

Did you know?

by the Venezuelan Mission of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis



Baseball Withdrawal in the USA and Venezuela

If you're a Twins fan, with the 2020 season scheduled to begin March 26th but suspended indefinitely due to the coronavirus, you may be going through baseball withdrawal. Not to worry. Major League Baseball has you covered, making every one of the 4,930 games played in 2018 and 2019 available free at MLB.com. Once baseball returns to stadiums and TV, you can get your fill with the season extended into November and lots of doubleheaders. You can even drive down to Dyersville, Iowa, to attend the first MLB game ever in that state where the movie "Field of Dreams" was filmed. Put it on your calendar...August 13th, Yankees vs. White Sox.

For baseball in Venezuela, withdrawal has another meaning. Baseball was introduced here in the early part of the 20th century by Americans coming to work in the country's developing oil industry. A professional league was formed in 1945. Over the years, the league served as a bridge to the MLB for young Venezuelan players as did similar leagues for players in other Latin American countries.



Most of the first Latino players in the MLB came from Cuba. Some notables wearing Twins uniforms were Zoilo Versalles, Camilo Pascual and Tony Oliva. When Fidel Castro banned professional sports in Cuba in the 1960's, MLB teams turned their attention elsewhere, especially to the Dominican Republic and Venezuela who, along with neighboring Latin American countries, account for 27% of the players in major leagues today. The success of the Minnesota Twins last year was due in part to the inclusion of Venezuelans Williams "La Tortuga" Astudillo, Gabriel Moya, Luis Arráez,

Ehire Adrianza, Martin Perez and Marwin Gonzalez in the lineup.

Becoming a major league player was the dream of many a poor young Venezuelan, the best and often only pathway to fame and fortune. Even young Hugo Chavez, long before presidential dreams, hoped to become a big-league pitcher. Corporations and social clubs here in Ciudad Guayana fed the dreams, building beautiful ballparks and sponsoring teams. In 1997 the MLB inaugurated a Venezuelan Summer League. Several MLB teams ran baseball academies comprised primarily of teenage players. Major league scouts ran tryout camps in cities around Venezuela including here in Ciudad Guayana which was in the process of constructing one of the best stadiums in the country to attract a professional team and more MLB interest.

Baseball was big, but Venezuela's faltering economy and political instability in recent years began to take their toll. One after another major league team closed their academies here. The MLB summer league moved to the Dominican Republic. Ciudad Guayana's beautiful ballpark sits empty...not a single game has been played there for years. MLB scouts no longer come. The corporations no longer have money to sponsor teams and maintain ballparks as they used to. This past August, as part of US sanctions, the MLB prohibited players and prospects, many of whom previously came for winter training, from playing in the Venezuelan league.

So it is that Venezuela has suffered its own kind of baseball withdrawal. It's rare to see kids here playing baseball any more. It's not just that they can't afford gloves, bats and balls. The dream is gone...but maybe that's okay. Maybe it's better that kids just play sports for the pure enjoyment of the game, the interaction with friends and the exercise. That's where soccer, not baseball, comes in for kids here in our parish. They don't need sponsors, expensive equipment, or a stadium with a large grassy field. A neighborhood street will do, and dozens of games are played on the streets of our barrios every night. If the ball is worn through the outer skin or low on air, it doesn't matter. Even a bunch of rags tied into a ball will work. As with their parents facing so many difficulties these days in Venezuela, kids here make do. Rather than withdrawing, defeated by the challenges of life, they find joy in the simple things of life and go on.

Points to ponder

What is your favorite sport or hobby? Is it expensive? What would you do if you didn't have any money for equipment? What if there were no organized teams or leagues?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.