

ISLAND ADVENTURE

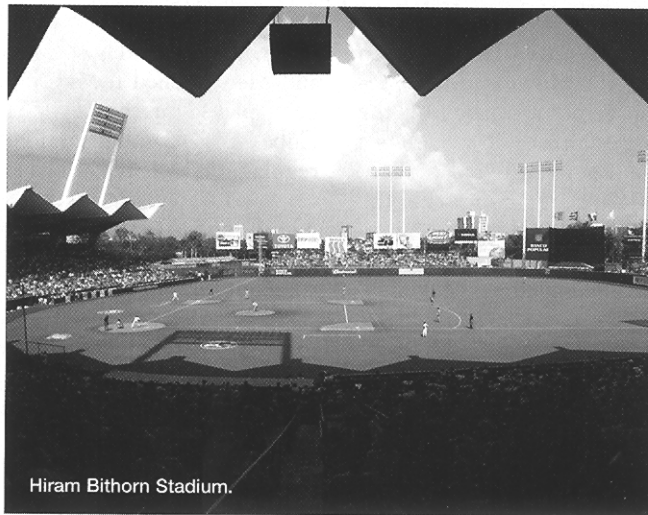
☀️ PUERTO RICAN FANS HAVE PASSIONATELY ENJOYED BIG LEAGUE BASEBALL WHILE THE EXPOS HAVE MADE SAN JUAN THEIR PART-TIME HOME FIELD.

BY NATHAN HALE

HIS NOSE POKES THROUGH THE BLACK NETTING, WHICH HE PRESSES UP AGAINST, SURE TO LEAVE A MARK WHEN HE FINALLY PULLS AWAY. * "LOOK AT THIS KID RIGHT HERE," TONY BERNAZARD SAYS, GESTURING BEHIND HOME PLATE WHERE THE YOUNG BOY STANDS IN THE FRONT ROW, ABSORBED BY THE ACTIVITY ON THE FIELD DURING BATTING PRACTICE. "HE HASN'T MOVED IN ALL THIS TIME, LOOKING AND TRYING TO PAY ATTENTION. THAT KID IS GOING TO GET INSPIRATION FROM ALL OF THESE GUYS, AND YOU KNOW THERE ARE MANY ALL OVER THE PLACE." * MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL HAS RETURNED TO PUERTO RICO THIS SEASON, AND THIS TIME IT'S UNPACKING ITS BAGS FOR A LONGER STAY.

While it's only the second day of the Expos' first "homestand," Bernazard, a native Puerto Rican, former player and now a special assistant to the executive director of the MLB Players Association, has been so busy answering questions, taking in the scene and thoroughly enjoying himself, that his voice already is hoarse and cracking.

With the Montreal Expos looking for a second home, the land of Clemente beckoned. And as in 2001, when the Texas Rangers and Toronto Blue Jays opened the regular season here, warm weather and enthusiastic crowds greeted the big leaguers at Hiram Bithorn Stadium. This time around there would be much more baseball to see, and there would be a greater opportunity for Puerto Rico to show the richness of its culture, the stability of its economy and the depth of its passion for baseball. In three San Juan homestands, the Expos play host to the New York Mets, Atlanta Braves, Cincinnati Reds, world champion Anaheim Angels, Texas Rangers, Chicago Cubs and Florida Marlins. The 22 games will let Puerto



Hiram Bithorn Stadium.

Rican audiences see a collection of All-Stars in action: Mike Piazza, Gary Sheffield, Alex Rodriguez, the Caribbean-born Vladimir Guerrero and Sammy Sosa, and of course, local heroes such as Jose Vidro, Javier Vazquez, Roberto Alomar, Felipe Lopez, Ivan Rodriguez and Juan Gonzalez.

And while the uncertainty about the Expos' immediate future in Montreal opened the door for this venture, these series might actually

have their greatest long-term impact on the sport as a whole, as well as its tradition in Puerto Rico.

The prospect of small crowds at Olympic Stadium prompted the Expos to move some games from Montreal in search of larger audiences and increased revenue.

The extra money, Expos President Tony Tavares says, "will be significant enough, we believe, for us to retain one player for our franchise."

The search for a home-away-from-home led to a focus on San Juan, Puerto Rico.

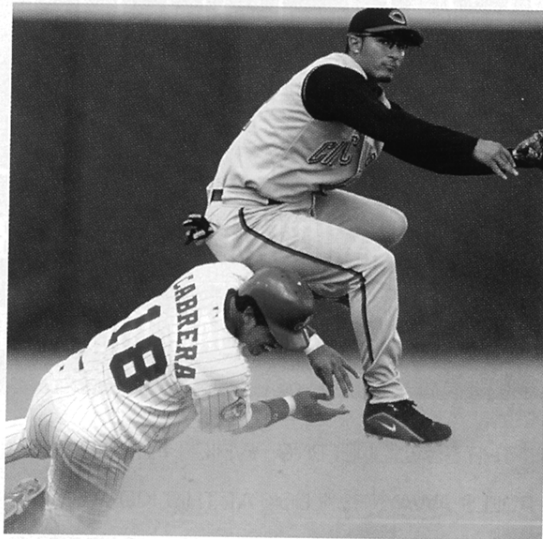
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“Right now, in 2003, like it was in 2001 when we opened the season here, Puerto Rico had all the pieces of the puzzle to do it. It was ready to do it,” Bernazard says.

The island’s baseball tradition and contributions to the Major Leagues are well established. Since its arrival via Cuba in the 1890s — the first organized game for spectators was reportedly played Jan. 9, 1898 — hundreds of players from Puerto Rico have made it to the big leagues. The majority followed in the footsteps of star outfielder Roberto Clemente, who still looms as an iconic figure, both for his Hall of Fame play in the 1960s as well as the humanitarian efforts he pursued up until his death in a plane crash in 1972.

San Juan offered Hiram Bithorn Stadium — the island’s largest ballpark — as a site for the Expos series. It’s best known for the distinctive 1960s-designed, clamshell-like canopy over the one-tier grandstand. Outfield bleachers that increased seating capacity to 19,000 and a video screen beyond center field were the most significant results of \$2.5 million in improvements made for the games. Other than that, much was already in place. As a United States commonwealth, Puerto Rico uses U.S. currency, postage and phones (787 area code). Exiting the crowded freeway and passing the 200-store Mall of the Americas across the street from the stadium feels like being just about anywhere in the States — only with

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*SINCE BASEBALL’S ARRIVAL, HUNDREDS OF PLAYERS FROM PUERTO RICO — SUCH AS REDS SHORTSTOP FELIPE LOPEZ — HAVE MADE IT TO THE BIGS.



tropical weather. And while not quite as strong as those of the 50 states, Puerto Rico’s economy is ahead of other Caribbean nations, and visas and passports are not required for Americans to travel there.

While economics played a part in bringing the Expos to San Juan, this was only part of the equation, and in the long run, maybe the smaller part.

As John McHale, Major League Baseball’s executive vice president, administration, explains, “We’re here because the Commissioner charged us with improving the economic situation for the Montreal club, but we’re also here because of his determination to take Major League Baseball to new audiences and to play it in places that would celebrate Major League Baseball’s history and tradition.”

Already in 2003 the Mets and Dodgers visited Mexico City for two Spring Training games. The Mariners and A’s were scheduled to open the season in Japan, until war in Iraq derailed those plans.

Japan, however, did host two games in 2000, when the Cubs and Mets opened the season there. Exhibitions also have been played in recent years in Mexico, Venezuela and Cuba. And scouting is already underway for a possible regular season trip to Europe in 2004.

The Expos’ 22-game schedule in Puerto Rico marks by far the longest visit for Major League Baseball outside of the continental 48 states and Canada. “This has been a cradle of great players and great baseball for many years,” McHale adds. “This is an opportunity to expose our fans to the vitality of the Puerto Rican culture, to its economic strength, and to the beauty and warmth of its people.”

The fans made their appreciation for the games and the players clear from the start of the first series between the Expos and the Mets. Puerto Rican stars including Alomar, Vidro, Vazquez, Rey Sanchez and Wil Cordero received lengthy standing ovations. The feeling was mutual; tears ran down Alomar’s face as he tipped his hat to all four corners of the stadium during pregame introductions.

“We had a lot of emotions out there,” Vidro said. “It was the first time we played at home, and had people really cheering for us the whole nine innings. It felt very good.”

With the most international roster in baseball, Montreal was a fitting team to call San Juan home. The Expos brought 14 Latin American players to Puerto Rico: locals Vidro, Vazquez and Cordero; Orlando Cabrera (Colombia); Tony Armas Jr. and Endy Chavez

GRAN BEISBOL

HIRAM BITHORN’S NAME might not be as well known as Clemente, Cepeda or Alomar, but as the first Puerto Rican to reach the Majors, those stars, and other Puerto Rican players, have him to thank. He broke in with the Cubs on April 15, 1942 — exactly five years before Jackie Robinson’s debut with the Dodgers. Bithorn’s live arm produced 18 wins in his second season along with seven shutouts, still the single-season record for Puerto Rican pitchers.

After serving for the U.S. in World War II, Bithorn’s arm was never the same. Tragically, his life was cut short at age 35 when he was shot by a policeman on New Year’s Day 1952 in Mexico. —NH



(Venezuela); Guerrero, Claudio Vargas, Henry Mateo and Fernando Tatis (Dominican Republic); Livan and Orlando “El Duque” Hernandez (Cuba); Luis Ayala (Mexico); and Jose Macias (Panama).

“All the guys from Latin America — not just Puerto Ricans — take this thing very seriously. We go out there and take a lot of pride in what we do,” Vidro says. “I think as Latin players, we feel that we have to do a little bit more, and that’s what we’re doing. So it’s very good the way we’re representing our native [countries].”

The fans agreed, cheering most consistently for the Latino players, especially the Puerto Ricans, who came through with some special moments. Alomar took his curtain call after surpassing Clemente’s career total for the most runs scored by a Puerto Rican (1,416). On April 13, Vidro sent the fans into a frenzy with a walk-off home run in the 10th inning of the third game.

“People were rooting for baseball — and the Puerto Ricans,” Bernazard says.

But Mike Piazza also drew some of the loudest cheers of the series. With strong ties between Puerto Rico and New York, chants of “Let’s go Mets” came as often as those for the Expos, despite the efforts of Montreal’s always energetic mascot, Youppi.



“People here like different teams,” one taxi driver explained during the ride to the stadium. Sure enough, later that night the kid in the next seat sporting a

Mets hat admitted that his true allegiance was firmly rooted in New York’s other team, the Yankees.

But the driver also said, “Everybody loves baseball,” and that was ultimately what the fans came out to cheer. As the Expos swept the first four games from the Mets and won six of 10 on the homestand, they started to build a hometown allegiance in San Juan. In the opener, the fans jumped to their feet when Montreal’s Brian Schneider took David Cone deep for a grand slam. They booed when the Mets chose to intentionally walk Guerrero. And they hollered when Livan Hernandez made Jeromy Burnitz’s knees buckle with a big, looping curveball. The fans knew a big play when they saw one, and they always responded with excitement.

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“THE CROWD CERTAINLY HAS A LOT OF ENTHUSIASM AND ENERGY, WITH THE SINGING AND THE MUSIC AND THE DANCING.” —Mets pitcher Al Leiter

“There’s certainly a lot of enthusiasm and energy, with the singing and the music and the dancing,” says Mets pitcher Al Leiter, who played winter league ball for Arecibo in the early 1990s. “It’s very festive, and having played here and felt the Puerto Rican fans’ enthusiasm for winter league, it’s fun and I think most of the players enjoy it. There’s certainly an energy level that’s different than in the States.”

The games also brought out several former Puerto Rican big leaguers. Hall of Fame slugger Orlando Cepeda threw out the ceremonial first pitch before the opener, and former Yankees pitcher Ed Figueroa did the honors the next night.

The Puerto Rican fans also had a chance to witness the full extent of Major League Baseball’s global reach. The first two games between the Expos and Mets also featured appearances by Tomo Ohka and Tsuyoshi Shinjo of Japan, Jae Weong Seo of South Korea, and Graeme Lloyd of Australia.

However, that was just one manifestation of the importance of the first series. It also gave fans the chance to celebrate the tradition of Puerto Rican baseball while bringing in an estimated \$8 million to \$10 million for the local economy.

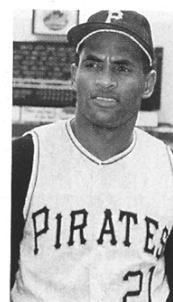
Major League Baseball’s visit comes at what in many ways is a critical time for the game on this island, and the Expos series might go down as the start of a new chapter.

HOMETOWN HERO

IT HAS BEEN 30 years since Roberto Clemente died in a plane crash while attempting to bring supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua. Still, his legacy lives on.

He’s still revered as the greatest Puerto Rican player ever, even at a time when a number of fellow countrymen are All-Stars. A fan at the Expos’ Puerto Rican opener held a sign that read “Clemente is back in Vlad,” the ultimate compliment to the Expos’ superstar outfielder, Vladimir Guerrero.

His legacy includes the Roberto Clemente Award, given annually to the player who best combines on-field talent with off-field service, and the Roberto Clemente Sports City, a recreational facility. —NH



Politics is sometimes described as the actual national sport of Puerto Rico, and it offers some parallels to the status of Puerto Rican baseball.

The great political debate among Puerto Ricans focuses on the future status of their island. Some Puerto Ricans push for statehood; others want independence; but the majority always seems to vote for keeping the middle ground, and remaining a commonwealth of the United States. Puerto Ricans currently cannot vote for the United States President and have no representatives in Congress, but receive benefits and support from the American government.

To some, the equivalent of statehood would be a permanent Major League franchise in San Juan. This was a frequent topic of questions from reporters, but while many Puerto Ricans say it is a dream of theirs, they also remain realistic about the possibility.

"I think everyone in every country would like to have a Major League team," says Puerto Rican journalist Eduardo Valero, who has 50 years of reporting experience and also hosts a weekly sports talk radio show on the island. But he adds, "In order to have a Major League team, you must realize that you must do a lot of selling and advertising because a Major League team costs quite a few million per year — and I'm not only talking about the salaries for the players."

Meanwhile, Puerto Rico's own winter league has experienced declining attendance figures in recent years.

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stronger economy than other Caribbean and Latin American countries, the island's young people might be drawn to a wider array of opportunities. Puerto Ricans also point to their inclusion since 1989 in the amateur draft. As of Opening Day 2003, Puerto Ricans still represented the Majors' second-most prolific contingent from outside the United States with 38 players, behind only the Dominican Republic's 79; however, there were just 113 Puerto Ricans in the Minors, far fewer than the 793 Venezuelans and 1,437 Dominicans, countries in which emerging prospects can be signed younger and less expensively as free agents.

Some attribute this to poor marketing, but another factor is the absence of established Major League stars.

Both managers for the opening series, Frank Robinson for the Expos and Art Howe for the Mets, played and managed in Puerto Rico.

"These teams were very, very solid top to bottom," Howe recalls. "I think the only time you didn't have a Major Leaguer on the field was when you got into middle relief."

The advent of free agency and higher player salaries have caused teams to exercise more caution in protecting their players, both veterans and top prospects. Likewise, players no longer need the extra money and many now prefer to keep in shape in the offseason by working out at private gyms or even at their team's Spring Training facilities.

The number of Puerto Rican-born players in the Minors and Majors also has decreased over the past decade. With a

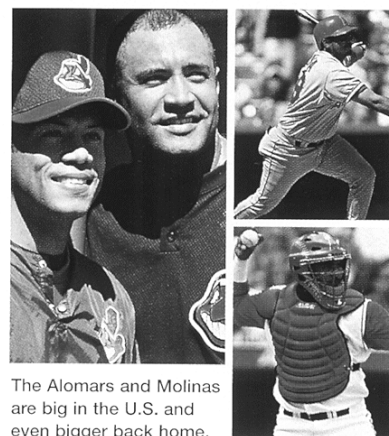
*BASEBALL BLOODLINES

AS WOULD BE expected, a trip home meant that the Puerto Rican players had family and friends in the stands. Roberto Alomar's mother, Maria, watched her youngest son receive a tremendous ovation from the home crowd. Javier Vazquez's grandmother Isabel saw him pitch in a Major League game in person for the first time. Jose Vidro couldn't get enough tickets for his personal cheering section.

"It's a culture in which family is very important," Puerto Rican native and former player Tony Bernazard explains.

That seems to be especially true on the diamond. The Alomars are the All-Star family of Puerto Rican baseball; the Giants' Jose Cruz Jr. joined his father and two uncles as Major Leaguers; and Bengie and Jose Molina both got to play back home this year when the Angels trekked to San Juan.

Even Roberto Clemente, Puerto Rico's favorite son, had a son follow him into American baseball. Although Roberto Jr.'s injury problems forced him to give up before making it to the Majors, a nephew, Edgard, played a bit in The Show before injuries ended his career, too. —NH



The Alomars and Molinas are big in the U.S. and even bigger back home.

Puerto Ricans insist that their love of the game remains strong, and near-capacity crowds totaling 142,821 fans through the first 10 games supported those claims. There also was hope that the Expos series would generate increased interest among young players.

"I think it will have a great effect on the young Puerto Rican player, the young Latin American player when an event like this comes," Expos GM Omar Minaya says. "That's how baseball grew. Baseball grew by going to other parts of the world. At one time there wasn't baseball in the Dominican Republic, and then you ended up having the Sammy Sosas and Vladi Guerreros. I think this event helps the game of baseball in Puerto Rico and it helps the game of baseball as a whole."

But new solutions might also be needed.

The most promising is the Puerto Rico Baseball Academy and High School. The brainchild of former big league pitcher Edwin Correa, the school in Gurabo — about half an hour south of San Juan — fills a void felt by the absence of high school baseball in Puerto Rico since

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✱ WHILE PLAYING IN PUERTO RICO IN APRIL, ROBERTO ALOMAR SURPASSED CLEMENTE'S TOTAL FOR RUNS SCORED.

1973. The school is completing its first year with about 105 students. They practice at the local stadium in Caguas for three hours starting around 7:30 each morning, then take classes in a building donated by the University of Turabo for four hours in the afternoon.

Correa's school offers a more extensive curriculum than existing baseball academies in the Dominican Republic, for example. Major League Baseball, as well as several players, have recently committed hundreds of thousands of dollars to finance scholarships and other costs.

With MLB considering a worldwide draft, Correa's school might just be a step ahead of the game.

And for young Puerto Rican players such as Luis Martorell, 16, a pitcher and student at the school who was

selected to be a batboy for the New York Mets, the Expos series added serious viability to the dream of playing a Major League Baseball game before a home crowd.

"It's everything I wanted," he says. "It's perfect." ♦

Nathan Hale is a freelance writer in New York.

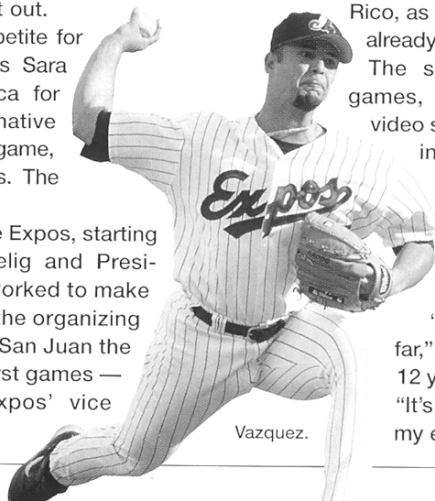
✱ MAKING IT HAPPEN

TEN GAMES DOES not a season make. But if the Montreal Expos' first trip this April to San Juan, Puerto Rico, is any indication, the concept of playing a portion of a team's schedule abroad will transform how Major League Baseball reaches out to its international fans.

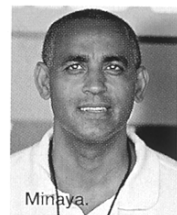
By many accounts, the Expos' 10-game homestand, which featured impressive performances by players like Puerto Rico native Javier Vazquez, was a smashing success. The crowds at Hiram Bithorn Stadium, averaging 14,242, were boisterous and passionate, usually lingering until the last out.

"There is definitely an appetite for MLB in Latin America," says Sara Loarte, Director-Latin America for MLB International and a native Puerto Rican. "You watch a game, and it's like the World Series. The fans hunger for MLB."

Everybody at MLB and the Expos, starting with Commissioner Bud Selig and President and COO Bob DuPuy worked to make it possible. But the brunt of the organizing fell to Loarte — who lived in San Juan the two months preceding the first games — and Omar Minaya, the Expos' vice president and GM.



"I appreciate that we're giving people the opportunity to see games that otherwise they would have never seen," says Minaya, a native of the Dominican Republic and MLB's first Hispanic GM. "Jose Vidro had a chance to play in front of his mother for the first time because she's afraid to fly. That's priceless."



Loarte says the first homestand exceeded everyone's expectations. The local promoter behind the games in Puerto Rico, as well as promoters from other countries, have already made preliminary overtures for 2004.

The stadium was overhauled for this year's games, and RadioShack will be donating a new video scoreboard later this summer. If MLB returns in 2004, chances are the ballpark will be tweaked further. While it's clearly premature to say that Puerto Rico is ready for its own franchise, the league is always looking for new ways to attract and appease international fans.

"I never envisioned things developing this far," says Loarte, who has worked with MLB for 12 years, including eight with MLB International. "It's been an interesting evolution. It's a peak in my eyes." —Clemson Smith-Muniz

Appeared in 2003 MLB All-Star Game Official Program