

Fall 2000

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Recommended Citation

Regalado, Samuel O. (2000) ""Latin Players on the Cheap:" Professional Baseball Recruitment in Latin America and the Neocolonialist Tradition," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgls/vol8/iss1/2>

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“Latin Players on the Cheap:” Professional Baseball Recruitment in Latin America and the Neocolonialist Tradition

SAMUEL O. REGALADO*

INTRODUCTION

“Bonuses? Big money promises? Uh-uh. Cambria’s carrot was the fame and glory that would come from playing *béisbol* in the big leagues,” wrote Ray Fitzgerald, reflecting on Washington Senators scout Joe Cambria’s tactics in recruiting Latino baseball talent from the mid-1930s through the 1950s.¹ Cambria was the first of many scouts who searched Latin America for inexpensive recruits for their respective ball clubs. The attraction of Latin America, of course, was not only the possibility of recruiting cheap talent, but also the availability of potentially skilled players in regions where labor laws accommodated Major League Baseball (MLB) owners. Since the 1930s, thousands of young men signed contracts that contained little more than empty promises. Little, if any, money was exchanged; and contracts prohibited players from marketing their talents—the practice of free and competitive enterprise—elsewhere. Interestingly, MLB techniques in Latin America were consistent with the business practices of U.S. companies throughout the region since the late nineteenth century. Professional baseball recruiting in Latin America embodied many of the features of the neocolonialist tradition.

I. THE NEOCOLONIALIST TRADITION

Though many historians often consider the Spanish American War in 1898 as the genesis of large-scale American foreign capitalism in Latin America, the United States, like many other Western industrial powers, was already well-entrenched in this region within and around the periphery of the Caribbean and Mexico. Foreign investments were heavy in Latin American

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1. Ray Fitzgerald, *Uncle Joe—Senators’ Cuban Connection*, THE SPORTING NEWS, June 21, 1980, at 17.

resources, including agriculture, minerals, and petroleum. Foreign capital also inundated other Latin American industries, such as the railroads and shipping.

Between 1880 and the 1930s, several Latin American leaders, who hoped to draw revenue into their countries, openly embraced investments from Western industrial giants. Central American, Caribbean, and Mexican rulers encouraged large-scale foreign business ventures and created internal policies to suit the outsiders.² During the Porfiriato, Mexico accommodated American and British interests so much that the phrase “Mexico, mother of foreigners and stepmother of Mexicans” was a popular and an accurate statement of Mexican circumstances by the end of the nineteenth century.³

Throughout this period, the Latin working class had little influence with their domestic leaders or foreign employers. *Campesinos* in the fields endured long work days, ruthless bosses, and inhumane conditions. Their brethren in urban industry were no better off. Historian Ramon Eduardo Ruiz observed, for example, that Mexican industrial workers “spent a good part of their lives in sweatshops, crowded into unventilated and unheated rooms that hot weather turned into furnaces and in winter’s cold into iceboxes.”⁴ Workers at the United Fruit Company in Guatemala and other agricultural facilities toiled in a system that “exacted at least 150 days each year of debt labor ‘in lieu of taxes.’”⁵ Worker protests about their treatment almost certainly invited trouble from the companies and government authorities.

American enterprises also penetrated deeply into Cuba and the Dominican Republic. American capitalists poured substantial resources into major Cuban agricultural and urban industries;⁶ and the U.S. government aided such investments through the infamous Platt Amendment, which radical leader Juan Gualberto Gomez argued “reduced the independence and sovereignty of the Cuban republic to a myth.”⁷ By 1929, American companies controlled fifty-six percent of all Cuban production. Foreign investment also negatively

2. See BENJAMIN KEEN & MARK WASSERMAN, *A HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICA* 208-10 (3d ed. 1988). See also E. BRADFORD BURNS, *THE POVERTY OF PROGRESS: LATIN AMERICA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY* 132-33, 138-39 (1980).

3. KEEN & WASSERMAN, *supra* note 2, at 215. See also RAMON EDUARDO RUIZ, *THE GREAT REBELLION: MEXICO, 1905-1924* 102-4 (1980).

4. RUIZ, *supra* note 3, at 60.

5. STEPHEN SCHLESINGER & STEPHEN KINZER, *BITTER FRUIT: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE AMERICAN COUP IN GUATEMALA* 38 (1990).

6. JAIME SUCHLICKI, *CUBA: FROM COLUMBUS TO CASTRO* 82-83 (2d ed., rev. 1986).

7. *Id.* at 83.

affected the Dominican Republic's independence. Overseas banking interests, in particular, controlled the Dominican economy which accommodated American sugar interests.

II. NEOCOLONIALISM, MAJOR LEAGUE-STYLE

Within this neocolonialist environment, professional baseball organizations from the United States had taken notice of the resources in Latin America by the first decade of the twentieth century. Part of the reason for this interest was that nineteenth century *laissez-faire* business practices were still viable there. Labor relations with management were loosely defined and scarcely regulated. Child labor laws were virtually non-existent. And, there was a plethora of recruits eager to enter the professional baseball labor force.

Latin baseball players also had much in common with their counterparts in the agrarian and urban industrial sectors. MLB teams treated Latin American baseball players like commodities and gave little attention to helping the often star-struck recruits adjust to North American culture. Largely impoverished, but full of youthful vigor, the growing number of Latin American baseball players buoyed their spirits with the hope that big-league opportunities lay just around the corner. But their aspirations, as they eventually learned, were no match for the shrewd and experienced MLB scouts, whose affiliations with major league clubs gave them the leverage they needed to attract young Latin players for little or no cost. Contracts were loosely structured and often carried little legitimate weight. Remarkably, this exploitative process was started by a person whose legacy is that of a great humanitarian—Branch Rickey.

Branch Rickey, of course, gained his greatest fame for his efforts to integrate the major leagues racially. But the enterprising administrator also spearheaded a philosophy that became the standard by which Latin players would be recruited, a process that played a significant role as MLB teams extended their recruitment efforts deeper into Latin America. Characterized by Kevin Kerrane as a "manipulative" operator, Rickey introduced the use of non-binding agreements, which he called "desk contracts."⁸ Rickey taught his

8. KEVIN KERRANE, *DOLLAR SIGN ON THE MUSCLE: THE WORLD OF BASEBALL SCOUTING* 27 (1989). Part of Rickey's influence came from the legendary St. Louis Cardinals' scout Charlie Barrett whom Rickey once asserted "'could assay the gold content in a handful of ore.'" *Id.* at 23.

scouts the art of “signing thousands of amateurs on a purely tentative basis.”⁹ Utilizing this “quality out of quantity” principle, players, upon being signed, were sent to various outposts where they were “scouted at [a] greater leisure, and, perhaps . . . released a few weeks later without money for transportation home.”¹⁰

Clyde Slapnicka also used similar tactics during his reign as scout and general manager for the Cleveland Indians in the late 1930s. The art of “cutting corners” and manipulating contracts was the rule of thumb in the Slapnicka era. While this approach greatly benefitted MLB teams, players were, unfortunately, often plunged into limbo and left holding contracts that were frequently undated, non-binding, and useless.

By the late 1930s, scouts from many MLB teams modeled signing techniques on the Rickey and Slapnicka approach. Looking to gain an edge on competitors, scouts competed fiercely with each other to sign Latin American talent. Additionally, North American blue-chip players were often costly and, worse yet, apt to bargain their services with competing scouts. Hence, the inexperienced and unheralded scout continually faced uphill battles to win American players for his ball club. Joe Cambria was originally one of the “ivory hunters” who struggled to sign players in North America. Frustrated by his campaigns in the United States, Cambria turned his attention to Latin America where he eventually made his mark.

By the end of the 1930s, the appearance of Latin players on MLB rosters had already taken place. Since Esteban Bellan’s inclusion on the Troy Haymakers of the American Association in 1871, players from Latin American countries had sporadically played American professional baseball. All, except for Colombian Louis Castro in 1902, had been from Cuba. And all were considered to be white. But only one, Adolfo Luque, became a star. In a career that spanned from 1914 to 1935, Luque won 194 games, claimed a World Series victory, and, in 1923, led all National League pitchers with a microscopic 1.93 earned run average. But aside from Luque, other Latinos received little notoriety. Generally, the attention directed toward them centered on cultural and comical stereotypes. The phonetic spelling of their broken English commonly appeared in the sports pages. And one, “Good Field; No Hit,”—a phraseology reportedly delivered by Cuban catcher Mike

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* at 27.

Gonzalez in his description of a potential Latin recruit—became the caricature of Latin players who came into American professional baseball. Although many Latins performed admirably against big leaguers in the United States and the Caribbean, they were regarded by scouts or MLB teams as no more than cheap, disposable players.¹¹

Clark Griffith, however, was not entirely sold on these common perceptions of Latin players. In 1911, Griffith recruited two Cubans, Armando Marsans and Rafael Almeida, to play for his club. After the 1912 season, Griffith left Cincinnati for Washington where he managed and eventually came to own the Senators. As an owner, Griffith unfortunately had a difficult time fielding competitive teams. Moreover, his tight budget hurt his ability to recruit top American players. Recalling his earlier experience with Latin players, the Senators' chief again opted to see what type of talent might be recruited in the Pearl of the Antilles.

By 1930, Cuba had truly become baseball's Caribbean "epicenter" with a long and noble baseball past that was nearly as extensive as that of its northern neighbor. By 1900, for instance, professional baseball already existed on the island. Although there was ample competition at home, Cuban interest in MLB grew. For a number of Cuban players, the lure of greater fame and fortune, as well as the opportunity to compete against legendary *Norte Americanos*, proved to be a magnet much too powerful to resist. And Joe Cambria, many Cuban players were convinced, was the man who could take them north.

When Clark Griffith crossed his path in 1930, Cambria, a businessman of Italian extraction, operated both a Laundromat and semi-professional baseball team. Cambria remained in baseball thereafter, largely in the capacity of a scout. Even during his earliest years in American professional baseball, Cambria's recruitment tactics earned him the unwanted attention of Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis. The exceedingly rigid Landis viewed Cambria's habit of utilizing loosely structured contracts as a violation of professional baseball rules and moved to have Cambria removed from the game. Griffith came to Cambria's rescue and convinced Landis only to issue Cambria a warning. In 1932, Griffith hired Cambria to be a full-time scout for the Washington Senators. Within the next few years, Cambria recruited such

11. SAMUEL O. REGALADO, *VIVA BASEBALL!: LATIN MAJOR LEAGUERS AND THEIR SPECIAL HUNGER* 39 (1998).

stars as Mickey Vernon, George Case, and future Hall of Famer Early Wynn. But these findings were few and far between. Given his limited abilities relative to other seasoned scouts, and the burden of Griffith's tight wallet, Cambria viewed Cuba as an answer to his problems.

In a day and age that predated provisions to prevent the exploitation of Latin youth, Cambria implanted himself in a baseball-crazed environment that welcomed his presence. "I heard that Cubans were a deeply religious people," wrote reporter Sam Lacy in 1947, "[i]n two days here [in Cuba] I have learned that baseball is their religion."¹² Since the initial appearance of baseball on the island in the 1870s, the game spread like wildfire. Within a few years, several teams formed and competition throughout the country grew more organized. Moreover, as Cubans struggled to win their freedom from Spain, baseball was among the important elements that Cubans identified as being distinctly American. In fact, proceeds from games were often turned over to the rebels who were fighting for independence.¹³ By the turn of the century, Cuba's romance with baseball was evident in the game's appearance in literature and poetry.¹⁴

Exposure to the North American Major Leagues also advanced the Cubans' hunger for the sport. By the end of the 1920s, MLB clubs routinely toured Cuba searching for additional training, competition, and finances. The high salaries and impressive skills of big-name players further whetted the baseball appetites of young Cuban boys. At the beginning of the 1930s, the already large gap between the haves and have nots, compounded by a depressed economy, produced great poverty, particularly among the rural population and blacks. It was in this environment that Joe Cambria made his initial appearance.

Described by Cuban baseball chronicler Roberto González Echevarría as a "cagey man,"¹⁵ Cambria set up shop in Havana and directed a "network of bird dogs who scouted for him in the Cuban bushes."¹⁶ From the late 1930s to the mid-1950s, Cambria monopolized Cuban players for the Washington

12. KERRANE, *supra* note 8, at 6.

13. ROBERTO GONZÁLEZ ECHEVARRÍA, *THE PRIDE OF HAVANA: A HISTORY OF CUBAN BASEBALL* 83 (1999).

14. *See id.* at 75-111. González Echevarría's Chapter Four, "A Cuban *Belle Époque*," provides an excellent analysis of the relationship between Cuban baseball and its culture during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

15. *Id.* at 269.

16. *Id.*

Senators. Though he reportedly signed some 400 players—including such notables as Roberto Estalella, Camilo Pascual, Pedro Ramos, and Carlos Paula—many did not come close to reaching the big leagues. Many did not even leave the island. Despite Cambria's exploitative techniques, Cubans welcomed Cambria's presence. But the manipulative scout also took advantage of his circumstances. The profits he accumulated from the quantity of players he signed gave him a virtual *carte blanche* to use whatever tactics he chose. His success with this method also led him to boast that he could sign players to less bonus money "than you would pay for a hat." "In Cuba," Kerrane claimed, "Cambria didn't even bother with the hat."¹⁷

Not only did Cambria sign many players with little or no hope of reaching the majors, those that did make it to the United States received no orientation to adapt and succeed in this country. Cambria's program did not escape the attention of Bob Considine, an American sportswriter who sarcastically referred to Cambria as an "ivory hunter." Writing for the *Washington Post*, Considine criticized Cambria for inadequately preparing the raw recruits for what they would experience in the major leagues.¹⁸ When Cuban players faced a constant barrage of insults, bench-jockeying, and discriminatory attitudes, they played and lived in an environment in which satisfactory performance was exceedingly difficult. Moreover, the devastating language barrier aggravated these problems.

Years later, however, some Cambria defenders emerged. Ralph Avila, a former Latin American scouting supervisor for the Los Angeles Dodgers, praised the legendary scout: "A lot of people resented Cambria because he signed so many players for the Griffiths and so many got released. But I don't. He gave opportunity to a lot of my people that no one else was willing to give."¹⁹

During the 1950s, Howie Haak, following in Cambria's footsteps, gained notoriety in the Caribbean region. Employed by the Pittsburgh Pirates, Haak spearheaded the club's Latin American scouting program. Unlike Cambria, however, Haak did not venture into the Caribbean on his own. His travels in

17. KERRANE, *supra* note 8, at 30.

18. GONZÁLEZ ECHEVARRÍA, *supra* note 13, at 270. (Considine "reported how badly the Cuban players fared with the Senators, where they were paid meager salaries and were the victims of the sort of prejudice Jackie Robinson would have to endure a few years later.")

19. MICHAEL M. OLEKSAK & MARY ADAMS OLEKSAK, *BÉISBOL: LATIN AMERICANS AND THE GRAND OLD GAME* 45 (1991).

the Caribbean came after Roberto Clemente's appearance on the Pirates' scene. In 1954, Clemente was languishing in the Los Angeles Dodgers farm system. The Pirates, who finished in the National League cellar in 1953, received the rights to Roberto Clemente in 1954. Branch Rickey, who by then was the Pirates' club president, went to view his new acquisition the following spring. Clemente dazzled the mahatma. In the midst of a long-term plan to rebuild the Pirates, Rickey immediately saw the potential value in a Latin American market and beckoned Howie Haak: "If there's anymore of those 'creatures' down there," he told the scout, "I want 'em!"²⁰

For the next several years, Haak traveled extensively throughout the region and challenged Cambria's hold on the territory. Like the Senators' scout, he found many young players who begged for the opportunity to play in the United States. Indeed, after his first full year of Latin scouting, he boasted that he had signed "four gems for about a thousand dollars of bonus money—total. . . . To get four guys that good in the states might've cost a hundred thousand."²¹ In accord with Rickey's "quality out of quantity" philosophy, Haak routinely held tryout sessions and signed several players at the same time. "[A scout] could go down and take his pick and say 'well, we'll save this bunch for next year,'" remembered scout George Genovese, a Haak contemporary who worked in Mexico.²²

Despite the embellishments of the big-league scouts in Latin America, bonuses were few and far between and moderate, at best. Felipe Alou signed for a \$200 bonus, Juan Marichal and Orlando Cepeda each signed for \$500, and Roberto Clemente received a remarkable \$10,000. Nevertheless, these cases were rare. Most players signed contracts that merely paid for their passage to the United States. "Bonus? Sure, we all get bonus," remembered the late Zoilo Versailles, who, in 1965, became the first Latino to win American League Most Valuable Player, "You know the bonus we get? Carfare, that's the bonus."²³

The contract itself was a euphemism. Joe Cambria, for instance, simply held onto contracts until he deemed players ready to move on or move out. And the players, many desperate, had little recourse. Additionally, by signing

20. REGALADO, *supra* note 11, at 57.

21. Ross Newhan, *Howie Haak: The King of the Carib bean*, in BILL MAZEROSKI'S BASEBALL: THE OFFICIAL YEARBOOK OF THE MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL PLAYERS ALUMNI ASSOCIATION 10-11 (1990).

22. REGALADO, *supra* note 11, at 58.

23. *Id.* at 60.

under these circumstances, the players forfeited their opportunity to play in prestigious amateur leagues and, thus, were unable to market their talents to other teams. In effect, the players became chattels for Cambria and his contemporaries.

Hunger and poverty accentuated the Latin Americans' desire to play professional baseball. Felipe Alou, who was only seventeen when he signed with the then New York Giants, recalled that as he signed his contract in his small house, "I looked at the tired walls of our home, at the crowded rooms, at the weariness in my parents' faces I could only hope that better days were coming and that I would help bring them."²⁴

Age restrictions, too, were loosely obeyed. Anxious to offset competition, consideration of youth in a period that well predated "rights of child" mandates was not a factor in the recruitment process. Scouts frequently viewed the signing of exceedingly young players as a badge of honor. "[At that time] you could still sign 'em real young. I got Tony Peña when he was 16, [Omar] Moreno when he was 16, and I could have had Juan Marichal when he was 16," remembered Howie Haak.²⁵

Haak, of course, was not alone. The practice of signing players younger than seventeen continued unregulated by MLB into the 1980s. Moreover, former Latin players themselves were, at times, parties to these signings. In the mid-1970s, Ruben Amaro, a former big-leaguer turned scout, signed Jorge Lebrun of Puerto Rico to a contract with the Philadelphia Phillies for a large bonus of \$38,000. Lebrun was fourteen years old. Jubilant at the time of the signing, Amaro recalled an episode which greatly tempered his joy. "One day he was supposed to go to a workout at the ballpark, but [instead] asked me 'May I stay in the backyard and keep on playing with Ruben and David?' My two sons were ten and twelve [and] all three were playing tag," said the surprised scout.²⁶ Lebrun's career never developed; and, shortly after he turned eighteen, the Phillies released him. Other signings like Lebrun's, however, also occurred. Julio Franco signed a Phillies contract at age sixteen, and Orlando Isales signed at fifteen. Still, Amaro viewed these early-aged signings in the spirit of competitiveness. "[A] lot of Latin players mature

24. FELIPE ALOU & HERM WEISKOPF, FELIPE ALOU: MY LIFE AND BASEBALL 21 (1967).

25. KERRANE, *supra* note 8, at 101.

26. *Id.* at 313.

early, and if you wait too long you can lose them to other scouts," he claimed.²⁷

By the end of the decade and into the 1980s, other scouting techniques also raised eyebrows. The "quality in quantity" principle remained in order as baseball's activities in Latin America entered the age of the academy. Somewhat akin to the School of the Americas in Panama, where U.S. army personnel trained Latin American officers in the art of counterinsurgency warfare, the academies were, in theory, designed to provide young hopefuls both game training and orientation to North American culture. But, in some cases, they proved to be holding centers in which clubs could protect their investments. So adamant were the organizations in this quest that, as anthropologist Alan Klein learned, there existed cases where scouts virtually kidnapped players to prevent interlopers from interfering with their catches. As related to Klein, Papi Bisono, a former Dominican baseball commissioner, claimed that the baseball academies acted as "hideouts because the scouts didn't want their kids seen by other scouts. It almost seemed like they were concentration camps."²⁸

The perceived prestige that came along with the title "academy" also masked the financial discrepancies between what clubs spent on Latin recruits compared to their North American counterparts. According to Kevin Kerrane's study, in the 1975 June draft, MLB clubs paid on average \$60,000 to players from the United States while Latino signees received a paltry \$5,000.²⁹ Six years later, the Philadelphia Phillies revealed that Players Development funding for North American players was \$355,000 compared to \$25,000 for Latin American recruits.³⁰

In fairness, however, some of the baseball academies did introduce young players to North American cuisine, social culture, and, most importantly, the English language. The number of Spanish-speaking agents also increased by the 1980s. To some extent, the appearance of agents and representatives, though their numbers were small, helped level the playing field for determining compensation. Moreover, the growth of the U.S. Spanish-

27. *Id.* at 314.

28. ALAN M. KLEIN, SUGARBALL: THE AMERICAN GAME, THE DOMINICAN DREAM 54 (1991).

29. KERRANE, *supra* note 8, at 313.

30. *Id.* at 311.

language media, the influence of Hispanics in state and local government, and the tremendous success of players such as Fernando Valenzuela in the 1980s and Sammy Sosa in the 1990s, have helped magnify both the achievements and plight of Latin American players.

CONCLUSION

But the neocolonialist tradition is not easily overcome. Baseball's historical treatment of Latin baseball hopefuls was grounded in the tradition of American exploitation of Latin labor dating back to the nineteenth century. Indeed, MLB followed in the footsteps of such enterprises as Standard Oil Company in Mexico prior to 1938 or the United Fruit Company in Guatemala from 1900 to the 1950s—companies that paid meager wages and monopolized the work force. Indeed, even in the United States, Latin labor exploitation, as seen in the controversial Bracero Program from 1942 to 1964, was not uncommon. That MLB clubs conducted their business in the same manner was in keeping with American historic business practices on foreign soil. American baseball activities since the Cambria period have also been dubious, at best. Efforts to curb MLB scouting abuses emerged, such as Dominican President High Blancos' 1984 Presidential Decree regulating MLB academies in his country and MLB's 1984 enactment of the seventeen-year old rule. MLB clubs still, however, sought and continue to seek ways to side-step these guidelines. In short, MLB teams had recruitment guidelines,³¹ but they rarely pressed their scouts in Latin America to put them into practice. Moreover, the financial playing field between American and Latin talent was anything but level.

In his multi-volume study *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal, concluded, that the exploitive nature of American capitalism contributed directly to the racial discrepancy between whites and blacks.³² The principles of Myrdal's conclusions also apply to MLB's relationship with its Latin

31. Angel Vargas, *The Globalization of Baseball: A Latin American Perspective*, 8 IND. J. GLOBAL LEGAL STUD. 21, 26 (2000). See also Arturo J. Marciano & David P. Fidler, *The Globalization of Baseball: Major League Baseball and the Mistreatment of Latin American Baseball Talent*, 6 IND. J. GLOBAL LEGAL STUD. 511 (1999) (on continuing MLB abuses in Latin America).

32. GUNNAR MYRDAL, *AN AMERICAN DILEMMA: THE NEGRO PROBLEM AND MODERN AMERICA* 208 (1944).

constituency. MLB's actions have been a microcosm of America's historic attitudes towards its southern neighbors. The MLB practice of signing young Latin players "on the cheap" was and is not a new development. It was, and remains, part of the American neocolonialist tradition.