



DRSEA INFORMER

Volume II, Issue 20: A Publication For Your Reading Enjoyment

Piratas Del Caribe (Pirates Of The Caribbean) – Rarely do things in sports live up to the hype, but the Pittsburgh Pirates’ new academy in the Dominican Republic exceeds everything I had heard and read about it. I have visited numerous Dominican academies over the past decade, and Pittsburgh’s sets a new standard for excellence and impressed not only me, but also a group of educators for whom I arranged a tour.

I was originally supposed to visit the Pirates’ academy a few months ago at the grand opening, but the trip fell through. I had been anxious to see the compound, which boasted about not only the baseball component, but also the educational facilities.

I put together the tour on behalf of the new Cross Cultural Center (CCC) in Santo Domingo, an organization the DRSEA is working with on a number of programs. The CCC was hosting a group from the International Education Research Center Educational Foundation (IERCEF), whose mission is to foster study-abroad programs at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

The tour was arranged by Pirates’ officials Patricia Paytas and Trevor Gooby, who were extremely gracious in setting it up; our guide, Joseph Viscaino, was enthusiastic in giving the tour of the academy. And my, what a facility!

The main building houses administrative offices, recreation facilities, a spacious kitchen, and the dormitory. I was struck by how homey the dorm rooms are, even given that they accommodate four to a room. The baseball facilities are state-of-the-art, with a modern weight room, training room, locker room, film room, and more, and the baseball fields are immaculately groomed. But it was the classrooms that stood out to me. Large and spacious, they included computers and video setups to enhance learning. The Pirates have vowed to offer educational programs to all players and try to provide each with a minimum of a high school equivalency. Hopefully, they will set a standard here as well.

The visitors from the IERCEF were equally impressed with the Pirates’ campus, and expressed a desire to work with the team, as well as other teams in the Dominican Republic.

Steven W. Jones, president and CEO of the foundation, says that Dominican baseball fits right into the mission of the foundation and its internship program in the Dominican Republic.

Historically black colleges and universities have, for a large part, been left out of the international education movement, Jones said, something his foundation wants to remedy. “We are heading towards a global society,” he said. “The IERCEF wants to make sure that students attending HBCUs have this global experience.”



Sam Brooks and Steve Jones of the IERCEF at Pirates Academy



Another view of Pirates' academy



Inside the academy

Why the Dominican Republic? “The Dominican Republic is one of the most multicultural, racially mixed communities in the world, and certainly in the Americas,” said Samuel A. Brooks, executive vice president of IERCEF. “Our audience is the HBCU, so students there will be in a region that reflects their experience and is better in this case than European venues, and doesn’t reinforce the ethnocentrism that the world is Eurocentric. The African Diaspora tells a story that European venues do not.

“The goal is the interns perceive their identity in global perspectives and understand their heritage, and in many respects it is a personal identity. Let’s look at this Third World country and the races it embraces and social issues we don’t contend with elsewhere. The Caribbean is not just a place with beaches. This is a global experience that will lead to global engagement and participation in a global society.”

Why include baseball in that experience? “So many Dominicans sign up and go to baseball camps in the Dominican Republic, but statistically, 95 percent don’t make it,” Jones said. “There is a great need for educational services for the 95 percent who don’t make it. Going back to what we do, global engagement dictates that there is something our students can do about this. We can provide teachers, tutors and mentors. It is not only necessary to be a consumer of knowledge, but also a producer of a solution or a service; answering a need.”

Jones said he expects the intern program to begin next summer, with more than 50 interns from colleges and high schools descending on the Dominican Republic, and the program expanding at some point to include as many as 600 students. The program will be based out of Livingstone College in North Carolina, and initially including a number of HBCUs in that state, but all HBCUs will be welcome to participate, Jones said.

The program provides a great opportunity for the DRSEA to get involved, improve its visibility and credibility, and make a difference.

Embrujada (Bewitched) – Our reading program for children continues to be something we are proud of, in large part because of the impact it is having. Each installment is well attended by Dominican kids eager to embrace the magic that books contain.

The program, in keeping with a tradition in the cigar industry called *el lector de tabaquería*, is a collaboration of the DRSEA and Children International (CI) that sends people out into Dominican communities to read aloud to children, seeking to develop and sustain a love for reading.

In both Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the cigar industry, even today, has long employed a reader to entertain the cigar rollers while rolling and cutting the leaves. The *lector* reads aloud from newspapers and novels to help pass the hours. The readings came to be regarded as a social and cultural right, and spurred many cigar rollers to learn to read, and also to social activism.

The latest chapter of the DRSEA reading program took place in Santiago at a community center before more than 40 kids who trooped single file into a meeting room. I am still amazed at how orderly and polite Dominican children are – compared to American children.

The Santiago event was noteworthy in that two of the readers actually got into character, dressing up in pointy hats and carrying broomsticks to read a book about *brujas* (witches), scaring and delighting the children with their cackles.



I handed out crayons and paper to the kids after the reading and watched the young Picassos draw witches and other characters from the stories they had just heard, evidence of how the mind is stimulated by reading.

I was shown the “library” at the community center; three or four bookshelves – inside a garage – stocked with a few dozens books, mostly school manuals. Not what I would call a library, but evidence of the lack of reading materials and resources in much of the Dominican Republic.

To help address some of the book shortage, we are launching a book drive in conjunction with the Juan Pablo Duarte Foundation in New York City. Spanish language children’s books are best, but we will take anything we can get. More information on the book drive will be in the next issue of the **DRSEA INFORMER**, but you can send book donations to the JPD Foundation at 427 Fort Washington Avenue, Suite #BS-A, New York, NY 10033. We also need school supplies such as crayons, pencils, paper, etc., as well as donations to cover shipping costs.

Onda Del Futuro? (Wave Of The Future?) – I had heard a lot about Steve Swindal’s development of a new baseball academy in Boca Chica, home for a number of academies in the Dominican Republic, so I wasn’t surprised when the facility held an open house recently. What was surprising was that 150 evaluators showed up at the event, giving rise to the question whether such facilities may be the wave of the future.

Swindal, the academy's principal owner, is the former general partner, chairman of Yankee Global Enterprises LLC, and Yankees owner George Steinbrenner's son-in-law, who fell from grace two years ago after being arrested for drunk driving and divorcing from Steinbrenner's daughter. That he has resurfaced in the Dominican Republic, operating a baseball camp just across the street from the Yankees' own facility, is significant in what it may be signaling – a new wrinkle in the development of Dominican baseball players.



Steve Swindal

The camp – *La Academia de Beisbol Internacional* – operates independently of Major League Baseball and its teams. The partnering with former U.S. ambassador to the Dominican Republic Hans Hartell and former Yankees vice president of international operations Abe Guerra, makes Swindal, with his connections, a major hitter in Dominican baseball. And, presumably it gives the Yankees an opportunity to double dip in the Dominican talent pool, since all but one Major League Baseball team, including the Yankees, has a cap of 35 players permitted at any one time in an academy.

The fact that so many scouts from most of the major league teams attended the talent show, which included several top Latin American prospects, also suggests that other teams will benefit from Swindal's academy, whose goal is to have prospects obtain big league contracts. Add to that at least three other similar academies in the Dominican Republic, and one reportedly under development in Nicaragua, leads me to conclude that these independent camps – some with extraordinary ties to Major League Baseball – will crop up more and more.

That is not necessarily a bad thing, and such camps are not unprecedented. More camps mean more Dominican baseball players will have an opportunity to develop. Whether that dilutes the talent pool remains to be seen.

My concern is how these camps will be operated. When I visited several camps back in 2000, conditions were miserable at many of them, with players living in squalor. When Major League Baseball established an office in the Dominican Republic that year, the league set standards, and conditions improved dramatically. Many teams now have facilities in the Dominican Republic that resemble college campuses in both design and comfort.

While Swindal's academy is said to be pristine and offers quality baseball facilities and comfortable living quarters, it is not subject to Major League Baseball standards. While I have met some of the people involved with the other Dominican independents, and have no reason to doubt their sincerity in wanting to develop players, others who will inevitably follow might not have the same integrity.

Dominican baseball already has a problem with *buscónes* – agents who buy and sell talent – who have come under scrutiny for taking advantage of their young charges. Who is to say that these independents aren't going to exploit the system at the expense of young and naive players?

At least one of the camps I am aware of is operating on the principle that it will share in the bonuses of players who sign with teams to recoup their investment. Will that share be 10 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent or more, as the *buscónes* often take? What conditions and facilities will such unregulated camps offer; will they sacrifice comfort and safety for the bottom line?

Time will tell.

Un Año En La Vida (A Year In The Life) – At the end of October, I will celebrate one year living in the Dominican Republic. It has been the roller coaster ride of my life; exhilarating and frustrating, exciting and boring, satisfying and disappointing, joyful and sad, tranquil and scary, befriended and lonely – a veritable cornucopia of emotions – and I would not trade a single moment. Living in the Dominican Republic has been one of the best years of my life and has brought me closer to knowing myself, the world I live in, and how I want to fit into that world.

It was only a few years ago that I found myself at a low point in my life. I had sought solace in a bottle, trying to wash away my troubles with a river of vodka. When my girlfriend – the love of my life at the time – found out, she dumped me. As I tried to take control of my addiction, I was hospitalized briefly with what doctors originally thought was a heart attack. Then my mother died. My father was diagnosed with cancer. One of my best friends dropped dead. My job disappeared. My father died. The burdens of life seemed overwhelming.

Today, through faith, direction and purpose, I feel blessed. I approach six years of sobriety with a new appreciation for the past, the present and the future. God takes us on an amazing journey, but I have learned that patience is essential to understanding His will – and my purpose within His will.

While things didn't work out between me and my ex – a Dominican woman – I would never have known about this magnificent country and the joy it now brings me, so while it broke my heart to lose her, I am grateful for having known her. Without my parents stressing the importance of education, I wouldn't be pressing the issue in the Dominican Republic. Without my battle with alcohol, I would never have found the strength to reach deep inside to find and pursue the dreams I now have. Nor would I have found the peace of mind I currently enjoy.

I wrote in the first **DRSEA INFORMER** that I questioned my sanity as I headed to the airport to catch a plane to relocate here to pursue the dream of turning the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy into a reality. I felt overwhelmed with the daunting task I faced; to develop something where there is nothing. It remains a daunting task, but much progress has been made not only in chasing the dream, but personally as well.

We are slowly closing in on a site for the DRSEA, though land is still a very expensive proposition. But we are exploring options that will make acquisition easier and more affordable. We are zeroing in on a course of studies that will prepare students at the DRSEA to not only get accepted to U.S. colleges and universities, but excel. We have had inquiries from potential students not only in the Dominican Republic, but from all over the world. People interested in teaching at the DRSEA have reached out to us. Numerous colleges and universities have contacted us, inquiring about students and even offering scholarships. Slowly, ever so slowly, we are developing the support and infrastructure needed to build and sustain the DRSEA.

It has not been without frustration. The economy has taken its toll. Less than two years ago, we had a developer willing to donate land for the academy and support its construction. That disappeared with the failing economy. And, there have been far too many people who promised a

check that never appeared, who offered support that never materialized, who promised to embrace the dream, but never did.

But there have been many who have helped make this year special with their support and belief. My friends back in the USA like WCK, who is wise in his observations, judgements and constructive criticisms. Joe B, who despite needing to be prodded upon occasion, has helped tremendously, particularly with making sure that important things get safely to me in the Dominican Republic. And thanks to Oscar, Cephas, Al X, Honest E, Big Bernie, Greg Miller, and other members of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, whose friendship is essential to my soul.

And there is my buddy, Johnny D, who has been there when I needed him, as has Vaughn Thomas, who sometimes thinks I forget his support, but I never have. And Sandy Jacquez, who has always lent a helping hand. Lauren, who helps me understand all things Dominican. My cousin, Nancy, who seems to know exactly when to offer a kind word of encouragement. And special thanks to my brother, Terence, who in no small way has enabled me to live out my dream.

And in the Dominican Republic, I have appreciated the support of Valoree de LeBron, who has helped me maintain my sense and sensibility in a foreign country, while opening her home to me and making me feel welcome here, as has all of her family. And there is Caesar Geronimo, the great Cincinnati Reds player who provides me with insight into how the game of baseball in the Dominican Republic, outside the white lines, is played.

And Paco, who shares with me the joys – and frustrations – of living in the Dominican Republic, and knowing we are blessed to be here. And, of course, my friends at *La Leyenda del Cigarro*, where I have spent so many pleasant hours enjoying great cigars and great company. In particular, there is Jose, as good a friend as anyone can have; he has taken me under his wing to try to turn me into a true Dominican, or come as close as any *Americano* can.

I would, of course, be nowhere without the support, guidance, and friendship of my co-founder, Harold Mendez, who has shared the dream from the inception, and helps to keep it alive in me when at times it has seemed impossible. When I have had my doubts, Harold erases them and pushes me to work even harder, renewing my determination and drive. I look forward to the day very soon when the DRSEA is a reality, and sharing that moment with him.

But that day will not come soon without others sharing in and supporting the dream. We have come a long way in one year, but have so much further to go, and it will take the efforts of many, not just a few, to reach our goal.

I hope that every **DRSEA INFORMER** reader will take a moment to reflect on the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy, its lofty goals and mission to provide educational opportunities in the Dominican Republic where none exist, to touch the lives of Dominican children and make those lives better. I have spent the last few years, and in particular the last year, trying to turn dream to reality, but, as I have said before, I can't do it alone. I need your help.

I ask each of you to reach deep into your hearts, and into your pocketbooks, to support the DRSEA. I know times are tough for everyone, but even the smallest donation will help. Ultimately, this is a costly venture, but to fail would be even more costly. Please make a generous donation today so that tomorrow the dream will live.

Home Is Where The Heart Is – I recently took a trip back to the USA to see friends and family, watch the seasons change, eat foods and drink beverages I can't get here, and to generally take a break. I was able to take in Homecoming at my alma mater, Lincoln University, which has

taken on a new attitude after reviving its football program a year ago. But Lincoln will never be the same without my dad around. I continue to miss him every day.

It is even stranger to be without a permanent residence in the USA. I gave up my apartment in New York, and the house I grew up in has a tenant, so I slept on a mattress on the floor in an adjoining property my brother and I own; in New York, I crashed on the couch of a friend.

One night, alone on the mattress on the floor, I couldn't help thinking that I really had no place to truly call my own anymore. A sadness enveloped me and tears welled in my eyes, until it struck me – of course, I have a home!

For the rest of my visit to the USA, people would ask me how long I was going to be there and when was the next time I would be home again. The answer was easy – “I am going *home* to the Dominican Republic in a few days; I don't know when I will be back in the United States.” When I got back to my apartment in Santo Domingo, I clicked my heels three times and joyfully repeated to myself, “There's no place like home.”



Dominican League Baseball Game

Play Ball – My return to the Dominican Republic also marked the day the Dominican League baseball season opened and some friends and I took in the opener between arch rivals *Licey* and *Escogido*.

You have to understand, baseball is baseball – except in the Dominican Republic where it borders on religion. Legions of fans for each side packed the small stadium to cheer the start of another chapter of the book that has been written for more than 100 years. Fan loyalties are well defined; blue adorns the *Licey* fans, while red is the color of choice for *Escogido*.

The competition on the field is always exciting. Dominican players embrace the game with a certain flair; they stretch singles to doubles, turn double plays with balletic execution, run into and through objects to chase down a fly ball. The passion for the game is always evident.

And then there are the fans. I have never seen such rabid participation. Whole drum sections appear in the stands, their rhythms accompanied by the constant blast of whistles and horns. *Brugal* rum and *Presidente* beer are sold in the stands, serving to further fuel enthusiasm, but there is little rowdiness as all energy is reserved for cheering the action on the field.

In this case, *Licey* – the team I chose a few years ago to embrace – prevails with a 6-3 come-from-behind win. The *Licey* fans respond with deafening cheers and whistles as they exit the stadium, their celebration continuing as they pile into cars, honking horns in victory as they drive off in all directions.

There is nothing in the world like Dominican baseball.

Impulsión De Suscripción (Subscription Drive) – We hope that we have both entertained and enlightened our readers as we continue our mission of creating the Dominican Republic Sports & Education Academy. Part of that effort is letting people know what we do, which has made the **INFORMER** a valuable tool. Please make an effort to forward this issue to others who might enjoy reading the publication and ask them to go to our web page and fill out the inquiry form so we can add them to the subscriber list. **UN PASO MAS Y LLEGAMOS.**

"Any time you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don't, then you are wasting your time on Earth." – Roberto Clemente

Charles S. Farrell

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