

## Zapatos

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It was ridiculous bringing it up; the kids just laughed at us. Bob and I suggested using piles of dry “cow pies” for bases would save time, allowing the Puñal youth baseball team to start using its new practice field much faster. Fortunately, they changed our minds. It was July 1963, a bit into the hurricane season, with lots of rain. Wet cow pies do not make good bases. Sliding into them would be horrible.

Puñal was going to have a baseball team. However, we did not take into account the *zapatos*.

Bob and I are Peace Corps volunteers (PCVs) in small, not-quite-a-village, Puñal, twenty-five miles south of Santiago de los Caballeros in the Cibao Valley of the northern Dominican Republic (DR). Laughingly, we call Puñal, Fernández Town; almost everyone has the same last name, Fernández. We live on the second floor of the pale lime-green, wooden *casa curial* or parish house, next to the small wooden church, also painted the same nauseous green color. There is no electricity, running water or sewer. Rent is cheap; twenty-five dollars combined out of ninety-five we each get monthly. You can buy a lot of rice and beans and Presidente beer with the rest. We only have to stay out of the way on Sundays, when the priest comes from Santiago for services.

The rest of the time we work on projects: water supplies with hand pumps from CARE, grade school and adult English classes, vegetable gardens, and hog production. We introduce new varieties of cigar wrapper tobacco. The local men

learn windmill and pump repair. Periodically, the US Information Service loans us a movie projector and generator to show educational and cultural films on the outside wall of the church. What big, festive crowds we have! We do anything to keep busy and to better the lives of the Puñaleros.

On the second floor, we have a good view through open hurricane shutters of what is going on in the community. In front of our house is a large open area, where frequent religious processions start, winding ceremoniously through the fields and pathways of the community.

For miles, almost all the way to 3,000-foot high dark green mountains to the north, are fields of tobacco, *yuca*, bananas, *platanos* and corn, with scattered coconut trees. Clusters of orange trees shield low coffee bushes. Skinny cattle graze in fields, along with goats and burros.

We can see Aurora Fernández' house, with old white-haired Don Cirilo seated in the doorway, the sun warming his bones as he rocks away, smoking his pipe. Behind the house is the thatch-covered women's area, where they sew, husk corn, shell beans, or pluck chickens, talking as they work. Almost meatless, multi-colored chickens run under the chairs scavenging corn and potential edibles, oblivious to the plight of their now-featherless brethren.

We enjoy life here; so quiet at night, so dark, sky full of dazzling stars. Late into night, we often read by kerosene lamplight. An unknown admirer of the Peace Corps recently contributed 225 literary-quality softbound books shipped in big cardboard boxes, with built in shelves. We go through them, one by one, choosing according to our interests.

Often, after dark, we are out along the poorly paved road running north to Santiago. Here we gather with the older guys at the small *tiendas*, to spend some of our money on tiny cans of sweetened condensed milk, candies or small bottles of red Spanish wine. Along the road, we squat, knees pulled up to our chest, arms resting on our knees, Dominican-style, sipping wine and watching the rickety cars and trucks trundle past.

It does not sound very exciting, does it? Actually, it is, perhaps, one of the most rewarding periods of our lives, a chance to withdraw from the rush of modern civilization, and to understand how others live.

In early July 1963, we drive to Santiago to the regional Peace Corps office in our blue Jeep station wagon, picking up a big box of baseball gloves, bats, balls, a catcher's mask and chest protector. Most of the communities where PCVs are located have baseball teams. What a surprise it is for the kids when we dump the contents of the box in front of them. There is a scramble for gloves and balls, and the open area in front of our house is suddenly full of flying balls and screams of excitement.

After chores and school, the kids gather in front of our house and play ball. There are lots of arguments about foul balls or whether one of them was safe or out. The balls often hit the church, threatening the windows. Adult supervision is needed. We call a meeting, to form a team. Horacio and Manny volunteer to be coaches. However, we need a place to play.

As a group, we corner Chucho Fernández, Horacio and Caonabo's father, to ask whether we can use a fallow field for games. Chucho, squatting in an

opening beyond his house, is getting his rooster ready for the cockfights. He laughs, a toothy smile, and gives us permission.

The field is filled with stumpy roots of corn and yuca left over from the last crop, as well as hundreds and hundreds of cow pies where cattle have grazed. This does not faze the newly formed Puñal baseball team, *Los Puñaleros*.

Oh, I forgot to tell you what Puñal means: The Dagger. Therefore, the team called itself the 'Dagger Men'. I am not sure where the name came from, perhaps a long-ago nasty fight or from some of the men who have the skill of creating beautiful double-edged daggers from common steel files, attaching brilliant multi-colored handles and broad hilts. Most of the men carry one in a leather sheath, stuffed into their belts.

We were practicing in the open area in front of the house, but now it becomes more serious. A team from La Canela, coached by another PCV, Skip, has challenged us. With little time, we start to work.

Thirteen kids, with machetes and a few shovels, show up on July 12<sup>th</sup> to prepare the field. Under hot sun, they chop and dig out the roots of the harvested corn and yuca, smoothing the surface with shovels. Machetes turned sideways and held at ground level, they cut down weeds. The cow pies are heaved over the wire fence. A pitchers mound is built. For bases, the girls fill up gunnysacks with dirt. We continue to suffer from our recommendation that dried-up cow pies could have been used. Bob and I find some thick plywood and cut home plate from it. Big spikes hold it to the ground. Foul lines are outlined with spoiled powdered milk obtained from CARE.

Horacio and Manny, clipboards and ball game charts in hand, strut about, coaching the team. We are not too bad, but lack teamwork. Everyone seems to play for himself. I am not sure how this will work out.

The team is comprised of Felix Omar, José Rafael #1, José Rafael #2, José de Jesús, Caonabo, Alcibiades, Gilberto, Charley, Fernando, Miguel de Jesús, Luís, Francisco, and Manuel, most of them of the Fernández clan. Yes, we call the two José Rafaels, *Número Uno* and *Número Dos*. Felix Omar is our pitcher, a superb athlete, with a lot of control. Miguel de Jesús, called Bucky Beaver because of his toothy smile, plays shortstop. Fernando and Alcibiades are outfielders and our power hitters. The rest are not particularly skilled, but try hard.

July 14<sup>th</sup>, the big day. Before leaving, we take a picture of them all dressed up in their best clothes, white ironed shirts, pressed khaki pants and shined shoes. It is like they were going to church. Most of their lives they do not wear shoes. Their feet are calloused and broad, hard to get into shoes. When they wear them, they walk with ballet-like steps, out of balance, mincing along.

Bob and I jam the team into the seats and back of a big pickup truck and drive the thirty miles to La Canela, northwest of Santiago. Many of the kids have never been to the other side of Santiago. Wide-eyed and excited, they yell at everyone we pass.

We lose in 9 innings (2 extra), 7-6, not bad considering that the other team appears to be made up of much older guys. They are wearing old clothes and no shoes. Their pitcher is fast. We did fine, except for fielding and leaving men on

base. Moreover, the guys could hardly run in their tight shoes, and they would not slide into the bases because of their good clothes.

The La Canela team laughs at us and throws sticks and stones at the truck as we leave. Skip does not try to discipline his team. We are upset with this lack of sportsmanship.

All the way to Puñal, they blame each other for the loss. Bob and I wonder, what happened? We have a good team.

Meeting with the team on the 15<sup>th</sup>, we discuss game results and individual performance, and continue work on developing the ball field. Our team has problems. They play as individuals. Moreover, they think it is the pitcher and the “power hitter” that win games. Therefore, they swing too hard and come down on the pitcher when the other team knocks him about, even though it was poor fielding, not pitching,

It is raining heavily on the 17<sup>th</sup>, all day. The ball field is a swamp. The early hurricane season rains are here. It is still raining on the 18<sup>th</sup>, all day. The water is almost knee deep as it moves down the dirt road to our house from the highway. Soggy cow pies float around, seeming to attack us as we wade up the road to the highway.

July 19<sup>th</sup> is finally a sunny day. We contact Skip, but cannot have a rematch right away; He is going on vacation to Puerto Rico. He agrees to a game in late August. Therefore, we wait and practice.

Some portents make us worry a lot about the upcoming game:

On July 29<sup>th</sup> with the sun directly overhead there is a gray zone around the sun with a circular rainbow around that. I point it out to everyone. Some of the superstitious old women run to the church, praying and mumbling about the coming of the end of the world. It is just a 'sun dog', a variety of rainbow, but formed by high altitude ice crystals.

A few days later, while we are sitting up on the second floor, there is a low bass rumble, and the house begins to shake and move back and forth. "It's an earthquake, Bob." I am so excited; this was my first earthquake experience as a young geologist. Running to the window, I see chickens and burros running about, crazed, cackling and braying. A low, rolling line of dirt moves up the road and through the fields as the undulating vibration of the earthquake moves through the area. No damage, but it was exciting.

Then, Paulo chops his little brother, four-year old José Mauricio, on the head with a machete. Bob and I clean the wound. The kid pees all over the place as we apply Mercurochrome to the cut and pull it together with 'butterfly' tapes. Caonabo cuts his foot, and we fix that. Manny cuts his arm on barbed wire. A cow steps on Alcibiades' foot. We hope that our players will not get seriously hurt with this wave of injuries. We are always cleaning cuts on the kids' feet; they never wear shoes. We luck out.

Finally, it is August 20<sup>th</sup>. Our team has been practicing hard; they look like a real team. They are ready for the La Canela gang when they come to Puñal.

Bob and I have given a lot of thought to why we lost last time. The conclusion? It is the shoes, the zapatos. The problem is, wanting to win vs.

wanting to look good. Therefore, at the last team meeting we tell them, “No shoes.”

What a crowd, almost as many as at the cockfights. A lot of the parents come from their homes and fields to watch and cheer. Lourdes and Anita and other girls stand about with large black or flowered parasols, all dressed up for the boys, yelling at their favorites and catcalling the La Canela team.

Felix Omar is overwhelming with his fastball. The fielding is almost perfect, and Fernando and Alcibiades hit homers. Caonabo strikes out twice as he looks at my camera. That is my mistake; I should have remembered how he likes to have his picture taken.

Los Puñaleros win, 7-1.

What was the difference? As we thought: no *zapat*os, no shoes. However, the La Canela kids came all dressed up in good white shirts, pressed pants and shiny shoes, and could hardly run. Just like our team, they have big wide feet from walking around barefoot most of their lives. When they wear their tight shoes, they cannot run. Skip does not see this yet; he just goes about ranting and berating his team.

Later, September 12<sup>th</sup>, we beat them again, 8-5. No one on either side wore shoes for this third game. Skip will not play us any more, after our team threw sticks and stones at his truck as he left with his team. Guess he forgot.

Today is September 15<sup>th</sup>. The St. Louis Cardinals are only 1-½ games out of first place. It is Stan Musial’s last season. How nice if they ended on a high

note. They won 17 of the last 18 games. What a season that must have been!  
Well, we did OK here also!

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Looking back on this and noting the makeup of modern baseball teams, there have been 457 players from the Dominican Republic. Only three of these played in the majors before the arrival of the Peace Corps in 1962. Only two of them were named Fernández, and they were not from Puñal. The Dominican Republic supplies more players to Major League Baseball than any other country outside the U.S.

Among well known Dominican players' names are: Osvaldo 'Ozzie' Virgil, Felipe Alou, Juan Marichal, Julian Javier, Rudy Hernández, Mateo (Matty) Alou, Manny Mota, Rico Carty, Jesus Alou, Cesar Gerónimo. Pedro Borbón, Cesar Cedeño, and Sammy Sosa.

Of the 30 American League and National League teams, almost all presently have players from the DR, with the total number of players being approximately 85.

The first baseball teams in the DR formed in 1894 or 1895, but the real surge came after the Peace Corps, with its youth teams sponsored by PCVs, arrived in-country. Many former PCVs, including myself, wonder if our role had that big an impact.