Sport

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But they turn out to be far more successful even than the Americans. The two US major leagues, the National League and the American League, elect a “most valuable player” at the end of each season. Last year, Albert Pujols of the St Louis Cardinals won the title for the National, while Alex Rodriguez of the New York Yankees won in the American. Both are Dominican. (Rodríguez was born in the US to Dominican parents).

In the American League, the next three most valuable players were all Dominicans – David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez of the Boston Red Sox and Vladimir Guerrero of the Los Angeles Angels. That league’s Cy Young Award, for the best pitcher, went to Bartólo Colón, of the Angels, another Dominican.
They are also well remunerated. Three Dominicans – Rodríguez, the iconic pitcher Pedro Martínez and the great home-run hitter Sammy Sosa – have all been paid more than $100m in wages over their careers. Rodríguez’s salary of $25m makes him the best-paid athlete in the US. His Dominican compatriots earn an average of $3,000 per year, an amount he makes roughly every hour.

All of this despite the fact that the Dominican Republic is a poverty-stricken island nation of 8m, and that virtually every boy in the US – vastly wealthier and more populous – grows up playing baseball.

How to explain this? The biggest reason is hunger writ large.

“American kids are comfortable. They probably play three other sports,” says Fernando Cuza, who acts as agent to a number of iconic Dominican baseball stars.

“Dominicans know no sport but baseball. And they know this is their only way out. They’ve got no other choice but baseball if they’re going to get out of this and succeed. American kids can’t possibly match that discipline and drive.”

Tradition is also important. Baseball came to the Dominican Republic during the occupation by US marines early in the last century. Americans also ran the sugar mills and plantations in and around the south-eastern city of San Pedro de Macorís, now the capital of baseball in the country.

The region had recently taken in an influx of descendants from African slaves, who were fleeing poverty in the British Caribbean. They had been brought up playing cricket, and their work swinging machetes helped develop the co-ordination and upper body strength needed for baseball.

Baseball is now as much a part of the Dominican DNA as cricket is for Barbadians or Jamaicans. Boys play it incessantly, in the worst conditions, even using sticks and stones to

practice on traffic islands. The climate allows them to play all year round, and the country's professional six-team winter league has the best and most fiercely competitive baseball to be found anywhere outside the US.

Desire and natural ability are allied to remorseless organisation. All the 30 major league clubs from the US keep at least one feeder club in the Dominican Summer League, which functions as a "high A" minor league. Typical progression is then to AA and AAA leagues in the US, and thence to the major leagues.

The Dominican summer league is the only A league based beyond US shores, and it has more teams than any other. There are 36 in total, with some major league clubs deciding to underwrite two teams on the island. All employ a full-time Dominican scout, whose job is to seek out talent wherever it can be found. Even boys playing with a stick in the streets of San Pedro de Macorís can reasonably harbour the hope that a scout is watching them.

If all goes well, young prospects sign a five-year contract with the summer league at the age of 17. It is a commitment to live and breathe baseball. At the Arizona Diamondbacks' "Baseball City" complex, which it shares with the Chicago Cubs, Minnesota Twins and Cincinnati Reds, about a half an hour along the coast from Santo Domingo, trainees live eight to a dormitory, and stay all year round.

Their diet is carefully monitored. Beyond daily training drills, fitness work-outs, and practice matches, they also have to attend classes. All are taught English, and all are taught financial management. It is essential that they must be able to adapt and survive in the US, and that they should not disgrace their country when they get there.

The aim is to develop what skills the players have, and also to spot those that have the right "make-up" to survive as a big league ballplayer.

There is a sense of shared purpose. The Dominican teenage trainees "play hard". But they also help each other, holding intense debriefing sessions where every minor technical flaw in everyone's game is dissected. Each has their own ambition, their managers say. But national pride is only marginally less important. Those who do not get to the big leagues themselves want to make sure that as many as possible will do so.

Once there, Dominicans do not – or maybe cannot – forget their roots. At a press conference during his Red Sox' epic conquest of the New York Yankees in 2004, Pedro Martínez launched into an odd soliloquy. He was asked how he felt about the relentless booing he received from the New York crowd and replied: "I actually realised that I was somebody important, because I caught the attention of 60,000 people, plus the whole world watching a guy that if you reverse time back 15 years ago, I was sitting under a mango tree without 50 cents to pay for a bus."

Martínez, like most of the other Dominican players, returns home a lot. Colón has invested in a baseball and softball facility in his home in the island's rural north-west.

His neighbours talk proudly about how the great pitcher still lives in his home town during the

winter, and still drinks beer with his friends.

Dominican success in the US matters a lot. A popular cap worn in the street is for the Chicago Cubs, for whom Sosa hit 66 homers in 1998. He beat the record of 61 that had stood for 37 years, and even though he finished second to another hitter that year, Mark McGwire who hit 70, his sportsmanship captured American hearts. When McGwire beat the record, Sosa, who happened to be on the opposing side that day, was the first to congratulate him, creating a lasting televisual image.

But that success goes beyond pride. Sosa used to work as a shoeshine boy in San Pedro de Macorís – one of the island's most impoverished towns since the sugar industry went into decline. Locals keenly take tourists to see the house that Sosa had built for his mother.

He has made other contributions. In 1996 – when he was well-established in the US, but before he had become an all-time great – he set up the Sammy Sosa centre in San Pedro. It includes a maternity clinic that bears his name, and a centre where children can go for their vaccinations.

The centre is one of the nicest developments in the town. In its courtyard is a fountain with a statue of Sosa in his Cubs uniform. A plaque invites visitors to throw their change into the fountain, so it can be donated to the town's shoeshine boys.

Those shoeshine boys are still hawking for business at San Pedro's seafront promenade, known as the Malecon. But their job is little different from begging.

Tell one of them your shoes do not need shining, and he lifts his Cubs T-shirt to point to his stomach. "Tengo hambre, señor, tengo mucho hambre." Or in English: "I'm hungry, sir. I'm very hungry."