

Contents

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS vii

PREFACE ix

- 1** Venezuelan Bust, Baseball Boom
Mr. Reiner's Dream 1
- 2** It's Their Game Too
The Origins of Baseball in Venezuela 14
- 3** The Astros Go South
Scouting in Latin America 37
- 4** From Zero to Prospect
The Astros' Academy 50
- 5** From Tunapuy to Guacara
The Search for the New El Dorado 63
- 6** On the Road to El Dorado
Scouting on the Frontier of Baseball 77
- 7** A Dream Come True
Ten Years at the Academy 93
- 8** Maracuchos y Gochos
Scouting in Maracaibo and the Andes 107

- 9** The Talent Search Expands
*Scouting in Colombia, Nicaragua,
Panama, and Beyond* 124
- 10** Refining the Product
The Venezuelan Summer League 143
- 11** Foreigners at Their Own Game
Welcome to the Astros' Minor League System 161
- 12** What Happened? Where Did
the Prospects Go? 177
- 13** Good-bye to the Astros
Andrés's Farewell Tour 198
- 14** Andrés's Dream and the Future of
the Astros in Venezuela 211
- 15** Epilogue 229
- ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 241
- APPENDIX 245
- NOTES 247
- BIBLIOGRAPHY 253

Illustrations

Following p. 138

Caracas Baseball Club May 1895

The first baseball game in Venezuela, May 1895

Pete Rose with the Caracas team, 1964–65
winter season

Bob Kelly Abreu flanked by Rubén Cabrera and
Dr. Lester Storey, May 1990

Andrés Reiner, May 1990

Andrés Reiner, Round Rock, Texas, June 2005

Orlando Sánchez Diago and René Cárdenas,
late 1960s

José Herrera

Melvin Mora and Andrés Reiner, Guacara,
Venezuela, November 1999

Astros' Venezuela academy at Guacara, May 2003

Astros' Venezuelan staff, Guacara, May 2003

Wladimir Sutil a week before signing with
Houston, May 2003

Roberto Petagine in Jackson Generals uniform,
San Antonio, Texas, 1993

Richard Hidalgo, 2005

One of baseball's hottest tickets, Caracas versus
Magallanes in Caracas

Bob Kelly Abreu, August 2005

Seattle Mariners players, Aguirre, Venezuela,
August 2002

Rafael Cariel, Ciudad Bolívar, 2001

Prospect Douglas Salinas in a tryout, July 2005

Scouts evaluating Salinas at the Astros' academy,
July 2005

Salinas and his grandmother listen to an offer
after the tryout

Sixteen-year-old Salinas relaxing after his tryout

Preface

In 1987 when I began to do research on baseball in Latin America, I read anything I could find on the subject in both English and Spanish and interviewed every current and former player from the region I could locate. I soon discovered that baseball was the most popular sport in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, and Venezuela and also had a long history in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the north coast of Colombia. I also realized that the definitive history of baseball in the Caribbean region that I envisioned writing was neither possible nor necessary: the subject was much too complex, and other scholars and serious journalists were also working on the topic.

In the early 1990s I focused my research on Cuba and Venezuela. Not much was written about contemporary baseball in either country, and both were coming onto the radar screens of major league scouts. In 2000 my book, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball*, a look at baseball in post-1959 Cuba, was published. The focus of this book is Venezuela, and to a much lesser extent Colombia, Nicaragua, and Panama.

I first went to Venezuela in 1986 to attend an academic conference and was intrigued by this fascinating country. I returned to Venezuela in May 1990 to write a six-part series for the *Houston Post* on the Astros' Latin American scouting program. I stayed in contact with those in the Houston front office in charge of Astros' scouting and also communicated with other major league organizations concerning their interest in searching for players in Venezuela. And I closely monitored the progress of the increasing number of Venezuelan players in U.S. professional baseball: 75 percent of the 214 Venezuelans

who have played in the major leagues made their debut after 1988. Clearly Venezuelan baseball had become more important to professional organizations in the United States.

While Venezuela is not actually a “new” frontier for baseball scouts, it is a country that had been on the back burner until Andrés Reiner opened the Astros’ facility in 1989. In the early 1990s it became apparent that the Astros were the front runners in this Venezuelan scouting boom, and I began to write about the accomplishments of the organization in opening the market for the recruitment of major league baseball players. Portions of those articles that first appeared in *Astros Magazine*, *Baseball America*, and *USA Today Baseball Weekly* are herein included.

In addition to examining Andrés’s vision of scouting and development, *Venezuelan Bust, Baseball Boom* also includes a brief overview of the origins of baseball in Venezuela, explores the role of the Houston organization in scouting in Latin America since its inception in 1962, and traces the progress through professional baseball of several of the prospects signed out of the Astros’ academy.

The book is the product of a seventeen-year conversation with Andrés Reiner. I traveled with him throughout the Caribbean on over a dozen occasions and observed the manner in which he carried out his project. I saw scouting reports on most of the players he signed and reviewed his correspondence relating to the academy. Between 1990 and 2005 I went on scouting trips and attended ballgames and tryouts from one end of Venezuela to the other with several of his scouts (in particular Rafael Cariel and Orlando Fernández), and just hung out with coaches and instructors at the Astros’ academy near Valencia.

Being with these scouts and coaches was such a pleasure that I found it difficult to end to my research. I wanted to continue to tag along with Andrés as he crisscrossed the Caribbean Basin and beyond, and to accompany Rafael Cariel on the road to El Dorado.

Venezuelan Bust, Baseball Boom

Mr. Reiner's Dream

On August 2, 2005, the Houston Astros sent an e-mail message to the other major league organizations announcing that Special Assistant to the General Manager Andrés Reiner would be leaving the organization at the end of the season. Reiner, who had worked for Houston since 1989, was the architect of the Astros' Venezuelan academy. In the seventeen years since the organization opened its facility in Venezuela, twenty-two players signed by Reiner had reached the major leagues. Seven of them, including 2004 and 2006 American League Cy Young Award winner Johán Santana (Minnesota), 2005 All-Star Game Home Run Derby champion Bob Abreu (New York Yankees), Freddy García (Philadelphia), Carlos Guillén (Detroit), and Melvin Mora (Baltimore) are still active in the major leagues. Only two of them play for the Astros.

Reiner's resignation was a shock to many in the baseball industry, but his departure had been in the works for well over a year. After GM Gerry Hunsicker resigned in November 2004, Reiner knew his days with the Astros were numbered. He was convinced that the Astros' front office was incapable of making the changes he believed essential and felt that if he stayed he would, in effect, be endorsing what the club was doing. In late February 2005 he submitted his letter of resignation, citing "philosophical differences" with the current management of the club. He agonized before making that decision and had to summon up the inner strength that had carried him through tough times in the past. But once Reiner decided to leave, he told me he felt an inner peace.

Andrés Reiner was born in Hungary on November 16, 1935, and immigrated to Venezuela in late 1946. He played soccer as a child in Budapest but lost his left leg in an accident. “It was because of my English class that I lost my leg,” Andrés told me. In Hungary his father, István Reiner, insisted that he study English when he was seven years old. Andrés was about ten and on his way to class one winter day when he tripped—his school bag got caught on the train—and the train hit him. The accident put an end to any hope of following in his father’s footsteps as a professional soccer player.

István Reiner was born in a part of Hungary near Zagreb, now in Croatia. Selected to the Hungarian national soccer team thirteen times, the senior Reiner later went into banking and was the head of the Bank of London’s operations in Budapest before operating an import-export business in the Hungarian capital.

In 1946 with the Communist Party on the verge of taking control in Hungary, the family decided to immigrate to the United States. István Reiner, through a government official who was a former soccer teammate, arranged for the family to receive passports to leave the country legally. But they would not be allowed to return, and the export business would have to be forfeited to the government.

The visas to the United States never materialized. The family, however, was able to obtain visas to Mexico and with them traveled to Paris, where they were allowed to stay for ninety days while arranging passage to Mexico. While the Reiners were in Paris, the newly elected Mexican president, Miguel Alemán, cancelled all visas for foreigners. Andrés and his family were stuck in Paris and at the end of ninety days would be sent back to Hungary.

Mr. Reiner inquired about obtaining a visa for Uruguay, but the process was slow. Then someone told him about a man in a café who every afternoon sold visas for another South American country.

“I was eleven at the time and had learned a little French so my father asked me to go with him to the café,” recalls Andrés. “The man was the consul for Venezuela in Paris, and he was selling visas for four hundred dollars each.” István Reiner purchased visas for the family. “On the way home my father said, ‘Andrés, let’s go to a bookstore, buy a map, and see where this country is.’” Forty-five

years later, it was Andrés who put Venezuela on the map of Major League Baseball.

In 1946 only three ships made the voyage from France to the French Caribbean and on to Venezuela. Andrés remembers the consul explaining how they might get passage on the ss *Colombé*. The consul had sold visas—and passages—to a group of Italians but thought they would have a difficult time getting to the port at La Havre because of the possibility of a rail strike in Italy. The consul could not assure the Reiners passage on the ss *Colombé* until the Italians were no-shows and the ship had actually set sail. Andrés and his family made their way to La Havre, the Italian rail strike did occur, and the passengers didn't show up. So with Andrés and his family sitting on shore with all of their possessions, the ss *Colombé* set sail. When the ship was about a half a mile out, it sent back a small boat to pick them up. They were finally on their way to Venezuela. Andrés recalls that after a little more than a week at sea, the ship docked on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. After stops in Martinique and Trinidad, the ship landed at the Venezuelan port city of La Guaira. The Reiners soon settled into their new home in downtown Caracas.

When they arrived in Venezuela, Andrés spoke no Spanish. Within six weeks, he was sent to school where the instruction was exclusively in Spanish, and as he puts it, “I survived.” But he was clearly a stranger in a new land, learning a new language and adapting to a new culture, and was often referred to as *musiú*—a term Venezuelans use for foreigners, especially those who are white and don't speak Spanish.

Andrés wondered why soccer wasn't played in Venezuela, and on his way to school, he noticed that many of the boys carried something made out of leather. He asked his father and older brother what this strange thing was, but neither knew. It was, Andrés later ascertained, a baseball glove. His classmates played only baseball in school, and he soon joined in. But Andrés quickly discovered that due to his physical limitations (he now wore a prosthesis) as well as his unfamiliarity with the game, he could only be a pitcher. He also found that if he arrived with a baseball, he would be one of the boys picked to play in the sandlot games. He never turned up without

one and soon fell in love with baseball. And like most young boys in Caracas, he spent countless hours playing *chapitas*—the Venezuelan equivalent of stickball—where the batter uses a broom handle to attempt to hit a bottle cap.

He remembers attending his first professional game in Venezuela at Estadio San Agustín in late October or early November 1947. There was a doubleheader every Sunday at the stadium—starting at 9:30 a.m.—featuring the four teams in the league, Vargas, Venezuela, Cervecería Caracas, and Magallanes. Andrés showed up at 7:30 a.m. for batting practice and was particularly intrigued by the Vargas team that featured the battery of pitcher Don Newcombe and catcher Roy Campanella, both Negro League stars who went on to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Other Negro League greats such as Sam Hairston, Bob Dandridge, and Ray Welmaker; Cuban sensation Lázaro Salazar; and Venezuelans Alejandro Carrasquel and Alfonso “Chico” Carrasquel were also players who made a lasting impression on Andrés in his early years. This combination of playing and watching, along with his desire to discover the attributes of a successful ballplayer, would greatly aid Andrés in the pursuit of his dream almost forty years later.

I first met Andrés in 1990. After reading in a Houston newspaper that the Astros had opened a new baseball facility in Venezuela, I contacted Houston scouting director Dan O’Brien and asked if I could visit the academy. O’Brien explained that it was run by Andrés Reiner and gave me his phone number in Valencia.

I called, introduced myself, and began to explain that I was a sportswriter.

“I am familiar with your writing,” interrupted Andrés, having read a story I’d written about another Astros scout, Julio Linares. I told Andrés that I had an assignment from the *Houston Post* to write a series on the Astros’ involvement in Latin America and asked if he would have time to visit if I came to Venezuela.¹ He responded that he’d be happy to show me around and would meet me at the Valencia airport. “I’ll be the one wearing an Astros cap.” When I arrived in late May 1990, he was.

In the ensuing sixteen years, I returned to Venezuela more than a dozen times to visit Andrés and have accompanied him on scouting trips to Colombia, Nicaragua, and Panama. I met him in Cuba during the Baltimore Orioles visit in 1999 and in Mexico during the 1997 Caribbean Series. I have sat with him at games in Round Rock, San Antonio, New Orleans, and Houston. I've interviewed him about the progress of his program at least twice a year, often more frequently, and speak with him at least once a month. I now call him a friend—a good friend. And I have often thought whether I could write in a dispassionate way about him. Could I be fair? After some deliberation, I decided that Andrés's story was an important one to tell and that I was the best person to tell it.²

“I have spent my life in baseball, even when I had my own business,” Andrés told me when we first met in 1990. Whether operating a jewelry store, a construction business, or a bowling alley, he devoted all of his free time to baseball. During the 1960s he worked as an instructor in the minor leagues of Venezuelan professional baseball. In 1970 he helped establish the Criollitos—the foundation of youth baseball—in Valencia, a major industrial city one hundred miles west of Caracas. That same year Andrés worked with a group that moved the Magallanes club of the Liga Venezolana de Béisbol Profesional (Venezuela Professional Baseball League) from Caracas to Valencia—akin to taking the New York Giants out of the Polo Grounds and relocating them to San Francisco. During the early 1980s while living in Houston, he recruited prospects in the United States to play for Magallanes during the winter. But it was only in 1989, when the Astros hired him, that baseball became a full-time business for Andrés. Finally, he would have a job he really loved.

Andrés is not the sort of person one would imagine as a scout on the frontier of baseball. He is bilingual and bicultural, and while fluent in English (albeit with a slight Hungarian accent), his preferred language is Spanish. He is happiest having dinner with his wife at home and listening to classical music or taking a respite from baseball to travel in Europe. His refined, conservative nature and gentle demeanor would seem to make him unsuitable for scouting in Ven-

ezuela. The search for talent there is old style, just as it was in the United States before the free-agent draft began in 1965. In Venezuela, the competition must be outthrustled and outworked. And when Andrés is looking for players, evaluating talent, or negotiating with the parents of a prospect, he is a tiger, both feared and respected by opposing organizations. The competition is well aware that Andrés and his staff will comb the countryside in search of players and can often convince parents into signing with the Astros for less money.

He is much more comfortable dealing with the baseball world in Venezuela than he is navigating the complex internal politics of the baseball industry in the United States. Andrés is an exceptional judge of baseball talent, but he is also keenly attuned to trends in Venezuela's economy, and he believed that the downturn in the economy in the early 1980s would result in an upsurge in interest in careers in major league baseball. He had a vision: to establish a baseball program that would scout, sign, develop, and prepare players to compete in the United States. Andrés was convinced that Venezuela was to be the new El Dorado in the search for baseball talent. His only problem was convincing a major league team to think likewise. In 1984 he explained his plan to create an academy for the production of baseball players to several major league organizations including Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Houston. All turned him down.

With the Astros, Andrés presented his plan to Bill Wood, who in 1984 was the organization's director of minor league operations. The two had become acquainted in 1982 when Andrés was living in Houston. How did Wood react when this man who had never played professional baseball presented him with a scheme that appeared to be less than practical?

"Andrés and I had a relationship based on his assistance in placing players in winter ball, so it wasn't as if he came in cold," recalled Wood, now a scout with Cincinnati. "I knew he had an association with baseball. He sold his premise very well, and it struck a chord in my mind. I felt like the Houston ball club was failing in our approach to our Latin development program," explained Wood. "We just weren't developing the players. I thought we were behind severely in the Dominican, and it would be really expensive to catch up there."

“So this was a whole new beginning when Andrés explained his idea to me. He sold me on the idea that if we took this approach in the way he suggested, we really would have an edge on people. He said nobody else was approaching it this way and that we could establish ourselves much the way that the Dodgers were in the Dominican Republic. And that just really appealed to me,” Wood said. “He did a great sales job to a willing buyer. It was Andrés’s idea to do it right in Venezuela—build an organization there that could lead to something big. And I thought that it was a good plan.”

But in 1984, Wood was not able to act on Andrés’s proposal. “I told him, ‘If you don’t sell this idea to someone else, there will be a receptive ear here in the future,’” said Wood. When Wood became the Astros’ GM just before the 1988 season, he decided to take a chance. He called Andrés and asked him to update his proposal. Andrés laid out his revised vision—complete with budget—in a four-page single-spaced letter to Wood, explaining that in the years since his first discussion with him, he had carefully thought about the proposal.

“I am more convinced than ever that my project is the best and only way to get really good prospects out of Venezuela,” wrote Andrés.

Andrés believed that Venezuela had the potential to produce as many major league players in the next five years as it had in the previous forty years (it actually took eight years to accomplish this). Not only was the current generation of players bigger, but due to the economic situation, much more likely to be interested in careers in professional baseball. The petroleum-based economy of the 1960s and 1970s had caused parents to encourage their sons to pursue their studies. When the economy turned sour, parents of young men began to view careers in professional baseball as a long-term investment strategy.

Andrés pointed out that scouting in Venezuela in the late 1980s was superficial and without any overall plan or strategy. For the most part it consisted of a scout covering a small area close to where he lived. Once or twice a year, a scouting supervisor from the United States would come in, work out a few prospects for a couple of days, and sign a player or two. He went on to explain that unlike the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico, which are very small, Venezuela is

a big country—slightly larger in area than Texas. It could take a scout up to eighteen hours to get from one part of the country to another by car. Andrés also noted that because of the organization—or lack thereof—of Venezuelan amateur baseball at that time, the players to be scouted would be both technically and physically poorly prepared.

“The conditions are perfect now to make some investment in money and labor to put a good scouting network together,” Andrés concluded. He then laid out the three basic points of his plan:

- = Maintaining a very simple instructional camp with the purpose of improving the candidates both physically and technically. This would allow a better evaluation of the players and lower the risk of making mistakes.
- = Dividing Venezuela into three geographical scouting zones.
- = Hiring a supervisor or coordinator loyal to the organization. The supervisor would live in Venezuela and direct the day-to-day activities of the facility. In addition to the supervisor, Andrés suggested two coaches, three zone scouts, a trainer, and a physician trained in sports medicine.

Andrés also included his budget. For the first year he asked for \$73,300—which included all salaries and expenses. It was revised downward by the Astros with the supervisor’s salary lowered and one zone-scouting position eliminated, bringing the total operating cost to approximately \$60,000. When shown the budget fifteen years later, Bill Wood admitted being embarrassed that it was so abysmally low.

The advantage of such a comprehensive scouting program, the first such endeavor by any major league organization in Venezuela (Pittsburgh operated an academy in Caracas in 1955, and Toronto had a small facility in the 1970s), would be that a team would have its own network scouting in the country on a daily basis. Prospects would be brought to a facility, receive instruction, and be evaluated. This would enable the organization to have a good idea of the talent

and make-up of players, resulting in fewer players being released. Although it was not an issue at the time, Andrés was introducing the concept of combining aspects of both scouting and development. Most, if not all, baseball organizations go to great lengths to keep the two separate.

Andrés believed that the players trained in the academy would develop a loyalty to the organization and thus sign for less money. He saw the Venezuelan market value for players as between \$3,000 and \$6,000, with only a few exceptions. At the time, the highest bonus ever given to a Venezuelan player was \$40,000, and the players who had received this amount could be counted on one hand.

“Dear Bill, if you want to put this project in progress, I would like to be the supervisor or coordinator,” Andrés ended his letter.

On July 12, 1989, Andrés signed a contract with the Houston Astros to work as a scout for an annual salary of \$8,000. Less than a month later, he began to develop the program outlined in his plan. Using his contacts in the business, baseball, and university communities, Reiner opened the Academia de Béisbol de los Astros de Houston, and his dream was now en route to becoming a reality.

While the Astros and other major league teams go into the international market as a cost-saving measure, the reality is that the baseball industry is forced to recruit players overseas because there aren't enough quality players being produced in the United States. Whether this shortage is the result of the sports talent in the United States being spread too thin (baseball has to compete with football, basketball, and soccer for the top athletes) or because there are too many other options for young men (television, the Internet, video games) is really irrelevant. To be competitive, all major league organizations participate actively in the Latin market. Most teams focus on the Dominican Republic, a few on Venezuela.

Houston was the first club to venture into Venezuela in an organized and systematic way. Before Andrés and the Astros opened the Venezuelan pipeline, few in the baseball industry understood the talent-producing potential of the South American country—and with good reason. Prior to the mid-1980s it was difficult to interest many

young men in professional careers in the game, even though baseball is the national sport of Venezuela.

“I remember telling my friends that I was going to play professional baseball, and they asked me, ‘How are you going to make a living?’” recalls Al Pedrique, former major league manager and now Special Assistant to the General Manager/Latin America for the Astros. In 1978 when Pedrique signed a minor league contract with the New York Mets at age eighteen, it was indeed an unusual career path for a young Venezuelan man.

Venezuela was the richest country in Latin America, and with the enormous revenues generated from its petroleum boom during the 1970s, it went through a spending frenzy. Venezuela Saudita—Saudi Venezuela—was the term widely used. Part of the bonanza meant that almost any qualified student could obtain a grant to attend a university overseas. Why play baseball when the opportunity existed to study abroad on a government-paid scholarship?

For centuries residents of what is now Venezuela had been aware that petroleum resources were located in their territory—it seeped out of the ground near Lake Maracaibo—but it was not until petroleum-based products began to be in demand in the United States in the 1860s that Venezuelans viewed the substance as a commercial product. In the early 1890s Venezuela was still a predominantly rural country that depended on its coffee crop to earn foreign exchange, but by the early 1900s the British and Dutch began to exploit the oil fields. On a December day in 1922, an oil well on the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo gushed 100,000 barrels into the air and put Venezuela at the forefront of leading petroleum producers.

“By 1928, Venezuela exported more crude oil than any other nation and ranked second in world output,” writes Stephen G. Rabe in *The Road to OPEC: United States Relations with Venezuela, 1919–1976*.³ It was during the boom of the 1920s that U.S. companies became dominant. For the next fifty years, Venezuela enjoyed a prosperity that few of its residents could have dreamed of. By the early 1970s, with the formation of the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), oil prices on the world market quadrupled, and Venezuelans imagined they lived in a magical place where oil revenues would

provide almost everything for everybody. But average real incomes in Venezuela peaked in 1978, midway through the oil boom, and for the overwhelming majority of the population, they have declined ever since. In 1983 approximately 75 percent of Venezuelans were still considered middle class. Twenty years later, more than 60 percent of the population lived below the poverty level. How did such a drastic shift occur? The main reasons were Venezuela's almost complete dependency on petroleum for over half a century and the extremely high external debt incurred during the oil boom of the 1970s.

A precipitous drop in the price of petroleum in the early 1980s and the subsequent devaluation of the Venezuelan currency—the bolívar—on “Black Friday,” February 28, 1983, sent shockwaves through the economy and led to a drastic shrinking of opportunities for the vast majority of Venezuelans. The situation led many parents who once hid bats and gloves from their sons to now encourage them to play baseball. And play they did. By the late 1980s, spurred on by the success of native sons Tony Armas, Bo Díaz, Ozzie Guillén, and Andrés Galarraga, there was a renewed interest in young men signing professional contracts to go to the United States to play the sport.

No matter how bad the economic situation is in Venezuela or how visionary the scouting program of Andrés Reiner, significant quantities of baseball players can only be found in a country that has a long, rich tradition of baseball. Although a young man's dream of striking it rich in baseball is a motivating factor in the increased signings, other equally important elements help explain why Venezuela produces so many quality players: baseball is the sport of choice of young men, and it is played year-round. Recent surveys show that 75 percent of *criollos*—native-born Venezuelans—selected baseball as their favorite sport, and no one in Venezuela ever gets bored watching or talking about it. So while in the United States the World Series has to battle with *Survivor* for television viewership and the slow pace of baseball has skewed support of the game to the over-fifty crowd, in Venezuela baseball enjoys a popularity comparable to that in the United States in the 1950s when the sport was in its heyday.

An ideal place to get a glimpse of the depth of the love of baseball in Venezuela is the Salón de la Fama/Museo de Béisbol in Valencia. A sort of a mini-Cooperstown, the museum was the idea of, and a tribute to, Carlos Daniel Cárdenas Lares. I met Carlos Daniel at the Caribbean Series in Puerto La Cruz in 1994, only a month before he died at age twenty. Although muscular dystrophy confined his body to a wheelchair, it did not hamper his devotion to the game. In 1990 when he was only sixteen, Carlos Daniel wrote *Venezolanos en las grandes ligas*, a book that detailed the careers of the fifty-five Venezuelans who had played in the major leagues.⁴ His collaborator on that volume, Giner García, is a Venezuelan journalist and baseball commentator whom I would come to know very well during my visits to Venezuela and in our work together for *Baseball America*. In 2005 García was named executive director of the Salón de la Fama.

The Fundación Cárdenas Lares, the foundation run by Carlos Daniel's family, built the museum. The family owned the land on which the Centro Sambil, an upscale shopping mall on the northern edge of Valencia, is located. The family gave the shopping center developers the land, and in return the museum was placed in the very center of the mall. It is quite impressive. The mall itself is in the shape of a diamond, and the entrances are Home Plate (in English), Primera Base, Segunda Base, and Tercera Base.⁵ The center of the museum and the shopping mall is a sixty-foot-high fiberglass baseball covered in white canvas with red stitching. Inside the ball are statues of the members elected to the Salón de la Fama, which opened in the summer of 2003.

I had spent more than a decade going to games in Venezuela, talking to players, scouts, and team owners and reading the history of the sport in the country. I was well aware that baseball was both the national sport and a national passion, but it was only after I spent two afternoons in the museum in 2003 that I truly understood the intensity of the love Venezuelans have for the game.

Although baseball was being played in Venezuela as early as 1895 and the first player to reach the big leagues, Alejandro Carrasquel, made his debut with the Washington Senators in 1939, it was a contest in 1941 that really solidified the nation's fascination with the

game. Venezuela's unexpected victory over Cuba in the championship game of the 1941 World Amateur Baseball tournament, highlighted in the museum, fixated the country on baseball.

"This was as important for us as winning a gold medal in the Olympics," Giner García told me.

The 1941 win created an atmosphere in which baseball flourished, and in 1946, the Liga Venezolana de Béisbol Profesional was inaugurated. Andrés arrived in Venezuela only months after the league started, and he and professional baseball have literally grown up together in his adopted land.