

The Cost of Major League Dreams

In the film, *The Road to the Major Leagues*, David Ortiz tells the story of how he would use plastic caps from large bottles of drinking water as baseballs. His sisters hid their dolls because David would decapitate them, remove their hair and send them over the right field fence of dirt baseball diamonds. This is the dream—the rags to riches story of the player who started with nothing in the stark poverty of the Dominican countryside and goes on to achieve great wealth and fame. A small Dominican boy in that same film tells the filmmaker, “David Ortiz, he is just like me. He is a lefty like me, and he comes from my country. Someday I will be in the big leagues like him with God’s help.”

It looked as if that dream might come true for Yewri Guillén. The baseball men started coming around when he was 15 years old. In 2009, he signed a \$30,000 contract with the Washington Nationals. He continued to train at the Nationals camp in Boca Chica. When they authorized his contract in 2011, he was told he would be playing with their rookie league team in Florida. But he started to get headaches. When he missed a game because the pain got bad, the trainers yelled at him. You don’t miss a game because of a headache. But the headaches got worse and he got a fever. He barely made it to the health center. They called his family to come get him and take him to the hospital. But he didn’t have health insurance and because his contract hadn’t been finalized his family could not pay for the treatment, so they had to take him to a public clinic. The doctors diagnosed Yewri with bacterial meningitis. He had surgery, but it was too late. He died the next day.

The news reported this as a minor item, but there was a lot that was left out of the story. There wasn’t a certified athletic trainer or a doctor to examine Yewri at the training camp. A simple vaccination could have saved Yewri’s life.

There are many other problems with Major League Baseball in the Dominican Republic. American baseball players have to finish high school to be able to play on a major league team, but Dominican players can be as young as 16. David Ortiz says, “When I signed at 16, I didn’t know what I was doing.” All minor league teams in the US have to have a certified trainer and medical facilities, that is not true in the DR. Of the hundreds of players in the camps in the Dominican Republic, less than half will leave the island to play in the minor leagues, and only 3 of every hundred will ever play in the major leagues. Conditions at the training camps are sometimes dangerous and no education is provided for the players. Those who come to the US often have no education and do not speak English. If their baseball career does not work out, they have nothing to fall back on. Signing bonuses are much lower for Dominican players. David Ortiz signed for \$25,000 in 1992 when he was 16 years old. A comparable American player, Lance Berkman signed in 1997 at age 21 for one million dollars—40 times as much.

Many Dominicans dream of becoming major league baseball players. But only a very few actually realize that dream. For many, the cost of that dream is very high. For Yewri Guillén it cost him his life.