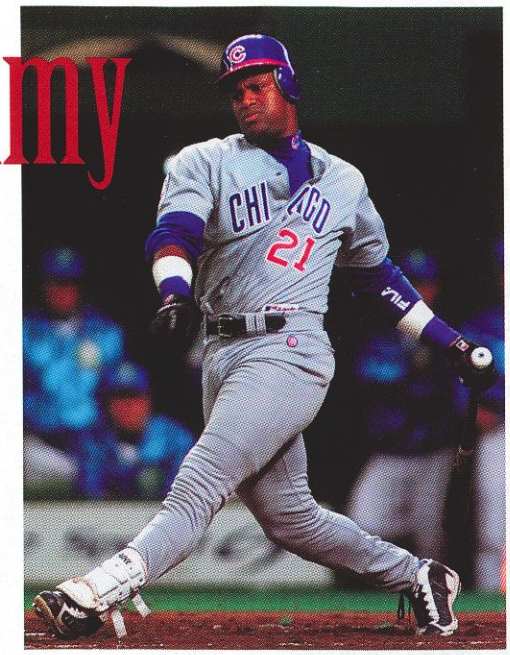
Play it Again, Sammy



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Locals may argue the origins of America's pastime and the accuracy of America's history books, but there's no debating the cultural impact America's dollars have had on the Dominican Republic.

By Dean Nelson

As it turns out, my baseball encyclopedia was all wrong. All these years I was under the impression that baseball began in the United States, although, as the encyclopedia acknowledges, our ancestors were playing stick-and-ball games in Egypt, China, and Persia thousands of years ago.

But the game as we know it today, of hitting a ball with a bat and running around bases, was not Abner Doubleday's invention after all. It turns out that was just another one of those ethnocentric entries in an American encyclopedia.

"It started here," said Cristian, pounding his finger into the tabletop at a deafening watering hole in the Colonial section of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. "It started in the Dominican Republic."

This was news. I simply couldn't accept this without verification. So I looked across at Cristian's fellow Dominican countryman, David.

"Surely, you don't believe that," I challenged.

A broad grin developed on David's face. He shrugged.

"It's true," he said. "You Americans think you are responsible for everything. Baseball started here. Ask anyone. It's in our history books. We learn it in school."

The waitress was walking past. Lucky for me she spoke some English.

"Where did baseball begin?" I shouted into her ear, blocking her sight line so she couldn't see the conspirators at my table.

"I don't know," she started to reply. I began to turn back, triumphant, but she leaned closer, having to shout over Shakira straining the sound system. "I don't know what village."

Village?

"It was one of the villages on the coast, though."

"You mean in this country?"

She recoiled as if I asked if she were carrying any diseases.

"Of course," she sniffed, and moved away, keeping her distance for the rest of the evening.

The men at the table smiled.

It is true that baseball is *the* sport in the Dominican Republic. Travel through any part of the country and you won't see kids—or even adults—kicking around a soccer ball as you will in most Latin American countries. I didn't see a single pick-up or organized soccer game when I was there recently. But I saw plenty of baseball diamonds. And if kids weren't on those diamonds, they were in the middle of the street in every community hitting rocks, aerosol can lids, doll heads, and balls. They were running makeshift bases. Sports bars in the cities all have televisions tuned to Major League Baseball games.

Within walking distance from where I was staying, in a community called La Victoria, was an Oakland A's training camp. It shimmered like an oasis within a community dominated by corrugated tin shacks, ubiquitous infested dogs, and chickens roaming the streets. A nearby community's sixteen-year old boy had recently been given $600,000 by the Kansas City Royals for the rights to him two years from now, the locals said.

The player everyone from the country points to as a role model is that skinny shoeshine boy who once signed for $3,500. His name is Sammy Sosa.

The Dominican Republic is now the focus of virtually every Major League Baseball team. Most teams have academies or training camps on this little island of 8.5 million. In April 2002, about one-quarter of the 5,700 players given minor league contracts with major league teams were from the Dominican Republic. The player everyone from the country points to as a role model is that skinny shoeshine boy who once signed for $3,500. His name is Sammy Sosa.

Dominicans quickly rattle off names of other local players who dominate in the big leagues: Pedro Martinez, Albert Pujols, Alfonso Soriano, Miguel Tejada, Manny Ramirez, Vladimir Guerrero. There are more than seventy Dominicans on Major League Baseball rosters. Since 1933, only Puerto Rico has produced more players from outside the United

States who have appeared in all-star games. No other country is even close.

Baseball even helped avert a possible civil war during the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. A team backed by Trujillo was facing a team backed by one of his political opponents in 1937. Both teams had raided stars from the Negro Leagues in the United States to help them win. Trujillo, though, had hired top gun Satchel Paige, one of the greatest pitchers to ever play the game. In the seventh and deciding game, Trujillo's troops lined up with rifles and bayonets near the first base stands. The opponent's troops did the same on the third base side. In his autobiography, *Maybe I'll Pitch Forever*, Paige wrote that the manager of his team simply said, "Take my advice and win." Paige said he pitched harder than he had ever done in his life, and won the game. The next morning he hurried back to America.

According to U.S. history books, the game came to this island in 1874, after American sailors taught it to Cubans. When Cubans fled their own civil war, they brought it to the Dominican Republic.

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Cristian and David shook their heads at this account.

"Of course that is what you would be taught in America," Cristian said, leaning back and laughing. "And it may have happened that way in part, where the game has nine players and three outs per side. You're just missing a very important piece of information."

David nodded soberly. Now there were several Americans pressing in around the table, ready to have the lies of their baseball encyclopedias exposed.

"Fill me in," I pleaded.

"How do you think it got to your country in the first place?

We were stumped.

"Columbus," Cristian declared.

The bar erupted.

"You can't be serious," I yelled.

"When Columbus arrived on our shore, the people who saw his ship approaching were playing baseball."

"They politely stopped the game and welcomed him to their country," continued David.

"Then they went back to playing," Cristian said.

"Let me guess," I said. "The game was past the halfway point when Columbus arrived."

"Yes!" Cristian knew where I was headed.

"And that's where they got the idea for the seventh inning stretch?"

"Exactly."

My baseball book says that the stretch came from a game in 1910 attended by U.S. President William Howard Taft. At the mid-point of the seventh inning, he stood to stretch his legs. The crowd, thinking he was leaving, also stood out of respect. Then Taft sat back down. So did the crowd. I had no idea that it really came about when this Caribbean Island stopped to welcome its first tourist.

The game has changed some in the 140 years, or the 550 years it has been played (depending on whose history you read). But perhaps the biggest change in the Dominican Republic is the reason to play it. In the United States, presumably, people play because it's fun. That's why I played Little League. Granted, some overzealous parents are trying to hide their own misery and unfinished psychological business by forcing their kids to play (that's why my kids played Little League), but by and large, we play for fun and recreation. George Will said that every young male in America goes to sleep thinking about striking out the heart of the Yankees' batting order, 1-2-3.

Kids in the Dominican Republic play for fun, too. And for something else.

"It's the ticket out of this country," Cristian said, suddenly serious. "Look at the conditions these kids live in. This is one of the poorest countries in the world."

Our table was quiet for a while, momentarily oblivious to the ear-bleeding music. I tried to picture Columbus interrupting a game, paying his respects, then going on to discover the rest of the New World. And bringing part of the Old World with him.

Maybe that's why it's called America's pastime. I'll have to look it up.

What do you think, Chris? These primitive behaviors sure are peculiar.