

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN DOMINICANS SLIDE INTO INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATIONS WITH A SOFTBALL TOURNAMENT

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

As U.S. baseball fans eagerly await the crack of the bat that heralds spring training next month and the regular season in April, local Dominican baseball fans are celebrating the end of the Caribbean winter season and keeping their equipment ready for another round of local tournaments.

For Dominican Republic residents in south Florida, the baseball season never really ends, and for that they give thanks.

“I have played baseball since I was a kid,” explained Rolando Rodriguez of Sunrise who is the president of the Club Quisqueyanos, a sports and cultural club in Miramar that organizes sports teams and other events for area residents.

“Baseball is a national pastime for Dominicans,” Rodriguez said. “If you are born in the Dominican Republic, by the time you start walking your parents buy you a glove, a ball and a bat.”

“In the Dominican Republic, they play on the streets,” said 13-year old Stephanie Castillo of Hollywood who plays baseball at the McNichols Middle School. “You see little kids playing it. When my Dad grew up, that’s all he played.”

Castillo recently attended a softball championship game at Sunview Park in Davie, a popular venue for Dominican baseball year-round. Her father, Luis, plays second base for the club’s Presidente team and is responsible for the club’s entire sports program.

“I played baseball as a kid in the Dominican Republic,” said Rafeal Montesinos of Coral Springs. “I also played college baseball and on teams when I lived in New York.”

Montesinos plays with league teams at Davie’s Sunview Park but also has his own team in Coral Springs. “It’s a mixed team with Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and others. They are a very good team,” he said.

Montesinos said that he is trying to start a girl’s softball team. “It will be the first one in the area.”

The Club Quisqueyanos sponsors several leagues year round, with championship teams going on to play other teams from Orlando, Tampa, New York and even, on occasion, in the Dominican Republic.

“We had a team go to Santo Domingo last year and probably will have one go this year,” Rodriguez said. “Our players plan ahead and take vacation time to make the trips out of town.”

Dominican teams play at Sunview Park three nights a week and on Sunday during their summer and winter leagues. Each season lasts up to 21 weeks, then there are championships and the out-of-town games which work to fill up the year.

Playing baseball not only takes up a lot of time, but it costs money for those who participate. "A player has to be a member of the club to play in our league," Rodriquez explained. "They also have to pay to play in the league."

Payments help to pay for the costs of the park rental, uniforms, equipment and payments to umpires.

Some teams find outside sponsors to help pick up the costs. "We do it for promotion and to help out the clubs," said Luis Tifa, owner of the Santo Domingo Mini Market on Pembroke Road in Hollywood. Tifa's store sponsors two teams throughout the year, and Tifa plays second base on his own team through the Miramar club.

"We see our fathers playing baseball as we grow up and we see it on TV," Tifa explained. "We have it in our blood."

In addition to playing baseball, Tifa worked part-time as a baseball umpire for Dominican teams when he lived in New York. "It's nice to be able to do something you like *and* to get paid for it," he said.

Tifa bought his small market two years ago and carries goods that are of particular interest to the area's growing Dominican population. "We have special seasonings, breads and candy as well as hair products," he said. "We also provide a service to send money back to people in the Dominican Republic and other countries."

The market also is a local outlet for Dominican newspapers. "Our players stop by here all of the time to check out the scores from teams in the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean countries."

The 2000 census showed that there were 10,498 people of Dominican heritage in Broward County, up from 3,489 in 1990, 36,454 in Miami-Dade, up from 23,475 a decade ago and 3,649 in Palm Beach County, an increase from 1,155 in 1990.

Dominicans not only enjoy baseball as a pastime, but they see it also as building character. "Baseball teaches discipline," explained Quilvio Guerreo of Coral Gables who helps coach youth teams at Miami's Martinez Sport Academy. "It also helps young people dedicate themselves to achieving goals and to be a team player."

"It also teaches youth how to walk correctly and to follow orders," said Guerreo, a pitcher, who expects to try out for one or two major league teams in the next few months. "Baseball has kept me and other kids out of a lot of trouble."

The Martinez school trains 86 seven to sixteen year olds in Miami's Allaphatta area, a community heavily populated by Dominicans. The school's owner, Bernardo Martinez of North Miami Beach said that he plans to open another school soon in Miami's Wynwood area.

Martinez said that several Broward County young people also attend his classes. Several of his graduates have gone on to play minor league baseball with San Diego, Milwaukee, Cincinnati and the Independent League of Texas.

Local fans have been watching Caribbean baseball closely in recent weeks as the Caribbean World Series was held earlier this month in Puerto Rico. Championship teams from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Mexico competed in the annual event. Venezuela normally sends a team to the series, but that country's season was cancelled this year because of the extended general strike in opposition to controversial president Hugo Chavez.

This year's series was won by xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. The Dominican Republic last won the series in 1991.

Dominicans aren't the only Latin countries with a passion for baseball, a surprise perhaps to those who believe that soccer is the only sport of interest in the region. In fact, baseball is the number one sport in Nicaragua as well as the Dominican Republic, and very popular in Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Panama and Puerto Rico.

It's popularity is growing so fast in Puerto Rico that the Baltimore Orioles have scheduled several of their regular season games there this year.

While it is commonly believed that American soldiers took baseball to the Dominican Republic, in fact it was Cubans fleeing war in their country between 1868 and 1878 who actually introduced the game to Dominicans.

Two professional teams in the Dominican Republic today can trace their roots back to before the U.S. Marines arrived there in 1916.

Local fans guess that over 120 Dominicans are playing in the major leagues. The best-known, of course, is the Chicago Cub's home run-hitter Sammy Sosa, Boston Red Sox pitcher Pedro Martinez and Texas Rangers shortstop Alex Rodriguez.

Currently, four Dominicans play for the Florida Marlins. They are Jose Cueto, Luis Castillo, Wilson Valdez and Juan Encarnacion.

Meanwhile, south Florida Dominicans take their sport very seriously. "The weather has to be pretty bad for us to cancel a game," said Rodriguez. "Our players really want to play."

“Sometimes we do the field maintenance ourselves. We do our own groundskeeping after a heavy rain and sometimes it is pretty sloppy,” he said.

“During the recent cold spell, we continued to play,” Rodriguez remembered. “Some days we played until midnight and were dressed in three sweaters.”

“When it got really cold, we lit a charcoal fire to warm ourselves up between innings.”

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