

Baseball is everywhere — and the big leagues are the dream

Record-Journal reporter Dan Champagne recently spent nine days in La Romana, Dominican Republic, with missionaries from this area. Here is another installment of his Dominican Journal.



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A STEADY STREAM of traffic moved down the road. Trucks carried bananas, buses carried people on their way to or from work, mopeds zipped to the left and right.

Then there was a lull. There was time for a few quick pitches.

A young boy stood opposite two others on the sidewalk. One served as the pitcher, one the batter and one the catcher. The pitcher wound up and side-armed a plastic water jug seal. It looked like a yo-yo split in half.

The batter swung a thin wooden stick and smacked a head-high pitch onto the roof of the church across the street. He was not congratulated, but scorned for hitting a homerun. The young boys had to find another object to pitch. They found a cap from a 20 ounce plastic soda bottle.

The game resumed.

Baseball, like religion, is everywhere in La Romana, Dominican Republic, and it is the dream of most of the young boys to make it to America and the Major Leagues. They have seen others go from the streets to the stadiums. They wear the jersey of Red Sox slugger David Ortiz, a native of Santo Domingo, and sing the praises of Mets pitcher Pedro Martinez, a native of Manoguayabo, who consistently donates money to the area.

The people are proud of the ones who have made it and let their pride be known to anyone who will listen.



Dominican boys play baseball with a stick and the seal from a plastic water jug — or anything else that will serve — in the streets of La Romana.

Matt Powers, a 12-year-old Wallingford resident, one of dozens of missionaries who traveled to the area from central Connecticut, wore a T-shirt of Santo Domingo native Manny Ramirez at a restaurant in Altos de Chavón, a resort made to resemble a Mediterranean village perched high above the Chavón River. A man sitting at a nearby table called him over.

“You follow baseball,” the man asked through a Spanish accent.

“Yes,” Powers answered.

“You heard of Big Papi,” he asked.

“Yes,” Powers said again.

“ES DOMINICANO” the man replied emphatically.

“You heard of Pedro,” he asked.

“Yes,” Power said.

“ES DOMINICANO” the man shouted again.

Fields of dreams

Baseball fields are few and far between in La Romana, but they do exist. There is a nice one

replete with bleachers and dugouts in Batey Guerrero. Texas Rangers relief pitcher Antonio Alfonseca grew up within a long ball of home plate.

The field has a dirt infield and the grass is thick and green. Sugarcane stalks serve as the boundaries. There is no out field fence and no bases. The mound is a block of wood nailed into the ground. It rises well above the Major League regulation 10.5 inches above home plate. No one complains.

Many fields — if you can call them that — are not as nice. Driving through the poorer areas of the sugarcane fields, young children can be seen playing in any sort of clearing.

Picture “Field of Dreams” with a \$2 budget. There were no base paths, backstops or mounds, just dreams of making it to a bigger stage.

They play on anything they can find. Pieces of cardboard serve as gloves. If cardboard is scarce, they field grounders and shag pop flies with their bare hands. It doesn’t hurt, considering they rarely play with an actual baseball. Rolled-up socks stuffed with newspaper do the job.

Most children who play in the street use the plastic water jug tops. When pitched, they curve in, out, up and down as they glide toward the batter. If the cap comes anywhere near the catcher, even if he has to lunge to grab it, it is considered a strike. It’s suddenly easy to see how Major Leaguer Vladimir Guerrero, a native of Nizao, is able to hit a pitch seemingly off his shoe tops for a homerun.

The rules are relatively simple. Three strikes, called or swinging, and you’re out. If the pitcher or catcher picks up the cap before it stops rolling, or if it is caught in the air, you’re out. The pitcher becomes the catcher, the catcher the batter and the batter the pitcher. The games last for hours.

“Is everyone’s dream”

Wilson Moya has played those games. Moya, a Wallingford resident and native of La Romana, grew up on the softball field because his father was a coach.

He committed to becoming a Major League Baseball player when he was 11 years old. He signed with the Texas Rangers as a second baseman at age 16.

Above The Dominican Republic Mission Team plays ball with local boys at Batey Guerrero in La Romana.



Moya played professionally for two years in the Dominican Republic before being added to the Rangers’ minor league team in the Gulf Coast League in Florida in 2000, where he played with former Rangers outfielder Laynce Nix. Moya broke his pinky finger that year and the dreams of his professional career were over.

“It’s the only way you can get away from here,” he said of baseball. “Sometimes you go to college, but it’s still hard to get a job. Major Leagues is the best way to make money.” The techniques used to teach baseball in the Dominican Republic seemed either years behind or years ahead of what Little Leaguers learn in the United States.

As a boy, Moya would hit kernels of corn and grains of rice with a small stick to help his vision and swing. He was lucky enough to have equipment because of his father, but he knows many were not so lucky.

“In the U.S., you have every thing you need to play,” he said. “Here you have to find things. You just get whatever you can and get on that field and play ball.”

Michael Angel, a La Romana resident, coaches 14- to 17-year olds. He calls it “training.” “Many, many people play baseball here,” he said. “Young kids all play. They want to play for a job.” He remembers playing as a kid and he hasn’t let his childhood dreams die, even at the age of 42.

“I’m going to be signed,” he said, not cracking a smile. “Is going to happen. Is my dream. Is everyone’s dream.”