

Baseball-Central American version

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

San Jose, Costa Rica—Attending a professional baseball game in Costa Rica is an exercise only for those who take the sport seriously.

Fans who are used to the entertainment that accompanies a major league baseball game in the United States may find one that centers only on baseball a bit dull.

Absent are the garish scoreboards that flash statistics, replays, advertisements and between-inning games of chance. Also missing are the ceremonial first pitches by celebrities, t-shirts shot by cannons into the crowd, seventh-inning stretch exercises and even the waves that make their way around Pro Player stadium when the action gets a bit boring.

Those Costa Ricans who go to games are there for the love of the sport or their loyalty to their favorite teams or players.

Not that baseball is a universal passion or the national pastime here.

In this country where tens of thousands turn out for intensely competitive *futbol* (soccer) matches and where hundreds of thousands take to the streets in endless parades and horn-honking marathons when their national soccer team qualifies for world-class competition, 150 fans at a recent semi-final playoff game seemed pretty weak.

But those fans made up for their small numbers by shouting and whistling enthusiastically for their team and hissing and praying when things didn't go well.

"Aiii, Señor, (Oh Lord)" cried one woman as a ball sped by her team's first baseman into right field for a base hit during the third inning. Her team, Santo Domingo from the San Jose suburb of Heredia was experiencing a poor start that saw the competing Jazz Casinos of San Jose jump to a 4-0 lead early in the game.

Partisanship was evident in the crowd at San Jose's Estadio de Beisbol Antonio Escarré where a late afternoon rainy season downpour had settled the dust and left some of the seats damp or dirty. It was quickly evident that while the Jazz Casinos were the home team, the hearts of the majority of the crowd were with the Santo Domingo players.

"The Jazz are a semi-professional team, mostly made up of Nicaraguans, Cubans and a few Costa Ricans," explained one *aficionado*. "But, the Santo Domingo team consists of all Costa Ricans, so we support our own team," she said, putting her hand over her heart.

Support for the local boys was enhanced by the knowledge that they were not professional players like the Jazz team who receive some remuneration and, thus, are considered at least semi-professional. "Our players have to work at other jobs and play only in their free time," explained another fan.

Unspoken was the long-standing perception among Ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves, that the several thousand Nicaraguan immigrants who have settled in Costa Rica since the regional civil wars of the 1980s are responsible for many of the country's ills including a rising crime rate and problems with unemployment.

Besides, baseball is the number one sport in both Nicaragua and Cuba, so many Costa Ricans feel that players from those nations have an edge over their own men who play in a country where soccer dominates the sports pages and everyday conversation.

As for the Santo Domingo team, several fans pointed out that they won the national championship in 2002. Their obvious wish was that they would repeat that feat this year.

With concentration on the action on the field, there were few distractions that evening to divert attention away from each pitch.

No vendors plied the crowd with beer or cotton candy or inflatable animal characters. No overhead blimps drew eyes away from the action on the field. No flashing announcements or extraneous activities absorbed the interest of fans.

Those who felt a need to eat hurriedly left the stadium between innings to dash across the street to the Soda Beisbol restaurant where the owner/chef was doing a booming business selling hamburgers, hot dogs and cheese or meat-filled empanadas for around 35 cents and soft-drinks for 50 cents.

No one lingered, since the between-innings breaks were short and action would resume quickly.

Typical Latin American courtesy reigns at these events. In a culture where anyone entering a room *must* make the rounds and shake everyone's hand even if they are late, each player on his first time at bat stopped to shake hands with the catcher and umpire.

Even disputes between players and umps showed no animosity punctuated by flailing arms and face to face heated exchanges. Contestants simply made their points in a conversational manner and quietly retreated to the bench or their playing position when the decision was affirmed.

If there was any showmanship among the game's personnel, it was by the home plate umpire. On especially close or important plays his calls were punctuated by dramatic gestures indicating whether the player was safe or out.

Perhaps he had been watching his fellow umps in Major League baseball games from the U.S. that are on cable TV here once or twice a week or the games from the Mexican Baseball League that fill a lot of air time on the weekends.

Games move slowly here—the first four innings of the recent playoff game took two hours. Eventually, the Jazz Casinos prevailed over the Santo Domingo team, 6-4. That was their third win in the best of seven series, dimming the hopes of the faithful that the local boys might repeat their victory this year.

It wasn't an evening for those whose minds wander from the sport or who must be entertained by scoreboard or on-the-field entertainment. It was, simply, a grand night for pure baseball.

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