



The Eastern Stars: How Baseball Changed the Dominican Town of San Pedro de Macoris

Mark Kurlansky

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The intriguing, inspiring history of one small, impoverished area in the Dominican Republic that has produced a staggering number of Major League Baseball talent, from an award-winning, bestselling author. In the town of San Pedro in the Dominican Republic, baseball is not just a way of life. It's "the" way of life. By the year 2008, seventy-nine boys and men from San Pedro have gone on to play in the Major Leagues—that means one in six Dominican Republicans who have played in the Majors have come from one tiny, impoverished region. Manny Alexander, Sammy Sosa, Tony Fernandez, and legions of other San Pedro players who came up in the sugar mill teams flocked to the United States, looking for opportunity, wealth, and a better life.

Because of the sugar industry, and the influxes of migrant workers from across the Caribbean to work in the cane fields and factories, San Pedro is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of the Dominican Republic. A multitude of languages are spoken there, and a variety of skin colors populate the community; but the one constant is sugar and baseball. The history of players from San Pedro is also a chronicle of racism in baseball, changing social mores in sports and in the Dominican Republic, and the personal stories of the many men who sought freedom from poverty through playing ball. The story of baseball in San Pedro is also that of the Caribbean in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and on a broader level opens a window into our country's history.

As with Kurlansky's "Cod" and "Salt," this small story, rich with anecdote and detail, becomes much larger than ever imagined. Kurlansky reveals two countries' love affair with a sport and the remarkable journey of San Pedro and its baseball players. In his distinctive style, he follows common threads and discovers wider meanings about place, identity, and, above all, baseball.

Watch a Video

The Eastern Stars: How Baseball Changed the Dominican Town of San Pedro de Macoris Details

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Joel says

San Pedro de Macoris is a city in the Dominican Republic (population nearly 200,000 as of 2010) which is famous for producing numerous major league baseball players over the past 50 years, including stars such as Rico Carty, Pedro Guerrero, Joaquin Andujar, Julio Franco, Sammy Sosa, Alfonso Soriano, and Robinson Cano. It's been justly described as the richest hotbed of baseball talent in the world. This book delves into the history of the city; its nation; and the players themselves, investigating how this came to be, and what the impact has been on the city. That last aspect makes the most interesting reading; it's hard to begrudge these players their multi-million-dollar salaries after reading about what a huge difference that money makes in the lives of the players, their families, and their community.

When Kurlansky writes about baseball, though, the text is riddled with factual errors and other subtle clues that his understanding of the sport isn't very thorough. He describes Charlie Dressen as a "legendary Hall of Fame manager"; Dressen hasn't been inducted into the Hall of Fame, and it's not likely that he ever will be. Writing about the slow process of integration in baseball, Kurlansky says: "By the 1960s, while integrated teams were prospering, the Red Sox stubbornly remained at the bottom with their all-white team." It's true that the Boston Red Sox were the last major league baseball team to integrate; but they did so in 1959. The most amusing mistakes come at the end of the book, where Kurlansky provides capsule summaries of the careers of every player from San Pedro de Macoris who had reached the major leagues. He claims that relief pitcher Guillermo Mota, in his career, had hit 67 home runs by the end of the 2008 season; and that another relief pitcher, Hector Carrasco, had hit 69. Kurlansky is apparently unaware that, when looking at pitching statistics, "HR" refers to how many home runs the pitcher has given up, not how many he's hit.

All of these, of course, are trivial and petty details. Nobody who reads this book, myself included, really cares whether Charlie Dressen is in the Hall of Fame. The problem is that there are so many of these errors; and they should have been very easy to check. You have to wonder: if Kurlansky did such a sloppy job of researching and fact-checking the easy stuff, how much confidence can you have in the more obscure details (such as the sections about the history of the Dominican Republic)? It goes beyond this book, too. I've previously read two of Kurlansky's other books, "Cod" and "The Basque History of the World", and I liked both of them. But I'm not knowledgeable enough about those subjects to spot inaccuracies. After reading "The Eastern Stars", I can't help harboring doubts about those other books. And I'm disinclined to read any more of his writing in the future.

It's a shame that I can't recommend this book; the subject is meaty, and deserves to have somebody write a great book about it. This simply isn't that book.

Michael says

Just getting started but I love Mark Kurlansky's books. I find the historical background fascinating, especially the rivalry and parallels between Joaquin Balaguer and Juan Bosch.

Tim Timberly says

I'm not sure who the audience is for this book. Kurlansky repeatedly defines the most basic baseball terms for the reader. I wouldn't say this is a baseball book, but instead a book about San Pedro. Kurlansky went into more detail about local recipes than baseball. I was excited, but this is not the book I hoped it would be.

Barney says

ark Kurlansky wrote one of my favorite books (Salt) and one book I used for summer reading for my European History class (Cod). Kurlansky specializes in bringing together the most varied strings of information to produce an overall history of a single item. I was very excited for this book, as:

1. I am a baseball nut.
2. I love the other three books of his that I have read.

Alas, it was not to be. Kurlansky breaks down the book into two sections, Sugar and Dollars.

Sugar

"For those who don't make it, there is sugarcane." (1) So begins the second paragraph of the book, and section one will tell you everything you ever wanted to know about the hard labor that is the zafra, the cane harvest, in the Dominican. The first half is by far the more compelling section of the book, as Kurlansky uses his experience as a correspondent in the Caribbean for the Chicago Tribune to excellent effect. The great number of Spanish sources helps in this area. I was astounded by the racial attitudes surrounding the Dominican Republic, down to a 1912 law "that imposed restrictions on bringing in workers who were not white." (41) I would have liked Kurlansky to spend more time comparing the institutional racism of the U.S. with the "pan-Caribbean obsession of calculating racial differences." (71) I found his discussion of race in a decidedly mixed race society quite interesting and wished there was more than the 15 or so pages allotted. I did not know that San Pedro de Macoris was famous for its poets long before it was called "The Cradle of Shortstops" and will look for works by Pedro Mir, whose poems are quoted throughout.

Dollars

The second section is where the book falls apart. In his short discussion of baseball and race, Kurlansky trots out the old chestnut that Cap Anson was nearly single-handedly responsible for the banning of blacks in organized baseball. Well, he wasn't. As Bill James pointed out in The Historical Baseball Abstract, it is downright foolish to think one person could do that, much less enforce his will on club owners. Sure, Anson was a racist, but I would guess 99.5% of whites in the United States in 1890 were racist on one level or another. In another bit, he writes that in 1978 Alfredo Griffin posted a .500 batting average. HOLY SHIT! I thought. Then I thought wait a minute, how many times did he hit? Four times in five games. That's just silly and sort of lazy, but it typifies the attitude of the book towards the research on the sport.

In discussing "San Pedro's Black Eye" Kurlansky opines "in America the idea that there is something less than proper about all these foreign and wild "Latins" getting into baseball has considerable resonance." (206). I call bull shit on that. He bases this on more than 100 letters he received after his article for Parade magazine about San Pedro de Macoris in 2007, many from African Americans. I think this is bull shit for several reasons, but the most reasonable is historical development. After the integration of baseball in 1947, black players were dominant throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, baseball featured a good mix of

ethnicites, with the exception of Asian players. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Latin players began to dominate: David Ortiz, Albert Pujols, Alex Rodriguez, Pedro Martinez. As baseball becomes the way out, it stands to reason that there will be more "Latin" players. Sure, Gary Sheffield may complain about the academy system, but to insist that the idea that most fans do not want to see "wild Latins" on the field is bull shit. Kurlansky is correct in writing that baseball is playing second fiddle to football (has been since the late 1960s) and this is one reason why teams are scouring the Caribbean, South America, Australia, Japan and South Korea for players. This is not news; using the views of one player (Gary Sheffield) to support a wrong headed assessment is incorrect.

The most famous son of San Pedro is probably Sammy Sosa. In the chapter entitled "Fickle Judgment from the Peanut Gallery", Kurlansky writes the following: "In 1999, Sosa, the former shoe shine boy too two hundred shoe shine boys in Santo Domingo to lunch, to which Macorisanos responded that he had failed to do anything for their shoe shine boys." (215) I think Kurlansky is on the side of the Macorisanos, especially after his treatment of the baseball "academies" (read: factories) that MLB runs throughout the Caribbean. The tone is ambiguous. I just am confused by the "fickle Judgment from the peanut gallery" chapter title. Kurlansky writes "Heroics is a lot to expect for someone snatched away without education at 16 and handed fame and wealth" (219); while I agree, I do not think that it is incorrect to expect it. Sosa got in trouble for pointing out all he does for the town while really not doing very much. America loves to catch people acting like big mouthed hypocrites, regardless of whether or not they are athletes. Is this wrong? Not at all; it becomes wrong when it is unwarranted. Some ballplayers do a lot for their hometown, some don't. Sosa's big sin was lying about his contributions to charity and hurricane relief.

Ah hell. The first half of the book is great. I'll probably check out a few books on Caribbean history because of it.

Skip says

The subtitle of *The Eastern Stars* is accurate, but incomplete. As with just about everything Kurlansky writes, there's a whole lot of background leading up to the main theme. The book is certainly about baseball changing San Pedro, but it's also about everything else that impacted San Pedro and the rest of the Dominican Republic, as well as quite a bit of baseball history.

The early chapters are largely about the origins of the city of San Pedro, and how it became a production powerhouse in the sugar industry. That industry helped form the city's baseball roots in many ways, including factory-sponsored teams that were early places to discover talent. The middle and later chapters focus more on baseball, including quite a few stories of individual players. There's still plenty about the changes in San Pedro, though, and how the city has changed over the decades.

For me personally, the subject matter is a perfect match. I've visited the Dominican Republic a few times, and baseball is easily my favorite sport. I found Kurlansky's meticulously researched details fascinating: about the town of San Pedro and the Dominican Republic, the sport of baseball, and many of the key figures involved with both.

Having said that, I could see how someone who isn't quite as interested in one or both subjects might not find this book as interesting as I did. If you're not into either of those subjects, this book probably won't change your mind. But I think anyone curious about either the Dominican Republic or baseball history would find *The Eastern Stars* a good read.

John Hiller says

This was an interesting book, and incredibly insightful. As Major League Baseball is becoming integrated more and more by players from around the world, this was a great look at the history of baseball in the Dominican Republic, and how their love for the game developed from its earliest origins. From the difficulty of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier to the modern presence of steroids in baseball, Mr. Kurlansky weaves the culture of this Caribbean country into the history of America's pastime. Every baseball fan should read this book.

Pelican Rapids says

so interesting--good opportunity for people in very poor country

Matt says

This book badly needed to be written. May it please be put on library shelves, replacing dull histories of the Yankees, Red Sox, and Brooklyn Dodgers. Mark Kurlansky, meanwhile, ain't Walt Whitman, and no disrespect to Whitman, but that's a good thing. Baseball lovers will be disproportionately attracted to the book, but it notably is not about baseball, and it's not geared toward baseball fans. It's more about the surrounding society and the history of how this small island has changed and been impacted by global forces.

I've personally been fascinated with the Dominican Republic since I was baseball-obsessed and three apples tall, a time when the only Latinos I'd ever seen were on big league rosters. Eastern Stars offers a portrait of the Dominican Republic, and San Pedro de Macoris in particular, and its evolution in becoming the cradle of baseball stars.

I'm not sure Kurlansky is the ideal writer for this subject, but he is an excellent historian and his perspective is very sober and balanced, good with big-picture perspective. And given that he is someone who is clearly more at home thinking about political economy matters than sports, he's probably written a book that's a lot more interesting than whatever Mike Lupica or Rob Neyer might have put together. (I also am not sure if Kurlansky has ever written a book that doesn't include a few recipes. The man must love to eat, and that can't be a bad thing.) I read somewhere that the book doesn't effectively humanize the people of San Pedro, and that's a fair criticism. But from his emotional distance we are nonetheless given what I take is probably a pretty accurate perspective on the country and on baseball's role in the community.

John says

I feel a little bad giving this a poor review, because there is a lot to like about it. I read it because it is the time of the year for baseball books, and I didn't know anything about the history of baseball in the Dominican Republic. I have been playing around with a lecture on the spread of sports in the Americas, and

there is lots of interesting stuff here that I could throw in.

But then I started to notice mistakes. And once I started noticing them they kept popping up. First it was little grammar stuff, like misplaced modifiers. Then sentences that popped up out of nowhere and seemed to belong elsewhere in the book. There is one sentence about Sammy Sosa that shows up at the start of a paragraph about other players, a couple pages before Sosa is introduced.

And then weirder. Kurlansky writes that Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers won a World Series in 1956, when it was '55. He writes that a famous pitchers duel between the Giants and Braves took place on January 2nd, 1963.

And beyond the mistakes, does he have to explain every little thing about baseball in this book? How many people who decide to read this book don't know what a shortstop is? Or a grand slam?

The only other Kurlansky book I read was "Cod," and I listened to the audio book that time. Were there mistakes in that one too? Audio can be forgiving because you aren't going to go back and check. In print a baseball game in January just stares you in the face. It just seemed sloppy. But if you love baseball and really want to read about the DR and baseball, you would probably still like the book, all in all.

Jerry Tyrrell says

That's

Nancy says

Mmmm. Not as enthralling as Kurlansky's best works, nor as thorough. I don't think that the book was as much about HOW baseball changed San Pedro as it was about WHY San Pedro produces so many Major League players, so if you're expecting more of a "baseball and all its money came to town, here's what happened" story, that's not what you'll be getting. It's more of a "why baseball and all its money came to San Pedro in the first place" kind of story. One isn't better than the other, but they are not the same.

The book (not unlike this review) was disjointed, in part because it was trying to solve both of those questions in 220 pages. I think also because Kurlansky doesn't seem fluent in baseball, his descriptions of certain statistics or players would fall flat and would lead him away from any narrative flow he had going.

Recommended if you want a brief course in the history of baseball in the Dominican Republic, but it'll probably leave you wanting more.

Nathan says

Both the sheer number of errors and the obvious nature of these errors in this book is incredibly surprising. Why would any book about baseball claim, as Kurlansky does, that Hector Carrasco "had a 3.99 ERA and had hit 69 home runs" in his career or that, similarly, Guillermo Mota "had a career ERA of 3.93 and had hit 67 home runs"? This evinces a fundamental lack of understanding of the game. Perhaps it is just to troll people who care about baseball? Maybe all sports, as Kurlansky refers to the "National Football Association" on page 199 of the hardcover. This book was published by Riverhead Books -- a division of Penguin -- yet does not appear to have been seen by an editor. Kurlansky's Cod is one of the most enjoyable books I've read, but this book really seems to raise the question of how much care goes into his work and whether

factual inaccuracies abound.

Valerie says

Once again, the moral of the story is that practice, the willingness to devote your time, energy and focus to something, will result in making you better at it.

The rules that make it cheaper to sign a 16 year old Dominican, instead of an 18 year old US citizen are both part of the problem of the decline of baseball, and a logical response to that decline in the US. In places the stuff about rules and fans and how teams find talent, reminded me of the wistfulness of Fever Pitch. It seems like team sports are locked in a downward spiral with their fans.

There was a lot to think about here, and there is no better reason to read a book.

N-rose says

I can't believe just how bad this was.

It was an aimless look at baseball in the Dominican Republic town of San Pedro. I think. That's what Kurlansky tells me this is about. There is some information on how the town came to be - and the role of the sugar markets. But the books drifts from topic to topic, often repeating itself in a way that reads like bad editing and hasty first-draft writing.

And perhaps there are readers who know nothing about baseball, but this is written as if to explain baseball to a three-year old from Venus.

At times, a reader feels that she or he is following a writer who keeps reaching interview dead ends, and so describes those dead ends. In detail. There's not much personality to the people and he hints that the Dominican simply has no culture of its own, which is an interesting statement.

The book feels uninspired, and doesn't answer the question in the title very effectively. It gets a second star for occasionally catching up with the Julio Francos of baseball, for mentioning some of Sammy Sosa's conflicted relationship with where he is from. But in the end, Kurlansky half-asks a question and answers it in a line; the rest feels like a fluff job to get over 200 words and make a saleable book. I really like a lot of Mark Kurlansky's other work, and was shocked at how disappointing this was; I almost put it down, but had made a pact with myself to finish the book.

Steph says

A good read for anyone interested in baseball, the history of the Dominican Republic, and the effects of the larger baseball industry on the Dominican Republic (particularly on the youth in San Pedro de Macoris)
