

Book Reviews

Klein, Alan M. *Sugarball: The American Game. The Dominican Dream*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991. 179 pages, photographs, notes, index. \$15 paperback.

“Once the United States is in, who will get it out?” forewarned Cuban patriot José Martí during the late nineteenth century as he sought to temper American encroachment into the Caribbean. By 1900 and into the twentieth century, Martí’s prophetic words rang true as American hegemony did. indeed, eventually encompass all aspects of Latin American life-including baseball. This theme characterizes the intuitive study of Dominican baseball found in Alan M. Klein’s *Sugarball: The American Game. The Dominican Dream*. *Sugarball* chronicles the rise of baseball on the island and explores its socioeconomic impact that, in fact, transcends the game itself. Klein’s arguments include the plight of the Dominican game itself as it struggles to exist under the long shadow of the American baseball institution. The author also investigates the myth of the American baseball economic influence in the Dominican. Through his seven chapters, Klein, a professor of sociology-anthropology at Northeastern University, introduces readers to a concise history of the Dominican and skillfully paints a picture that describes the region’s culture and people who struggle to resist American influence while maintaining a rigid sense of nationality. As the author explores all aspects of Dominican society, he includes his own experiences as an English instructor at one of the baseball academies.

Sugarball is especially intriguing in its treatment of Dominican baseball. Largely overshadowed by its American counterpart, the island’s baseball tradition, though damaged by the loss of players to United States big league institutions, continues to survive as both a symbol of Dominican nationalism and beacon for resistance. Indeed, the Dominican game itself is surrounded by a colorful atmosphere. Klein, for example, cleverly coins his visit to Quisqueya Stadium in Santo Domingo as an experience in “Quisqueya Culture.” Vendors, Klein describes, “never seem hurried, will chat with the customers about almost anything, sometimes flirt with them; one young woman (vendor) showed me a picture of her youngest child and spoke with me for a full five minutes about him” (p. 140). On the field, those games which pitted national teams against those comprised largely of Americans carried considerable impact. Indeed, conquests over the “conquerors from the north” provided great satisfaction and “were by no means treated as entertaining and meaningless. They provided hope and vindication, as well as cherished memories to be passed on to succeeding generations” (p. 117).

Other interesting sections include the competitive world of scouts who, in some cases, actually kidnapped young prospects in order to prevent opponents from discovering them; the ideal and the reality of the English instruction courses found at the baseball academies; and the role of the national government with respect to baseball on the island. Throughout the book, one is reminded of how baseball serves a dual purpose in the Dominican. On one hand, the "American game" paves a path for fiscal opportunity and social mobility. On the other hand, Klein argues, it serves as a mechanism for foreign control of the island. "Yanqui" baseball, the author suggests, guts the Dominican baseball establishment with little fiscal benefit for the country at-large.

Klein's arguments are sound. American hegemony, an all-too familiar trait in Latin America, has, in so many ways, contributed more to stagnation rather than progress in the Caribbean. American meddling, for instance, slowed land reform measures, added to the establishment of military oligarchies, and planted the seeds for widespread repression. It also gave rise to a number of populist movements as nationalistic leaders strove to break free from under the yoke of American influence. Dominican baseball and all that it represents serves as a microcosm of this ongoing struggle. Dominican players who succeed in the United States, for example, remain fiercely loyal to their island. Clearly, the ties to the fatherland are apparent by the very fact that the majority of Dominicans who play in the American big leagues not only return to their homeland as proud citizens, but they greatly contribute their time and money towards various programs designed to uplift their countrymen. Dominican sports journalists, too, Klein argues, serve an important function. As the true "gatekeepers of Dominican nationalism," they aim their criticism not at Dominican nationals, but towards the North Americans.

Klein's arguments which focus on American neocolonialistic ventures, however, need, at times, to be placed in appropriate context. They also lend themselves to debate. For example, is the Dominican desire for American goods and fashion a feature of what he calls "cultural colonialism" or simply the free enterprise system at work? Certainly, by comparison, Americans who purchase Japanese automobiles or Swiss watches cannot be categorized as "cultural colonials." Also, what of the ballplayers whose priorities lie in their respective major league institutions? Are they accomplices to the American hegemony or are they simply looking for work? For that matter, should the impact of the "American game" be broadly defined as a mercantilistic venture or analogous to a feature within a diplomatic trade agreement? Moreover, to what extent does baseball influence the mechanism of Dominican government and domestic policy at-large? To be sure, nineteenth-century neocolonialistic ventures were well-defined throughout Latin America as the industrialized countries swarmed into such areas as mining, railroads, real estate, and petroleum, among others. But these ventures, such as those in Mexico during the Porfiriato, also curbed domestic policy at large on behalf

of the foreign capitalists. The subsidies granted by the Dominican government towards baseball matters does not appear to have the type of a major impact on a large scale.

Other interesting aspects in *Sugarball* include the author's survey of the Dodgers' Las Palmas academy. Klein's description (which sometimes appears like a Dodgers' promotional guide) of both the camp and its chief architect, Ralph Avila, offers the readers an opportunity to explore the day-to-day operations and philosophy of the island's most well-run baseball institute. The most fascinating part in this section, however, lies in Klein's description of the social and psychological makeup of the player himself, particularly, the "head case." This is important territory in that Klein attempts to explore the roots of the players' mindset. Unfortunately, parts of the section remain unclear. Few players are named. Indeed, the author, to protect the anonymity of the player, offers footnotes accompanied by simply "interview" and a date. This anonymity, unfortunately, creates more questions than it answers. For instance, what of the interviewees' own respective backgrounds. Are they urbanites? Agrarians? Do they stem from dysfunctional families? Surely, knowledge of this backdrop might influence a player's behavior. In this attempt to provide a psychological assessment, Klein makes a noble effort to explore this aspect of the Dominican player. What is needed, however, requires far more analysis than is offered in *Sugarball*.

To be sure, baseball clearly serves a dual purpose in the Dominican Republic. It is both a symbol of American hegemony and a path for opportunity. It is a mechanism to be resisted and a game to be embraced. Finally, it is the uneasy bridge between two cultures whose saga is marked by a tenuous past. Klein's study is a major contribution and rich in information that makes it ideally suited for courses in comparative cultures. In all respects, *Sugarball* lends itself to a better understanding of not only baseball in the Dominican, but Latin culture at large.