



## A.P. Gonzalez Visits the Dominican

With a grant from the UCLA Institute of American Cultures (IAC), Director/Producer A.P. Gonzalez travels to the Dominican Republic for *El Béisbol*.

by A.P. Gonzalez  
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I wanted to get a visual impression of the Caribbean country before actually shooting there for key portions of *El Beisbol*, our two-hour TV documentary.

I traveled with my friend, Luchy Guerra, a Dominican who went to college in D.C. and has lived in Southern California for many years. Luchy has her own company now; she's the president and CEO of Athlete Life Management Group LLC. Before that, she worked for the Los Angeles Dodgers for 15 years; and she knows just about everyone in baseball, players and management alike.

We landed near Santo Domingo, the capital, on the evening of Oct. 27<sup>th</sup>. Even though it had been a long flight with a long layover in Miami,

I was so excited to take in a game between two ancient rivals, *Licey* and *Escogido*. What an introduction to this island nation! Baseball in the Dominican Republic reigns supreme.

Our driver, David Binet, somehow managed to back into a spot smaller than the van. He just stepped on the gas, and people moved out of the way! I yelled something like, "Me vas a matar" ("You're going to kill me") and that became a running joke for the next five days as our driver skillfully avoided other drivers in a game of high-stakes "bumper cars."

The stadium was packed with *fanaticos*. These two rivals are both from the capital. They share the same stadium, alternating home team advantage. The atmosphere that night was



electric – people hawking parking spaces, smells of grilled food, *merengue*, mascots, swirling fans displaying their colors, loud music pumped through the P.A., dancing girls, and the beautiful natural sounds of baseball. In a wild game, *Escogido* trumped *Licey* in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>.



The next day, we traveled to the Dodgers Academy, *Campo Las Palmas*, the oldest of the Baseball Academies in the Dominican. I met Roman Barinas, an American born Dominican who graduated from Cornell and is now the Assistant of Baseball Operations at the Academy. He gave me a tour of the tranquil facility, and I watched scheduled tryouts on the main field.

That afternoon, we traveled to the cradle of Dominican baseball, *San Pedro de Macoris*. Mini-moped-taxis outnumbered large vehicles in this famous port town. We visited MLB manager, Manny Acta's, start-up academy. Here, much like American little league, baseball is played on three different large diamonds for boys and girls of all ages, and it's operated by Acta's foundation.

We took in a game that night where the home team, *Las Estrellas Orientales*, have played in *San Pedro* since 1910. More incredible atmosphere and, of course, great baseball!

On the 29<sup>th</sup>, we traveled to *San Cristobol*. This was my favorite city; it's nestled amongst verdant mountains with beautiful views in every direction. Two famous ex-major league

ballplayers, Raul Mondesi and Jose Rijo, are among the candidates for mayor here; and we



tracked both of them down. Raul Mondesi agreed to meet with us after a campaign stop in the city, and I sat down with him to tell him about our documentary. Although in the middle of a political campaign, he was warm and friendly. He liked the documentary's emphasis on culture and family, and he agreed to be interviewed when we are ready to shoot.

We met Jose Rijo just outside a progressive detention facility for women. He wanted to know all about the documentary and invited us to his cigar bar that evening to watch a World



Series game in the atmosphere of his club. He, too, agreed to an interview; and said he'd help us get to other players and baseball personnel. Earlier that day, I visited and toured the brand new Academy owned by the San Diego Padres. This facility is extraordinary. It resembles a huge resort; and it has first-class amenities and workout facilities for its young MLB prospects. Heartfelt thanks goes out to

Jesus Negrette and Veronica Nogueira for their thorough tour and friendly manner.

Oliver Arias, an MLB ex-pitcher, runs the beautiful hilltop Academy rented to the Detroit Tigers by José Rijo. We traveled all the way up “*Loma de los Sueños*” to find Oliver Arias right around lunch time. We were graciously invited to have lunch with the ballplayers in a beautiful outdoor setting that overlooked big-island mountains. I met young Jafet Medoza, who teaches English language and American Acculturation at the Academy. We also met batting coach, Rafael Martinez and pitching coach, Jose Parra. Both had plenty of stories about their struggles to make it to the majors and beyond.



On the 30<sup>th</sup>, we went to Baseball City in *Boca Chica*. Here, various MLB teams rent facilities in an older-style academy set up. Modest buildings, some training facilities and playing fields are shared within several acres of land. The high point of this day was meeting Al Avila, the assistant General Manager of the Detroit Tigers. Al’s father is Ralph Avila, a Cuban, and one of the most famous scouts in baseball history. We talked about baseball being in his blood and that I’d like to interview him about the influence of family in Latino baseball. He not only agreed, he told me that he was also in the Dominican to visit his son who is catching for *Escogido*. That’s right – three generations of baseball Avilas!

At Baseball City, I also had another good discussion with another Cuban American,

Louie Eljaua, Special Assistant to Jim Hendry, GM of the Chicago Cubs. Louie invited me to spring training in Florida.



The New York Mets have a gorgeous, brand new Academy off a main road not too far from Boca Chica. This year, the Mets are mixing 25 U.S. players at their first-class Dominican facility in order help the cross cultural climate, which is slowly becoming a necessity. Thank you for the hospitality to Virgilio Santa Maria and Lic. Juan Henderson.

On our last full day, after being treated for lunch with some of Luchy Guerra’s wonderful family, we planned a meeting with Jose Lima, who has pitched for a number of fine MLB teams. In great shape, Jose Lima, already an advocate of our documentary, met us before game time. I wished him luck with his well known chant, “IT’S LIMA TIME.” Turns out that he pitched a winning game for Santiago’s *Las Aguilas* against San Pedro’s hometown *Estrellas*. After the game, he pledged to meet with me in Los Angeles before the end of the year to talk some more about our coming documentary, *El Béisbol*.

Luchy and I made it to the airport the next day; and I thanked our driver, David, for our escapades in the van. I met a lot of great souls, and it is clear to me that this is a nation of people who don’t have the material things that North Americans are used to; but they are warm and rich with family -- and they have that other thing that really matters – *el béisbol*.

