



# *Dream Merchants*

**Inside Dominican  
Baseball - And what we can learn**

Written by  
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I began playing baseball at age 9. By today's standards that is quite late to begin a sport. By age 11, I decided I wanted to play Major League Baseball. I had no idea what that meant, the type of commitment my goal would demand, or the countless hours refining my skill set I would spend. But, those things didn't matter to me then, I was fueled by a dream to be the best.

While I never realized my MLB dreams, I did become a professional athlete playing in the Seattle Mariners organization. It was there that I first realized that half of the minor league team I was playing for was born in a foreign country. Many of those guys came from the Dominican Republic, or Puerto Rico. Why were so many guys making it into professional baseball from relatively tiny Latin American countries?

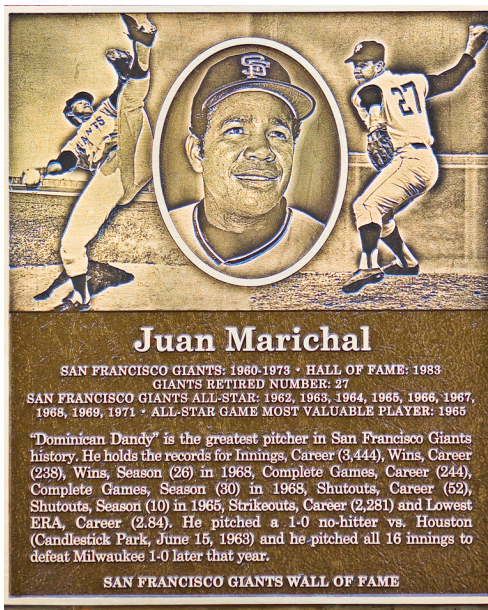
Over a decade later I sat down to research and find the answer to my question and to see if American athletes have anything to learn from Dominican players. This ebook, *Dream Merchants*, explores my findings and offers some advice to the serious baseball player.

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*Juan Marichal, one of the most famous Dominican born baseball players of all time. With his unorthodox delivery and multiple different arm slots, he won 191 games during the 1960's which was more than any other pitcher in the National League.*

*He finished his 16-year career with a 243-142 record, a 2.89 ERA, and 2,303 strikeouts.*

*Juan was the first Dominican born athlete inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1983.*



234 foreign-born athletes were listed on the opening day rosters of MLB teams in 2011. This number constituted just over 27% of the total number of athletes on opening day. The Dominican Republic provided 86 of those 234, a staggering 10.3% of active rosters. Further, just under half of the entire minor league system is made up of foreign born athletes, a large percentage of those players being from the D.R.

To many baseball fans in the United States, this ratio is amazing. How can a nation of roughly 10 million citizens and a poverty rate of 42% consistently turn out athletes such as Albert Pujols, Manny Ramirez, Sammy Sosa, Robinson Cano, Pedro Martinez, Alfonso Soriano, Vladimir Guerrero, and David Ortiz? Are we American athletes, parents, and coaches dropping the ball, so to speak, in training we demand from ourselves and our athletes? What can we as a baseball community learn from the athletes coming from the Dominican Republic? The answers to these questions are more complex than you may initially think. Let's explore.





## The Baseball Factory

If baseball in the United States is the national pastime, baseball in the D.R. is the national craze. Scores of kids begin playing baseball as soon as they can walk. Because of the expansive poverty rate, many kids will pick up limes and stick, or whatever else they can find, and head to the cow pasture to play. Pieces of folded cardboard serve as gloves for many of the kids, since very few own a leather glove. The more fortunate scrounge up a worn baseball with the cover torn off and set up makeshift batting cages and spend hours honing their skills. Baseball is more than a sport for the boys of the D.R.; many see the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Ortiz, Cano and the others as a way to break their family out of the chains of poverty and provide a better life. The alternatives are few and far less appealing: farming, manual labor, or random odd jobs when they can be had. However, none of those jobs provide enough to truly make an impact on the standard of living. With a government that spends just 2% of the GDP on education, academic successes in the D.R. are very rare.

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*Miguel Sano is a shortstop playing in the Minnesota twins organization (as of 2011). At 6'3 and 195 lbs, he began his professional career at the age of 17 in 2009.*

*Signing with the Twins for a record (for position players) \$3.15 million, Sano hit .292 last season (2011) with 20 home runs (2nd most in the league) in 66 games at the Rookie ball level.*

*Miguel Sano Links:*

- *Sano Signs* <http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=4517993>
- *Twins Prospect Rankings* <http://www.baseballamerica.com/today/prospects/rankings/organization-top-10-prospects/2012/2612823.html>
- *Sano Stats* <http://www.baseball-reference.com/minors/player.cgi?id=sano--001mig>

Baseball is big business on the island as all 30 MLB teams have built multi-million dollar training academies where young 16-18 year old Dominicans eat, sleep, and develop their raw talent. The process is fairly simple; *buscones* (Spanish for searchers) scour the island nation by the hundreds looking for young talent. The buscones train, and sometimes feed and house these teenagers. If their assessment of the young athletes is correct, and the training effective, the kids at 16-18 will sign a professional contract with one of the MLB teams and begin further training in one of the baseball academies littered through the countryside in the D.R. With some good fortune and a lot of hours of work put in, it's on to the minor league system in the United States.

The incentive to find and develop talent is worth the time, effort, and years spent developing athletes. The *buscones* pocket typically 25%-40% of the signing bonus of these athletes. The bonuses can vary widely from tens of thousands of dollars to millions of dollars depending on the talent and projectability of the





athlete. Sano's \$3.15 million bonus is extremely rare, but any amount of money is heaven sent to the families of these athletes where the average annual household income is just over \$8,000.

### **Reasons For Success**

There are some obvious reasons why such a large percentage of Dominican ball players filter into the professional baseball system. While most kids in the U.S. won't experience the same type of poverty and hardships compared to the kids from the Dominican Republic, that doesn't mean we can't learn a few things from them. I came across an article written by strength and conditioning coach, John Doyle

([www.baseballtrainingsecrets.com](http://www.baseballtrainingsecrets.com)).





He had taken a fairly recent trip to the D.R. and had the following to say about the work ethic and mental toughness of the athletes there. *"Simply put, they are simply stronger between the ears than everyone else. They cannot be shaken. They believe in themselves, even in the most difficult circumstances. Losing is not an option. And it's never even considered."*

Getting cut means more to these kids than a lump in the throat and a demoralizing feeling of rejection for a few days. For many, it means they had lost the only hope to help out their family have a better life.

For Miguel Sano, getting a shot at Major League Baseball means helping out his mother. Growing up in the D.R., Miguel shared a 600 square foot house with his mom, stepfather, and eight siblings. His story is not uncommon. Gloves are forged from milk cartons and baseballs are created from rolled up socks wrapped in tape. Even with this type of poverty, the dream is alive and well in the



*At 6'1, 195 lbs. Alfonso Soriano, of the Chicago Cubs, exhibits great strength to weight ratio.*

D.R. When the motivation to succeed means more than a personal accolade or accomplishment, athletes tend to develop a greater sense of urgency and work ethic.

Because John Doyle's professional focus is on strength and conditioning, he had some other interesting observations as to why D.R. sends so many athletes to professional baseball. He cites joint range of motion as one of the contributing factors for success,

*"Certainly the Dominican ballplayer is genetically geared towards baseball. Their frame is typically lean and long, with an excellent strength-to-weight ratio. Their cultures' emphasis on manual labor is responsible for their high fast-twitch muscle fiber make-up. This is crucial to becoming a high level ballplayer. But what was extremely refreshing to see what their incredible dynamic joint range of motion throughout their hips, ankles and shoulders. This allows for high speed & power while running, throwing and swinging."*



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## Dynamic Movement:

*Functional training that emphasizes dynamic movements are valuable to baseball players.*

- *The disadvantage of bench pressing in training for baseball is that the movement is not duplicated in the baseball environment. Therefore, benching (especially heavy weight) does little good.*
- *Dynamic movements that forces the stabilization of your body while you do the lift, or exercise, is beneficial.*
- *Think for a moment how much rotating, twisting, and contorting of the body occurs in an average baseball game.*
- *More and more MLB teams are ditching the weights in favor of dynamic training that simulates movements found on the baseball diamond.*
- *Here, Dan Gazaway discusses how rotational power helps pitchers. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIot4yhqRBs>*

While American athletes have no control over the genetic makeup handed down from their parents, there are steps that can be taken to improve quick-twitch muscles, strength, and flexibility. We will get into this later on.

Another component working for athletes in the Dominican is the emphasis on what Doyle calls "speed" strength, not muscle mass. He writes,

*"While their frames allow for large increases in muscle mass, they know that it is not necessary to hit for power or throw in the mid to high 90's. While I taught them a great deal of new explosive exercises, they were already using others to develop strength, speed and power without risking injury. You certainly won't catch Dominican athletes dedicating an entire day to the bench press or heading to the gym to work "chest and tri's". For some reason it's very difficult to get most American athletes to get away from bodybuilding routines, baseball players included."*

In college, we were required to lift during the off season a few times per week. One of my roommates would always head to the bench press and put up unreal poundage for his size. He had a huge chest, though I'm not sure it did him much good during the season. The point is that what it means to be a strong athlete today is changing from the idea of a strong athlete of even a decade ago. The Dominican kids have figured it out, and their way of life lends itself to a quick, durable, and agile body type. Those body types hold up under the length of a professional baseball season. Take a look at the MLB disabled list in August any given year and you won't see very many Latin American names or Japanese names on the list. I don't think that is a coincidence.

## **Factors Weighing Against The American Baseball Player**

The serious athlete already understands, to some extent, what type of work is required to develop a skill set that will be attractive to a future professional ball club. What he, and his parents, may not understand are some of the finer points of success that are increasingly tougher to acquire in American society.

Americans are fragmented. One quick examination of the weekly schedule of many families with a couple athletes shows something resembling the following. One or both parents work full time. One of those parents gets off work earlier than the other, and consequently gets the task of taking son or daughter, or both, to some sporting practice/event. This could be baseball, football, basketball, soccer, dance, cheer, etc. Depending on the season the sport may change, but the routine doesn't. After practice and a quick bite to





eat on the way home, it's time for homework. As the kids settle down at the kitchen table or in their bedrooms, the parents, exhausted from work and the running around afterward, plop down on the sofa and click on the television. After some time absorbing information, checking email, engaging in some light conversation, it's off to bed. The routine repeats in the morning.

Weekends aren't much different. Games flood the schedule and zooming to and fro is commonplace. It's then time to get caught up on bills, shopping, etc. Sunday evening rolls around and the mumblings of frustration over no time occur as the work week begins again in the morning. For many, this reality won't change; it's just how life works here in America.

Does this mean that the American family life is not conducive to producing professional athletes? It doesn't mean that at all. It is simply a byproduct of an advanced society where there are so many different paths to choose, and different values held. Without consistent focus on anything, there is little hope of achieving greatness. Are we really investing time in the areas we value? This is a valid question to ask.



*David Ortiz of the Boston Red Sox is highly regarded in the Dominican Republic. Winner of the 2011 Roberto Clemente Award, Ortiz' foundation has raised over \$2 million that has paid for over 200 heart surgeries for children in the Dominican Republic.*





Another factor weighing in against the American baseball player is the sheer amount of avenues for fun and freedom. Video gaming occupies countless hours that could otherwise be spent moving around. iPods are everywhere. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter demand constant interaction. Television watching becomes routine. Hanging out with friends and dating find their places in the schedule also. Again, these are freedoms we have come to enjoy because of how our American society has developed. I haven't thrown away my sons Xbox; I don't plan to. Both my young children enjoy classical music on their mp3 players. We as a family take in the occasional movie as well. As I write this, I've got my earbuds in listening to music coming to me through Pandora as I type away on my Android tablet in a coffee shop. So please understand, I'm not advocating a hermit lifestyle full of technophobes. I am however cautioning the excess usage of these products and services. If the goal is to play professional baseball (or at least college baseball), there have got to be some regulations by the serious athlete and his parents.

Did You Know?

*Not only do you need a good work habit in athletics, but university attendance is becoming more competitive too.*

- *According to USA Today, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities has increased 4.7% over the last year (2010-2011).*
- *China leads the way sending 157,558 undergraduate and graduate students to the U.S. during the 2010-2011 academic year. That is up 23% from the previous year.*
- *Enrollment into post-secondary institutions grew 9% between 1989-1999. Then, between 1999-2009 enrollment grew another 38%.*
- *Academic and athletics success many times go hand in hand. Work hard in both areas and you'll give yourself the best chance to succeed after high school.*

## Options of the American Athlete

I had an interesting email conversation recently with a parent named Kevin; he had a great observation. Regarding the importance placed on education in America he writes,

*"In spite of the US being a sports-obsessed culture, we place an even higher premium on education, and higher education is available to a larger portion of Americans than it is to the same portion of Latin American citizens. The time spent on educational pursuits for many kids rivals the time spent playing a sport. My son spends about 2 hours (or more) a day on homework, whereas we might spend 4 hours a week on baseball. And if push comes to shove, if he has a project due for a class, we'll gladly forgo practice to focus on studies without question. Education is the priority in my house, and I can say with certainty that the same goes for probably 90% of the families that we play baseball with."*



For many of the athletes I train, this comment by Kevin is right on. I think more and more parents are becoming aware that a valuable education is a more important (and attainable) option in the long run. As a teacher in a public high school, I have conversations with very few parents who are not promoting their student athlete's educational success.

This value on education is not readily available to parents and their athletes in the D.R. Because of the dire conditions, skipping school to focus on baseball seems to be common place.

It's wonderful to have the option for our future that America allows. However, with options (as I mentioned earlier) come distractions and fragmentation. This forces the serious athlete to prioritize his ambitions. As Kevin wrote, there is time in the day for school and baseball. Just not enough to add many of the other options on a consistent basis IF the goal is to achieve greatness in baseball.



*With beaches like these, it's a wonder Dominican kids put so much time into baseball!*

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"I believe that good work habit is not just simply raw hours put in, but has to do with precise work."

*Precise work has to do with how well you understand your craft.*

*One of the most frustrating parts of playing high school baseball was when times were tough at the plate or on the mound, I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know how to fix the problem, and neither did my coaches.*

*Become a smart baseball player and use the internet for a reference to good mechanics. Simply search in YouTube with the words "slow motion hitting mechanics" (or pitching mechanics) and you'll find a lot of great clips to watch and learn from.*

### Where To Go From Here

To compare directly the ratio of players playing professionally from the D.R. to the ratio of players playing professionally from the U.S. is misleading. There are too many differences between the Dominican Republic and the United States to make a fair straight across numbers comparison. But, what IS fair is to examine the components that are under the control of the athlete and find ways of improving. As mentioned earlier, John Doyle sighted a few important pieces contributing to the success of the D.R. athlete: work habit/dealing with failure, joint range of motion, and "speed" strength.

The importance of work habit has been heavily impressed into the minds of serious athletes continually by parents and coaches. I don't want to revisit the need to get out and work on skills, that SHOULD be an automatic. Instead, I believe that good work habit is not just simply raw hours put in, but has to do with precise work. Because of the internet and specialized training programs, athletes today have a virtually unlimited amount of





resources in which they can use to train.

Therein lies part of the problem. The internet has created the ability for anyone to publish information about baseball technique. It seems like weekly I run into an athlete who explains his coach has taught him differently than I regarding pitching or hitting mechanics. While that is not entirely bad, it doesn't necessarily help athletes if they are changing their mechanics each season to accommodate the philosophy of a coach.

Instead of shifting mechanics and training around to meet the demands of a coach, is it not more productive to study what effective Big League athletes are doing and duplicate their core movements? This is what I mean by precise training. Which of the following athletes would make more meaningful progress: the athlete who takes 200 swings daily in a cage, and doesn't fully understand his mechanics, or a hitter who takes 100 swings, three times per week, who fully understands effective hitting mechanics? The first athlete exemplifies hard work (hours put in), but the second athlete demonstrates precise work



(knowledge about his craft). I argue that all serious athletes who wish to play high level baseball need to move towards fully understanding their mechanics based on what is currently working in Major League Baseball instead of just putting in the hours in practice. This is why I send each of the kids I work with slow motion video clips of hitters and pitchers to watch in order to reinforce the mechanics I'm teaching.

Flexibility, range of motion, and "speed" strength are all trademarks of many Dominican athletes. There are a few cultural components that come into play here for sure, but besides those, serious American athletes could stand some drastic improvement in these areas. Baseball is a sport that demands feet to fingertip body control. The more core stability and flexibility an athlete has, the more effective he can be with proper mechanics training. Conversely, the more large muscles are worked over and over, without focus on small muscle groups, the less flexible and stable an athlete will be.



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The sheer number of websites devoted to teaching proper joint flexibility and core strength has skyrocketed in the last decade. My friend, Barry Lovelace, (the King of Core - [www.barrylovelace.com](http://www.barrylovelace.com)) has been working full time promoting the idea that core strength is must for any successful athlete. I like Barry because he emphasizes training in an unstable environment. That is, forcing the body to balance while performing strength exercises. Here are a couple YouTube clips that illustrate his ideas well.

<http://tinyurl.com/79j5mtp> - Swiss Ball Knee Tuck

<http://tinyurl.com/7zf98ha> - Push Ups With Squat Jump



I again use John Doyle to illustrate the idea of proper training,

*"The biggest mistake I see in the structure of baseball specific training programs (besides the wrong exercises and emphasis on "strengths") is how there's not a focus on building the complete athlete.*

*Most programs have a weak warm-up, then go straight into weight training and then throw some "abs" in at the end. That's it. No focus on baseball-specific movement patterns, joint angles or strength, speed and power that will transfer over to the field."*

I've provided some links in the resources section at the end of this ebook for you to explore that illustrate what John means by exercises that apply to the athlete on the field.

So why don't more serious athletes utilize the same types of training techniques as high level baseball players? Just as with everything new, there is always an adoption and implementation barrier. With time, the barriers fade away and the new techniques and training strategies become mainstream. Consider what the Seattle Mariners have done in 2010 to better serve the need for developing their athletes.

<http://tinyurl.com/74uhwz8> - The new Seattle Mariners weight room.

If you haven't yet implemented the types of training Lovelace, Doyle, and the Seattle Mariners are using and promoting, you're not maximizing your training time. You may be working hard, but you're not being precise. Precision is all that counts in high level baseball.





## The Message To The Athlete

The saying, you don't know what you don't know, applies here to this subject. If you don't know about the hole in your swing, or the problem with your throwing mechanics, you don't know what needs to change. If you don't know that the two days per week you work on your game is not going to cut it if you want to achieve your professional baseball goal, then you don't know what you don't know. And finally, if you don't know that you burn too many hours playing with technology, then you'll never make it. My purpose in writing this ebook is to show you what other athletes, who are competing for your future job, are doing to further their dreams. Just remember while you're logging the hours in on your Playstation or Xbox, there are kids in the Dominican hitting limes with sticks who are developing work ethic. The desire of the Dominican athlete to play professional is massive. What will you change this season to give yourself the edge?



## The Message To The Parent

I told my parents when I was young that I wanted to play professional baseball. I cannot ever remember a time where my dream was bashed by my mom and dad. In fact, quite the opposite occurred. While we didn't have a lot of money to dump into private lessons or a new bat each year, I got something better from them. Support. I don't remember a time where both of them were gone for one of my games until college (except for a tournament in Florida my summer team took). I could deal with teammates and coaches telling me I wouldn't make it, but I couldn't have dealt with a lack of support from my parents.

You are in a powerful position as a parent. Whether your athlete shows it or not, he/she is grateful to you if you show interest and support. Alternatively, if you are not supportive of his/her goals, it will have a massively negative impact on the dreams of your athlete. My advice is that helping your athlete dream and work on achieving is much more valuable than bringing those dreams back down to "reality". I did get a chance to play professional baseball. I know I would have never made it without my parents active support.





## The Message To The Coach

While I had a lot of coaches who sincerely wanted me to succeed, I didn't have any coaches who truly understood proper hitting and pitching mechanics until I got to college. In today's technological age, there is no excuse for you to not understand how to teach proper mechanics to your athlete. A few hours reading and watching on some of the sites I list in the resource section could have a massive impact on your team this year.

Avoid changing your athlete's style unless it is interfering with a mechanics standard. I won't go into what a mechanics standard is here, but I've written on this subject before (<http://tinyurl.com/7c5ertz>); it's highly important. Please take time to build your coaching philosophy on what MLB athletes are doing. It's the closest to baseball truth we can get at the moment. Teams invest millions into their athletes teaching them how to eat, exercise, hit, and throw. The internet passes many of those tips onto us, if you're willing to look. You owe it to your athletes to help them build precise work habit. The *buscones* in the Dominican are incentivized by money. My hope is your incentive is to further the dream of your athlete. You can do that if you put the time into your own training as well.

When I set out to dive into the subject of why so many Dominican athletes (as a percentage) were making it into professional baseball compared to American born athletes, I thought my answer would be simple enough. I anticipated it would boil down to work ethic, plain and simple. I now have discovered that while dedication is a major piece of the puzzle, there are other major factors. Those factors many here in the U.S. will never experience. Poverty won't force the majority of U.S. athletes to skip school and devote multiple hours per days developing skills in order to change the financial realities within their families like Miguel Sano. Education and college won't cease being valued and promoted by our communities. And the age of technology won't diminish and cause less distractions among our athletes.

The serious American athlete has a series of hurdles to overcome. IF indeed the goal is to play collegiate or even professional baseball, there must be more hours carved out of the day and applied to proper strength and skill development. There must be a better, more precise understanding of mechanics as well as the mental game of baseball. And there must be fewer distractions devouring valuable hours in the day. If these components are not consistently a focus over the course of the middle school and high school years, there is little chance of achieving the dream of professional baseball.

But, for those American athletes willing to spend time on precise training, the avenue to high level baseball becomes a little more clear.



**\*\* If you'd like to continue conversation or have a question, I'll respond here.**

<https://plus.google.com/111870209380469381258/posts/RFjKiXFwDfp>

## Resources

### *Dynamic Strength Building*

Jon Doyle - <http://www.baseballtrainingsecrets.com/pages/home.htm>

Barry Lovelace YouTube Channel - <http://www.youtube.com/user/barryluv>

Dan Huff - <http://www.baseballstrengthblog.com/>

### *Pitching and Hitting Mechanics Information*

The Pitching Academy - <http://www.thepitchingacademy.com/>

The Pitching Academy YouTube Channel - <http://www.youtube.com/user/PitchingAcademy>

Project 400 - <http://www.natebarnett.com/>

### *MLB Athletes Training Clips*

Dan Uggla - <http://tinyurl.com/7oz4dgg>

Carl Crawford - <http://tinyurl.com/7u67vl6>

Jacoby Ellsbury - <http://tinyurl.com/7hdxfg8> - Speed - <http://tinyurl.com/78vnl3f>

Manny Ramirez - <http://tinyurl.com/87yera9>

Alex Gordon - <http://tinyurl.com/6negwwh> - Volume Optional

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