

To what extent does the American culture create negative challenges towards international players and how much does the MLB help them in spite of the salary?

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I. Introduction

In professional sports today, the addition of international players is becoming an everyday norm. Players are coming to the United States from all over the world; in countries like Cuba, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Japan, South Korea, and many more countries. The general public does not realize just how impactful playing in the US can be on these players. Sometimes these issues have no effects but with some of the players it can endanger their career status. The root of this problem is within intercultural communication and to understand this, “culture” needs to be defined. Culture is the core concept of intercultural communication, as it is the learned patterns of perception, values, and behaviors that are shared by a group of people that are dynamic and heterogeneous. Culture also involves our emotions, behavior and feelings and it is shared throughout (p. 31, Martin and Nakayama).

The goal of this paper is to answer the research question of, “To what extent does the American culture create negative challenges towards international players and how much does the MLB help them in spite of the salary? Specific players from Latin America and Japan will be looked at, as well as past events that have lead to good and bad intercultural communication experiences. Personal interviews were conducted with members of the professional sports media including ESPN reporter Pedro Gomez, former Boston Globe reporter and current Red Sox historian Gordon Edes, and Comcast Sportsnet reporter and TV personality Trenni Kusnierek will be examined. **Given all the research through multiple articles and interviews, the majority of international players have a hard time overcoming the challenges of the American culture but in recent years the MLB has stepped up its efforts to help international players have successful transitions to the United States.**

Statistical Information

At the start of the 2017 MLB season, there was a record 259 players born outside the United States (29.8%) on Opening Day rosters, ranging from 19 countries and territories. The previous record was set in 2007 with 246 players, as well in 2005 with 29.2% of them being international (MLB Communications). The league began tracking this data in 1995 and each year it has seen an increase in international talent. Diversity, the abundance of international players, in a clubhouse has proven to be very important for a team's bottom line, or the final amount of money a team is making. According to a study done in 2010 by the University of Michigan, they found that ticket revenue increased by an average of \$500,000 for each foreign-born player that was put on an MLB roster. The study stated that in the 2000 season MLB teams listed an average of 10.8 foreign-born players on its roster and garnered an average of \$6 million in additional revenue (Winfrey, Michigan). The numbers will continue to rise because the league welcomes both the international player and viewer with open arms. The international viewers rarely have an issue, but it is the player that will sometimes struggle adjusting to the American culture. Where does the fault lie: on the player or on the team itself?

II. Language: The Never-ending Barrier

There is no secret that players from outside the United States have trouble learning English as a second language. Recently in the MLB there had already been Japanese translators in place but this was not the case with Spanish translators. Finally the MLB, thanks to veteran outfielder and Puerto Rican native Carlos Beltran, implemented Spanish translators at the beginning of the 2016 season. Beltran talked about one of the reasons why he wanted to take charge in obtaining translators, "A lot of times when you don't speak the language well, you do an interview after a game and you want to say so many things but you're limited in how much

you can express in English. That may give off the wrong impression” (Ortiz, USA Today). A scenario like this happened to former Dominican player Sammy Sosa, as the media mistranslated something he said. His friend, Hall of Famer Pedro Martinez, made a statement saying that Sosa was rushed when answering a question and the media published this quote, “You got to stood up and be there for it,” to mock him (Rodriguez, New York Times).

In an interview with Comcast Sportsnet’s Trenni Kusnierek, she talked about the language barrier and the addition of Spanish translators, “Translators are essential when dealing with players who don’t have a comfortable grasp of the English language. Even if we don’t use the sound on TV, we often listen in on the interview to gather information and relay that to our viewers. I love that MLB has made it mandatory for each team to have a translator. Moving to a new country and speaking a language which is not native to a player is daunting and intimidating. At the end of the day the player’s first job is to execute on the field” (Trenni Kusnierek Interview, Comcast Sportsnet).

ESPN’s Pedro Gomez, a Cuban-American, is well known for his on air Spanish translations with players who do not speak English proficiently. He also commented on the MLB having translators, “The fact that MLB finally is providing translators for Latin players has been long overdue. In recent decades that task was always left to a teammate or coach who was somewhat fluent in both languages. Having a certified translator has been a welcomed sight in every clubhouse I walk into. The biggest reason Latin players were privately angered before was the ease most clubs utilized in hiring Japanese translators to help Japanese players but never did the same for them. What you see now is almost every club having at least one Spanish-speaking coach on every roster, meant to help with every player on the roster” (Pedro Gomez Interview, ESPN)

Our perceptions are shaped by language and the sender of the message is heavily relied upon in everyday communication (p. 141, Martin and Nakayama). When the players are relied upon to send that message (especially if they are uncomfortable with the language), communication can sometimes be lost. Miscommunications between teammates or the managers during games could almost be considered unfair to these Latin players. With the addition of translators, who can help these players practice everyday, the language barrier will improve and communication will become clearer.

III. Talent Across the Sea: Asian Baseball

In the MLB on Opening Day this year there were 14 Asian-born players (Japan: eight, South Korea: five, Taiwan: one) (MLB Communications). Historically, there have been standout Asian players that have excelled in the major leagues; future Hall of Famer Ichiro Suzuki (Japan) and Hideki Matsui (Japan) are two great examples. Then, at the other end of the spectrum where players run into problems, there is former Red Sox and Mets pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka (Japan).

Matsuzaka had a lot of pressure on him before even coming over to the states, as he signed a six year, \$52 million contract, one of the largest contracts ever for a Japanese-born player. Daisuke hadn't even played a game that season (2007) and already culturally he was having trouble. At his opening press conference, the media got mixed signs from Matsuzaka and was confused because of a translation issue, as the Japanese pitcher did not know any English. Art Martone, a writer at the time for the Providence Journal stated that, "Matsuzaka's interpreter's command of the English language was shaky, and thus the pitcher's translated comments were brief and, occasionally, unintelligible" (Martone, Providence Journal). Matsuzaka did have some success in the majors, as he won 15 games in his first season, made 32

starts, threw 204 innings, won the clinching game of the ALCS and also was credited with a win in the World Series (Gordon Edes Interview, Red Sox).

Red Sox historian Gordon Edes talked about the Red Sox' process trying to help Matsuzaka adjust to the US, "Without sounding like a house organ, it's hard to imagine the Sox could have done more to help Daisuke, from the very first meeting they had with him at the southern California home of Tom Werner, who specifically instructed his chef to prepare a menu to Matsuzaka's liking. The Sox hired a Japanese-speaking trainer. They provided him with a media liaison, personal interpreter, personal masseuse, English lessons, membership in a golf club, and paid for 10 annual plane trips between Japan and the States for his family. Manager John Farrell took Japanese lessons, and catcher Jason Varitek studied tapes of Daisuke pitching in Japan. Larry Lucchino had a Stanford professor, Dan Okimoto, who was very familiar with Matsuzaka and Japanese baseball, serving as an informal adviser. Sox front-office employees carried business cards printed in both English and Japanese as a sign of respect. Traveling secretary Jack McCormick helped line up housing for him in both spring training and the regular season. And Theo Epstein added another Japanese pitcher, Hideki Okajima, to the Sox roster" (Gordon Edes Interview, Red Sox).

Not only is language an issue for Asian players, but the American lifestyle is completely different than what Asian players are used to. For example, Americans love to talk and are very upfront about everything but Asians handle their business and everyday lives with a form of silence. In the US, that would seem a bit odd to be silent and not speak your own opinions but in Asia, this is how ideas are communicated: through body language and prolonged processes. Not to mention, the food is also different in the US, and when a player has to completely change his diet it can be strange and unnatural for them. Aside from the food and culture being different, the

way baseball itself is played in Asia is different; from methods on conditioning to strategic aspects of the game. Learning a different type of baseball in a new country makes it a bit uncomfortable at first for Asian players.

To help with all these challenges players face when coming over from Asia, a consulting firm called “Global Sporting Integration LLC (GSI)” was created in 2014. Formed by current CEO Han Gil Lee, this program focuses on specializing and assisting with Asian players’ transition to the MLB (Jacobsen). The program focuses on nutrition, cultural elements, and variances in physical training from an athlete’s native country to ensure the best experience for both the player and the team (Jacobsen). Many players use this service and it has helped them adjust to the US. American players that go play in countries like Japan and South Korea have also used the service and their responses have been positive.

It is interesting to think that if Matsuzaka had had this program when he was first brought to the US, would his career have been drastically different? Yes, he started off with two solid years, but conditioning was a big issue (more rigorous in the US) and he had to get Tommy John Surgery, likely due to the innings build up (at an increased level, more so than US innings restrictions) from pitching previous years in Japan. The talent was there, but the fact that he was injured, plus the difficulties he had with adjusting to the new culture may have made him not want to pursue to rebuild his MLB career, as he now pitches professionally in Japan again.

The main issue with Japanese players is again the language barrier. For example, having an interpreter come out for mound visits to help the manager talk to the pitcher slows down the game, as it takes longer to get a message across. The issue for a lot of the players is their will and interest level to want to learn the new culture and adapt. There needs to be mutual interest between the player and the interpreter or between the GSI. This idea can be compared to living

with a host family in a foreign country. If you do not make an effort to practice the language and experience the culture, you are going to have a horrible time. Doing the opposite, though challenging and nerve racking, is rewarding. Ichiro Suzuki is the best example of an Asian born player that has seen success at the highest level. He is fluent in English (and Spanish) and is one of the greatest hitters in MLB history (4,309 career hits between Japan and US). He was someone who wanted to adapt to the culture and he worked at it.

IV. Latino Baseball

The Asian and Latin worlds both equally love one thing and that is baseball. But their actual cultures do not have many similarities other than baseball. With the Asian culture using silence as a communication method, Spanish speakers are almost the complete opposite: they talk fast and they talk loud. They too have their challenges when coming to the MLB and it all starts with Cuba.

Cuba: Defecting and Succeeding

Cuba historically has had success with sending top-end talent to the US, including star players like Jose Abreu, Aroldis Chapman and the late Jose Fernandez. With the non-existent political relations between the two countries since the Cold War, the baseball relationship has been their lone connection, but the process for players to get out of Cuba is dangerous. Players have to “defect” from their homeland in the Caribbean, basically escaping the country and running away from their homes and families, as they start their new lives as baseball players in the US. The aforementioned Fernandez, a Cuban-born player who died in a tragic boating accident on September 25th, 2016, had a terrifying experience defecting from Cuba. The boat he was on tipped over, and a woman fell off. It happened to be Hernandez’s mother and without

realizing it was her, he jumped into the water to save her. These kinds of events happen constantly when players defect.

Pedro Gomez talked during the interview about the relationship between the US and Cuba, “The past 60 years, since Fidel Castro’s rise to power in Cuba and the eventual shutting down of relations between the two countries, baseball has risen to even higher levels when it comes to the dealings between the US and Cuba. There are various examples of this... the 2000 Olympics, when US coach Tommy Lasorda dedicated the Gold Medal victory to Cuban refugees living in the US. Baseball remains the one area the two countries can stand on even ground and see who plays the game best” (Pedro Gomez Interview, ESPN).

Another issue that Latin players are trying to deal with is the different playing styles of baseball between the two nations. In countries like the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, the game is played in an atmosphere where players have more confidence, are more flashy, and are more excited about plays that maybe American players would not think are exciting. The phrase “Latin flair” is used to describe this type of playing style. The reaction to this Latin flair from American fans has been mixed. For example, the public criticized Blue Jay’s outfielder Jose Bautista for flipping his bat (pictured below) after hitting a three-run home run in the bottom of the seventh inning to take the lead against the Texas Rangers in game five of the ALDS. In an ESPN produced interview with Pedro Gomez, Gomez asked Venezuelan natives Carlos Gomez and Salvador Perez and Dominican Robinson Cano about the bat flip and why the public is down on the Latin flair (MLB Stars Dish on Latin Flair ESPN):

- Gomez: “That’s how we grew up. It’s something you dream when you are a little kid.”



- Cano: “If it’s a big situation, do it, do what you have to do... The playoffs, you never know when you’re going to be there again... It might be your last game so have fun.”
- Perez: “It’s all emotional. The playoffs are different.”

Having to deal with playing the game a different way because the public criticizes you is also something that players have to adjust to. For them, they just want to be themselves and play the game the way they grew up playing. They grow up with fans throwing beers in the air after home runs or horns constantly blowing during games, but in the states the American fans sit in their seats politely, upright, as they clap gingerly while saying “OOH, AHH” for certain plays (MLB Stars Dish on Latin Flair, ESPN).

Another way the MLB has done a really good job adjusting Latin players to the majors is by stashing Major League regulated academies in their home countries.

Individual teams can have different ways of handling Latin players but most of the methods turn out to be the same. Edes talked about what the Red Sox have done for Latin players in the past, “The Sox do understand the importance of assisting their international players. English classes are a requirement in their academy in the Dominican Republic, and also are offered in spring training and in the minor leagues. The Sox have emphasized hiring more Spanish-speaking coaches in the minor leagues, and human resources make counselors available for things such as managing finances. Still, it is indisputable the challenges for players coming to a new culture are immense” (Gordon Edes Interview, Red Sox).

These academies are very common for MLB teams, as Pedro Martinez learned a lot of his English at the Los Angeles Dodgers academy in the Dominican Republic (Rodriguez, NY Times). In the Dominican Republic today, all 30 MLB teams have an academy. These academies offer the tools to develop players’ skills on the baseball field, but also they provide English classes, leadership workshops, anger and stress management, etiquette and protocol on basic

American culture and formal education. This not only grows them as players, but also grows them as well-rounded people, just in case baseball is not their real future (Rojas, Baseball Academies Thrive in the Dominican Republic).

V. Conclusion

The one thing baseball fans do not think about is how a player's life is changed when he moves to the US to start his professional career. They just see a name on a transaction list and think nothing of it. But there is more to it; learning a new language, a new culture, even a new game. Through countless examples it can be seen that players have a hard time adapting to the new culture, but through baseball academies in Latin America, the addition of Spanish translators, and the GPI program for Japanese players, Major League Baseball is making a concerted effort to make sure their players understand the language (even if it just enough to get through a solid interview), experience the culture, and improve their skills on the field. As Kusnierek stated above, a player's ultimate job is to execute on the field. Learning and experiencing a new culture is secondary, but it could be said that it is just as important to survive in the major leagues.

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