

## Handout #4:

# **“MLB, long expecting Latino players to learn English, is finally beginning to speak their language.”**

**By Jesse Dougherty, from *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2019**

It was in winter of 2012, on the skinny streets of Margarita, Venezuela, that Brian Dozier first felt like an outsider.

He knew a little Spanish — took college classes, spoke slang with other Minnesota Twins, listened in the clubhouse — but it really wasn’t much. Now, playing winter ball after his rookie season in the major leagues, he struggled to order at restaurants, he couldn’t get the check, and he couldn’t ask for directions once he wandered through the island town.

So Dozier made a promise to himself and kept it in the following years: He was going to learn a second language, help his Latin American teammates not feel this way in the United States and, in turn, maybe other American players would follow.

“I’ve been surprised that not a ton of guys have really learned it outside of the baseball talk and basic conversation,” said Dozier, now a 32-year-old second baseman for the Washington Nationals, who is nearly fluent in Spanish even if he still struggles with irregular verb tenses. “It certainly is hard. But for so long it’s just been understood that Latin players would learn English. Why not also flip that expectation?”

This week, with the MLB draft spanning Monday to Wednesday, hundreds of young players are set to enter professional baseball. They’ll be picked across 40 rounds, signed to all sorts of contracts and then spit into small towns all over the country to begin their careers in the minors. And that’s where they will meet their new teammates, many of them from Latin America, and many of them learning English as a second language.

Spanish-speaking players made up more than 25 percent of Opening Day rosters this season. That included 102 from the Dominican Republic, 68 from Venezuela and 19 from Cuba. The league does not oversee how teams assimilate their international players, often signed as teenagers, but franchises are responding to the increasing diversity. Many have ramped up English education programs, spread resources to their abroad academies and affiliates, and hired full-time teachers to teach language classes and aid in the overall

transition. Yet reversing that process, to have native English speakers learn Spanish and attack the language barrier from both sides, has only just begun.

Consensus around the game is that steps in that direction are long overdue.

“When an American speaks to a Latin player in Spanish, it almost acts like a hypothetical olive branch,” said agent Gene Mato, who represents a handful of Latin American players. “I have seen firsthand the advantages of speaking and understanding a teammate’s first language. It automatically brings down walls that can hinder camaraderie between players in the clubhouse.”

## **A Changing Sport**

Deanna MacNaughton has gotten familiar with the Latin American player’s experience in four seasons with the Boston Red Sox. And while teaching English to Latin American minor leaguers, her job since 2016, she has heard the same question many times.

“Teacher,” MacNaughton starts while recalling what her students have asked, “why do we have to learn English and they don’t have to learn any Spanish?”

“It’s something we’re assessing” is how she typically responds. “Because you’re right, that’s not fair.”

“American players don’t realize that it’s this invisible extra hurdle that the Hispanic players have to jump over,” MacNaughton said. “They are expected to just walk into a country they don’t know, speak a language they are not familiar with and then perform at 100 percent. I don’t think they realize the amount of effort that that takes in addition to what they are already doing.”

Mandatory, well-resourced English language programs are one of baseball’s industry standards. As far as emphasizing Spanish, something MacNaughton hopes is normalized in the near future, many teams are just starting to adjust. The Red Sox require Spanish classes for American players during fall instructional league. So do the Cleveland Indians at their spring training complex in Arizona. The Texas Rangers have a new Spanish curriculum for first-year minor leaguers, and the Colorado Rockies teach the language in various ways. The Nationals, Philadelphia Phillies, San Francisco Giants, Los Angeles Dodgers, Los Angeles Angels, Cincinnati Reds, San Diego Padres, Detroit Tigers, Seattle Mariners, Kansas City Royals and Pittsburgh Pirates offer voluntary Spanish education options.

The Baltimore Orioles and Houston Astros, similarly, have software subscriptions for American players wanting to learn Spanish. The Toronto Blue Jays and Atlanta Braves have classes for their front office and operations staff. The Chicago White Sox hope to implement a Spanish program in 2020, and the Chicago

Cubs and Oakland Athletics are in discussions to do the same. The Astros and Tampa Bay Rays encourage young American players to attend English classes with their Spanish-speaking teammates.

These are the incremental advances in a very new area of player development. (The Arizona Diamondbacks do not currently offer Spanish education to players. The Minnesota Twins have offered informal Spanish classes but nothing further yet. Four MLB teams did not provide information in time or did not respond to questions regarding their education programs.) Andy McKay, the Mariners' director of player development, estimated that 90 percent of the major leagues' education resources are geared toward assimilating Latin American players. He and others are not sure how much that will change moving forward. They just know that it already has.

"A very old modality that a lot of people have is that you're in the United States, so speak English," MacNaughton said. "But that's not what the United States looks like anymore, and that's not what baseball looks like anymore. We have to acknowledge that within the sport."

"I have never gotten upset that an American player doesn't know my language; that's not fair," said Aníbal Sánchez, a 35-year-old pitcher for the Nationals who is from Venezuela. "But it's always nice for us when one of those guys tries to a little bit. It can be really relaxing."

That comes with the shared challenge of communicating in an uncomfortable way. Latin American players spend the first years of their careers, maybe longer, stumbling over new words and sentences. Sánchez and other Latino players expressed that that becomes easier if they see their American teammates doing the same.

Just ask the Marlins.

## **Meeting in the Middle**

Nick Fortes's busy offseason included hitting, lifting weights, catching and, in a twist, weekly drives to the Marlins' complex in Jupiter, Fla., for one-on-one Spanish tutoring.

Fortes, a fourth-round draft pick in 2018, has taken to baseball's most-intensive Spanish program. The 22-year-old catcher grew up with a Cuban father and took the language in high school, but he couldn't communicate with Latino teammates before excelling in the Marlins' effort to improve their organizational chemistry from the bottom up.

Now Fortes is communicating with pitchers in Spanish, still practicing the language with the Class A Jupiter Hammerheads and even crossing over to help teach English classes for Latino players. His favorite aspect

of the program is the “My Amigo” exercise, in which an American and Latino player become homework partners. Their assignments are to learn about each other through conversation, go to dinners and, in class, present their teammate in the language they are working on.

“I’ve made a lot of new friends here that I never thought I would have, who don’t speak the same language as me,” Fortes said. “Just because they see me putting in the work that they are putting in for our language.”

The Marlins’ program is run by Emily Glass, a bilingual educator who teaches both English and Spanish. The team’s education initiative began like most others, with courses on English and basic life skills at their academy in the Dominican Republic. Since teams often sign players as teenagers, they put them through high school courses and English training. But the Marlins’ push to add Spanish for American players began when Derek Jeter became chief executive officer in early 2018.

Jeter learned a bit of Spanish throughout his 20-year career with the New York Yankees. Then he gained control of a franchise and urged Glass to create a way for players, coaches and the front office to learn Spanish. The goal was to connect better with the diverse Miami community, create a more comfortable space for Latino players and, with that, improve team dynamics on and off the field.

The Marlins’ Spanish program is still voluntary, but Glass hopes to grow it into a required program at all levels of the minor league system. She currently manages four full-time teachers in the Dominican, three in Jupiter and four more part-time educators sprinkled across their affiliates that handle a variety of subjects. The Marlins offer Spanish courses, in both one-on-one and classroom settings, in low Class A, high Class A and Class AA.

Baseball, it’s often noted, is a copycat sport. So maybe the Marlins are on to something.

“It’s important to meet somewhere in the middle,” Glass said. “As a professional athlete, baseball is a game of failure. But learning a language has a lot of failure to it, too.”

### **“We Need More Guys Like That”**

It was a common sight during Nationals spring training in February and March, to see Dozier sitting on the clubhouse couches surrounded by Latino players. He would argue about the rules of Casino, the team’s favorite card game, with Dominican catcher Pedro Severino. He taught Adrián Sanchez, a Venezuelan infielder, new ways to win at it.

And they all spoke Spanish, with some English mixed in, before heading out to the field together. Mato, the longtime agent, said he “never understood” why lockers are often clumped by nationality and language. He may have been surprised to see this, too.

“That’s really important in so many ways,” Nationals closer Sean Doolittle said of Dozier interacting with teammates in Spanish. “We need a lot more guys like that because this sport doesn’t have a first language. The burden has been one way, and all on the Latin players, for too long.”

Dozier learned through Rosetta Stone software and speaking Spanish with Eduardo Escobar, then a teammate with the Twins and one of his best friends. Escobar, a native of Venezuela, practiced his English on Dozier. Dozier answered in Spanish and soon became the Twins’ de facto interpreter during meetings and mound visits. He learned on his own, seeking out the time and resources, and now the next generation could get a bigger push.

Baseball is welcoming the next wave of young, impressionable players this week. That appears to be a good time for change.

“I have seen it get better and better every year,” Mato said, and then he added that there’s still a long way to go.

### Questions for Groups

1. In what ways can using another person’s language function as what Gene Mato calls “an olive branch”? What exactly does Mato mean by this?
2. Deanna MacNaughton suggests that we no longer live in an America where we can assume that English is the common language. How is baseball leading the way in addressing this new reality?
3. In his 1963 *Sport* magazine article, Felipe Alou describes being a Latin American baseball player in the United States as being an “outsider.” In the article above, Brian Dozier described feeling like an “outsider” in 2012 as a non-Latin American player in Venezuela. In what ways do you think greater efforts can be made to make immigrants, visitors, people working away from home, and others feel less like outsiders?