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NOTAS DEL CARIBE: Looking back at the 2012 Caribbean Series

With the 2012 Caribbean Series now in the taillights, I thought I'd put some random thoughts and notes together about the past week in Santo Domingo...

*The CS All-Star Team was announced, with one selection from the Mexican Pacific League champion Obregon Yaquis, who lost their final three games to finish last with a 2-4 record after winning the Serie del Caribe last winter. Obregon's Iker Franco was picked as catcher.

For the record, here are the 2012 CS All-Stars: 1B-Hector Jimenez, Aragua (VZ), 2B-Pablo Ozuna, Escogido (DR), 3B-Luis Figueroa, Mayaguez (PR), SS-Miguel Rojas, Aragua (VZ), OFs-Andy Dirks, Escogido (DR), Adonis Garcia, Aragua (VZ), and Jesus Feliciano, Mayaguez (PR), C-None (???), DH-Luis Jimenez, Aragua (VZ), LHSP-Raul Valdez, Escogido (DR), RHSP-Nelson Figueroa, Mayaguez (PR), RP-Jairo Asencio, Escogido (DR) and MGR-Ken Oberkfell, Escogido (PR).

Asencio, a Braves farmhand, was named the MVP after tossing three innings in three games, saving all three for the Leones while allowing no baserunners. But selecting no catchers? What target was Asencio throwing to, a strikezone-sized net between the batter and umpire?

*Attendance at the CS left much to be desired. The Dominican League website, hardly the place to go for dispassionate discourse on an event they were hosting, pointed out that the 11,400-seat Estadio Quisqueya was never sold out, with about 8,000 fans showing up for a game between LiDom champion Escogido and Puerto Rican League representative Mayaguez on the third day. Unofficial estimates are that about 6,000 per day turned out for the six doubleheaders, although organizers never did release official attendance figures.

Perhaps one reason for the low turnout was ticket prices, which ranged from US\$5 per day for the nosebleed seats overlooking left and right field to \$70 per day for corporate boxes (it was \$40 per day to sit behind home plate), with no breaks for people buying six-day passes. That may not seem like much for Americans in a nation with a per capita income of \$48,100, but with a PCI of \$9,300 in Dominica, tickets can start adding up, especially when there were so few of those \$5 seats available. Hopefully, organizers for next year's CS at the new ballpark in Hermosillo will take note and not price Mexican fans out.

*Speaking of future Caribbean Series, a delegation from the Caribbean Baseball Confederation will be heading to Havana in March (hats in hand, no doubt) to make another attempt to convince Cuban baseball authorities to rejoin the CS. Cuba was one of the original four nations in the CS between 1949 and 1960 until Fidel Castro took power and pulled out of the Serie, effectively killing the event for eleven winters until it was reorganized in 1970 by replacing Cuba and Panama with Mexico and Venezuela.

Two problems for the CS, however: The Serie runs while the Cuban National Series regular season still has more than two months to go. Who would they send? The previous winter's champion? An All-Star Team? How badly will Cuban baseball want to stretch their regular season another week? The second problem is that there would be concerns regarding possible defections among Cuban players outside the country.

*There are three nations that have applied for admission to the Serie del Caribe, but Confederation president Juan Francisco Puella rejected them outright, addressing financial difficulties among leagues in Colombia, Nicaragua and Panama by saying, "In regards to those leagues, if you can't take care of your own house, you can't take on another." Puella apparently has a short memory, since the Puerto Rican League suspended operations in 2007-08 because of attendance and money problems. They were welcomed back a year later.

2012 CARBBEAN SERIES FINAL STANDINGS

TEAM	GP	W	L	PCT.	GB
Escogido (DR) Leones	6	4	2	.667	----
Aragua (VZ) Tigres	6	3	3	.500	1.0
Mayaguez (PR) Leones	6	3	3	.500	1.0
OBREGON (MX) Yaquis	6	2	4	.333	2.0

2/7/12: YAQUIS BOPPED BY ARAGUA, 6-2, TO FINISH CS SCHEDULE

Cesar Suarez went 2-for-4 with a homer and two RBIs while Pedro Guerra and five other relievers combined to hold Obregon to one hit over the final six innings as the Aragua Tigres downed the Yaquis, 6-2, Tuesday to finish the Caribbean Series for both sides.

After both teams swapped goose eggs over the first two innings, the Yaquis posted two runs in the top of the third against Tigres starter Seth Etherton, a former MLB pitcher who spent part of last summer with the Quintana Roo Tigres of the Mexican League. Jose Rodriguez led off the frame with a single up the middle, moved to second on a Jesus Lopez sacrifice bunt and scored on a Chris Roberson single off Etherton's glove. Roberson went from first to third on Sergio Contreras' double and later came in to score on an Iker Franco sacrifice fly. At that point, Etherton was replaced on the hill by Tyson Brummett, who got Oscar Robles to fly out to end the inning for the Mexican Pacific League champions.

Aragua tied the game at 2-2 in the bottom of the fourth when Suarez bashed a leadoff homer over the left field wall off Obregon starter Marco Carrillo. Adonis Garcia then doubled, moved to third on a Luis Anotnio Jimenez single and scored on a Hector Giminez single.

The dam really burst open in the fifth after Oswaldo Martinez came out to relieve Carrillo on the mound for the Yaquis. Aragua went on to knock Martinez around for four runs on four hits and two walks in just two-thirds of an inning before he was yanked in favor of Cesar Carrillo. The first batter to face Carrillo was pinch-hitter Edgardo Alfonzo, who lifted a single to right to score both Miguel Rojas and Suarez to bring the score to 6-2. From that point on, Carrillo and four more Obregon relievers would let up just one hit the rest of the way (although Alan Guerrero struggled, issuing three walks on top of that single in 1.1 innings), but the fatal damage had already been done and the Mexican bats were being silenced by the Tigres relief corps.

Obregon ended the contest with just four hits, two of them singles by Roberson, while Aragua posted eleven safeties for the game. The Yaquis ended the CS with a 2-4 record after losing their final three games. Aragua, the Venezuelan champions finished with a 3-3 record. The host Escogido Leones fell to Puerto Rican champs Mayaguez, 3-1, in the CS finale, but the Dominicans had already clinched the title and came in at 4-2. The Indios brought their record to 3-3, pushing Obregon back to last place for the tournament after the Yaquis had finished the first go-round of the double round-robin format holding second place at 2-1 and only trailed Escogido by a single game.

2/6/12: OBREGON LOSES TO MAYAGUEZ, 4-3, ON WALKOFF SINGLE

Luis Figueroa singled off a full-count pitch from Obregon closer Luis Ayala to score Johnny Monell with the game-winning run in the bottom of the ninth inning, giving Puerto Rican kingpin Mayaguez a 4-3 win over the Mexican Pacific League titlist Yaquis Monday afternoon at the Caribbean Series in Santo Domingo. With the loss the Yaquis were officially eliminated from their quest for a second straight CS title by falling to a 2-3 record after five games with one to go, two games behind Dominican champion Escogido, who dropped to 4-1 after suffering their first loss in the nightcap, 7-0, to Aragua of Venezuela.

The Yaquis took a 1-0 lead in the top of the first when Karim Garcia singled in Chris Roberson, then stretched it to 3-0 in the third when Garcia tripled in Alfredo Amezaga before coming in on a Barbaro Canizares sacrifice fly. The Indios struck back with two of their own in the bottom of the third on Figueroa's two-run single, then knotted the contest up at 3-3 in the eighth when Jesus Feliciano scored on Jorge Padilla's bases-loaded groundout to Amezaga at shortstop.

Obregon's offense once again sputtered its way to an eight-hit day, as Garcia singled, tripled, walked twice to drive in two runs while scoring once in four trips to the plate. The Yaquis pitching generally held up well as starter Miguel Gonzalez went five innings and gave up two runs while Dan Serafini allowed one hit and an unearned run in two frames. However, Ayala (who's been sharp throughout the postseason) ran into some trouble in his 1.1 innings, walking four and throwing just 16 strikes in 37 pitches. And did we mention Figueroa's game-winning single?

The Yaquis will wrap up their 2012 CS schedule Tuesday afternoon against Aragua.

2/5/12: YAQUIS BLANKED 2-0 BY LIRIANO, DOMINICANS

Francisco Liriano outdueled Edgar Gonzalez as the Escogido Leones scored runs on infield groundouts in the first and ninth innings to defeat the Obregon Yaquis, 2-0, Sunday night to clinch at least a share of the 2012 Caribbean Series title for the Dominican League champions. With two games left to play, Escogido has a perfect 4-0 record, including a pair of wins over the Mexican Pacific League champions, who are 2-2.

Escogido scored their first run when José Constanza opened the game with a walk, stole second base, moved to third on a fielding error of a Pablo Ozuna grounder by Yaquis first sacker Barbaro Canizares and came in to score on an Andy Dirks groundout to Obregon shortstop Alfredo Amezaga.

That 1-0 lead was all Liriano and the Leones would need in this one. Liriano, who has fought injuries and inconsistency the past four summers for the Minnesota Twins after going 12-3 with a 2.16 ERA in his 2006 rookie season, tossed five shutout innings for the Leones to eventually collect the win. The 28-year-old lefty allowed four hits and as many walks, but the Yaquis couldn't bunch enough of them together to push a run across the plate.

Escogido tacked on an insurance run in the ninth when pinch-runner Freddy Guzman replaced Mauro Gomez after Mario Mendoza Jr. walked Gomez to begin the inning, then stole second, moved to third on Erick Almonte's groundout to Canizales at first and scored on Fernando Tatis' tapper to Yaquis third baseman Agustin Murillo (who had to throw to first to retire Tatis because he couldn't make a play on Guzman). Jairo Asencio retired Obregon in order on six pitches in the bottom of the ninth for his third CS save.

For his part, Gonzalez had a strong outing for the Yaquis as the Colorado Rockies hurler let up just two singles in six innings. Five relievers combines to allow just two hits and one run over the final three frames, but Obregon's anemic offense could gather only five base hits themselves while batting 0-for-9 with runners in scoring position. Doug Clark had two singles for the Yaquis while Canizales, Chris Roberson and Karim Garcia each singled once, but it just wasn't Obregon's night at the plate. As a team, the Yaquis lead the pitching-dominated CS with a .266 batting average, but the breaks weren't there Sunday.

Obregon has two games to play in Santo Domingo: Monday at 3PM local time against Puerto Rico's Mayaguez (1-3) Indios, and Tuesday at 3PM versus Venezuela's Aragua (1-3) Tigres.

2/4/12: VALENCIA DOUBLE PACES 4-2 OBREGON WIN OVER ARAGUA

Carlos Valencia sliced a two-run double in the bottom of the sixth inning to put Obregon ahead to stay as the Yaquis scored a 4-2 comeback win over Venezuela's Aragua Tigres Saturday in the 2012 Caribbean Series. The win gives Obregon a 2-1 record after three games in the double round-robin tournament at Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

The Tigres took an early 1-0 lead when Cesar Suarez laid down a two-out bunt single in the top of the first inning that Yaquis pitcher Rolando Valdez threw past first baseman Sergio Contreras, allowing Suarez to advance to second. Adonis Garcia followed up with a single to center field on which Suarez was able to come around to score the game's first run.

The two teams then swapped zeros until Obregon tied the game in the bottom of the fifth when Iker Franco lined a two-out double to left and then scored on a Contreras single. Aragua pulled into a 2-1 lead in the top of the sixth when Guillermo Rodriguez came in from third on a Suarez grounder to third sacker Agustin Murillo, who threw to second to force Miguel Rojas.

In the pivotal bottom of the frame, Chris Roberson led off with a bunt single for the Yaquis and moved to second on a bad throw by Aragua first baseman Hector Jimenez. Alfredo Amezaga then put down a sacrifice bunt that drew an error on the throw by Tigres pitcher Brian Sweeney, allowing Amezaga to arrive safely at first with Roberson advancing to third. Roberson then scored on Karim Garcia's ground out while Amezaga scooted to second. Then, a Barbaro Canizares grounder to third baseman Luis Maza drew Aragua's third throwing error of the inning, putting Canizares safe on first. Doug Clark then drew a walk from Sweeney, who was replaced on the mound by Pedro Rodriguez with the bases loaded. The first batter Rodriguez faced was Valencia, who drilled a 2-0 to left for a double, scoring Amezaga and Canizares with the go-ahead runs. It was then left to Valdez and three relievers to shut out Aragua the rest of the way to seal the deal for the Yaquis.

After allowing that first inning tally, Valdez settled down to end up with seven strong innings for the win, allowing two unearned runs, striking out five Tigres hitters and walking none. Luis Ayala struggled through the ninth, allowing two late singles, but settled down to hold Aragua scoreless for his second save of the CS. The Yaquis collected seven hits for the game, including two safeties for Franco, but this was a game the hinged largely on the combined five errors, each of which led to a run being scored.

Obregon next takes on Dominican champion Escogido, who come into Sunday night's game unbeaten at 3-0, thus a Yaquis victory would create a tie at the top of the CS standings. Aragua takes an 0-3 mark into their afternoon contest against 1-2 Puerto Rican titlists Mayaguez.

2/3/12: KEISLER, YAQUIS SHUT OUT MAYAGUEZ, 2-0; OBREGON NOW 1-1 IN CS

Randy Keisler combined with relievers Dan Serafini and Luis Ayala on a four-hitter as the Obregon Yaquis shut out Puerto Rico's Mayaguez Indios, 2-0, Friday afternoon in Santo Domingo to even their Caribbean Series record at 1-1. The Yaquis fell to Dominican hosts Escogido, 2-1, in Thursday's CS opener for both teams.

Keisler cruised through seven innings of work for Obregon, allowing just an Irving Falu double plus three singles and a walk while striking out five Indios batsmen. Serafini came on in the top of the eighth and walked Jesus Feliciano and struck out Ruben Gotay on four pitches before giving way to Ayala, who retired all five batters he faced, throwing 14 strikes in 17 pitches to earn the save.

Obregon scored the only two runs they'd need in the bottom of the fourth when Barbaro Canizares drew a one-out walk off Mayaguez starter Johnny Monell, who then threw the ball into right field on a pickoff attempt to allow Canizares to scoot all the way from first to third base. Doug Clark drew a walk from Monell before Jose Rodriguez lifted a sacrifice fly into center field to score Canizares. With Iker Franco at the plate, Clark stole second. Franco proceeded to stroke a single to center to plate Clark with what ended up being an insurance run. Franco, Lopez and Sergio Contreras each had base hits for the Yaquis while Karim Garcia collected two.

The Obregon win came the day after Thursday's disappointing 2-1 loss to the Dominican champs. The Yaquis drew first blood in the top of the second when Canizares hit a leadoff single, moved to third on Doug Clark's bunt single that drew a throwing error by Escogido third baseman Fernando Tatis, and then came in to score on a wild pitch by Leones starter Kris Johnson.

The Dominicans came back with a run in the bottom of the second when Wilkin Castillo and Tatis singled off Obregon starter Luis Mendoza to start the frame. Julio Borbon moved both baserunners up 90 feet on a sacrifice bunt, then Castillo tied the contest by scoring from third on Pedro Florimon's groundout to second.

In the fateful third entrada, Mendoza loaded the sacks to start the inning by letting up singles to Pablo Ozuna and Andy Dirks and walking Mauro Gomez. After a coaching visit to the mound, Mendoza got Julio Lugo to hit into a 6-4-3 double play, but Ozuna was able to score from third on the play to give Escogido a 2-1 lead they were never to relinquish. Obregon was only able to muster singles from Canizares, Clark and Agustin Murillo off Johnson and three relievers while Escogido spread out eight singles against Mendoza and two relievers.

In other CS contests, Venezuela's Aragua Tigres topped Mayaguez, 3-2, on opening day while Escogido topped Aragua, 5-2, Friday night. On Saturday, Obregon takes on Aragua and Escogido meets Mayaguez to complete the first run-through of the double round robin format.

Escogido leads the standings with a 2-0 record, followed by Obregon and Aragua with 1-1 marks and Mayaguez trailing at 0-2.