



# When the Game is Over: Major League Baseball's Practices in Latin America

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## Introduction

In 2020, the oft-used term “America’s favorite pastime” seems antiquated. The sport has served as a comfort in a chaotic world and is not just a phenomenon in the United States. In 2019, 251 players on Major League Baseball (MLB) Opening Day rosters were born outside of the U.S., third only to the totals in 2017 and 2018. Of those 251, over 100 were Dominican and 68 were Venezuelan, with Cuba third at 19, demonstrating the changing demographics of MLB.

Hoping for the next Juan Soto, MLB teams have entered Latin America. And that same belief exists for many in Latin America. Baseball holds significant allure for boys who see the fame and wealth of players like Albert Pujols, leading tens of thousands to flock to baseball programs, including 2-8% of Dominican boys aged 10-20. The desire to escape poverty is even more fierce in Venezuela, a country recently scarred by economic troubles. The instability has led MLB teams to withdraw from the country, making it more difficult for young players to get signed. Still, many parents go hungry or take on additional jobs to provide enough food for their kids to pursue baseball, even as many players remain malnourished.

Many boys are also encouraged to drop out of school to dedicate their lives to baseball full-time, leaving them with no education or job experience should their baseball aspirations fail. Ryan Hanlon attributes much of the gender gap that exists in Dominican educational attainment to the incentive for boys to drop out of school for baseball. The baseball-fueled gender gap has an immense effect on boys’ lives, as Dominican boys have twice the dropout and repeat rates of Dominican girls and are subsequently exposed to a host of other trends should they drop out, including higher rates of teen paternity, unemployment, criminal convictions, and gang involvement.

Even after some regulations were put in place, the system remains exploitative. MLB both makes deals with players directly and benefits from the work of *buscones*, unregulated independent agents. Instead of being paid by players, who often do not have the resources to do so, *buscones* are given part of a player’s signing bonus. *Buscones* vary in terms of quality, with some running reputable academies and others running dangerous operations that can implicate their players in fraud, including giving dangerous performance-enhancing drugs and encouraging players to falsify their age.

In the past few years, MLB has begun engaging in meaningful reform by attempting to provide education and employment opportunities to current and former players. Through this project, I have been able to gather information from MLB’s Commissioner’s Office on these programs and how MLB plans to grow them.



Albert Pujols is a ten-time, three-time Most Valuable Player and two-time World Series Champion who has played in the second-most games ever by a Dominican All-Star player in the MLB

## MLB Career Programs

### High School Program

Open to all players currently with an academy who have not completed high school, the program allows players to enroll in classes in addition to their baseball training to earn a high school degree. It is offered all year at baseball academies.

### First-Year Player & Parent Orientation Program

This one-day event educates newly signed players and their parents on how to make career decisions in baseball, and on MLB rules. It occurs in August, following the July 2 signing day.

### Domestic Violence Program

This program aims to educate players, staff and trainers on domestic violence prevention. It features a wide array of experts, both MLB-affiliated and third-party personnel.

### Rookie Program

The program is an annual two-day event for minor league players selected by their organization. It offers lessons to help players adapt to cultural and language barriers as they travel to the U.S. Topics include English and American culture, drug use, immigration law, and how to responsibly handle their finances.

### Arriba en el Conteo

*Arriba en el Conteo* is offered year-round, providing lessons to help players make informed career decisions. It consists of mandatory classes, including sensitivity and anti-discrimination training, and lessons on safe and responsible driving, sexual and mental health and wellbeing, and healthy relationships. There are also optional classes on self-esteem, fiscal decision-making and fluency in Microsoft Office.

## Post-Playing Programs

### Former Player Program

A grant offered to former minor league players who are either citizens or residents of the Dominican Republic to further their education or careers, it began in 2011 and has since given scholarship funds to about 500 former players, including 15 in 2019. The number of participants is expected to grow, doubling over the next three years.

### Professional Development Program

The program consists of classes offered to released players, including tips on building a resume, preparing for interviews, and general help making career decisions. Begun in 2017 and initially done via phone calls and emails, in 2019 the program expanded to in-person classes. That year, about 50 players participated virtually, and an additional 22 in person. Moving forward, MLB aims to expand the program to provide help to every released or retired player who desires assistance.

### Former Player Internship Program

This program offers former players internships at MLB’s office in the Dominican Republic. Internships usually last a summer and provide participants with experience in a professional environment. The program is relatively small, generally offered to one former player a year since its creation in 2015, although no player participated in 2019. Going forward, MLB plans to continue to offer an internship to one player every year.

### Player Resource Center

The Center is an online resource offered in English and Spanish that lists various resources to help current and former players with their lives outside of baseball. Resources include explanations and applications for all the programs outlined above. The online portal has existed since 2018, with about 130 visitors every week. MLB would like to spread awareness and access to this website, to make it available to all current and former players.

## Partnership Program

MLB started the Partnership Program in 2018; it allows MLB and its teams to partner with *buscones* to address a wide variety of baseball-related issues, including education opportunities for amateurs and current and former players, steroid and performance-enhancing drug (PED) use, educating parents of players, and improving training facilities. In exchange for agreeing to adhere to a certain standard of care for players, participating *buscones* get exclusive access to MLB and its teams through communications with scouts and invitations to private workouts. Three major showcases for players occur every year to which participating *buscones* have access, in addition to many smaller showcases and a three-month tournament for Dominican and Venezuelan players in the Dominican Republic. Currently, about 80 *buscones* participate in the program, with plans to expand to Panama and Colombia in the coming years.

## Implementation Difficulties

### American Relations with Cuba

Cuban players are the third-largest contingent of foreign-born players in the majors, with a long history of baseball stars including three-time All-Star Luis Tiant, signed by Cleveland shortly after the Bay of Pigs invasion, and Rafael Palmeiro, who, if not for a failed drug test, would likely be in the Hall of Fame. However, since the 1959 Cuban Revolution and subsequent poor U.S.-Cuban relations, the path players take from Cuba to MLB has become long and difficult. For decades, players would have to defect from Cuba, travel (often through illegal and dangerous means, to a third country before signing with an American team, since directly signing from Cuba was illegal.



Yasiel Puig is a Cuban outfielder who, like many, relied on human traffickers to defect from Cuba and sign with an American team.

On December 19, 2018, MLB announced it had collaborated with the MLB Players’ Association (MLBPA) and the Cuban Baseball Federation to allow players to sign directly from Cuba to the U.S. and Canada. That same day, the Trump administration released a statement declaring that it would not allow Cuba to profit from any American businesses, and by April of 2019 had killed the deal. Continued tensions between the U.S. and Cuba have made implementing reforms difficult, as MLB cannot operate freely in the country.

### COVID-19

COVID-19 has shaken the baseball world. The 2020 MLB season has been delayed, leaving many in limbo. The MLB Commissioner’s Office has announced it will pay Minor League Baseball (MiLB) players through May, but for players who are living paycheck to paycheck, the idea of income drying up in June is worrisome. The virus has also shaken Latin America, as the Dominican Republic has put restrictions on travel in and out of the country, and Venezuela, already mired in instability, has seen its economic troubles worsen. The Venezuelan healthcare system had already been overloaded, and the rapid spread of the virus will likely exacerbate the crisis. President Nicolas Maduro has requested aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but thus far his requests have been denied as the IMF does not see his government as legitimate. How COVID-19 will affect the larger baseball community and attempts to roll out new reforms remains unclear. But at the very least, the situation will raise important issues that will need to be addressed as soon as possible.

