying their age and identity are back with their teams after being handed suspensions for their transgressions.

Roberto Hernandez, formally known as Fausto Carmona, recently rejoined the Cleveland Indians and apologized to the fans and his teammates for the deception that endured for 12 years.

"I want to say I'm sorry," Hernandez said through an interpreter. "I thank God I am here and have been given a new chance." Hernandez threw a bullpen session at Progressive Field, then started a minor league rehab assignment — while serving a three-week suspension by Major League Baseball.

Miami Marlins pitcher Juan Carlos Oviedo, aka Leo Nuñez., was suspended eight weeks for similar fraud charges and has since been activated. "I was happy to hear my name," Oviedo said in an interview. "No more Leo Nuñez. My name is Juan Carlos Oviedo, and I'm happy to be back." Now 30, a year older than previously listed, he played as Nuñez for seven seasons.



Juan Carlos Oviedo

Hernandez said he was grateful to the Indians for standing by him after he was arrested in the Dominican Republic in January outside the U.S. consulate as he tried to renew his visa. That's when his real identity was discovered, revealing that he is 31 years old, three years older than originally listed.

The former All-Star revealed that the real Carmona is actually a "distant cousin," but that it was Hernandez who hatched the plan to take his name and claim he was only 17 when he signed with the Indians in 2000. He declined to discuss details.



Roberto Hernandez

Hernandez was given his old locker in the Indians' clubhouse and laughed when he looked up and saw, "No Name," which is the designation given new players before a nameplate can be made. "I want to forget the past," he said. "I want to work hard and help my team on the field."

Hernandez said he was "very sad all the time," throughout his time in limbo and felt he had let down his teammates. He said the toughest part was being rejected repeatedly when he went to the U.S. consulate to get his case resolved.

Indians Manager Manny Acta took Hernandez in with open arms. "It was great to see him and I was very impressed with his physical shape," Acta said. "I know he was antsy and probably discouraged through all this, but he never stopped working."

Acta explained that players from the Dominican Republic, eager to come to America and play professionally, have changed their birthdates to enhance their chances. He said he did not condone the practice and that it is good Major League Baseball is working to eliminate it.

I think Major League Baseball has taken the correct approach with regards to punishing players caught lying about their age and identity. Acta is correct in his assertion that the pressure to make it in baseball leads to the fraud, and while punishment is necessary to curb the practice, understanding its roots is also important. Letting Hernandez and Oviedo back into the game they have spent their lives pursuing is the right course of action.

Aqui Vamos De Nuevo (Here We Go Again) – I was stunned when I heard that Olympic legend Michael Johnson recently credited a "superior athletic gene" in the descendants of West African slaves as the edge black American and Caribbean sprinters have at the London Games. Stunned not only that he would make such an incredulous comment but also that it would receive any kind of credence from the media.

The Olympic gold medalist and BBC commentator is quoted as saying: "Over the last few years, athletes of Afro- Caribbean and Afro-American descent have dominated athletics finals. It's a fact that hasn't been discussed openly before. It's a taboo subject in the States but it is what it is. Why shouldn't we discuss it?"



Michael Johnson

Well, Michael, we shouldn't discuss it because it is a stupid hypothesis and plays into the slave master mentality that whites are genetically intelligent while blacks have superior physical capabilities. I thought the issue had been put to rest when Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder was fired in 1988 after 12 years as a CBS football analyst for remarks he made about the physical abilities of black and white athletes. Among other things, Snyder said the black athlete is "bred to be the better athlete because, this goes all the way to the Civil War when ... the slave owner would breed his big woman so that he would have a big black kid."

While the BBC probably won't fire Johnson for his comments, Johnson should be ashamed for stating, "All my life I believed I became an athlete through my own determination, but it's impossible to think that being descended from slaves hasn't left an imprint through the

generations. Difficult as it was to hear, slavery has benefited descendants like me – I believe there is a superior athletic gene in us.”

I asked my friend Richard Lapchick, who has addressed racism in sports for most of his life, how he felt about Johnson’s comments.

“Ever since the Nazi Olympics, ‘scientists’ have been trying to prove that there is some physical difference that makes black athletes superior to whites,” Lapchick said. “For them there was always the corollary that ‘blacks might be better physically but whites are more intelligent.’ Seventy-five years after the Berlin Games the names of the “scientists” trying to prove this have changed but the results have been the same: there is no proof that there is something anatomically different in blacks that make them better athletes.”



Richard Lapchick

I am frequently asked if Dominicans are naturally better at baseball than the rest of the world, and my answer is, "Yes, the Dominican Republic produces the best baseball players in the world, but it has nothing to do with race. First, you have weather where you can play baseball all year round. Second, there is a cultural passion for the sport. Third, you have dream merchants constantly selling baseball as the way to success. It is the perfect storm for producing baseball players, but you can't rule out hard work and determination as well. Great baseball players are made, not born."

Charles S. Farrell

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