

Plátano Power: Understanding the Rise of Dominicans in Major League Baseball

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Por más nimia y humilde que sea, esta obra se dedica a todos aquellos peloteros que me dejaron entrar en sus mundos. Nunca me olvido de esos días en el play. Que vivan sus sueños.

## ABSTRACT

Patrick W. Fields: Plátano Power: Understanding the Rise of Dominicans in Major League Baseball

Over the last decade, baseball players from the Dominican Republic have had an astounding presence in the top professional league in the U.S.: Major League Baseball. Just last season (2013), over 10% of MLB players hailed from this tiny, dusty, and poor Caribbean nation, and even the most casual baseball fan is sure to recognize some of the country's greats. This begs an often asked question: Why are so many Dominicans in MLB? Combining historical accounts, contemporary ethnographic material, and primary data, this study elucidates the reasons that are driving and sustaining the "Dominicanization" of MLB. These are the historic socio-cultural hegemony of the sport in Dominican society, the economic incentives associated with the modern game, and the highly efficient system of recruitment and development that MLB operates in the country.

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## Introduction

### Cooperstown Bound?

As I walked through the outskirts of Santiago, Dominican Republic, little wooden shacks and dirt roads surrounded me. I had gone to this *barrio* named *Cienfuegos* searching for a better glimpse of poverty in the developing world. I most definitely found it in *Cienfuegos* although it is widespread across this tiny Caribbean country of some 10 million. Such poverty, however, was not the only thing I vividly recall from this trip that I made on the back of a friend's *motor*. In the midst of such suffering and want, it is possible that I saw a future superstar and millionaire. Of course, anything might be possible. But, no! It is quite possible that I saw him: an individual who many will admire and clamor to meet in the future. I saw him tossing what looked to be a rock into the air. Subsequently, he swung at it with a stick (or what was perhaps a piece of sugarcane), sending the object flying towards a group of other young boys in front of him. Or perhaps I saw a future superstar and millionaire on the other side of the island, in the impoverished community of *La Piedra* near the country's capital, Santo Domingo. It, too, was a place of shacks and dirt roads, along with quite a few dogs and gunshots in the distance at night. But there, too, maybe I saw him as he hummed a baseball at me while we played pitch and catch in the village's community center.

Maybe it sounds like too much that such boys from a place like the Dominican Republic actually become superstars and millionaires. It is not out of their reach,

however. While they may be malnourished and uneducated, they just might be one of your favorite celebrities in the future. Indeed, some of their compatriots have risen to such heights. You might recognize some of their names: Pedro Martinez, Vladimir Guerrero, Sammy Sosa, Manny Ramirez, Albert Pujols, Robinson Canó, and Bartolo Colón. Their stories, and many others like them, are proof that young Dominican boys can attain the almost unthinkable. Poor, uneducated, and searching for a dream in the developing world, they might go on to become conquerors of one of America's greatest institutions and its national pastime. Such are the possibilities for those young men I saw in *Cienfuegos* and *La Piedra*. Their names may one day be etched into our minds, not to mention Cooperstown.

## **Why Them?**

Dominicans are doing something extraordinary in Major League Baseball. Just this past season (2013), over 10% of all Major Leaguers hailed from the Dominican Republic (Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace 2013). What is it, however, that says that these particular boys have a special chance to one day be your favorite baseball player? Why not someone from other baseball playing countries like Mexico, Colombia, or Italy? While Dominicans might tell you that they owe their success to the many plantains consumed daily on the island (“*Plátano power!*” as they say), the answer to the above questions are to be found elsewhere in Dominican society. In the Dominican Republic, baseball is a dearly held social activity, a powerfully attractive means of economic advancement, and an institution heavily influenced by Major League Baseball (MLB). The conditions produced under this triumvirate have created a pool of young men that vigorously pursue baseball and a job in MLB. On the other side of the equation,

MLB has built an apparatus of recruitment and development that intensely and effectively funnels players from every corner of the country into its system where it can evaluate and develop them. This study will investigate these phenomena – the socio-cultural position and history of baseball in the Dominican Republic, economic incentives, and MLB's recruitment system - and elucidate how they have been fundamental to the “Dominicanization” or numerical rise of Dominicans in Major League Baseball.

# Chapter 1: Dominican Baseball and the Dominicanization of MLB

## La Pelota

What might come as a surprise to many is that not all of Latin America is crazy about soccer. For Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and many in Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, and Central America baseball rules sports. Nowhere else is this more true than in the Dominican Republic. As Manuel Mota, former outfielder of the Los Angeles Dodgers once said: ““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]”” (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 65). Perhaps the sport’s importance in Dominican society is best exemplified by the way Dominicans refer to it. While the proper name for baseball in Spanish is *béisbol* many Dominicans refer to the sport as *la pelota*, which simply means “the ball.” Its players are *peloteros*, roughly translated as “ballers.” There is no need to explain which “ball” you are talking about in the Dominican Republic. Everyone gets it; baseball rules this country.

## Dominican Baseball: A Historical Overview

Baseball first arrived to the Dominican Republic in 1886 by way of Cuban sailors involved in the sugar industry. At the request of the Dominicans, the Cubans organized a

game with each team taking the name of one of the plantations from which they were picking up sugar on the island. As can be noted by the way the local press carried the September 26 game, it turned out to be more of a social activity than one involving sport. Indeed, local news sources did not even mention the score. (Yunén 2008, 13-14). Still, the game that would come to rule Dominicans' hearts had arrived, and it spread fairly quickly. By 1907, the country had its first professional team, called *Los Tigres de Licey* or the Licey Tigers, which were based in the capital. By 1911, two other teams, Nuevo Club and a team from the city of San Pedro de Macorís, were in operation. In addition to such professional clubs, amateur teams also sprung up, especially around the country's major cities (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 16-17). Others developed on the country's sugar plantations, where workers had six months each year with little to no work due to the dead season in sugar cultivation. Of course, during such months, they had plenty of time for baseball. Picking up sponsorships from the mills to pay the costs of equipment and uniforms, the players competed against other mill teams, honing their skills and continuing to build the country's baseball capital (Kurlansky 2010, 53). The formation of baseball heroes was another indicator that marked the game's development in the Dominican Republic. One of the most distinguished, Enrique Hernández, earned his fame (at least in part) by striking out 21 batters in a match against American sailors from the warship Washington (Yunén 2008, 23). In these ways, Dominican baseball developed as a social institution complete with various actors and distinguished individuals in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

This growth remained during the 1920s and 1930s as the quality of the players increased and the character of the Dominican game continued to develop. For instance,

in 1921 *Los Leones de Escogido* (or Escogido Lions) emerged from the capital and soon developed a fierce rivalry with Licey, an intense series which continues today. The 1937 season turned out to be an especially charged and emotional affair that heavily taxed the country's baseball infrastructure both socially and financially. Consequently, the professional game declined, although the sport did continue to thrive in the various amateur teams that represented towns, cities, and even companies. Especially important during these times were the teams that sprang up around the country's sugar refineries and in the cities (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 23-27, 33). A particularly notable example of amateur baseball in these times developed in the refineries around the city of San Pedro de Macorís. Many of the inhabitants in the area were immigrants or the children of immigrants from the eastern, English speaking Caribbean and their communities were "knit extremely tightly" (Kurlansky 2010, 53-54). The strong sense of unity these communities maintained found an expression in their support of the mill teams from the refineries, thereby fostering an environment in which the "games were closely followed and considered important" (Kurlansky 2010, 54). The presence of Americans who had been brought in by the sugar companies further strengthened the development of the game as it ensured that the workers were always up-to-date on the evolving rules and equipment of the game in the U.S. (Kurlansky 2010, 53). Under such circumstances, baseball thrived. Alan Klein documents this in an interview with a former member of the Consuelo refinery team, who commented: "These games [between refineries] were bigger than the World Series to us [...] when you lose a game, everybody crying or something; fighting or something" (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 26). The power of the

game in the lives of Macorisanos continues until today. As of 2008, seventy-nine of them had made their way into the MLB. In fact, between 1980 and 2008, there were only two years in which one of them did not debut as a Major League baseball player (Kurlansky 2010, 223).

In the face of professional baseball's decline, amateur teams maintained the game's intensity and continued to construct its importance in Dominican society. In fact, this reliance on amateur ball may have actually helped Dominican baseball in the long run as it provided a solid foundation and pool of talent for the country's professional teams when they eventually resumed play. As Klein points out, the amateur teams "matured and deepened the organization of baseball throughout the country" (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 32).

Professional baseball in the Dominican Republic finally made a comeback in the early 1950s with the establishment of a professional league composed of four teams. In comparison with earlier years in which the entire system was haphazardly managed, organizers put in place a more orderly schedule. Additionally, funds began to reappear. Even the Dominican government, at that time in the third decade of Rafael Trujillo's brutal dictatorship, was willing to pay \$200,000-\$300,000 for each team to bring in the best talent (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 30). Further indicative of the game's consolidation in Dominican society was "the establishment of a press corps that focused on it" (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 31). Additionally, the professional game maintained the intimacy between players and fans that had characterized the amateur leagues during the preceding years. This powerful connection between team and community manifested

itself, for example, in the easy access that fans had to players after the game when they would even walk with them (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 29). Baseball was truly the game of the people and an important part of Dominican society. Drawing on a much better organization, a deep pool of talent, and powerful community ties, Dominican baseball even began to gain more respect abroad. Indeed, it would not be long before the American Major Leagues developed an appetite for Dominican talent (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 33).

### **The Involvement of Major League Baseball in the Dominican Republic**

June 8, 1958 marked an important day for Major League Baseball and the dreams and hopes of young men across the Dominican Republic as Felipe Alou debuted with the (then) New York Giants. While some may point to Osvaldo Virgil's debut with the same NY Giants in 1956 as the first instance of a Dominican stepping into the Major Leagues, Alou's case is the first example of a Dominican making it to the big leagues after having gone to the U.S. solely to play baseball since Virgil's family had moved to New York in 1933, and it was there that he developed his talent and went on to play professionally. Two years later, in 1960, Juan Marichal and Guayubín Olivo increased the number of Dominicans to four. The next year, the Giants made it to the World Series, partly on the talent of Felipe Alou, his brother Mateo, and Marichal. Thus, the first group of Dominicans in MLB proved to be very talented (Marichal is now in the Hall of Fame) (Yunén 2008, 89-97). From there the numbers only increased. As Alan Klein points out:

“The number of Dominicans playing professional baseball in North America began as a trickle in the late 1950s and early 1960s, then grew to forty-nine between 1955 and 1980 and to hundreds in the 1980s.” (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 35).

Pushing these changes were various factors. First, with the arrival of Dominican players in the U.S., Dominican teams began networking with their American counterparts who were willing to share their players and baseball know-how. These institutional and personnel ties between American and Dominican baseball further improved with the change in the Dominican season from the summer to the winter which allowed the Dominican game to essentially “complement” Major League Baseball (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 34-35). Secondly, Cuba, which had previously supplied MLB with the most Latin Americans, saw its relationship with the institution effectively severed due to the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the U.S. embargo against the country that shortly followed. Lastly, American teams realized that they could pay Dominicans less than the typical American ballplayer yet still obtain fantastic talent due to the socioeconomic conditions of the country. This ability to pay less for great talent became especially important with the advent of free agency, which increased the bargaining power of U.S. players vis-à-vis their teams (MLB transaction rules for dummies 2012). Subsequently, wages for the vast majority of MLB players went up. All of these factors lead MLB teams “to establish a more substantial presence” in the Dominican Republic (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 35-37).

In 1977, one of the best scouts in the Dominican Republic, Epy Guerrero of the Toronto Blue Jays organization, decided to change the fundamental nature of how he recruited. Previously, scouting in the Dominican Republic was a straightforward, albeit wild and unregulated, process of “free-roving scouts” who wandered the country looking for baseball talent (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 42). Guerrero, however, wanted an operation that would allow him to evaluate and keep up with his prospects better, and in 1977 he built a compound that he later expanded to include a playing field and dormitories (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 42-43). From this year on, baseball in the Dominican Republic would never be the same as these academies (as they are called) became the new norm for MLB recruitment in the country. In fact, presently every team in MLB operates one of these recruiting systems in the Dominican Republic (Academies 2013). The purpose of these institutions is to develop the talents of young players. They “often include dormitories for players and coaches,[...] playing fields, weight room and training facilities, clubhouses, classrooms and recreational areas... (Academies 2013).

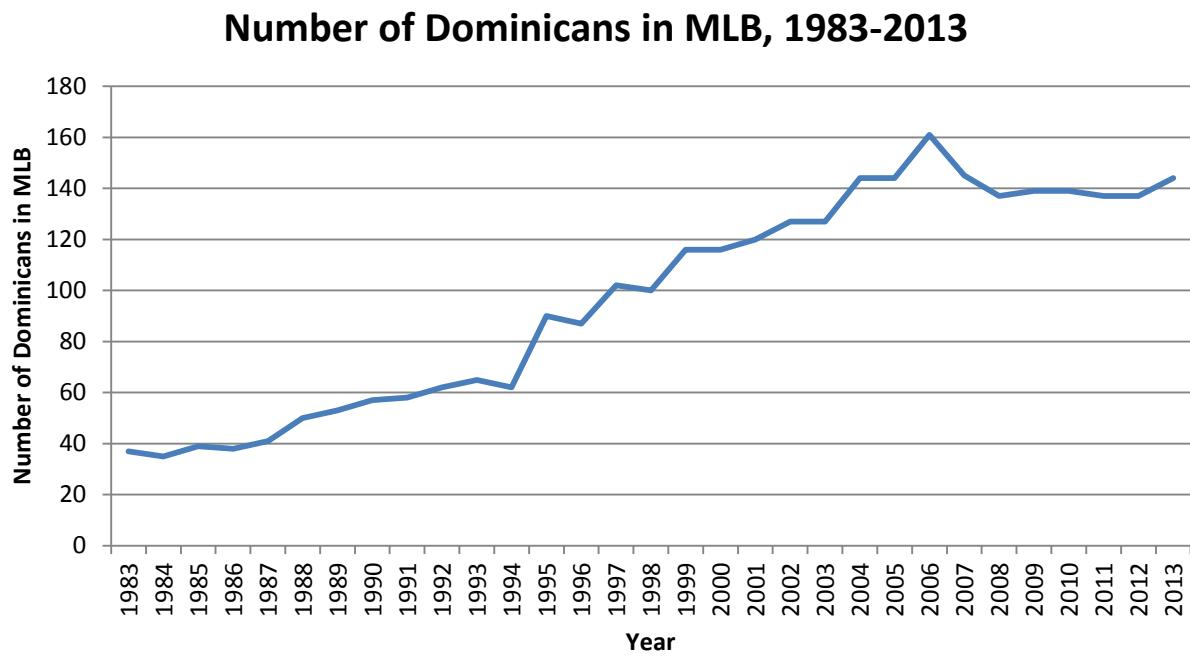
The commitment and hard work that MLB teams have invested in the Dominican Republic have yielded amazing results as teams have recruited and developed a massive amount of Dominican talent that has served them well. From the first Dominicans to play the game in the U.S. to the increases of their recruiting operations to the installments of the academies, MLB teams have profoundly impacted Dominican baseball as an institution in addition to countless lives (some of them for the better, some of them for the worse) (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991). However, they have also contributed to an interesting dynamic within MLB itself as

today Dominicans, at least in part, are coming to dominate the “Great American Pastime.” In fact, one could argue for a “Dominicanization” of Major League Baseball.

## Dominican Domination

Data from baseball-almanac.com show the astounding rise of Dominicans in MLB numerically. Figure 1 demonstrates this extraordinary rise of Dominicans.

**Figure 1**



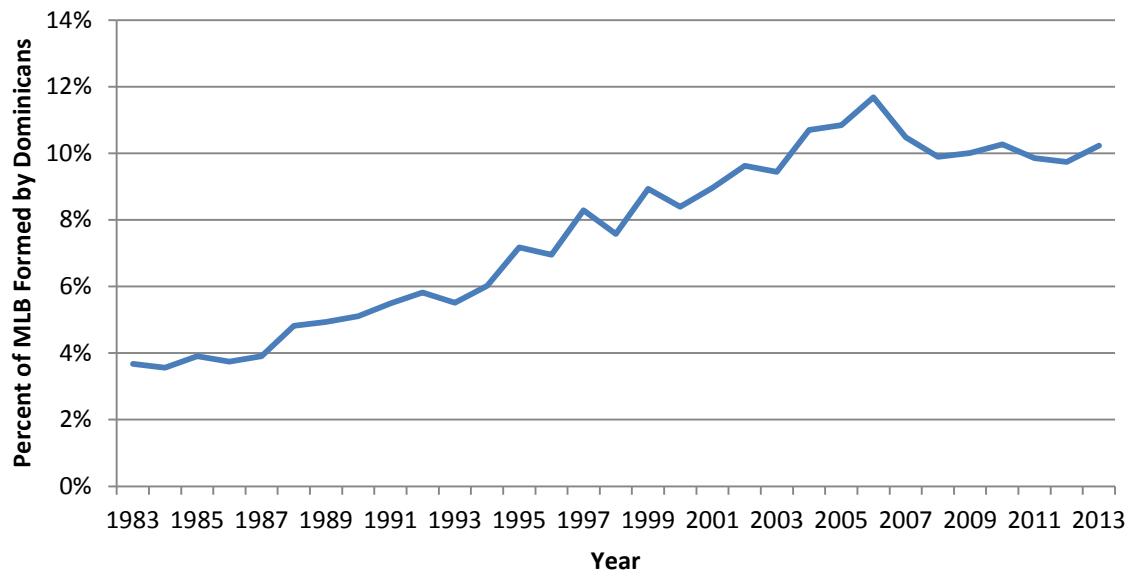
Source: *Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace*. 2013.  
<http://www.baseball-almanac.com/players/birthplace.php>.

From 1950-1960, only two Dominicans played in MLB. This increased to 22 during the decade from 1960-1970 and to 37 from 1970-1980 (Regalado 1998, 40, 117, 149). Thereafter, the numbers skyrocketed as evident in the graph. In 1983 alone, 37 Dominicans played in MLB. By the late 80s, this had increased to around 50 (per season) and by the late 90s to more than 100. It peaked in 2006 when some 161 Dominicans

played on a MLB team, and this past year's season (2013) it was at 144 (Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace 2013). Even more impressive, however, is the percentage of players in Major League Baseball that Dominicans make up. These numbers are shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

### **Dominicans as Percent of All MLB Players in a Season, 1983-2013**



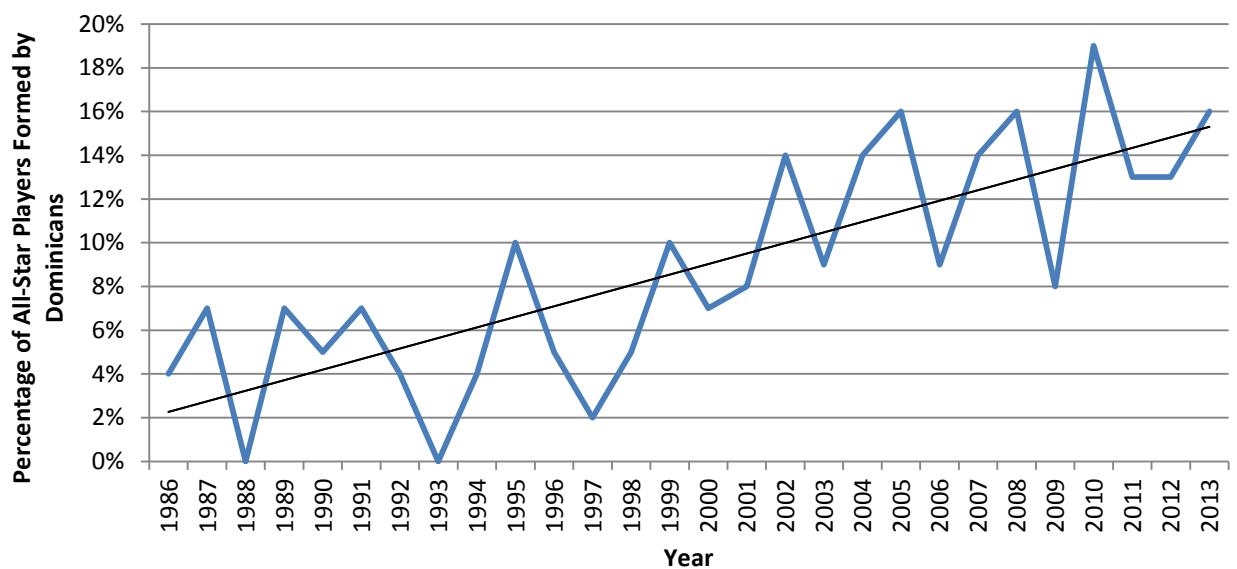
Source: *Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace*. 2013.  
<http://www.baseball-almanac.com/players/birthplace.php>.

In 1983, less than 4% of the 1,006 players that made it to the Major Leagues were Dominican. At the beginning of the 1990s, it had not increased too much as only a little over 5% of MLB players were Dominicans. Fast forward to the late 1990s, however, and the numbers of Dominicans in MLB hovered around 8-9%. In 2004, Dominicans were a full tenth of all MLB players. Their numbers peaked in 2006 when they formed 11.68% of the entire MLB player population. This past season (2013) they made up over 10% of all Major Leaguers (Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace 2013). Also, as noted

by a Forbes article from March 2013, a quarter of all minor league players are from the Dominican Republic (Jessop 2013). Thus, it does not appear that the trend towards “Dominicanization” will stop any time soon in the Major Leagues. These numbers are astonishing when one considers that the population of the tiny Caribbean nation is only a little more than 10 million (est. July 2012). The places that form the other major sources of MLB talent (Canada, Cuba, Japan, Mexico, Panama, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and the U.S) have a combined population of nearly 637 million (est. July 2012) (Countries 2012, Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace 2013). It is not just in mere numbers, however, that the tiny and poor Dominican Republic is disproportionately represented in MLB. To truly understand the impact the nation is having in MLB, one has to look at the quality and standings of its players. Here, too, Dominicans excel.

**Figure 3**

### **Dominicans in MLB All-Star Game as Percentage of Total Players, 1986-2013**



Source: 2013 MLB All-Star Game. 2013. <http://espn.go.com/mlb/allstargame/history/results>.

Note: For an undetermined reason(s), the players included on ESPN's All-Star rosters do not include as many players as the rosters recorded by other sources. However, given the respectability of ESPN in the sports world and the need to maintain consistent measurements in data, the author of this paper decided to stick with ESPN's All-Star rosters.

As recorded in Figure 3, in the latest version of the MLB All-Star game, 16% of the players hailed from the Dominican Republic according to data from ESPN (2013 MLB All-Star Game 2013). In the last decade, these numbers have dipped below 13% only three times, reaching an apex of 19% in 2010. If one strictly looks at the top batters in MLB, a similar pattern emerges. Since 2000, Dominicans have formed at least 10% of MLB's top 40 hitters with at least 500 plate appearances (502.2 are needed to qualify for the league batting title). From 2004-2008 and in 2010 and 2011, they composed at least 18% of the league's best batters. In 2011, they formed an astounding 28% of MLB's top 40 hitters (MLB Player Batting Stats - 2013 2013). These numbers, of course, are well above the proportion of Dominicans who play in Major League Baseball as a whole. If Dominicans are overrepresented in MLB as a league, they are especially disproportionately represented among its best hitters.

Such numbers are not restricted to batters, however, as an examination of the league's top pitchers reveals something similar. Using ESPN's Cy Young Award (given annually to the best pitchers in MLB) predictor, one can examine the top pitchers in both the American League and National League. Since 2002, Dominicans have composed at least 10% of the AL's watch list except in 2006 and 2009 (when no Dominicans were on it). In 2004, 2010, and 2012, Dominicans made up 20% of the AL's top pitchers. Dominicans have not been as prevalent on the NL's list of top pitchers and have placed at least one member on the ESPN's watch list just six times since 2002, although they did compose 20% of the list in 2004, 2008, and 2010 (MLB Cy Young Predictor-2013 2013).

## Existing Literature

A substantial body of work exists on baseball in the Dominican Republic and its relationship with MLB. Moreover, within this scholarship the authors approach the dynamic from various perspectives and with different foci. For instance, Mark Kurlansky's work titled *The Eastern Stars: How Baseball changed the Dominican town of San Pedro de Macorís* examines baseball and its place in society in a particular Dominican town known for producing Major League talent. It paints a picture of the town and baseball's place in it along with giving information on the many professional players from there. A similar approach to examining baseball in descriptive terms is taken by Lou Hernández in his book *The rise of the Latin American baseball leagues, 1947-1961: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela*. Of course, Hernández focuses on the time period 1947-1961 and his work largely recounts the outcomes of particular games and the performances of specific players in various Latin American countries. Keeping with this tone, his lone chapter dedicated to the Dominican Republic is strictly structured around facts of games and players. The book *¡Nos vemos en el play!: Béisbol y cultura en la República Dominicana* is also an excellent source of the game's history and development in the Dominican Republic in addition to information on important players. It does go beyond this, however, to examine the sport from a cultural perspective by looking at how it is identified with the Dominican Republic and influences the everyday language of Dominicans.

Some authors take a less general angle on Dominican baseball, offering accounts of it from the perspective of one of the parties involved in its existence. Alan Klein's

1991 book *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* provides a fundamental and authoritative work for anyone interested in Dominican baseball. Klein, like other writers, gives an historical overview of Dominican baseball, but he also investigates various phenomena associated with Dominican baseball, namely the academies and amateur baseball. He demonstrates how MLB's operations in the country undercut its amateur leagues and he calls attention to various problems linked to the ways players are signed and developed as they try to live their dreams. Klein also describes life in the academies, a normal scene at one of the Dominican Republic's premier ballparks, and he devotes an entire chapter to discussing how Dominicans push against U.S. hegemony via baseball. His point of view is always that of the Dominicans.

Klein's 2006 book *Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball*. Even though the book examines baseball and MLB across various nations, it contains an excellent chapter devoted to the contemporary history of baseball in the Dominican Republic and the dynamics associated with it. Once again, Klein highlights the power of Dominicans to exert some agency in their relationship with MLB. He updates his work with his 2014 book *Dominican Baseball: New Pride, Old Prejudice* in which he refocuses on the game and MLB's relationship with it in light of recent developments in its structure and the role of MLB clubs. He particularly devotes much of the book to exploring the differences and dynamics that surround the web of unofficial Dominican scouts known as *buscones*. Samuel Regalado's book *Viva baseball! Latin Major Leaguers and Their Special Hunger* is similar in that it sympathetically focuses on the plights of Latino ballplayers, although he examines the relationship between the U.S.

and baseball in Latin American as a whole. Both authors, in presenting their works from the side of the players, take a “bottom-up” approach to baseball in Latin America.

In contrast, Rob Ruck in his book, *Raceball: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Game*, does not necessarily take the same “bottom-up” approach of Klein and Regalado. For instance, Ruck does not appear to criticize MLB’s operations in the Dominican Republic as much as other writers. Instead, he describes the academies in a rather positive light, presenting them as an economically efficient source of great talent for MLB. Additionally, in contrasting the experience of a player like Tony Peña (who made it to the U.S. before the academies began to operate as they do today) with Dominican boys who go through the academies, Ruck finds that the academies provide a much better path to the U.S. than the previous system of recruitment. Still, he does pay attention to certain problems with the current system such as falsification of documents and the negative effect of the academies on amateur baseball in the Dominican Republic. He also gives a balanced view of the system of *buscones* in the Dominican Republic (see Chapter 3). Still, in contrast to Klein, who described the academies as “the baseball counterpart of the colonial outpost,” Ruck sees them more as “a U.S. beachhead on the island, not a conquest” (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 42, Ruck, Raceball: How the major leagues colonized the black and latin game 2011, 214). Thus, Ruck takes a more positive, yet not unbalanced, view of MLB’s operations in the Dominican Republic. His 1999 book *The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic* is similar in that it paints an ethnographic sketch of baseball in the country, covering history and the place and effects of the game in society.

In addition to the scholarly work found in books there exist helpful pieces in academic journals. Foremost among the works in such publications are those of Klein, which offer various perspectives and updated analyses of baseball in the Dominican Republic after the publication of his 2006 book *Growing the Game*. His articles include “Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry” (2007), “The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball” (2009), and “Progressive Ethnocentrism: Ideology and Understanding in Dominican Baseball (2008). This last article is particularly useful as it critiques the narrow use of an “[American] conflux of culture, ideology, morality, and social science” that some employ to understand Dominican baseball. It highlights the need to critically study the Dominican game based on realities and phenomena that are not situated solely within a U.S. American context.

While most authors take a more general view in their examinations of baseball in Latin America and/or the Dominican Republic, some writers choose to focus on a specific issue. Adam Wasch, for example, directs his investigations towards the impacts of baseball on education in the Dominican Republic. He gives information on education in general in the Dominican Republic, and he examines legal standards that could be applied to the education-baseball-MLB triumvirate that exists in the Dominican Republic. Thus, his work is critical of MLB’s operations in the Dominican Republic and makes a stand for the position of the Dominican players. A similarly limited focus of analysis exists in Meyer and Kuhn’s article “Effects of Major League Baseball on Economic Development in the Dominican Republic.”

Lastly, there exist numerous journal, newspaper, magazine and online articles that provide critical analyses of the effects of Major League Baseball's incursion into the Dominican Republic and/or allow one to better grasp the contemporary nature of Dominican baseball. The tone and content of the former can be understood simply by looking at their titles. These include Ian Gordon's 2013 critical article in *Mother Jones* titled "Inside Major League Baseball's Dominican Sweatshop System" and Sean Gregory's 2010 article in *TIME* that examined "Baseball Dreams: Striking Out in the Dominican Republic." "Baseball Academies in the Dominican Republic: From Sweatshops to Big Business," published online by SB Nation is similarly critical of MLB's operations, although it does highlight the state-of-the-art facilities that have recently been opened by various teams. Not all articles, however, are as critical of MLB's Dominican operations. For example, Leslie Lambert's article from 2012 titled "Language program helps push Rays players through organization" reports on efforts made by the Tampa Bay Rays to teach English to their minor league players from the Dominican Republic ([milb.com](http://milb.com)). Matthew Futterman's article in the Wall Street Journal describes recent changes MLB enacted to better regulate Dominican players in addition to giving information on some of the problems confronting baseball in the Dominican Republic. Such works are especially important in light of the fact that some clubs have instituted important changes in their Dominican operations in recent years. With the time lag that often occurs in the publication of books, these articles are important sources of up-to-date information. Additionally, they allow one to investigate certain situations that may be too specific as a topic of an entire book.

## Shortcomings of the Current Literature

Though the body of work on baseball in the Dominican Republic and MLB's relationship to it is quite extensive, it has disproportionately focused on the history of baseball in the Dominican Republic and what MLB hegemony is doing to it and the players. Approaches focused on "MLB in the Dominican Republic" abound. Such an approach must be balanced and expanded by one that understands the MLB-Dominican Republic dynamic from a "Dominican Republic in the MLB" mindset, also. Examining Dominican baseball and MLB from such an approach means looking at Dominican ballplayers not just as individuals acted upon and influenced by MLB hegemony. Instead, Dominicans and their society must be seen as actors whose fundamental characteristics and realities make possible and shape their trajectories into MLB. There exist dynamics autochthonous to the Dominican Republic and its people that are not completely grounded in U.S. hegemony. Scholars must recognize this and what it means: the U.S. is not the sole source of leverage and power in the processes by which Dominicans make their way into MLB. An understanding that fully considers Dominicans, their society, and their lifestyles must be combined with the more typical investigations of MLB's system and its effects in the country to understand the rise of Dominicans of MLB.

The dynamics that lead us to such an understanding can very well be gleaned from existing literature. Indeed, the events and outcomes that point toward a guiding intuition are recorded. What is lacking is a formal, systematic study that specifically aims to use them in a way that focuses on the numerical rise of Dominicans in MLB and not the effects of MLB in the Dominican Republic (for a brief and passing exception to

this see Alicia Jessop, “The Secrets Behind the Dominican Republic’s Success In The World Baseball Classic and MLB,” Forbes March 2013). Accordingly, this study combines historical accounts, contemporary ethnographic material, and primary data on the emergence of Dominicans in MLB to thoroughly investigate and describe the “Dominicanization” of MLB, why it has occurred, and why it continues.

## **Chapter 2: The Socio-Cultural and Economic Reasons Underlying Baseball's Hegemony in the Dominican Republic**

### **Famous Faces**

A quick look at a list of famous individuals from a given country may reveal quite a bit about its society as many of the individuals on the list are likely some sort of hero or celebrity in their country. As such, they receive the adoration and respect of the population and serve as role models for the younger generations. In short, they indicate what sectors of society are most revered by the population. A glance at a list of famous Dominicans leaves no doubt which profession is king. Out of 297 individuals on a list compiled by worldatlas.com, there are politicians, singers, authors, and various other types of professions in which Dominicans have distinguished themselves. What stands out, however, is the number of individuals listed as “baseball player.” In fact, over a third of the individuals on this list of “Famous Natives” stand out because of their contributions to baseball. (Famous Natives n.d.) Of course, this does not mean that in the Dominican Republic musicians and writers are not as idolized as baseball players. One could argue, for instance, that Juan Luis Guerra (a musician revered throughout Latin America) inspires young Dominicans to pursue music. However, the fact that more than a third of the Dominican Republic’s best known citizens are specifically tied to baseball says a lot about the sport’s position in society. As the former Los Angeles

Dodgers' outfielder Manuel Mota once said, “If you ask any Dominican what he is proudest of, he will read you a list of ballplayers” (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 1). This overwhelming presence of baseball players as role models and individuals of importance highlights the grip that the sport has on Dominican society, especially on the hearts and minds of the country's youth. It underscores the all-important position of the game as an institution and integral artifact of Dominican culture. The list also demonstrates the possibilities that Dominican youth have to make a living at the sport in a country that is part of the developing world. Both of these factors are essential in understanding the drive that Dominican youth have to pursue baseball and dedicate their youth to making it to the Major Leagues. The intimate and historic love affair that Dominican society has with the game, strengthened and complicated by the extraordinary opportunities for material gain that it presents, enables *la pelota* to dominate Dominican socio-cultural spaces.

### **Baseball as a Dominican Social Institution and Cultural Artifact**

Alan M. Klein points out in his book *Sugarball*:

“In the Dominican Republic baseball has a place all out of proportion to the normal one of sport in society. There is nothing comparable to it in the United States, nothing as central, as dearly held as baseball is for Dominicans” (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 1).

While some of this enthusiasm and impetus that Dominicans show for baseball comes from the economic incentives associated with the modern game, baseball's historic socio-cultural role in the Dominican Republic is integral to understanding the country's success

in MLB. As already mentioned, the game has deep roots in the Dominican Republic, going all the way back to the end of the nineteenth century. During its subsequent development, it transformed into the premier social activity of the country, even surpassing the dearly-held activity of cock fighting (Yunén 2008, 8).

This socio-culture position of baseball within Dominican society is immensely important to understanding why the country produces so many talented ballplayers. The game is ingrained into the Dominican national conscience. As such, it holds a unique position as one of the principal social activities in which Dominican youth participate and it has led the country to have an immense amount of baseball social capital. Baseball social capital is simply the drive and level of engagement that a population has with baseball in purely socio-cultural terms. It is not linked to economic incentives; instead, it defines the “love of the game” and the engagement with it that a population maintains because of its socio-cultural attachment to it. In the Dominican Republic, the level of baseball social capital is such that the sport effectively has a spell over society. While such a concept may be difficult to measure, certain historical occurrences point to the important position of baseball within Dominican society as a socio-cultural institution.

One such occurrence took place in 1937. The previous year officials reorganized the country’s national tournament and team owners began spending copious amounts of capital to sign the best talent, including foreign players. Such moves ignited the passions surrounding the game and increased the measures teams were willing to take to win games. Subsequently, during emotions ran especially high during the following season. Teams sought more foreign players, including some of the best talent from the U.S. Negro Leagues such as Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Cool Papa Bell. Political

interests even entered the fray once the brother of Rafael Trujillo struck an American player. In such ways “the passions of owners, players, and fans alike were indulged to the fullest” (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 21). In fact, officials cancelled some of the games because of “unruly fans” (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 22).

The energy and character put on display in the 1937 season highlight the intimate and emotional level at which Dominican society was already engaging baseball long before the sport became associated with tremendously high salaries. Perhaps no better signal of this exists than the fact that Rafael Trujillo decided to use baseball as a political tool that year. In addition to the problems created by his brother’s actions, Trujillo’s power influenced Dominican baseball as he pushed his personally chosen team to victory as a means of improving his image in the midst of challenges to his power (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 21). Trujillo recognized the importance of baseball to Dominican society across political and socio-economic lines. His desire to use the sport as a means of gaining widespread support and the emotions and actions displayed by the public demonstrate that long before baseball players could become enormously wealthy, the game owned the hearts and minds of Dominican society.

A second instance of baseball’s unique position in Dominican society as a socio-cultural institution lies in the intimacy that has historically characterized the game’s participants and fans. As already noted, amateur baseball was extremely important in the country’s history as was the following with which certain communities engaged their hometown teams. Once more, it is echoed by Kurlansky who notes this intimacy

between baseball and community in San Pedro de Macorís, saying “[...]these games were closely followed and considered important. They were, after all, the closest thing these people had to a leisure activity” (Kurlansky 2010, 54). However, these communities did not merely follow an organization. Instead, they forged personal and meaningful ties to the actual players. Klein, for instance, notes that around the sugar refineries “...the familial, close-knit nature of the communities...fostered an identification with the baseball *players* and teams...” (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 25; emphasis added). He later highlights how fans in the early 1950s would wait for players after games and walk with them. One Dominican player from that time period even described the relationship between the players and fans by saying, ““It was like a family”” (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 29).

This closeness between society and the sport further enhances the understanding we have of baseball as a Dominican socio-cultural institution. It was not just a sport played or watched to pass the time. Instead, it became an activity that united communities. Perhaps more importantly, however, it united them not just around a central organization but also with certain personalities from within the community. Consequently, communities forged social ties in two distinct ways. Firstly, fans built common bases of identity and fraternal relations within communities by defining their allegiances in terms of specific organizations. However, the identification with such entities was more profound than simple loyalties to a team. Instead, the ties between communities and their teams were highly personal as fans built strong attachments not merely to the logos and names of the organizations, but to certain individuals who played in them. This intimacy between community and the team (both as an organization and as

a group of known personalities held dearly by community members) incorporated the latter into the fabric of the community in a way that went beyond mere ownership and association. These circumstances have continued into Dominican baseball's modern era. For instance, in his 1999 book *The Tropic of Baseball* Rob Ruck points out that the Dominican game "...has remained much closer to the way the game was in the United States..." with players who "...are seen and heard, not just on the satellite transmission of games...but in person, on the street, and on the field." He also highlights how players in the major and minor leagues go back to San Pedro de Macorís and play "alongside the boys who wish to join [them] in baseball's promised land" (Ruck, *The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic* 1999, 171). This powerful sense of connection between Dominican society and baseball has contributed to the sport's consolidation as an institution within society; moreover, these intimate links remain intact today.

Lastly, the intimacy between Dominican society and baseball could have an even more profound impact on communities in modern times since today's baseball players are arguably more distinguished members of society than those of the more humble games of the past due to the former's success in one of the most powerful societies on earth. Indeed, it appears that success itself has reinforced the Dominican game's grip on society. In a 2012 interview with Scott Douglas of Runner's World Magazine, Jeff Horwich of National Public Radio asked about why certain countries specialize in particular sports. In response, Douglas stated that success has a hand in encouraging youth to take up certain sports. He noted that when some individuals have success in a sport, specifically from socio-economically depressed societies, it causes others to

“gravitate” toward that sport (Douglas 2012). In fact, Rob Ruck calls attention to this when he says “Every boy who leaves the island and returns to San Pedro (de Macorís) a major leaguer raises the town’s fever for the game” (Ruck, *The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic* 1999, 171). In this way, success itself has strengthened the relationship between community, identity, and baseball in the Dominican Republic.

For certain Dominican communities, baseball has not just been the premier social activity. Reinforced by relationships, success, and time, it has also remained one of the most meaningful ways in which communities build ties among their members and construct their identities. This strong socio-cultural position of baseball within Dominican society forms one of the pillars that explains why the country has risen to such prominence within MLB. Regardless of the economic incentives Dominican youth have to pursue the sport, for decades baseball has been one of the most common activities that Dominican youngsters engage precisely because it is ingrained into the country’s conscious. Perhaps this all powerful connection between baseball and society is best noted in the previously mentioned example of the town of San Pedro de Macorís. The town has produced more MLB players per capita than any other city in the world (Yúnen 2008, 102). Coincidence? Probably not.

### *El Cuarto*

The important position of baseball as the Dominican Republic’s premier pastime and social activity gives insight into why young Dominican boys take up playing baseball and not other activities. However, it does not offer a complete understanding of why they

stick with it or even why their families and communities may encourage them to pursue it above other interests such as academics. The other major force that drives so many young Dominican males to perfect themselves as baseball players is found in what Dominicans colloquially refer to as “*el cuarto*” or money. As Adam Wasch put it:

“A person who cuts sugarcane should earn \$80 a day, but they only get \$7.

Who’s going to cut sugarcane when they see Alex Rodriguez get \$252 million?

It’s very clear: You play baseball.” (Wasch 2009, 3)

While such enormous economic incentives associated with baseball have only been attainable for Dominicans in the modern era of the sport, money has affected the Dominican game since its earliest days. In fact, *el cuarto*’s influence on the game began when the ball played around the sugar refineries was still an important aspect of its existence. During those times, managers of sugar plantations would pay players to attract the best athletes to their teams. In a time and place in which doing the back-breaking work of cutting sugarcane was the main economic activity, the prospect to play baseball for financial gain undoubtedly heightened the interests of individuals to develop their talents on the field (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 151). The economic incentive to play the game continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s as the salaries of ballplayers in the Dominican Republic increased dramatically. Some clubs even had trouble coming up with enough funds to get the players they wanted and subsequently turned to economic and government elites for financing (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 21).

Salaries, however, were not the only economic factor that led to baseball's rise in Dominican society. Additionally, the game's development was centered on industries that were integral to the nation's economy. One of these was the country's beer industry, which is tied to baseball's beginning in the nation's capital (Yunén 2008, 126). In fact, the Presidente brewery (makers of one of the most popular beers in the country today) is credited with having a company team that competed during the years in which professional baseball suffered after the 1937 season (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 23-24). Another integral sector of the economy that supported baseball in various ways was the sugar industry.

The association that Dominican baseball had with these powerful sectors of the national economy was conducive to its rise in the country in two ways. First, it facilitated the contact Dominican society had with the sport and its subsequent integration into the popular conscious. For instance, in being sponsored by the beer industry, the sport would have gained an association that boosted its popularity and appeal. Additionally, the sugar plantations provided conditions (albeit often harsh ones) that fostered close ties within the communities that existed around them and depended on them. As already demonstrated, such ties combined with the arrival of baseball to create a community dynamic in which baseball flourished as a sport and as a socio-cultural institution. Secondly, baseball's ties to the nation's most powerful industries provided it with needed capital "...because even though [baseball] was not yet a rentable sport, the support from the two powerful national industries would facilitate the obtaining of material resources for [its] expansion" (translated by P.Fields with assistance from wordreference.com) (Yunén 2008, 129). For instance, the sugar companies provided facilities for the game to be played. Such

occurrences spurred the development of baseball as the Dominican Republic's pastime. Effectively, they contributed to the sport's consolidation as a principal arena of social activity and the formation of identities. However, the most conspicuous impact that *el cuarto* has had on the game can be found in the astonishing salaries that Dominicans can make in MLB.

The dire economic conditions of the Dominican Republic stand in stark contrast to the eye-popping salaries that an individual Dominican can earn playing professional baseball in the U.S. The country's GDP per capita stood at a \$9,800 (2012 US dollars) in 2012, and its poverty rate is officially recorded to encompass around a third of the entire population (34.4% in 2010). The nation's unemployment rate was 14.7% in 2012, although such data does not reflect the many Dominicans who are underemployed (Dominican Republic Economy Profile 2013 2013). In contrast, the Los Angeles Dodgers' Hanley Ramirez made \$15,500,000 last year alone (2013). That is equivalent to \$51,000 *every time he stepped to the plate* (Baseball salaries for 2013 2014, Hanley Ramirez Stats 2013). The New York Yankees' Robinson Cano also earned over \$15,000,000 last year while the Boston Red Sox slugger David Ortiz earned over \$14,000,000 (Baseball salaries for 2013 2014). These are but a handful of Dominican *peloteros* that play in MLB, where the average salary in 2012 was \$3.2 million and the minimum salary in 2013 was \$490,000 (MLBPA Info: Frequently Asked Questions 2014). Dominican ballplayers, however, do not even have to make it to these heights within the baseball world to earn a handsome salary. For example, a Dominican youth who simply signs a contract to play and train at an academy will usually earn a bonus of at least \$5,000, although some of the best players are able to command substantially

more. However, even a sum as little as \$5,000 is meaningful in a country where the average salary in a year is only \$9,800 and the opportunities to engage other meaningful economic activities are severely limited. The benefits of getting into an academy also include food and healthcare (Meyer n.d.). These opportunities for economic gain and improvement in living conditions contrast sharply with the economic disparity in which many young Dominicans live. As Rob Ruck stated, “There are no comparable alternatives to a baseball career, at least no legal ones, and the boys know it... (Ruck, The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic 1999, 170).

However, the push that young Dominicans have to pursue baseball because of *el cuarto* should not be thought of only in terms of desires for personal wealth and fame or a decent wage due to a lack of other viable jobs. Additionally, the economic incentives associated with the sport have magnified the influences from society that encourage young Dominicans to pursue baseball. These influences manifest themselves in the pressures, hopes, and expectations that society places on these young ballplayers. One source of these is the family, for which a baseball player “...may be [the] only hope of escaping poverty” (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 73). A second source can be found in the (in)famous *buscones* or Dominican scouts that seek out promising youth to train and perfect as baseball players. If a player under the tutelage of a *buscón* signs a contract with a MLB team, the latter receives a cut of his paycheck, thereby giving him the incentive to place substantial pressure on his pupils to perform well. This added social pressure can be substantial as it may occur over a relatively long time period. Indeed, relationships between players and *buscones* often form when the former is 14 or 15 years old (that is, up to two years before he is eligible

to sign with a MLB team) (Meyer n.d.). Thus, the economic incentives that face Dominican baseball players are layered. On the one hand, they perhaps experience an inner, personal drive to overcome a bleak socio-economic future. On the other hand, they face numerous pressures from family members and close associates to dedicate themselves to the game based on the promise of financial rewards.

### **The Wasch Study**

The numerous incentives that young Dominican boys have to play baseball offer a powerful lure to not simply engage the sport as a pastime. Due to the conditions on the island baseball becomes the center of many Dominicans' lives. In his 2009 article on MLB's effect on education in the Dominican Republic, Adam Wasch bears this out. Though his focus is on the effects of Major League Baseball's actions in encouraging and preventing Dominican youth from attaining an education, his research validates the relationship described above between Dominican youth and baseball. Taking data from NationMaster, which compiles its information from a variety of sources including the CIA World Factbook, the U.N., and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Wasch compares the enrollment of girls and boys at different points in the Dominican education system. He points out that the ratio between girls and boys at the primary level of education in the Dominican Republic stood at 0.95 with girls having the greater numbers. Vis-á-vis world standards the Dominican Republic ranks in the middle of the pack at number 103 out of 183 nations (the lower the ranking, the greater the disproportion between girls and boys). However at the secondary level, the ratio of females to males increases to 1.21 and the Dominican Republic jumps to the 5<sup>th</sup> ranking in the world (this time out of 172 nations). While 87.8% of girls who enter the first grade

in the Dominican Republic make it to the fifth grade, only 58.9% of their male counterparts do the same. However, the disparities in education are not limited to differences in quantity as evidenced by enrollment. Additionally, there exist differences in the actual abilities of Dominican youth. For example, within the population aged 15-25, the ratio of literate females to males is 102.6 (7<sup>th</sup> out of 123 countries) (Wasch 2009, 6-7). As Wasch states:

“Analyzing the numbers shows that boys and girls enter the Dominican educational system at the same rate in the first grade, but as the Dominican students go through the system, more and more boys drop out...” (Wasch 2009, 7)

He also includes an estimation by a MLB official in the Dominican Republic that the educational attainment of players entering the training academies is “at a middle school level” (Wasch 2009, 5).

Wasch calls critical attention to baseball’s economic incentives as the reason behind this phenomenon. As proof he offers the story of a Dominican *pelotero* and high school dropout who had made it to the minor leagues while believing that it was “... the only way I [the *pelotero*] can help my family from being poor.” Wasch concludes that “Thousands of boys devote their young lives to the sport, *because they view baseball as the only way off the island*” (emphasis added) (Wasch 2009, 12, 1).

With these strong and valid points, however, Wasch does seem to forget a critical component of why baseball has reached its current state in the Dominican Republic: its socio-cultural and historic place within Dominican society. Major League Baseball

teams did not arrive to the Dominican Republic and create the baseball crazy country that it is today. The only notion that he provides of any influences on young Dominicans beyond economic incentives is his statement that Dominican boys decide not to pursue an education because of “their love of the game” although he never elaborates on this love of the game beyond its connection with financial gain (Wasch 2009, 3). Still, the evidence and conclusions that he presents underscore how economic incentives strongly attract youth to play baseball in contemporary Dominican society.

### **Young + Male + Dominican = *Pelotero***

Growing up as a male in the Dominican Republic presents perfect conditions to become a baseball player. Most Dominican boys do not grow up going to the soccer fields, the basketball court, or other arenas of sport participation. Instead, many young Dominicans grow up going to the diamond just like their fathers. They go because of the game’s history and role as a meaningful part of community life, national pride, and history and because they, their families, and their communities hold it dear. At the same time, they go because they, their families, and their communities see the game as a principal means of escaping the dire economic realities of contemporary Dominican society. However, the relationship between playing baseball as socio-cultural patrimony and playing it for money is blurred. One young *pelotero* may go to the field, spurred by desires of fame and fortune from within himself, his family, and a *buscón*. Another *pelotero* may follow his passion for the game simply because his mother made him play outside as a child and he grew to love the crack of the bat and the thud of a 90 mph fastball in a catcher’s mitt. Thus, how much of baseball’s powerful existence on the island is traceable to history and how much is traceable to MLB’s salaries is unclear.

What is clear, however, is that the push that Dominicans have to play baseball is founded on two concepts: the socio-cultural hegemony of the sport and its promises of leaving poverty. These dynamics mean that to be young, male, and Dominican likely means to be a *pelotero*.

Dominican society's historical love affair with baseball and the country's poverty vis-á-vis the promises of MLB are integral in understanding where the supply of so many intensely dedicated young *peloteros* originates. These two phenomena are as fundamental as another Dominican classic: *arroz y habichuelas*. Still, as any Dominican will tell you, this dish is missing an important part: *la carne*. Likewise, in our understanding of the numerical rise of Dominicans in MLB we are missing an important link. We know why Dominican youth pursue the sport. We now turn our attention to how the sport pursues them.

## Ch. 3: The Road to MLB

The talent and drive to play that exist in the Dominican Republic are not enough to land so many Dominican stars in Major League Baseball. In addition to the supply of Major League talent, a demand and way to connect the two sides of the supply-demand complex must exist. Needless to say, such a demand does exist as MLB teams vie amongst one another for the greatest players. Still, there remains the challenge of how to connect Dominican players to opportunities that could lead them to MLB in addition to actually getting them into the league. Indeed, the Dominican Republic, although it sits relatively close to the U.S. in the Caribbean, is quite different from its neighbor to the north in socio-cultural and linguistic terms. Even if a young Dominican *pelotero* has the ability to play with the best in the U.S., he must still be “found” and connected to scouts. He must then confront a series of challenges as he transitions from Dominican society into the U.S. Such dilemmas are compounded by the fact that many, if not most, players have a limited education and contact with the world outside of their small towns, neighborhoods, or cities. MLB, however, has more than met these challenges. In fact, the teams from the league have set up operations in the Dominican Republic that find and bring players to the U.S. with astonishing efficiency. The formal scouting and development system that MLB teams currently operate, in addition to the informal scouting sector associated with them, have created conditions that find and evaluate every ounce of talent in the country.

## **MLB's Early Years in the Dominican Republic**

Major League Baseball has known about the immense talent that is available in the Dominican Republic for decades. The Cincinnati Reds, for instance, played on the island as far back as 1936, and while they won the first of their games against a Dominican squad by a score of 7-1, they only pulled out a victory in the second contest due to an error by the Dominicans (Inoa 2006, 95-96). MLB teams, however, were reluctant to take Dominican players into their organizations, at least in part, because of the segregated nature of the sport in the U.S. The fact that most Dominicans claimed African ancestry (some 90% of the current population can trace their roots to Africa) cut-off their chances of playing on all white teams. The historic 1947 season in which Jackie Robinson broke MLB's color barrier changed this. Subsequently, teams such as the Pittsburgh Pirates sent scouts not only to the Dominican Republic but also to Cuba and Venezuela. Still, it took until Felipe Alou debuted with the New York Giants (now in San Francisco) in 1958 for the first player recruited in the Dominican Republic to make his way onto an MLB roster (the Dominican Ozzie Virgil did it in 1956 but his family had immigrated to New York when he was a child). MLB's interests in Dominican players took another leap after Cuba, once a relatively fertile ground for MLB talent, was largely closed off to recruiting due to its 1959 revolution and the subsequent embargo the U.S. placed on the island. With this transition, the Dominican Republic became MLB's focal point for talent in the Caribbean and relations between the country's baseball industry and MLB grew and progressed through various stages, which overlap and are not clearly demarcated (Klein, Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry 2007).

The first stage was centered on a deepening of MLB's relationship with the baseball industry in the Dominican Republic that began in earnest in the mid-1950s and lasted throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Klein, *Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball* 2006, 95, Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 34-35). However, the exchange of talent went both ways. American teams would send players to the Dominican Republic to hone their skills while Dominican teams cooperated with MLB to "find and help cultivate Dominican talent for their American partners" (Klein, *Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry* 2007). Further entrenching the relationship between MLB and Dominican baseball was the change of the latter's season to the winter. Consequently, the Dominican baseball season complemented that of MLB, which plays its games in the spring, summer, and fall. This change allowed Dominican and American teams to even share players with individuals playing in one country in its respective season and the other in its respective season. Under these circumstances, the Dominican teams essentially acted as agents of MLB within the Dominican Republic. Already having roots and their own ways of recruiting within the country, they were able to find, evaluate, and develop Dominican players that could be sent to their counterpart team in the U.S. (Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* 1991, 35).

In conjunction with these practices, some MLB teams began to send their own scouts to the country. This second stage of MLB's involvement in recruiting the country did not take place completely outside of the first, but this means of finding talent within the country would shortly become the primary way in which MLB teams added Dominicans to their rosters. Before the 1980s, only a handful of teams were engaged in

this practice, including the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Toronto Blue Jays, the Los Angeles Dodgers, and the San Francisco Giants. By the early 1980s, however, the number of MLB affiliated scouts in the country had grown to such that every team in the league had somebody on the ground (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 42). Their efforts, however, were not particularly systematic. The merits of certain ball players would simply spread as they played within the Dominican amateur leagues and worked their way up to the professional squads. At that point, they could go through a tryout in front of MLB staff. Scouts would then sign the best players. Despite being ““hit-and-run[,]”” such tactics proved to work as MLB teams continued to pull in Dominican talent in increasing numbers (Klein, Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry 2007, Klein, The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball 2009).

## **The Academies**

Perhaps the most important development in Dominican baseball in the last several decades has been the advent and growth of MLB’s academy system and the informal network of local scouts that are directly or indirectly associated with it. The two teams that pioneered the academy were the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Toronto Blue Jays. As noted above, both teams were forerunners in the early years of direct scouting by MLB. Moreover, both teams maintained scouts that actually lived in the country. The Dodgers’ scout, Ralph Avila, and his counterpart from the Blue Jays, Epy Guerrero, both perceived the importance and advantage of scouting the island in a more systematic way that would localize their team’s presence (Klein, Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry 2007). Subsequently, in 1977 (the same year the Blue Jays came

into existence), Guerrero opened a compound not far from the nation's capital, Santo Domingo. There he could observe and train the athletes that he hoped to turn into MLB stars. Shortly thereafter, the Blue Jays decided to invest in a better camp for their prospective athletes and gave Guerrero a new compound that consisted of a playing field and rooms to house the players (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 42-43). Avila opened the Dodgers' first academy in 1981 and subsequently received the funding from the Dodgers' front office in 1984 to significantly expand and improve his operation, which was called Campo Las Palmas (completed in 1987). In addition to the Dodgers' and Blue Jays, the Philadelphia Phillies also contributed substantial resources in the pursuit of Dominican talent. (Klein, The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball 2009, Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 62-65).

These first MLB academies were rather rough in design and operation. Players were housed in nearby localities; the quality of coaching available to the prospects was not overly impressive; and playing conditions were relatively crude (Klein, The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball 2009). Avila's first academy, for instance, housed players in a small compound of two rooms that each had eight beds – all located behind a house. The wife of the homeowner supplied the prospects with meals. Despite such conditions, however, the academies proved to be quite successful as evidenced by some of Avila's earliest products that included Alejandro Peña (who would go on to have an MLB career that spanned 15 years) and Mariano Duncan (12 years) (Players 2013, Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991). Avila's later facility (Campo Las Palmas) was

much more extensive and included a “...modern dormitory, kitchen, clubhouse, administrative offices[,] and exercise facility” in addition to two baseball fields, all sitting on 250 acres of land (Klein, The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball 2009). By that time, the Blue Jays’ academy was also operating at a heightened level, making use of an annual budget that had reached \$100,000 by 1984 (Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 65). The quality of academies was not the only variable increasing, however, as other teams soon opened their own versions of academies. Whereas in 1986 “only a few teams were running schools or proto-academies[.]” by 1990, thirteen MLB clubs operated academies in the Dominican Republic and every team had scouts on the ground (Klein, Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry 2007, Klein, Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball 2006, 47, Klein, Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream 1991, 42).

## **The Modern Academy**

The impressive structure and operation of the Dodgers’ Campo Las Palmas was only the beginning and a taste of what MLB teams would come to utilize in developing their prospects’ skills. Whereas in 1990 only 13 programs had some sort of academy like operation in the Dominican Republic, by 2000 every MLB franchise had moved beyond simple scouting and had some type of academy or program. Conditions in most of these, however, remained less than ideal. A group sent by MLB to examine them found “...bugs in the rooms, cheese sandwiches for dinner” and some were even said to resemble “prisons” (Gregory 2010). Still, the presence of MLB on the island had increased. However, the competition did not stop as the drive to get the best Dominican

talent spurred continuous developments in the academy system. With every MLB team having an academy or program in the Dominican Republic, the league's presence on the island in terms of quantity had reached its maximum. Subsequently, teams began to focus more on the quality of their academies, spending millions of dollars in the process.

The Boston Red Sox were the first to turn the page to what has become more and more the norm for MLB academies in the Dominican Republic. In 2003 they opened what can be called the first "modern" academy that included amenities such as dormitory style housing instead of "military bunks." From there, the improvements in the system took off. The San Diego Padres, for instance, invested \$8 million in an academy that opened in 2008 near the capital. Its splendor was such that TIME Magazine described it as resembling "the Ritz" (Gregory 2010). Likewise, the Colorado Rockies upgraded their facilities, which first opened in 1997. Their new academy, opened in 2013 at a cost of \$6 million, includes dormitory style housing for the players, a training room, weight rooms, a cafeteria, housing for on-site staff, and even entertainment and computer rooms as well as a classroom. Another example of the modern academy is to open in the spring of this year (2014) and will belong to the Seattle Mariners. It will contain "two full-sized fields,...lighted batting cages, bullpen facilities with six mounds and a practice field" in addition to "...the dormitory, dining hall, classrooms...computer labs...[, and] a theatre and a video room" (Drysdale 2013).

Perhaps one of the biggest signs of the importance of Dominican baseball to MLB and the resources the latter is willing to spend to mine its talent is the turnaround in the Chicago Cubs' facility. In 1997, the Cubs' academy was labeled a "'sweatshop'" where 19 boys shared one bathroom that had no running water and suffered the abusive threats

of a coach with a gun. Arturo Marcano, the author of the book revealing these facts, even presented a story of a player who was nearly crippled after being taken to a street doctor with an injured arm (Drysdale 2013). In 2010, conditions at the Cubs' academy, while improved, were still unacceptable as 10 prospects were reported to share a room that "...at best, could comfortably fit two or three" (Gregory 2010). Only three years later, however, the Cubs were set to open an improved academy at the cost of \$6-8 million. Other teams engaging in building modern academies include the Houston Astros (opened in 2010), the Cleveland Indians (opened in 2010 at a cost of \$2.6 million), the Pittsburgh Pirates (one of MLB's pioneers in the country, opened their modern academy in 2009 at a cost of \$4-5 million), and the New York Mets (opened in 2008 at a cost of \$8 million) (Drysdale 2013).

In acting as the foundation of teams' Dominican (and even Latin American) operations, the academies do not only fulfill the role of recruiting and developing baseball talent as an entity in and of itself. Rather, the academies prepare and adjust recruits to the American professional system. As the Dodgers' legendary scout Ralph Avila once noted: "Before [the academies] a lot of players were signed in this country, taken to the U.S. and released...because the kids weren't ready. That wasn't fair" (inserted words not mine) (Klein, Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball 2006, 98). At least part of the preparations the *peloteros* receive is the formal education that some teams provide their players. For example, the Kansas City Royals and the New York Mets have enrolled students in subjects such as languages and social studies (Klein, Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball 2006, 99; Wasch 2009, 7). Such teams understand what the Mets' Director of

International Development said when he commented that “A better educated player will...have a better chance of making it to the big leagues” (Wasch 2009, 7). While this can, indeed, be a part of the benefit of training Dominican prospects in the academy setting, the point that Ralph Avila made must be understood in a different light. That is, the academies have been useful in preparing players to navigate the waters of American professional baseball via a process of acclimating them to the norms and expectations (even the most basic ones) of MLB and American society.

For instance, the Kansas City Royals are noted for emphasizing “pride and professionalism.” Ralph Avila, too, was known to stress professionalism in addition to self-discipline (Klein, Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball 2006, 98-100). Highlighting such tendencies does not reflect a lack of them within Dominican society or an ethnocentric view of their precise definitions. However, what the interactions between individuals such as Avila and the players show is that beyond “educating” players by teaching them English, etc. the academies provide Dominican prospects an enclosed environment where they can come into constant contact with the attitudes, expectations, and norms of a highly organized, powerful American institution and the culture from which it springs: both of which are quite different from Dominican society. Even if they do arrive in the U.S. not knowing much more than “I got it, I got it,” Dominican players that have come up through the academy are more accustomed to *how* to function in MLB in comparison with players of a previous generation.

## El Buscón

As Klein points out, “Discovering and cultivating young talent is a complex set of relations that involve social agents, families[,] and parts of communities...to get players into the ranks of professionals.” This process does not necessarily start at the academy because even a simple tryout in front of MLB staff might be the second step a player takes in pursuit of his dreams. The first step for many *peloteros* is the tutelage of a *buscón*. The first *buscones* were native Dominicans that acted simply as scouts on behalf of MLB and passed knowledge and information on to MLB about Dominican amateurs as young as 14. Once the academy system consolidated, however, the *buscones* found that they could train the players and pass them off to MLB teams, in the process pocketing part of a new signee’s bonus (Klein, The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball 2009). To the players they train they have become coach and agent, while for MLB they remain informal scouts. Moreover, their operations are quite varied. Some resemble MLB’s academies, with up to 100 players. One *buscón*’s program even has its own dormitory and ensures that players and coaches wear the same uniforms (Klein, Progressive Ethnocentrism: Ideology and Understanding in Dominican Baseball 2008). On the other hand, some *buscones* maintain operations that are much simpler such as the one TIME Magazine found where “players practice hitting in a trash-strewn space...amid wandering pigs, abandoned sneakers and empty bottles of booze. They pound stringy balls...into a tattered net tied to a tree” (Gregory 2010).

However, it is precisely that eagerness, ruggedness, adaptability, and connection to communities that make *buscones* an integral, albeit informal, part of MLB’s system.

Through their local connections, understandings of Dominican society, and willingness to deliver talent to MLB's doorstep from the most remote places in the country, *buscones* act as an especially efficient set of eyes, ears, hands, and feet on behalf of MLB. While most, if not all, *buscones* conduct their operations as a means to make a living or fulfill their own financial goals, they no doubt benefit MLB's scouting circuit (Klein, The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball 2009). With at least around 1,500 of them on the island, the reach of MLB throughout the Dominican Republic is dramatic in terms of geographic coverage and the intimacy and know-how with which the recruiting system engages Dominican communities (Klein, Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry 2007).

### **Case Study 1: Dodgers and Blue Jays vs. Rest of League**

MLB's work in the Dominican Republic, and the system it has created both formally and informally, has led to a significant increase in the number of Dominican players making it to the Major League. This surge in Dominican players is apparent both at a team level and for the league as whole. As noted above, the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Toronto Blue Jays were the primary forerunners in the creation of MLB's modern academy system. The Dodgers and Blue Jays opened their prototype academies in 1981 and 1977, respectively. The early establishment of their recruiting efforts should be expected to yield some type of advantage in the Dominican Republic vis-à-vis the rest of the league.

A sample of Dominican baseball players who signed with Major League teams from the early 1970s until 2009 demonstrates that the average Dominican prospect spent

5½ years in the minor leagues from the time he signed with a MLB team to the time he debuted in the Major Leagues (Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace 2013). Moreover, as pointed out above, Klein claims that “In 1986 only a few teams were running schools or proto-academies” (evidently the Dodgers and Blue Jays) (Klein, Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball 2006). Thus, it is to be expected that during the second half of the 1980s and the first couple of years of the 1990s, the Dodgers and Blue Jays, with their established ties and substantial programs in comparison with the rest of the league, should be at the top in terms of Dominican talent.

The chart below compares the number of Dominican players that debuted with the Dodgers and Blue Jays vis-à-vis the rest of the league from 1985-1991. Special emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of a Dominican player debuting with a team as opposed to simply being a part of a team’s roster. Since personnel trades between MLB teams are possible, there stands the chance that a team has acquired Dominican players from other teams’ programs. Looking at the number of debuting Dominican players, however, decreases the possibility of this and gives a better impression of the numbers of Dominican players that a team has brought up through its own ranks.

**Chart 1**

Debuts of Dominican Players in MLB, 1985-1991														
Team	Toronto	Los Angeles	Houston	Baltimore	Kansas City	Atlanta	Pittsburgh	Montreal	Oakland	Chicago WS	St. Louis	San Diego	Texas	Cleveland, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago Cubs, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Detroit
Number of Dominican Debuts	7	6	5	5	4	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	1
Years of Dominican Debuts	'85, '87, '88, '89, '91	'85, '86, '88, '89, '90	'86, '89, '90, '91	'87, '88, '89, '91	'87, '89, '90	'85, '89, '90	'86, '87	'86, '90	'87, '88, '91	'88, '91	'88, '90	'90, '91	'89, '90	-----

Source: *Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace*. 2013.  
<http://www.baseball-almanac.com/players/birthplace.php>.

The efforts of the Dodgers and Blue Jays to pioneer Dominican recruiting, evidenced by their extended involvement in Dominican baseball and their academies, brought noticeable results. While other teams produced similar numbers of Dominican debuts (Houston and Baltimore), the Dodgers and Blue Jays led MLB in the amount of Dominican talent on their rosters and the consistency with which they introduced Dominicans into the league. What is more is that in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Dodgers' numbers looked more like those of the rest of the league (4 debuts in 8 years) as did those of the Blue Jays (4 debuts in 7 years). However, with their early and substantial recruitment programs and academies, the Dodgers and Blue Jays reaped considerable benefits. In making moves to upgrade and install their recruiting systems more firmly in the Dominican Republic before the rest of the league, the two teams were able to pull ahead. This fact was not lost on other teams. Indeed, a December 1991 article on the

Orioles' system in the *The Baltimore Sun* noted, "The Dodgers and Blue Jays established superiority years ago..." (Eisenberg 1991).

### **Case Study 2: The Brewers' Bad Call**

The Milwaukee Brewers provide another example of the effects of the academy at the team level. The Brewers have the smallest market in MLB and have to compete against big market teams like the Boston Red Sox and Chicago Cubs. Naturally, then, money can be a concern (Klein, Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball 2006, 50, Neró 2011). To counter this, the Brewers decided to close their academy in 2003. The idea behind the move was to redirect funds from the infrastructure and staff needs of housing, training, and maintaining a standing pool of athletes in the Dominican academy to a streamlined program that focused on higher payments to better players who could be directly brought to the U.S. (McCalvy 2011). There was some upside to it, such as the attraction to prospects of immediately going to the U.S. Such a move, however, was a throwback to the pre-academy days when players did not have the formative experiences of adjusting to the MLB and American way of doing things via the academy. Dan O'Brien, assistant to the team's general manager, stated: "'What we found is that the transition was too radical. In addition to your baseball skills, all the things that go into becoming a good professional player, it was just too much.'" Consequently, in 2008 the Brewers began the reestablishment of their Dominican operations. In 2009, they fielded a team in the Dominican Summer League with the Orioles (the DSL is the league in which the various MLB academies compete against one another). In 2010 they reopened a complex in the country, and in 2011 they moved to better facilities where their

prospects take classes in English and “cultural training.” (McCalvy 2011). The Brewers’ closure of their Dominican academy changed their rosters.

**Chart 2**

<b>Number of Yearly Dominican Debuts for Milwaukee Brewers, 1998-2013</b>																
<b>Year</b>	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13
<b>Number of Debuts</b>	2	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0

Source: *Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace*. 2013.  
<http://www.baseball-almanac.com/players/birthplace.php>.

Once again recalling that the calculated average time between a Dominican signing and making it to the Major League is  $5\frac{1}{2}$  years, the effects of the Brewers’ decision to close their Dominican academy are clear. The Brewers steadily debuted Dominican players from 1998-2008, which adjusted for the  $5\frac{1}{2}$  year lag corresponds to the signing period 1993-2003. From 2009-2013, the numbers of Dominicans debuting for the Brewers dramatically drops off. Interestingly, this time frame corresponds to the signing period 2004-2008, which falls within the interval of interruption of the club’s academy operations. Such a change is not attributable to any league wide developments. From 1995-1999, 91 Dominicans debuted in MLB. From 2000-2004, this number was 98; from 2005-2009, it was 106; and from 2010-2013 (a span of one season less compared to the other periods), it was 96 (*Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace* 2013). Thus, the numbers of Dominicans debuting in the league never experienced a dramatic decline, confirming historical data that MLB’s Dominican operations never dropped off. In fact, they only improved (see section “The Modern Academy”). While the results of the reopening of the Brewers’ academy are some years into the future, the

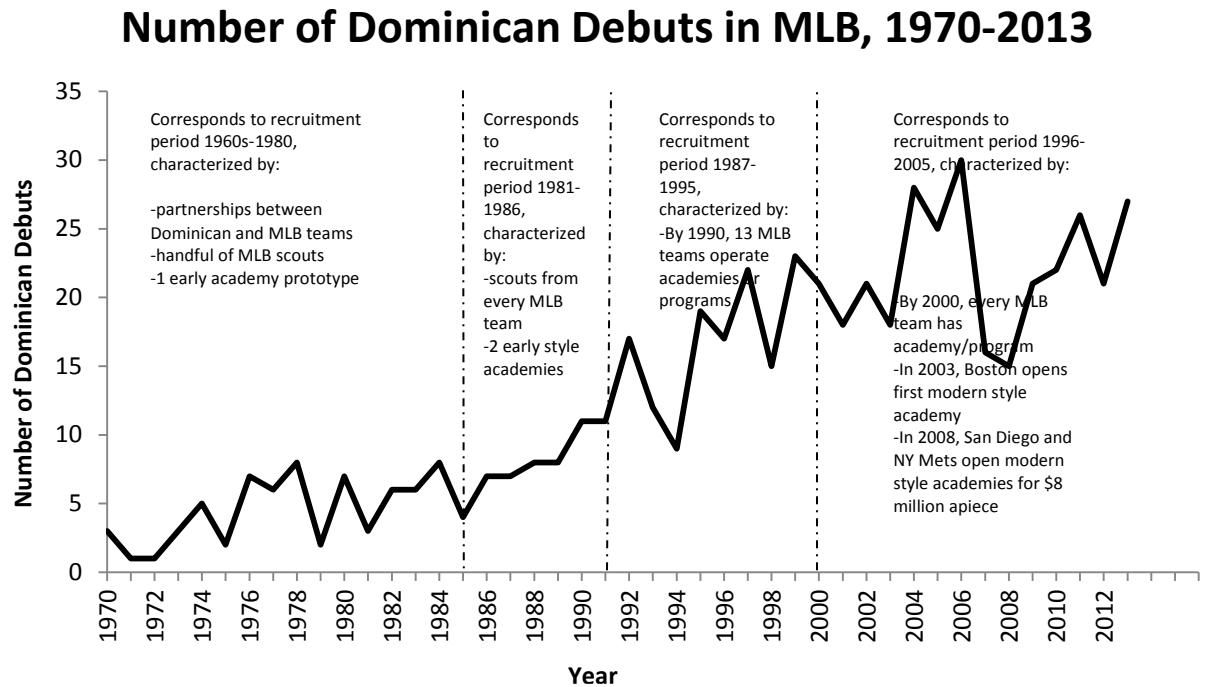
results of its closing are clear: a dramatic decline in Dominican talent. This highlights the importance of the academy as an institution and tool of MLB within the Dominican Republic.

### **Case Study 3: MLB's Overall Numbers**

While individual cases are helpful in correlating MLB's increased involvement and intensified recruiting techniques in the Dominican Republic to the greater numbers of Dominicans in the league over time, they are somewhat problematic. As mentioned earlier, teams are able to exchange players. However, this exchange not only happens at the level of the Major Leagues; it can also occur at the minor league level. It is quite possible for a player to be signed by team X in the Dominican Republic, attend team X's academy, spend three years in team X's minor league system, then be traded to team Y, with which he makes his MLB debut. Under such circumstances, a player could be perceived as evidence of team Y's involvement in the Dominican Republic, when his presence in the league is a reflection of team X's operations in the country. In fact, using the same sample that generated the 5½ year lag between Dominican recruits' signing and their debuts in MLB, the author calculated that 35% of all Dominican signees from the period 1970-2009 were traded as minor league players. This new information does not negate the conclusions of the two team case studies since nearly two-thirds of all players that were originally signed by a MLB team did debut with that same team. Thus, we should still expect a relationship between an individual team's activities in the Dominican Republic and the number of Dominican players on its MLB roster. Still, due to the above possibilities and the fact that when looking at individual teams we are dealing with small sample sizes (1-11 players), it is helpful to examine the league in its entirety as we

consider the relationship between MLB and the Dominican Republic. Figure 4 shows the increases in debuts of Dominican players in MLB since 1970. It also offers a characterization of the recruitment periods that would have spawned the results for each time frame.

**Figure 4**



Sources: *Major League Baseball Players by Birthplace*. 2013. <http://www.baseball-almanac.com/players/birthplace.php>; Klein, Adam. *Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006.; Klein, Adam. *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.; Klein, Alan M. "Dominican Republic: Forging an International Industry." *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* (Routledge) 10, no. 6 (Oct. 2007): 947-960. doi: 10.1080/17430430701550405; Klein, Alan M. "The Transnational View of Sport and Social Development: the case of Dominican baseball." *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* (Routledge) 12, no. 9 (Nov. 2009): 1118-1131. doi: 10.1080/17430430903137761; Gregory, Sean. "Baseball Dreams: Striking Out in the Dominican Republic." *TIME Magazine*, July 2010. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2004099-2,0.html>; Drysdale, Charlie. "Baseball Academies in the Dominican Republic: From Sweatshops to Big Business." *SB Nation*. April 9, 2013. <http://www.minorleagueball.com/2013/4/9/4203922/baseball-academies-in-the-dominican-republic-from-sweatshops-to-big>.

The increases in the graph above are also reflected in the total numbers of Dominican players in MLB, the number of Dominican players as a percentage of total MLB players, and the numbers of the best players in the Major League (see Ch.1, Figures 1, 2, and 3 respectively). As the intensity, commitment, and effectiveness with which

MLB has engaged the Dominican Republic have increased over time, more Dominicans have found their way into the league.

## **Further Considerations**

The reasons that MLB has been consistent in pursuing Dominican prospects cannot only be viewed as the chase for talent. Other factors have been involved in the process as well. Specifically, the lower salaries that MLB may offer Dominican players and the inefficiencies of the U.S. immigration system have encouraged the league's commitment to scouting the country. The first of these has been of particular importance as low salaries have offered teams economic incentives to recruit the country. As the New York Mets General Manager in the late 1990s stated: ““You can develop 30 to 45 players from the Dominican Republic for what it costs to sign a second-round draft pick in the States”” (Meyer n.d.). Today, the salaries of the top Dominican stars are at or above MLB standards. For instance, in 2007 Dominicans made up about 10.5% of all MLB players, but they commanded 12.2% of the league’s salaries (Meyer n.d.). What remains important, however, is that MLB teams can still sign Dominicans relatively cheaply in the early stages of a *pelotero*’s career. For example, in 2011 the average signing bonus given to first time American professionals was \$232,000 while “for international players, it was approximately half that” (Gordon 2013). The second phenomenon mentioned above, the U.S. immigration system, encouraged the construction of MLB’s academy system as it restricted the numbers of minor league players that teams could bring into the country. The academy was an answer to this problem (Klein, Progressive Ethnocentrism: Ideology and Understanding in Dominican Baseball 2008, Grassi 2007).

It may be said that low salaries and the U.S. immigration system have contributed to the rise of Dominican players in MLB by providing incentives for the league to move toward its current recruitment system. Such phenomena tell us why MLB went to the Dominican Republic, but they cannot explain the agency of Dominicans to pursue the sport or the actual mechanism by which they come to the U.S. Low salaries and caps on immigration can thus partially explain the reasons that MLB teams went to the country to begin with but not *why* and *how* they have been able to actually mine the country for its talent. It is precisely these latter questions that are of interest to this paper. Lastly, it should be noted that the immigration system cannot even be considered to be important in the contemporary operation of MLB academies in the Dominican Republic. In 2006 President George W. Bush signed into law a measure that allows MLB teams to import an unlimited amount of minor league players (Grassi 2007). Did MLB then cut back on their Dominican operations? No. Instead, eight teams have opened multi-million dollar academies since then.

## **Conclusion**

Major League Baseball's increased involvement in the Dominican Republic has yielded substantial benefits for the league. As the league's presence and recruiting techniques in the Dominican Republic have evolved to be ever more intense, widespread, and committed, they have become impressively efficient and thorough. Consequently, the league is able to find talent relatively easily due to the direct relations it has with Dominican communities and individuals within Dominican baseball society. There are very few steps between being a normal player on any ball field in the Dominican Republic and being an official rookie in MLB's system. To become a rookie in the minor

leagues, a Dominican does not have to pass through various processes that entail local media attention, secondary school and college coaches, practices with MLB scouts, the draft and the final signing. While one or more of these things can occur in the Dominican context, they are not necessarily an integral part of the process. In the Dominican Republic, any 17 year old kid that shows himself to be a good ball player can easily connect to the individual that will get him to the MLB scout (a *buscón*) or the MLB scout himself. It is direct and efficient. The efficiency of MLB's Dominican system is further accentuated by the fact that the league is able to scout every nook and cranny in the country. It may do so directly by sending its own personnel to a certain place or it may do so indirectly by using a *buscón* as an intermediary. It is as if MLB is able to wring the country dry of every drop of MLB level talent that it has. Effectively, the league has created conditions under which any Dominican youth, no matter how slight the chance he has of making it to the Big Leagues, has a direct and easy path to showing his talents to a MLB scout.

It is worth mentioning that the academies and the recruitment system of MLB are not without controversy. For instance, critics have pointed out allegations of the use of performance enhancing drugs among young baseball hopefuls. Especially important are the criticisms aimed at the league because of its implicit encouragement for kids to drop out of school and pursue baseball. (Wasch 2009). However, one may ask, "What are the exact responsibilities of the academies in terms of education, housing, etc.? Should they pick up the slack of the Dominican government?" Nevertheless, such issues are beyond the scope of the present work, which is simply focused on understanding why Dominicans are coming to dominate Major League Baseball.

## **Chapter 4: Dímelo otra ve'**

The reasons that Dominicans make their way into MLB are varied and operate via different mechanisms. The socio-cultural hegemony of baseball in the Dominican Republic and the dire economic circumstances in which many find themselves act as impetuses that propel young men to play the sport and to pursue it intensely. Complementing these processes is the system of recruitment and development that MLB has developed in the country that effectively funnels players into MLB. These three phenomena – baseball's importance in Dominican culture, the nation's poverty, and MLB's system – create a dynamic that pushes Dominican youth into baseball and subsequently pulls them into MLB and out of the Dominican Republic.

### **The Push**

Dominican youth grow up in an environment that heavily influences them to play baseball and pushes them into the sport. Their culture is steeped in baseball, a fact which historically allowed the sport to dominate other public activities. This foundation provided fertile grounds for baseball to grow and still makes up part of the hegemonic structure that it maintains in society. Especially in modern times, this structure has been expanded and strengthened by the economic incentives associated with the game.

Together, these two factors –tradition/culture and money - provide a powerful catalyst that pushes Dominican boys to pursue the sport intensively.

As discussed in Chapter 2, however, the exact nature of this “push” is hard to define. It is hard to know how much of it is grounded in socio-cultural norms and how much of it is grounded in desires for financial gain. Nevertheless, both have played and continue to play an integral role in the rise of Dominican *peloteros* in MLB. Together, they constitute a powerful force that pushes young Dominicans to pursue baseball.

### **The Pull**

Over the past 20 years Major League Baseball has constructed a system of recruitment and development within the Dominican Republic that is highly efficient at mining the country’s talent base. As demonstrated above, the increases in Major League Baseball’s activities in the country are directly correlated with the rise of Dominican players in the United States. MLB’s system of recruitment and development has provided the mechanism by which Dominicans have been “pulled” from the country into the U.S. leagues.

### **Further Concerns**

As social scientists well know, no topic of study ever has a clear-cut answer. This fact is evident in the present study. For instance, the push is known to be composed of a socio-cultural component and an economic one, although how much power each respective influence has in driving any one particular kid into baseball is not easily discernible. For a kid from the small middle class, perhaps the socio-cultural norms

which dictate that he plays baseball are more important than any financial lure the game has. On the other hand, a kid from a marginalized neighborhood may view baseball as his only viable means of escaping a life of poverty. In his case, the intimate ties between baseball and Dominican society cannot be discounted as having brought him into the game; however, the possibility of economic gain might “outweigh” such ties in the reasoning that the young man has to pursue the game intensely. Despite these shortcomings, we can still understand the overarching themes and factors that influence the process that takes a Dominican kid from the local diamond to the ballparks of MLB. I have tried to accomplish such a feat, although I recognize that other factors that have not been analyzed as thoroughly in this paper have played a role in the phenomenon of the “Dominican Domination” of MLB. For instance, the already mentioned 1947 end of segregation in MLB and the U.S. embargo against Cuba were historical moments that helped set the contemporary scene of Dominican baseball. Still, we must seek what is most important and what offers an explanation of the material under study in a way that characterizes and explains the mechanisms at work? MLB’s broken color barrier opened the way for Dominicans into the league, but it cannot explain why the country has been so good at sending its citizens to MLB. Similarly, the embargo against Cuba provides a reason for why MLB went to the Dominican Republic, but it does not elucidate the methods and fundamental reasons by which so many Dominican ball players are coming to the U.S. It is quite possible that if Cuba had not been shut off to MLB this Dominican phenomenon might be a Cuban one. Still, we need to know *why* it might be a Cuban one, and hence *why* it is a Dominican one. The reason it is a Dominican phenomenon is explained in the emergence of MLB’s recruitment and player development system that

has taken advantage of and combined with the social and economic conditions in the country.

## The Collision

Some people may ask “Why are Dominicans so good at baseball?” This question, however, may be misleading. We cannot say that Dominicans are any “better” at baseball than Americans or Cubans or Venezuelans. If countries in Africa had been exposed to baseball, would they be “good”? Would Nigerians or Senegalese be rising stars in MLB? The reason that Dominicans are seen as being so “good” or talented at baseball owes itself to their strong representation within MLB. Thus, the real question is that of this paper, namely “Why are there so many Dominicans in MLB?” As we have seen, they come from a country in which the population’s entire life complex upholds baseball in an important way. The sport is intimately connected to the social, cultural, economic, and even political realities in which Dominicans live. The game and its associated apparatuses “push” and “pull” young Dominicans into MLB via a powerful dynamic that is responsible for the Dominicanization of the U.S. game.

This dynamic plays itself out often and has become a defining characteristic of modern Dominican society. It directs a young boy to the baseball field, where he may pursue the game as a pastime for years, slowly honing his skills and becoming extremely adept with a glove and a bat. It may even make the game a dream and a goal that dominates every other. The young boy works, and he dreams. At some point, he may pursue MLB, going to a tryout or looking for the services of a *buscón*. On the other

hand, one of the many scouts or their affiliates may find him. Either way, the boy and MLB inevitably collide.

## The Dream

October 30, 2013 is a day few in Boston will forget. Their Red Sox, losers of 93 games the year before, beat the St. Louis Cardinals to win the World Series. The pride felt because of their championship that night extended beyond Boston, however. It even went beyond the United States to a tiny country in the Caribbean, mired in poverty and on the edges of the developed world's radar. From there came the Red Sox's beloved slugger David Ortiz, and he came with thunder. Hammering out an astounding .688 batting average during the series and reaching base 19 times in 25 at bats, Ortiz was awarded the World Series MVP trophy. Tagged by ESPN as "The face of the Red Sox franchise," he represented the possibilities for those Dominican youth I saw in *Cienfuegos* and *La Piedra* (MacMullan 2013). Indeed, growing up in a baseball crazy culture with heavy economic incentives to pursue the game and a direct and simple path to MLB, those boys have the push and the chance. Perhaps one of them, too, will deliver home runs on the world's biggest stage.

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