



United through baseball: Wayne Christian makes return trip to Dominican Republic

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Baseball is a universal language.

Curt Hinton wouldn't disagree.

He saw that first-hand, along with a group of nine current and former Wayne Christian athletes who accompanied him on a mission trip -- sponsored by Stoney Creek Baptist Church -- to the Dominican Republic in early June.

The group traveled to the remote city of Cienfuegos, which is located just outside of Santiago.

"One of the more successful aspects (of the first mission trip) was our baseball outreach," Hinton said. "The first year, only a few of us were there for athletic reasons. We had a strong desire to go back."

The second visit differed from the previous agenda which focused on mission work involving building a bible school and church. Reagan, Hinton's daughter, said she couldn't see a bunch of 17- and 18-year-old boys dancing and signing in bible school during the return trip.

Baseball, she thought, could be the perfect tool to help open the door to talk about Christ. Organizers, including his daughter, welcomed Hinton's suggestion with open arms. His players couldn't wait to go.

Once they arrived in Cienfuegos, Hinton and players met with Jose Pena -- a former minor league player who operated camps out of run-down stadiums that also served as homes for the many of the players. The teams had kids of all ages and skill levels.

Pena ran drills four to five hours a day. Each session ended with fun competitions where the players could win prizes. The player who hit the longest home run or made the most defensive plays without an error would earn a new bat -- a luxury that most in the poverty-stricken country could never afford to own.

The players' high skill level impressed Nick Easom.

"There was this little kid (at the camp), probably 14 and real skinny," said Easom, who made the trip last year. "No one expected much of him. No one thought he'd be any good. He got out there and we had one of our best pitchers throw to him, and this kid hit the ball probably 200 feet over the outfielder's head.

"He flew around the bases, too. And he was an amazing defender. It was cool to see that from a little kid."

Though the players communicated through their passion of a sport they loved, there was one major difference -- the Wayne Christian players were not fluent in Spanish. A full-time translator helped bridge the gap, which at times, provided some comic relief.

"The language barrier was humorous," Reagan said. "Most of the guys (on the trip) could only say like, 10 words in Spanish ... everyone was laughing and trying to speak to each other in the other language."

Easom said he and his teammates benefited from the experience on different levels, particularly how the people lived. There were no traffic laws and streets were dusty. The water is undrinkable. The players needed separate water to brush their teeth and wash their hands.

There was no air conditioning.

"See poverty like that makes you thankful for what you have here," said Easom, who picked up a few on-field tricks regarding ground balls on the rocky, dirt field in the rural town.

Coach Hinton agreed the mission trip erased the misconception that only one group would gain any type of education from a different culture.

"For me, it's fantastic," Hinton said. "Having coached in the U.S., it's great for me and my ball players to use the skills they've learned to help these guys. It's funny though -- in some cases, they don't need any baseball help. But they were always extremely appreciative.

"As a coach, it's a reward because we're able to give back to a community that loves baseball."

A third trip has been discussed.

"This year we're starting earlier for sure," Reagan said. "We have more contacts in the Dominican Republic now and are hoping to go for a longer time. We're also looking to travel more around the country. I think we're looking to do two different trips as well -- one would be baseball-focused while the other would be a more traditional bible school."

Easom definitely wants to make another trip.

"(Going to the Dominican Republic) is kind of a culture shock at first," he said. "And it was not at all what I was expecting. Everyone was nicer and harder working than I expected. As soon as I got back on American soil, I thought, 'man, I have to go back.'"

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