

# The Dominican Republic Major League Baseball Academies: Facilities of Opportunity

Latin American and Caribbean Studies Capstone at Washington and Lee  
University, Winter 2017

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**Sixto Sánchez: Eighteen-year-old Dominican native, aspiring Major League Baseball pitcher, and high school graduate hopeful. Pictured above after his eighth grade graduation at the Phillies academy in Boca Chica.**

(David Swanson, *Phillies Prospect Sixto Sánchez the latest fascination in Latino pitching pipeline*, 2017)

## **The Dominican Republic Major League Baseball Academies: \$ Facilities of Opportunity \$**

### **I. Introduction**

There are two major religions in the Dominican Republic: Catholicism and baseball, but the sport dominates the lives of Dominican young men. With the exception of the United States, the Dominican Republic produces the most Major League Baseball players because of the island's bottomless innate talent and genuine passion for the sport. Young Dominican baseball players have one goal: to be signed by a major league team. It symbolizes success. It is their ticket out of poverty. However, the transition to the MLB is not immediately to the United States and onto Wrigley Field or Fenway Park. Once they sign, they are uprooted within hours from their two bedroom, dirt floor home to their team's academy usually located on the southeast side of the small island.

The academies are a vital part of the baseball culture in the Dominican Republic. They serve as a launching site into the ranks of the major leagues. Built in the 1980s, the academies are owned by Major League Baseball clubs whose goal is to make the players "MLB-ready." However, the majority of Dominican natives in the academies never become "MLB-ready" and never fulfill their dream of playing professional baseball. For those natives, the academies serve a different, but also a very important, function: they are an opportunity to develop as a person.

The rise of Latino players in Major League Baseball is in large part due to the success of the baseball academies in the Dominican Republic. These institutions are often overlooked, but they are arguably the most essential key in the transformation a Dominican player's life in the Caribbean and for a chance at success in the United States. Whether or not the player makes it to the major leagues, the academies are platforms where young Dominican men are offered the tools for development, personally and professionally. Thus, the academies are very valuable to the lives of Dominican young men between the white lines of the diamond and beyond.

## **II. Dominican Legends**

The dream of many Dominican young men is to play professional baseball. That dream is rooted in the success many other natives have had at the professional level. For example, Major League Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher and three-time Cy Young Award winner, Dominican Republic native, Pedro Martínez, is most notably known for his five-year stint with the perennial Boston Red Sox (Milton). The average baseball fan remembers him for his incredible feats and his leadership on the mound for the Red Sox in the 2004 World Championship series, which they went on to win. Martínez made history for all of Major League Baseball, but especially for the Latin American players in the MLB. He became the first Latin American player to reach 300 strikeouts in a single season and 3,000 strikeouts in a career (Milton).

Pedro Martínez is just one of the hundreds of Dominican players that have experienced major league success. The history of Dominican players in the United States is truly impressive. Today, the Dominican Republic sends more players to the majors than any other foreign country. In 2016, more than eighty-three Dominicans held spots on the starting rosters of all 30 MLB teams (Lagesse). This made up over 10% of the entire league, and since the early 2000s this percentage has increased every season (Lagesse).

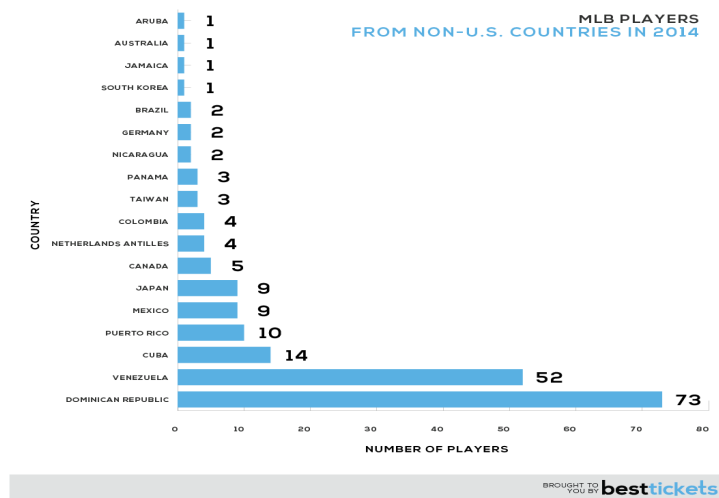


Figure 1: MLB Players by Country in 2014 (Powell-Morse, 2014)

Although these statistics seem promising for the future of a young Dominican baseball player, the path to the highest stage is not easy or guaranteed. The island in the Caribbean is home to some of the most natural baseball talent in the world, but not all of them will end up playing baseball in the MLB. For the eighty-plus Dominican players in the majors today and for the hundreds of Dominican players who fail to make it past the academies, it is their experience in the academies that is most important to their personal and professional development. Institutions built and funded by MLB teams serve as the nurturing grounds for the young Dominican players to teach them

important life skills and qualities to enjoy a stable and responsible life—whether that is an MLB player or a hardworking, family man in the Dominican Republic.

Pedro Martínez's journey to the major leagues passed through an MLB academy. He was born in the small and impoverished town of Manoguayabo. He lived in a house made of palm wood and tin for a roof and shared a mattress for a bed with his five siblings on the dirt floor (Gedda 124). His passion for baseball however was not hindered by his family's unfortunate conditions. He used scrap materials for a glove and bat, and often followed his older brother, Ramon Martínez, on his journey to the major leagues (Gedda 124). Pedro's talent was coincidentally noticed at the Los Angeles Dodgers Academy when he was there carrying his brother's bags. He knew his only ticket out of poverty was to make it into the academy and hopefully make it to the United States. The Dodgers officially signed him in 1988 at the young age of sixteen. After spending close to four years at the academy, he made his major league debut in August 1992 (Gedda 123). There is no doubt that Pedro Martínez had exceptional talent, but his talent alone did not make him ready to compete against the men in the MLB. He needed seasoning, training and mentoring, which he received at the Dodgers academy in the Dominican Republic. Many of the skills he learned at the academy have served him well in his life after baseball. He is now a baseball analyst for the MLB network (Milton).

Miguel Tejada, born into a family of eleven children in the poor town of Baní, was destined for a life of poverty and socioeconomic struggle. He learned to beg for food at the young age of three and by age six, he shined shoes for his family's income so that one day they could have running water and electricity (Gedda 136). With a milk carton for a glove, Tejada caught the eyes of the Oakland A's in the late 1980s and they uprooted him to their academy for development before joining the majors (Gedda 137).

Bartolo Colón's journey to pitching fame is another "rags to riches" story. Similar to Tejada, he used a milk carton for a glove and tightly bound rags for a ball (Gedda 139). He worked long twelve-hour days in the fields with his father so that they could have clean water to drink and wash themselves (Gedda



**Image 1: Raymel Flores, 16 year old native of San Pedro de Macorís living his last days in his tin roof, 2 bedroom house. (Hanson, 2011)**

139). Colón's story is unusual in that he was signed a bit older than his Dominican companions. At the age of twenty in 1993, Colón signed with the Atlanta Braves and left his home in rural and poor Altamira for professional coaching, a roof over his head and adequate meals (Gedda 140). In addition to Martínez, Tejada and Colón, there are hundreds of stories of Dominicans who have the same goal of playing professional

baseball. Since the academies inception in the 1980s, that dream has become more attainable.

These are just a few examples of how the MLB academies entirely uproot a Dominican boy's life of poverty and offer him an opportunity for success and wealth. Without acceptance into an academy, they most likely will never receive formal education. 58.9% of boys that attend first grade stay in school until 5<sup>th</sup> grade and 27% of all Dominican boys make it to secondary schooling (Hanlon 236). Even more startling, only 62% of male children in the Dominican Republic attend high school ("Beyond Baseball"). With the lack of formal education in the country, spending the days working and making money for the family is much more valuable. One of the only ways to receive an adequate education is through the academy, therefore, most mothers and fathers hope their sons are talented enough to be signed. One in forty Dominican young men make it into the academy, meaning that approximately 2.5% of all Dominican young men are given the opportunity to achieve the professional status and aid their family out of severe poverty (Hanlon 239). The academies are developing the future of Major League Baseball, as well as offering the resources for personal greatness in a country of men and women that seek better opportunities everyday. Even though only roughly 2% of all Dominican men make a living in professional baseball, those who do not make it to the majors, walk away from the academies with more personal development than they would attain without the academy (Hanlon 239). With a

national poverty index of 33%, the hope is that someday the academies will directly assist in lowering the number of Dominicans who live in extreme poverty (The World Bank).

The most unanswered and often overlooked question about the academies is what does the future hold for Dominican players who do not advance to the major leagues—those without the last name Tejada, Martínez or Colon. Since most Dominican men in the academies never get to play in the United States, it is important to understand the impact the academy has on these players after a team releases them. Although it may seem that those who do not make it past the academies are destined for failure, they do continue to succeed. The academies offer an opportunity for education that can lead to job opportunities they may not have gotten otherwise if they never made it to the academies. Therefore, regardless of the outcome, major leagues or not, Dominican young men who earn spots in the baseball academies are on track to succeed as players and, more importantly, as overall persons.

### **III. Pre-Academy Life**

Before making it to the major leagues in the United States, Dominican players must go through the ranks of the professional baseball system. Many players in the Dominican Republic are born with natural and raw talent for the sport. However, it takes those with the passion for the sport to truly succeed. At young ages, they start



pickup games in dirt fields with equipment made of whatever materials available. Even after long days of work or some sort of informal education, they will play until the sun goes down and until they can no longer see the ball. They invest time into practice and games so that when they come of the age to enter the academies, they can stand out among all Dominican players and move onto the United States.

### *Buscones*

It is common that *buscones*, or scouts, aid in the steps leading up to contractual offers to Dominican players. They cannot be officially signed by an MLB team and attend the academies until they are sixteen years old (Hopkins). In the baseball mecca that is the Dominican Republic, this age determines the futures of many young men. *Buscones* typically uproot the players as young teenagers out of their needy family homes and provide them with the best training they can receive before receiving professional training at the academies (Gedda 58). They prepare the players to be their absolute best come time for signing. In return, the *buscones* receive a commission for the signed contract.

However, the *buscones* can be a controversial element of the scouting process. The services and assistance that they provide are either considered essential or detrimental to the overall development of the Dominican players. First, the majority of baseball critics claim that they are key elements in the baseball industry in the Dominican

Republic. They are vital and critical pieces to a player's advancement (Gedda 65). Being natives of the island, they understand the young players more than a major league team would understand them at their young age. They partner with teams to achieve the ultimate goal of making it to the majors. They are for the most part, free of MLB regulation, and operate under few strict rules (Hopkins). As the academies are progressing, MLB teams are partnering with the *buscones* to find the most talented Dominican players (Hopkins). Therefore, without the *buscones*, the major league teams may never notice some of these players. They are critical components to the path of professional success for Dominican players.

On the other hand, some major league coaches and administrators consider the *buscones* detrimental to the player development process altogether. Since they are free of most MLB regulation, some *buscones* participate in illegal activity to enhance the performance of their players. This kind of activity includes document fraud and steroid use (Farrey). Many Dominican young men are talented enough before they reach the official signing age of sixteen, so *buscones* lie about their age to major league teams (Gedda 62). Additionally, some *buscones* want to give their players every possible competitive edge, so they turn to illegal performance enhancing drugs (Gedda 62). In the Dominican Republic, many players have the talent and ability, but they lack in strength and power because they were malnourished and lacked the resources for proper meals for developing young players. In the Dominican Republic, most

performance enhancing drugs, including testosterone, are legal and easily sold at cheap prices in pharmacies (Llenas). Erick Almonte, Dominican player for the Milwaukee Brewers Triple-A team, served a suspension for testing positive in 2013 (Llenas). He admitted that steroid use among Dominican players on the island is a problem rooted in the *buscones* and their ignorance to MLB regulation (Llenas). Their illegal activity is often caught and they hurt the player's chance at being signed (Gedda 63). Since "baseball is the maximum" in the Dominican Republic, *buscones* are willing to risk reputation and a player's future by giving him everything necessary to reach that "maximum" (Gedda 18).

Often times, *buscones* establish their own version of academies for younger boys and recruit them to train until they can be signed to an MLB team. At ages twelve or thirteen, *buscones* recruit players to their own programs, but they are not regulated at all (Baustista). Instead of academies, they are more like baseball "farms" because families sign a consent form to take them out of school, if they have been attending, to be trained at the meager facilities owned by the *buscones* themselves (Bautista). For the most talented young men in the Dominican, this is the first step out of poverty. Even though they are still living in poor conditions, they are one step closer to the official academies. When viewed in this light, *buscones* are one of the most integral parts of getting Dominicans into the academy. To Dominican young men, the *buscones* also represent hope and a future out of poverty. Although they do not receive any education, books or

computers to learn about anything other than baseball, the experience is highly beneficial to their future on the field.

The most famous and successful Dominican *buscón* is Enrique Soto. He runs a “baseball-player factory” in Baní, made up of over one-hundred young Dominican players at a time looking to be the next Miguel Tejada, one of Soto’s first products (Farrey). He pushes his players in batting practices, field drills and weight training sessions for most of the day in the sweltering island sun (Farrey). Over the past few decades, he has attracted hundreds of young teenagers to leave home and train with him. Some reports claim that Soto participates in the typical illegal activity of *buscones*, and his reputation is tainted by accusations of document fraud and substance abuse (Gedda 63). However, Soto disagrees strongly and is confident that without his program there would be fewer Dominican players in the major leagues (Farrey). Soto is just one example of the hundreds of *buscones* in the Dominican Republic.

Although major league teams use *buscones* to discover the best talent in the Dominican Republic, major league teams also scout young players. Clubhouses have invested much of their foreign spending for the purpose of acquiring the prospects in the Dominican Republic (“Phillies expect”). For example, the Philadelphia Phillies have recently allocated millions of dollars to specially appointed Dominican scouts to find the best available talent (“Phillies expect”). In order to keep up with the competitive

baseball market, teams must heavily focus on acquiring the Dominican talent by using methods in addition to the *buscones*.

Buscones are no doubt controversial figures. On balance, their benefit to the baseball industry in the Dominican Republic is greater than the harm they may cause to the players and their teams. In the end, *buscones* are essential pieces to the player advancement and development before they reach the academies.

#### IV. Academy Structure

Today, all thirty MLB teams have academies in the Dominican Republic. Since the inception of the academies in the 1980s, the number of Dominicans signed to the MLB has starkly increased. Today, four hundred to five hundred Dominicans are signed each year (Rojas). This increase in signees is largely because of the capacity in the academies (Rojas). They house seventy to eighty players at a time (Rojas). When the Dominican teenagers step foot into the academy their life immediately changes and they become one step closer to success. Today, most of the academies are located in San Pedro de Macorís, La Romana and Boca Chica. There are also a few located in



**Image 2: The four major cities for academies are located on the southeast side of the island: Santo Domingo, Boca Chica, San Pedro de Macorís and La Romana. (University of South Florida, 2017)**

the capital city of Santo Domingo (Kurlansky).

The academies were initially introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the first academy was not finished until 1987 for the Los Angeles Dodgers, Campo Las Palmas, which is home of the start of Pedro Martinez's career as a major league baseball player (Rojas). Before the Dodgers' establishment, the MLB was already finding talented players throughout Mexico and the Caribbean, and this caused the baseball industry in the Dominican Republic to boom. Similar institutions were placed in Venezuela, but with the political and social unrest in the country, they were forced to close. Although a great deal of talent comes from Cuba and Mexico as well, academies could not sustain there due to Cuba's relationship with the U.S. and Mexico's own established major league system. Thus, the Dominican Republic was and still remains a perfect destination for baseball talent and MLB investment. On average, it costs a franchise about \$4 million to build an academy in the Dominican Republic (Rojas). The more luxurious and advanced academies can cost up to \$10 million to build (Rojas). In the past five years, teams have relocated and upgraded their facilities to provide the Dominican players with the best possible resources for development (Rojas). For example, the Philadelphia Phillies and the Minnesota Twins partnered to build a shared facility that is more modern, more accommodating and much larger than their previous separate facilities ("Phillies expect").

Once a Dominican player signs with an MLB team, he immediately leaves home and moves into the academy. Dominican players are signed in two different ways. First, the most talented players, found by either team scouts or *buscones*, are recognized in the desolate fields of their hometown and are offered contracts on the spot (Gedda 48). The alternative process for signing is through a 30-day tryout period. Teams can invite unsigned players for no more than 30 days to be evaluated for consideration of a contract. However, a decision usually takes no more than one week (Gedda 49). Ultimately, once a coach is convinced that a player has potential to be one of the best in the league, he is signed. At that moment, the coach provides the player with the glimpse of opportunity out of poverty. That moment gives the player a sense of accomplishment by itself. Most likely, the player grew up watching older friends or siblings who vied for a contract or even left home for the academies. This is a pivotal and memorable time in his life.

While at the academy, the player is housed in a dormitory with six to eight other players in a suite-style room while all sharing the same dream of reaching the major leagues. Although sharing a rather large dormitory with a few other players may not sound ideal, it is luxury compared to that player's previous living conditions. Before the academy life, they are living with up to ten of their siblings in a one-room shack on one mattress for all (Baustista). The dormitories are kept spotlessly clean and often resemble military quarters with shoes lined up perfectly under the beds (Kurlanksy 184). The

living quarters are equipped with computer labs with Internet access and video game systems to keep the young men entertained when they are not on the field or in the classroom (Baustista). All of these resources are foreign amenities to natives of a developing nation.

In addition to luxurious living quarters, the academies provide the players with proper weight training instruction and dietary needs. When Dominican players arrive at the academy, they are often undersized and undernourished because of their meager lifestyle. Their natural baseball talent made them attractive prospects, but they typically need to be stronger and healthier to succeed in the major leagues. Atlanta Braves academy trainer, Gary Aguirre, speaks to the transformation he has seen in the physicality of the Dominican players through their time at the academies. He explains that they are "built up" so that by the time they leave the academy, whether they go to the United States or back home, they are much bigger and stronger than when they started (Kurlansky 193). Typically, they all receive three meals and two snacks a day (Kurlansky 194). Their meals consist mostly of a standard Dominican diet, such as rice, beans and chicken, to start. However, the kitchens gradually incorporate American foods--hamburgers, pizza, or even pancakes--so that if and when they reach the United States, they are comfortable with the food (Kurlansky 194). Even their everyday meals are a crucial part of the overall development of the young men. They are taught proper nutritional value and what it takes to fuel their bodies (Kurlansky 194). Without the



academies, they may never receive this kind of guidance and understand what proper nourishment their bodies need.

The most recently renovated academy is the joint-facility between the Philadelphia Phillies and the Minnesota Twins. This academy complex is a central example of the type of



**Image 3: The Phillies and Twins joint academy in Boca Chica. (Rand, 2017)**

advancement MLB teams are making. The two franchises found it financially sounder to buy land together and share certain resources. The teams do have separate dormitory buildings, fields, batting cages, offices, coaches and administrators, however, they share necessary services such as grounds keeping crews and kitchen staff (“Phillies expect”). The advancement of this large facility can be seen on all sides of player development, including the baseball, educational and lifestyle aspects. The teams have invested in high-end nutritional specialists who help chefs provide the most appropriate meals for the players (“Beyond Baseball”). The school classrooms are equipped with air conditioning and comfortable desks and learning spaces (“Beyond Baseball”). There are three baseball fields for each team and they are perfectly manicured every day (“Beyond Baseball”). In addition, the weight rooms and batting cages are filled with the most advanced state of the art resources (“Beyond Baseball”). The living quarters

include spacious bedrooms with comfortable beds (“Beyond Baseball”). They also get to enjoy other amenities, such as the Internet, pool tables and flat screen TVs for entertainment (“Beyond baseball”).

When academies were first introduced in the Dominican Republic, the facilities were not as accommodating, and they have transformed significantly in the last decade. Most of the teams have multiple fields within the complex. At first, they had only one field to work with the players (“Phillies expect”). Today, multiple batting cages and pitching mounds are the norm among academies. Weight room sizes have increased substantially and now almost all of the players can use the gyms at the same time (Lagesse). The living quarters have also improved since their original inception. Initially, dormitory buildings were only big enough to sleep thirty players to a room. Today, no more than six players share a dormitory. The details of the bedrooms, bathrooms and common rooms are also intricate and unique to each team’s facility (“Beyond Baseball”). The Dominican players appreciate the luxurious lifestyle because it is a major upgrade from their tin roof and shared bed lifestyle.

The ultimate goal for each major league franchise is the overall success for the players. To do so, many franchises understand the importance of bringing happiness to the players through the renovation and advancement of the academies. Although they only will end up taking roughly 10% of the players in the academies to the minors and majors, teams are starting to feel responsible for the development of all players in a

more holistic way ("Beyond Baseball"). Joe Jordan, director of player development for the Phillies, believes that if you "send a happier player to bed... A happier player is going to wake up ready to get after it the next morning" ("Beyond Baseball"). This kind of approach helps develop the players on the field and in the classrooms. They are receiving a lifestyle that they would never have gotten the opportunity to live without the academies. Thus, major league teams are contributing to the overall development of the youth in the country.

A typical day of sixteen-year old Dominican players living in an academy is as follows. It begins at 6:30 am for a wakeup call and a hearty breakfast to fuel them for the day of training and school. After breakfast, they play loosely organized ball games and get warmed up for the day ahead of them. During the mid-morning before lunch, they attend their required daily English conversation classes. These hours of the day are as critical as their time spent on the field. This is so because they are learning the language of the major leagues. These courses prepare them to survive in the United States. Without this kind of instruction and preparation, they would not acclimate as well in the majors. After a nutritional lunch, they continue on their player development plan, which includes either a weight training session, batting practice or field practice, followed by more classes. The end of the day usually concludes with another game. Teams emphasize the practice of games because before reaching the academy, few have ever played in a regulated game and it is important that they get comfortable with the

regulation and pace of an MLB sanctioned game. Usually, the players have strict curfews and bedtimes, so that they get enough rest for the next day to perform their best. This kind of disciplined and routine lifestyle prepares them well for life in the majors as well as for life beyond. Without the academy, they may never experience such a lifestyle.

### **V. Education at the Academies**

The most significant change to the academies over the last thirty years is the implementation of education into the everyday schedule of the players. Since 2012, most academies offer a high school program for all players (“Beyond Baseball”). When they are not at batting practice or collecting grounders in the field, they are studying. The majority of the Dominican players have not been in school since they were twelve, or they never were in school. Their everyday classes consist of learning conversational English and reading and critical thinking skills. They also learn basic mathematics, history, geography and art. In addition to the traditional academic courses, they also learn life skills that will help them from struggling as a foreigner in the United States. They take classes on financial planning, health, nutrition and acculturation techniques. The interesting aspect about the value in these educational opportunities is that they also provide alternatives to playing baseball to the majority of players who are not fortunate or talented enough to move to the major leagues.

The educational systems that have been put into place at the academies serve as the first structured and disciplined environment for the young Dominican players. As previously stated, before arriving at the academies, they have very little schooling and the quality of it was typically poor. Therefore, they never worked on strict schedules or were responsible for their own development. In order for the players to succeed as professional athletes, the academies know they must transform the lifestyle of the young players. Attending class and practice every day on a timely schedule adds to the educational value in the academies. This prepares them for the rigors of life in the major leagues when they travel and must manage their time and priorities. In addition, it provides those who do not make it to the major leagues a sense of structure for their lives after the academies. They will have a better understanding of the importance of discipline in order to succeed in life past baseball.

### **Holistic Approach**

Major league teams have taken measures to advance their academies over the last decade and especially in regards to education. The educational resources have advanced as much as the baseball aspects, which contributes to the overall development of the player. Life after baseball can also be difficult, so that is why some major league teams have instituted a high school education program at their academies. Prior to these programs, only English conversation classes and other very basic courses were mandatory (“Beyond Baseball”). The most transformative example of the educational

system at the academies can be seen through the Philadelphia Phillies franchise. They have adopted a program that puts their Dominican players' educational attainment at the forefront of their priorities for the players ("Beyond Baseball"). Of course, baseball development is the priority and is the most important aspect of the academies, but the Phillies are starting to expand their goals of the academies ("Beyond Baseball"). They feel it is their responsibility to educate the players since many of them will not get any of these resources again when they leave the academies. Many Dominican players came through the academy with little to no schooling background. Most come in at age sixteen with the knowledge level of a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. There is a lot they can learn to help

them on the field and in the rest of their lives.

Rafael Carvajal was nineteen when he

arrived in Boca Chica at the Phillies academy.

He was considered older than the age that

scouts typically like signing Dominican players.

Before signing a \$5,000 bonus offer with the

Phillies, he worked for his father as a *cobrador*,

the man who collects bus fares on the round

trip rides between the Haiti border and Santo

Domingo ("Beyond Baseball"). He dropped

out of school at age thirteen because his father needed him to work to financially



**Image 4: Rafael Carvajal, 19 years old: Phillies Dominican pitching prospect and high school diploma hopeful. (Swanson, *Beyond Baseball: Phillies offer Dominican players a high-school education*, 2017)**

support the family. At this point in his life, he could not read or write so his future was forever collecting bus fares, unless he signed with a major league team (“Beyond Baseball”). Although at age nineteen, he already had slim odds of being signed, he kept pitching and hoped to be noticed by a professional team. Soon enough the Phillies were impressed with his abilities to give him a bed at their Dominican academy (“Beyond Baseball”). This was his ticket for opportunity. His future of collecting bus fares was drifting farther away and his dream of escaping poverty was becoming a reality.

Carvajal is one of the seventy-eight players living in the Phillies academy today (“Beyond Baseball”). Contrary to what people probably believe, Carvajal is more like the majority of the players living there. There are more players who sign small bonuses and never leave the island, but at least they get to walk away with an education that will take them farther than any of the jobs they had before attending the academies. Carvajal is now in the equivalent of 6<sup>th</sup> grade and has hopes of getting better at baseball and receiving a high school education before he is sent to the United States or back to his hometown. He attends English, math, reading and critical thinking classes, which all teach him important skills to succeed past the baseball field (“Beyond Baseball”). Carvajal is one of the many players whose life was completely transformed during his stay at the academy.

Inside the Phillies academy, eleven players received a high school diploma in January 2017 (“Beyond Baseball”). Most of those eleven players were only signed for \$1

million or less, and are struggling to reach the major leagues. Although they are already among the most fortunate players in the Dominican Republic because they are in the academy, they are in the group who will never make it to the major leagues. However, players like Carvajal including Luis Encarnacion and Jose Taveras, nineteen and twenty-three years old, explained the feeling of walking across the stage to receive their diploma as "a dream come true" ("Beyond Baseball"). These eleven Dominican Phillies players symbolize true success outside of the baseball field in the Dominican Republic. Even though those players may not reach the United States, they feel that they have succeeded because they accomplished feats they would not have been able to without the baseball academies. If they are released and return to their hometown, they have a foundation to help them move forward in life. They will be able to acquire better jobs and help their families out of poverty and onto better opportunities.

Jose Bautista, Dominican professional right fielder, exudes the importance of major league teams supplying players with an education in order to succeed past the field. As contributing editor of "The Cycle" published by the *Players' Tribune*, he expresses his concern for Dominican players who must make a living after unsuccessfully achieving major league status. Before the implementation of high school programs in the academies in the 2000s, he was upset with the majority of Dominicans who were "spit back out" into their respective hometowns with no alternative plan for personal achievement (Bautista). They returned to a life of poverty and minimal



economic advancement opportunities. Although he admits the MLB has made significant improvements to the educational resources at the academies in the last ten years, he strongly believes there should be an educational standard for all MLB teams to follow (Bautista). Such a standard could be to provide all the players with a high school degree before being released from the academy. This would give the roughly 97% of players who never make it to the major leagues an option for a legitimate career (Bautista). With such an accomplishment, they could continue with more schooling, move to the United States for social and economic opportunities, or secure a well-paying job in the Dominican Republic. As major league teams are feeling more responsibility for the personal development of all the players in the academies, including those who will not advance to the majors, this type of standard could become a reality in the Dominican Republic.

## **VI. More than the Players**

In addition to a high school degree program for the players, the Phillies academy has also begun to offer degrees to Dominican coaches and scouts that the team has hired (“Beyond Baseball”). This concept is very new to the typical academy structure. Of course, this program is dependent upon financial means of a franchise. Fortunately, the Phillies are able to provide these services. More teams are beginning to implement similar educational programs that extend past the high school level players (“Beyond Baseball”). The Phillies and other teams have been taking a more altruistic and holistic

approach to the structure of their Dominican academies, which supports their investment in the people of the island as a whole. They are hoping to give the country, not just the baseball players, a chance for achievement, personally and professionally.

A humbling example of how the Phillies are transforming more than the players is through the story of Alex Concepcion, the thirty-two-year-old pitching coach. It was about fourteen years before his high school graduation day in January 2017 when he stepped foot as a young Dominican player into the Phillies academy with the same dream as the hundreds who passed through before and after him. He wanted to make it to the major leagues, but his dream stopped short at the Phillies minor league team in

Allentown, Pennsylvania (“Beyond Baseball”). He had no choice but to return to his home country without a professional baseball player's salary, high school degree or a sense of any accomplishment. A few years ago, he was asked to be a pitching coach at the academy since he was living in the area and was familiar with many of



**Image 5: Alex Concepcion, Phillies pitching coach and Dominican native, receiving his high school diploma from the academy at age 32. (Swanson, *Beyond Baseball: Phillies offer Dominican players a high-school education*, 2017)**

the players that the Phillies signed (“Beyond Baseball”). Concepcion never felt more accomplished than the day he received his high school degree at the academy (“Beyond

Baseball”). After the heartbreak of not making it to the major leagues, the Phillies academy offered him the opportunity to succeed again.

Although the Phillies are the only clubhouse to have such a program, it is very likely that other teams will follow. If all major league teams adopt similar educational programs that extend past the players, the island will develop much faster. The more natives who receive an education and are given the resources to obtain well-paying jobs, the more the island will flourish. Baseball academies may be the future of development and progress for men in the Dominican Republic.

## **VII. Making it into the Major Leagues**

For the small number of Dominican players that do advance to play in the United States, their lives in the major leagues can be difficult. They are uprooted from the only country they have ever known and given barely any time to adjust to a new home and team. Initially, during the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dominican players had a very difficult time adjusting to their new life in the United States. Without any knowledge of the English language, they struggled to communicate with their teammates, coaches and other people they came in contact with everyday. Many found it difficult to order dinner because they did not know how to speak in English (Lagesse). They even struggled to communicate with their American teammates. As a result, they sometimes even sustained harsh and discriminatory comments from their

teammates and other players in the league (Lagesse). There was a barrier between foreign players and American-born players that seemed everlasting. However, the introduction of educational programs in the academies started to break down that barrier.

Alex Rodriguez, Dominican-American baseball legend, identified the change he witnessed in the abilities of the Dominican players to adjust to and live in the United States after their stay in the upgraded academies. Although Rodriguez did not attend an academy and instead attended the University of Miami, and was drafted from college into the MLB, he has seen many players come through the academies (Rollo 2017). When he started his MLB career in the late 1990s, he was the same age as many of the Dominicans that were coming up from the academies. He remembered their struggle and hardship to acclimate into the professional baseball world in the United States (Rollo 2017). Their American teammates had a difficult time connecting with them since they could not speak, read or write in English. They also did not have much basic knowledge due to a lack of formal education in their early life. Rodriguez recalls that many Dominicans did not know how to text on a cell phone or order a meal at dinner with the team (Rollo 2017). However, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he recounts the slow progress the Dominican players were making, and not just on the field (Rollo 2017). He attributes their improvement in communication and acclimation in the United States to their experiences in the academies, which were much more advanced at that

time than they were in the late 1990s (Rollo 2017). He recognizes that the young Dominican players have grown much more comfortable as a result of their real education in the academies (Rollo 2017). Rodriguez believes that the Dominican players' performance on the baseball field has improved because of their improved adjustment to life in the United States (Rollo 2017).

### **VIII. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Major League Baseball academies in the Dominican Republic have served as valuable venues for increasing the number of Dominicans in the MLB. They also have been valuable in the development of the Dominican players into adulthood even if they never achieve professional baseball status. Since their inception, they have improved their teaching quality both in terms of baseball and life skills. They have become more formal and legitimate institutions, which has also helped control the negative aspects of *buscones*. Specifically, the academies have evolved by providing higher quality living environments, friendships with other Dominican players, weight training instruction, dietary guidance, strong upper level education in English, mathematics, and other subjects, and lessons about American culture. All of this has been accomplished through mentoring and state of the art technology and tools. The end result of this progress is hopefully a career in the major leagues for some, but, for most, social and educational development, which will serve them well for the rest of their lives. In the end, it is their love and passion for baseball which gave them this

opportunity, and it serves as a positive motivation for Dominican young men to continue to play the sport they cherish.

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