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America's Out-of-Style Pastime

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Ethics Contest Essay

America's out-of-style Pastime

In 2006 the Washington Nationals signed 17-year-old Esmailyn 'Smiley' González to a \$1.4 million signing bonus officially bringing him from the Dominican Republic to the United States in order to play for them. González was a highly coveted player in the Dominican which led to many teams also wanting to sign him, thus bringing up the amount of his signing bonus. However, shortly after signing his new contract, it was discovered that Esmailyn González was actually 21 years old. Not only this, but his real name was Carlos Álvarez Lugo, and Esmailyn was a fake alias. Lugo did this because it is known that teams are willing to pay higher for younger prospects, and the younger they are, the more money they are likely to get due to their higher potential. Latin players that attempt to deceive Major League teams with their identity or age are extremely negatively received in the United States by front offices, players, and fans. When analyzing a situation like this, it is important to know some background before one is to make a judgment. However, it is understandable that many people don't have much background about a situation like this considering Major League Baseball (MLB) makes a great effort to cover up their recruiting processes in Latin American countries, particularly the Dominican Republic. Given the situation that many of these teenagers/young adults are in, I don't doubt that most people would do the same as Carlos Lugo if they were to be put in his situation. So, before making a judgment, one must ask: What causes Dominican players to have high usages of performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) and lying about their identity? Through the analysis of texts by Melanie L. Harris and Emilie M. Townes, along with utilizing a womanist perspective to

view the situation, it will be made clear that the exploitation of youths in Central America, particularly the Dominican Republic, need stronger regulations and significant restrictions when it comes to the recruiting process.

Baseball is so much more than a game to people in the Dominican Republic. As soon as a child can throw a ball, several hours each day are spent practicing, training, and playing games in order to strengthen their skills and chances to make it to the MLB. Latin born players consist of 25.85% of the MLB with Dominican born players being over 11% (SFGate). These numbers are increasing every single year with more youths playing baseball in the Dominican along with the MLB having more full-time scouts in the Dominican Republic. The MLB spends about \$100 million per season to operate around 40 training facilities in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela (Ruck). These facilities are where the best equipment and workout gear is, but the only people allowed inside are those that the scouts deem to have true Major League potential. Just about everyone accepts the invitation as many kids will practice playing baseball with oranges, rocks wrapped in socks, and sticks for bats outside of the facilities. These facilities may sound like something that these kids should strive to be accepted into, but it also has its dark side. Children from ages as young as ten are offered to train at these facilities by different scouts, and if they are to accept the offer then they are expected to eat, sleep, and live there. They also qualify as schools, so these kids do not have to ever leave the facility, but these kids lack good counsel, and many are uneducated, along with their parents, which leads to them accepting terms that they are not fully aware of.

As soon as kids turn 17, they are eligible for the MLB draft and to be signed by any team. This rule is quite recent and was implemented when the Toronto Blue Jays attempted to sign a

13-year-old Dominican-born kid named Jimmy Kelly (Ruck). Since the players have to wait until they are 17 in order to be drafted, they will intensively train at different facilities and do anything that they can to get drafted. This has led to people known as *buscones* “street agents” to take advantage of these kids before they are eligible for the draft. These *buscones* have no affiliation with MLB teams, but have their own training facilities in which they offer spots to interested kids (Ruck). There are more than a thousand of these *buscones* in the Dominican Republic alone, and the majority of them have ill intentions. This is due to the *buscones* receiving a third of the players signing bonus and salary if they are to sign with an MLB team. This happens through the kids needing to sign contracts created by these *buscones* in order to use their facilities. The same goes for the baseball focused training facilities/schools that will take a portion of any players signing bonus and salary for the rest of their careers if they had trained/attended there. These *buscones* and schools are solely focused on getting the kids to the MLB with the largest contracts possible which is why someone like Carlos Álvarez Lugo would lie about his age and create a fake name. The *buscones* will help with falsifying birth certificates for their players as well to try and get them larger signing bonuses. It also leads to the very prominent issue of PEDs being used by players since these *buscones* will supply their recruits with steroids in order to help them throw harder and hit the ball farther. There is a very clear problem in baseball when it comes to Latin-born players using PEDs. In the entirety of MLB history there have been 144 suspensions given to players for PED usage and 90 of these have been to Latin-born players. That’s equivalent to 62.5% of suspensions being given to Latin-born players despite them only composing 25.85% of the MLB (SFGate). That percentage of Latin-born players in the MLB has only been increasing in recent years as well, so that 25.85% is much higher than previous years

when some of these suspensions were being given out. Theoretically, the percentage of suspensions being given to Latin-born players for PEDs should be proportional to the percentage of them in the MLB. However, this is clearly not the case which indicates that there is a problem with the methods taken in order to get to the MLB by these players. When a player gets caught and suspended for PEDs, since they are illegal to use in baseball, everyone is quick to blame the player when in reality there are many unknown circumstances that play into their decision.

A very relevant reading that can be connected to the problems that are especially taking place in the Dominican Republic is that of Melanie L. Harris in her book *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*. In chapter four she discusses Alice Walker's six-step approach that she utilizes to incorporate elements of African American culture in her writing. In these six steps, it focuses around uncovering stories and experiences along with validating these stories and experiences (Harris, 4). There are too many stories of Dominican born players that have gone unheard and it is surprisingly difficult to find many players backstories of their life before professional baseball. It can be assumed that those who failed to make it to the United States and onto an MLB roster have stories, but they go unheard because they are not considered someone noteworthy and therefore lack a voice. They spend most of their life practicing and training to play baseball professionally, and since this is how they spend all their time many are uneducated. Due to this lack of education, it is very hard for those who don't make it to put their stories out there and have their voices heard. After uncovering and validating these experiences, Alice Walker directs us by saying that we should ascertain values and moral lessons from critical reflection on these experiences and stories. Not only that, but then connect these values, act upon the wisdom and values founded, and then take substantial movements towards justice (Harris, 4).

I personally don't believe there is a single better way to evaluate the situation in the Dominican than with Walker's six-step-approach and taking a womanist perspective when evaluating the situation. If changes are to be made to the recruiting process it begins with uncovering stories of those who have experienced the abuse of the recruiting process and to have their stories heard. These abuses should be well known, but the MLB works hard to cover up what really goes on (Ruck). However, power in numbers, a large number of stories, is how we would begin to have these abuses well known with the hope of the recruiting process becoming heavily checked and regulated.

An additional reading that is relevant to the topic at hand is that of Emilie M. Townes in her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. In chapter eight Townes explains how we are contributors to the world that we live in and must hold ourselves accountable for what she deems 'the cultural production of evil' (Townes, 8). Being ignorant to the events taking place outside of one's everyday life is unacceptable. Choosing to not listen to the injustices taking place or feeling that one is not responsible is how things like the abuses in the Dominican Republic are allowed to continue for much too long. Another large contributor, which Townes addresses, that allows for these events to continue is the way our society is built. We live in what she calls a 'win it all' society in which everyone is willing to do whatever is necessary in order to gain the upper hand on everyone else (Townes, 8). This is extremely prominent in baseball as these teams consist of some of the most competitive individuals who see the Dominican as a way to gain the upper hand. These kids in the Dominican Republic are comparable to being produced in a factory as baseball machines, with the sole purpose of training until they are eligible to join a team and contribute to helping that team win. Townes states that rather than having a society

built on competition, we should have one that is centered around justice and peace. Instead of being constantly paranoid that others are trying to take one's belongings or is out to get what one has, society should be built in a manner that people are mutually beneficial to one another to avoid these injustices from occurring. This would lead to MLB teams choosing morals over competitiveness since they know that the recruiting process is extremely wrong. If they weren't aware then they wouldn't try so hard to cover it up, and there would be much less problems with Latin players taking PEDs and lying about their age.

The abuse of youths in the Dominican Republic by the MLB has gone on for far too long. For change to occur, the stories of those who have had first-hand experiences with these abuses must be uncovered and heard. There will be great amounts that people can learn from these stories, and when valuing peace and justice over competitiveness, it will become clear just how horrendous these events truly are. Through the analysis of texts by Melanie L. Harris and Emilie M. Townes, along with utilizing a womanist perspective, it should have been made clear that the exploitation of youths in Central America, particularly the Dominican Republic, needs stronger regulations and significant restrictions when it comes to the recruiting process. As much as I personally love baseball, America's pastime is in the past concerning the methods that are being utilized by everyone's favorite teams. It's past time for change to be made, but only together and through analyzing things through a new perspective will we be able to achieve true justice.

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