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Our Beautiful American (Latin) Pastime

Henry Weinberg

He hustled to the airplane bathroom to eat passport pages, piece by piece, forever destroying the evidence of his fake identity. Knocks began to rap on the door sending him into a scramble. He ripped out the pages with pictures and returned to his seat. He continued, piece by piece, ordering a Guinness to wash it down, then sat anxiously for the duration of the flight. Days later he signed with the Chicago White Sox for \$68 million. Jose Abreu's story is movie material, but it is not uncommon. Aspiring baseball players in Latin America go through unprecedented measures to play in America. Players like Abreu devote their teenage years to baseball because it's an escape from their often poverty-stricken or violence-ridden lives. Major League Baseball has provided countless happy endings for Hispanic players, however, the means to reach 'the show' expose a tricky situation that possesses social and cultural significance. With paths to the MLB marred by unethical developmental practices, shrouded in mystery, and inherently illegal, baseball's dark side is fully underway and under the radar.

Abreu was 26, alongside his fiancée, parents, and sister, on a raft in the dead of night. Immersed in darkness and surrounded by waves at sea, the moment a passing boat sent 15-foot swells over the Abreu's dingy could have been the end, but they survived the 12-hour voyage and arrived in Haiti...to complete the first step of the journey. Abreu said it himself, "It was dangerous, the waves were high, but the Lord was at our side. God gave us the chance to reach our destination." After a brief stay in Haiti to generate fake documents he was on the move again. In the Dominican Republic Abreu got picked up by a local athletic agency in Santo Domingo, eventually leading to him latching on at a New York Yankees training complex in the country. His agents held workouts and showcases, drawing interest from a majority of MLB teams. The Chicago White Sox won the bidding war, and now all Abreu had to do was make it to America. *Sports Illustrated* recently obtained and released evidence on the subject. The story above can be put into overarching context through *SI's* summary of the trend:

The migration of Latin American talent to Major League Baseball—particularly players from Cuba—has long been an

unseemly business, shrouded in don't-ask-don't-tell secrecy. These exodus stories often come suffused with tales of bribes, kickbacks, side deals with smugglers, dubious immigration documents and middlemen skilled at working around immigration laws.

If you can succeed at the pinnacle of baseball, seemingly nothing else matters, which is questionable business ethics and generally just wrong. Major League Baseball represents asylum. Whether one has immigrated illegally or endured the unregulated training complexes. The aforementioned don't-ask-don't-tell nature holds true for both immigrants and those who arrive through the twisted training in other countries. While these players shouldn't be condemned for following their dreams, there are blatant sins occurring along the way, signifying a need for change and - at the very least - truth.

The truth would be ugly. Baseball recruitment in Latin America can be traced back to the 1940s. For the next 60 years it expanded, unregulated and corrupted. Teams would scout players beginning at the age of 10 and establish independent training complexes to house teenage talent. The kids would train and live at these facilities, working to impress ball clubs that would come periodically for showcases. The pressure to be signed combined with the unregulated environment led to rampant usage of steroids. In these often-impoorished communities, it is bootleg horse steroids or veterinarian substances that teenage baseball recruits inject themselves with. An uptick in documented deaths in the early 2000s prompted outcry, to which Rob Manfred Jr., then head of MLB's drug program and *current* MLB commissioner said "We're trying to gather some information and re-evaluate what we want to be doing. We don't want to flush a lot of money down the toilet." The policy changes that soon followed led to additional money for testing of Hispanic players in the minor leagues, but limited action abroad. Countries like the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Cuba have their own leagues out of MLB jurisdiction, so the status quo prevailed.

In 15 years since the initial backlash from the severity of steroids abroad, seemingly the only lesson learned is that using cattle steroids is a poor technique. All 32 teams have baseball operations located in a Latin American country, in fact all 32 teams have training centers in the Dominican Republic alone. Franchises capitalize on these lawless lands to develop pipelines to farm systems. A former executive described the situation by saying, "it's a Third World country, and that's the way [the clubs] treated it.

Today, it is not nearly as lawless as it used to be, but it is far from fair. Buscónes are modern agents who often identify kids with potential and begin training them, eventually putting them on the radar of MLB teams. These street-level trainer/agents broker contracts between the parties... a nice portion also goes to themselves. *The Spanish word translates directly to swindlers.* They are known to falsify documentation and ages, while

encouraging PED usage and identity theft when necessary. It is important to note that buscónes are self-employed, so some utilize proper, selfless means to develop and nurture young players. The recurring problem is that it is totally unregulated. MLB has said that they can't intervene because of antitrust type legislation. That seems like a faulty excuse considering the Major League Baseball Players Association has included buscónes in contractual talks in a joint-representation structure. Not to mention the simple sphere of power and immense oversight an organization like Major League Baseball possesses could most certainly generate action from within foreign governments to implement protocol of some kind. If not, players could still risk subjecting themselves to unfair treatment.

Alexis Quiroz grew up in poverty. Baseball was his savior. In 1995 at age 16 he was offered his first professional baseball contract from the Chicago Cubs. He was hesitant to sign, as many amateur players are first sent to the Dominican Republic - dubbed by other local players as "Vietnam". Yet, he signed for \$6,000 (minus the \$2,000 that went to his buscónes). The lure of Major League Baseball and Wrigley Field was too much to resist, but Quiroz would never make it. He spent a year living with two dozen recruits in a single-bathroom dormitory with no running water in the D.R. They were fed 3 scant meals a day and funneled performance enhancing drugs. The next season Quiroz separated his shoulder and the Cubs cut him.

Quiroz is important because he, unlike almost all others, had a burning desire and found a way to share his story. He came to America and confronted Cubs officials about the conditions in the Dominican Republic - becoming the focus of a *Chicago Tribune* article. He also corroborated on a book detailing his life and its power as a case study in the world of Latin American baseball operations.

Examples like Quiroz generated the first wave of response, occurring around 2003, when the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) went to the Commissioner's Office complaining of widespread injustice. MLB complied, introducing procedure such as providing contracts in Spanish, suggesting a global draft and planning addition drug testing. Earlier I described how the heightened drug screening was drastically limited by a lack of power aboard/cooperation, and the notion of a global draft never picked up much steam. But, at least, after about 65 years, Hispanic players could read and sign a contract that was written in a language they could understand!

However, the second wave of response is underway now in 2018. Within the past few months a Grand Jury of the U.S. Department of Justice has been investigating the MLB with the possibility to prosecute under the Foreign Corrupt Policy Act. In the *Sports Illustrated* dossier, conversations and specific team actions are depicted, summarizing legal aspects by saying:

The dossier also appears to describe efforts to circumvent federal laws and MLB rules requiring Cuban players to establish residency in another country before negotiating and signing with a team. Among those efforts to circumvent, the dossier includes a transcript of a Nov. 21, 2015, text message conversation between two Dodgers executives in which they discuss the need to “shred” a contract signed with a player before MLB had approved the document. There are also indications that dates on other official documents were doctored before they were forwarded to the MLB office. (Carl Prine, SI)

The Los Angeles Dodgers are a team frequently mentioned in the dossier as well as commonly brought up in media outlets due to their famous signings of international players. However, the immoral nature in their activity, and perhaps more shockingly the bluntness of it, is ridiculous. Within the dossier is a chart, dating back to 2015, that ranked recruiting techniques by “Level of Egregious Behavior”, with the average rank being “Significant; aware of and facilitates shadiness” and the most severe being “Criminal; oversees the operation, people and money”. Five Dodger employees earned the “Criminal” rank for their work in Latin America.

Few know that better than former Dodger Yasiel Puig. He had been attempting to slip out of Cuba for over a year, where the \$17 a month he’d get for his baseball career wasn’t cutting it. Puig escaped via boat on his fifth try. After being intercepted by the Cuban government or the U.S. Coast Guard on his previous four attempts, Puig made it to Mexico. There, a crew of smugglers held him for a month waiting for their money to arrive. Puig rarely recounts the tale, but says he faced threats such as a “whack with a machete—“chop off an arm, a finger, whatever, and he would never play baseball again” It took a fake kidnapping planned by Puig’s agents to get him on the move again. Even when he got to America, he was routinely threatened unless he continued paying the smugglers. Puig asked a friend to make a stop and got a guarantee that the situation would be “neutralized.” Soon after the head smuggler was found dead in Cancun (Robertson,3).

Furthermore, once they get to the United states, Latin American players have historically been taken advantage of. Massive new TV deals balloon salaries, making way for some splurges on Hispanic talent for teams like the Dodgers, Red Sox, and a handful of others. However, Jose Fernandez signed with the Marlins and made \$490,000 his first year despite being a previously heralded pitcher. Miguel Tejada got \$2,000 to sign with the Oakland Athletics and was the MVP a couple of years later. Baseball scholar Kevin Kerrane calculated in 1975 that major-league organizations gave U.S.-born players selected in the draft an average signing bonus of \$60,000, while the signing bonuses for foreign-born Latin Americans acquisitions averaged

\$5,000. In 1997 the league average salary was \$1.3 million - the Cleveland Indians signed 40 foreign players for \$700,000 the same year.

The examples I mentioned cover a sizable portion of baseball history, and obviously the salaries overall have continuously risen, but the wage gap is unchanged. Today franchises like the Athletics, Marlins, and Padres bargain hunt with Hispanic players by the dozen (Baseball America). To repeat a quote from earlier "it's a Third World country, and that's the way [the clubs] treated it." Because the "prospects" of the area are often trapped in financial hardship, agents get them for pennies on the dollar, so to speak. Rene Gayo, who worked as the Pittsburgh Pirates Latin American Scouting Director until last year, agreed, saying "These guys, if they don't play in the big leagues they're going to end up selling mangoes in the street." Gayo believes since these teenagers have no other options, MLB's stingy offers are more than enough.

And yes, they are. More Hispanic ball players are coming to America and succeeding, to the tune of over 32% of players on 2018 rosters being Latin American. But there is just so much wrong in the ways that they get here. It's unfair for them and unfair for MLB, as a business, to loophole and discard laws that other businesses have to abide by. There have to be changes and they should come from all sides. It is the duty of Latin American players, like Abreu and Puig, to go to courts of law and divulge the absurdity of their situations. It is the duty of Major League Baseball to actually act like a powerful organization and work with governments to bring about policy. And good god - the players union - the MLBPA has to start standing up for these players and bringing attention to their struggles. It is a travesty that significant portions of their MLB earnings are subject to blackmail and ending up in the hands of gangs and smugglers. It should be a combination of those things. The issue involves all of them to varying degrees and each group has different abilities they can bring to the plate, which at the end of the day is where everyone wants to be.