

MLB Winter Meetings

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Orlando, Florida, USA

Nelson Cruz

Mike Teevan

Scott Harris

Rob Manfred

Albert Pujols

Junior Noboa

Kelvin Cruz

Dominican Republic Press Conference

MIKE TEEVAN: Thank you so much for joining us today. We're really excited to be here today we have a great dais of guests. And thank you all for being here for an announcement we're really excited about.

To get us started, we're going to start with the Commissioner of Baseball, Rob Manfred.

ROB MANFRED: Thanks, Mike. We're here this afternoon to make an announcement that I think is very exciting. On March 3 and 4, 2026, the Dominican National Team is going to play two exhibition games in Santo Domingo against the Detroit Tigers.

This is something we've been working on for a number of months, and really excited that it has come to fruition. There are a lot of people -- when you have a good idea, a lot of people are involved in making it happen. This idea started in a conversation between Omar Minaya and Nelson Cruz about the possibility of the Dominican National Team playing some exhibitions in the DR.

We talked to Albert Pujols, who's obviously going to manage that Dominican National Team. Albert was a big supporter. Between the two of them, we then approached the government in the Dominican. President Luis Abinader was really supportive, actually helped us with some of the renovations that needed to be done to the facility.

We have with us today Junior Noboa, who's the Commissioner of Baseball in the Dominican, and Kelvin Cruz, who's the Minister of Sport. Really excited that they could come here and be with us today.



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Last, in terms of thank yous, I want to thank the Detroit Tigers organization. I think most of you understand during Spring Training any disruption of the routine is difficult for clubs. It's something they don't do lightly. And the Tigers were all in from the very beginning. I really appreciate their cooperation.

When Nelson came to me with this idea, I was reminded of the exhibition game that we played a couple of years ago in the Dominican Republic. I was there for that game. The Dominican players were just so excited and proud to have the opportunity to play in their home country and in front of their friends and family.

I was also struck by the sort of camaraderie that existed with the non-Dominican players. They seemed to be equally excited for their teammates. So when this idea was broached, it seemed like a great way for baseball to kind of get the WBC undertaking going in early March.

Unfortunately, a few days after we started talking about this, the tragedy at the Jet Set nightclub took place, and we quickly adjusted our thinking to kind of focus the games around the victims of that tragedy and make it an opportunity for baseball to kind of give back in the community.

So I would say, in summary, two really important initiatives for us. I think playing in the Dominican Republic again is an important step in our ongoing internationalization efforts, and equally important, it's an opportunity for us to give back in the Dominican Republic where we have so many players that have entertained our fans for years. So a very exciting event.

MIKE TEEVAN: Thank you, commissioner. I'm pleased to hand it over to seven-time All-Star, special advisor to MLB's general operations department and the general manager of the Dominican Republic National Team, Nelson Cruz. Nelson, thanks for your leadership on this issue.

NELSON CRUZ: Good evening. I think you're a true



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professional because I'm really pumped. I am so pumped, and I'm happy, man. Like, you don't know how, as a player, that's a dream for every player to be able to go in and play in your country, for your country. That was my dream.

I know I talked to some of the players, and they're really excited as well. So I'm sorry not going to be as professional like you, but I'm really pumped.

You mentioned most of the stuff. I have to thank you first, the president, the Detroit Tigers. My friend Omar, he was the one who brought me the idea. Since the day one, we've been thinking how special it would be to do this.

We were talking about like what happened in 2001, 9/11, and baseball brought back the love for people. That's the idea that we have behind these games, so we can at least give some joy to those people who lost their family in that tragedy on April 8.

Yeah, today has been a few months. Like, I was talking to my mom about it, eight months since the tragedy, and my mom, she sent me a note. She didn't even know we're going to do this for the tragedy. I'm going to wait until tonight to tell the surprise.

But she was really said. Every 8th of every month, she's down as she can get. I know she's going to be pumped, and she's going to be happy for this. And the people who lost a member on that day as well, they're going to be happy.

So let's do this. Thank you again.

MIKE TEEVAN: Thank you, Nelson. We'll go from one MLB great to another, three-time MVP, special assistant to the commissioner, and the manager of team Dominican Republic, the great Albert Pujols.

ALBERT PUJOLS: Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Good afternoon. Just like the commissioner say and Nelson, I'm just really excited.

As a player, like Nelson was saying, we all dream about going to your country, play in front of your fans, the people that really support you. When I find out about this event, I was really excited about it because for two things.

One, being a manager and had the opportunity to lead a ball club next year to hopefully win the World Baseball Classic, which is a lot of responsibility that we have. But the other thing is to have the opportunity to bring that joy back to those people as well that lost a lot of family and friends, teammates that I played with and against, which is

really sad. I think that's what's so good about this game that, when things like this happen, we use this game of sport.

I think the commissioner has done a really, really good job on growing the baseball, growing the sport, not just in Latin America. If you look at it, I've been a part of a couple of trips to Europe. It's about growing the game. For me, I'm just really pumped up, really excited to be part of it.

I thank God, first of all, for this opportunity, and we're just going to have a great time putting a team together. Over the last six months, talking to Nelson probably every day, whether it's on the call, whether it's in a Zoom, or whether it's in a test, to put the best team to represent our country.

I think at the end of the day, the players that are going to take the field on those days are going to be really, really excited, and so are the fans. Really thanks for the president of our country, Luis Abinader as well, for supporting our country, continue to give back to the game of baseball and continue to give back to the sport.

Kelvin is here, Junior Noboa, they know how important this is, not just for us, but for the players. I think that's the most important thing.

Thank you all for being here today. It's going to be a dream come true for all of us. God bless you.

MIKE TEEVAN: Thank you, Albert. Appreciate it.

Many parties worked together to make this happen, and one of them is the commissioner of baseball in the Dominican Republic, Junior Noboa. Junior, thank you for being here.

JUNIOR NOBOA: Thank you very much. I think this is a great day to say thank you. Thank you to MLB. Thank you to Commissioner Manfred. Thank you to two people that they've been working very hard putting together a lot of effort.

Omar, Nelson, thank you very much for all the effort to put this together, for giving our people the opportunity to see our national team and the Dominican Republic facing a Major League team but part of our WBC.

In the name of the people, the fans of the Dominican Republic and the name of our president, thank you very much for all the effort and to put this series together so we can give them the opportunity and the chance to, our fans, to see their national team in the Dominican Republic. Thank you.



MIKE TEEVAN: I'll hand it off to the minister of sport in the Dominican Republic, the honorable Kelvin Cruz.

KELVIN CRUZ: (Speaking Spanish).

MIKE TEEVAN: Kelvin, thank you so much for your support. We really appreciate it. Participating in this series will be the Detroit Tigers, who are led by president of baseball operations, Scott Harris. Scott?

SCOTT HARRIS: Thank you. Thank you, Major League Baseball and Commissioner Manfred and everybody on this stage for the opportunity. When we first heard about this opportunity, it was an instant yes for us, the opportunity to go to the Dominican, play on Dominican soil, and support a great cause all at the same time was a no-brainer for us.

So we're really excited about the opportunity. We really thank everybody involved for inviting us and allowing us to participate. It sounds like we got our work cut out for us because you've got a really talented team over there. So we've got to start preparing right now.

Q. The stadium improvements you mentioned, what are some of those, and what would be needed to be done to play regular season games in the Dominican Republic?

ROB MANFRED: The renovations are actually pretty minor. It's upgrading of the field surface, things like that, just to make sure that the playing surface, in particular, is up to speed for a Major League game.

I think the limiting factor on regular season games is just the size of the facility. You know how the economics of those games work. We replace the gate that the home team's given up, and it's just very hard in a stadium of this size that we're talking about to do a regular season game.

Q. How did the Tigers' involvement come about with this, and what made them a good candidate to make this trip?

ROB MANFRED: Yeah, I think that we started from the proposition that, given the time of year, it was best to have a team in Florida. We thought given the way the Tigers had played the last couple of years, that they would be a formidable opponent and a great exhibition warmup for what's going to be a really, really good Dominican National Team.

Q. Scott, the main reasons you're doing this are obvious, to support that. You guys have also been the benefit of some great Dominican talent. And I believe

you have an academy still. What are some of the residual benefits you'll get as an organization from this exhibition?

SCOTT HARRIS: The Dominican Republic has a rich history of baseball talent. My job, I'm trying to find talent wherever we can, and the opportunity to play in front of Dominican fans, I understand we're not going to be the most popular team on the field that's playing, but the opportunity to showcase our talent on Dominican soil in front of Dominican fans, I think, raises the overall brand and profile of the Detroit Tigers and hopefully will help persuade some young Dominican players who will eventually be playing for Nelson and Albert someday to want to be Tigers in the future.

It's part of the reason why we're doing it, but the primary reason is to support Major League Baseball and to support a really important cause.

Q. (In Spanish.)

ALBERT PUJOLS: His question, he was asking how difficult it was to convince the commissioner about this game. So I'll be the translator for that.

It wasn't difficult. I think the commissioner has been working for him over the last couple of years. I seen how much he wants to grow the game and make an impact in this game, not just here in the United States, Latin America. Like I say before, Europe with the couple of series that I've been a part or.

I think it's about growing the game of baseball, and he knew how important that was to us, to Nelson and I. And when we came up with that idea -- I didn't find out until he brought it up to me. He's like, hey, Nelson and I, we're talking about probably playing a couple of exhibition games.

And I was like, wow, this is really exciting. I got really excited about it because, like I said earlier, this is an opportunity now. Being myself as a manager, I only got to play winter league for one month. I got to be a manager last year.

To have an opportunity now to lead the national team in the World Baseball Classic and playing in your own country, it's a dream come true for me.

So it wasn't that difficult, because when you're talking about our commissioner Rob Manfred, it's about growing the game of baseball. Anything that he can do to make the game better -- not just here, in Latin America as well -- he's going to do, and that's what he has been doing since he

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took that position.

NELSON CRUZ: It was funny because how do you ask about two exhibition games? I was like, Manfred, can we play two exhibition games in the Dominican?

He's like, yeah, great idea. Let's do it. So it was really easy. It was really easy.

Like Albert said, anything that goes to grow the game, he's always aboard. Thank you again, Rob. We owe you one. I know the Dominican is excited today. Once the players find out, they're all excited, and they all want to be a part of it.

That's another, I guess, motivation for the players to be participating in the WBC as well.

ROB MANFRED: I've been very fortunate to have a number of former players involved with us on an ongoing basis. The number of great ideas that have come out of that group, you can't count on one hand or two hands, particularly when it comes to the Dominican. If Nelson Cruz comes to you and says you've got a good idea, you ought to pay attention to it. So this was an easy one.

Q. (In Spanish.)

ALBERT PUJOLS: He asked me about, as you guys know, I was trying to get a job as a manager in the Big Leagues, and he's asking how difficult that was or if that would make it difficult, obviously, to make that decision.

Yes, it would make it difficult. But I think one thing that never left my mind, it was my focus. Talking to Nelson, like I say, every week by text, by phone call, by Zoom just to let him know, hey, listen, there's a couple of teams that want to interview me for a job.

But my main focus was always, as soon as I close this door with Escogido, it was focusing on the World Baseball Classic, focusing on the roster of the Dominican Republic, the talent we have, which is going to be really difficult.

It can be a headache and you have a blessing on that side. And it can be a headache also because you have so much talent. You wish that you can make everybody happy, but at the end of the day, you have only 30 guys you can carry on your roster. As you know, we are blessed, the Dominican Republic has been blessed with so many talent.

So that has been my set of mind, really focusing on the roster, talking to Nelson, putting things together. And if the opportunity was given to me this year to be a manager, I think Nelson would have been the first person to find out

before anybody so he can have a good candidate, which we have a lot of good candidates as well that could take that spot.

I'm blessed that that's not the case. I didn't have to make that tough decision. And my main focus is, like I say, trying to put the best team -- we are trying to put the best team together to win next year.

I think our players know that. They know that responsibility that we have. Our country knows the responsibility that we have, and our players and myself. I'm pretty excited about it, and I'm up for the challenge.

Q. I'll do this just for Nelson and for Albert. Obviously it's important to go back to your home and play in front of your fans. Nelson, you did it about five years ago, I think. And Albert, you did it with Escogido, and you won a championship. To make it for a good cause, how much better does it make it for both of you guys?

ALBERT PUJOLS: Yeah, I think we've all been blessed on this earth, and at the end of the day, I always get challenged. A couple of friends of mine always tell me that there's more than baseball. And this is an opportunity to continue to give back to your country, continue to give back to baseball. This is for a great cause.

It's going to be really emotional because at the same time it's really fresh what just happened in our country. It's probably the biggest tragedy that we have in our country. We lost so many people. I lost, like, a brother. Octavio Dotel was like a brother to me. We won a championship together. I'm really getting emotional right now even to think about it because I remember where I was when they made that call and they told me, and I was trying to reach out to him. But not just him, just everybody in our country.

When you have a family or a friend that you lost that day, our country really, really was living in some dark space around those months. Nelson just lost his sister, who he built a great relationship. So it's going to be really, really emotional. Yes, we're giving back, but it's going to be two games that are going to be as much for the families.

For us, we are blessed to be part of it. Once again, thanks to the commissioner for just saying yes to this because we know how important this is going to be for our country and our nation.

NELSON CRUZ: Yeah, any time you have the opportunity to give back to our country, we do it. As a Dominican, we love, and we're proud of where we come from. So to be able to put this together, it means a lot for a lot of people.



I know Albert has a foundation. I have my foundation. And we give back.

But this is historical, like, for our country. You see the commissioner of baseball, the commissioner of sport, minister of sport, they're here. The president is all in. And the government, everybody's in -- the federation, Juan, all the press is here.

Whoever knows about our country knows how important baseball is to us. Those two games, they're going to be special. And do it for a great cause, even more special.

MIKE TEEVAN: We look forward to a powerful way to benefit the Dominican Red Cross in March. And best of luck in the WBC. Thank you so much.

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