In the film, The Road to the Major Leagues, David Ortiz tells the story of how he would use plastic caps from large bottles of drinking water as baseballs. His sisters hid their dolls because David would decapitate them, remove their hair and send them over the right field fence of makeshift baseball diamonds. This is the dream—the rags to riches story of the player who started with nothing in the stark poverty of the Dominican countryside and goes on to achieve great wealth and fame. A small Dominican boy in that same film tells the filmmaker, “David Ortiz, he is just like me. He is a lefty like me, and he comes from my country. Someday I will be in the big leagues like him with God’s help.”

It looked as if that dream might come true for Yewri Guillén. The baseball men started coming around when he was 15 years old. In 2009, he signed a $30,000 contract with the Washington Nationals. He continued to train at the Nationals Dominican Training Camp in Boca Chica. When the team authorized his contract in 2011, he was told he would be playing with their rookie league team in Florida.

But Yewri started to get headaches. When he missed a game because the pain got bad, the trainers yelled at him. You don’t miss a game because of a headache. But the headaches got worse and he got a fever. He barely made it to the health center at the camp. They called his family to come get him and take him to a private hospital. But he didn’t have health insurance and because the contract hadn’t been finalized his family could not pay for the treatment, so they had to take him to a public clinic. The doctors diagnosed Yewri with bacterial meningitis. He had surgery, but it was too late. He died the next day.

Most people have had vaccinations against this disease. A simple vaccination could have saved Yewri’s life, but the team did not vaccinate the players. There wasn’t a certified athletic trainer or a doctor to examine Yewri at the training camp. If he had been treated earlier, he would not have died.
There are many other problems with Major League Baseball in the Dominican Republic. American baseball players have to finish high school to be able to play on a major league team, but Dominican players can be as young as 16. David Ortiz says, “When I signed at 16, I didn’t know what I was doing.” All minor league teams in the US have to have a certified trainer and medical facilities, but that is not true in the Dominican Republic. Of the hundreds of players in the camps in the Dominican Republic, less than half will leave the island to play in the minor leagues, and only 3 of every hundred will ever play in the major leagues. Conditions at the training camps are sometimes unsanitary and safety rules are not enforced, making them dangerous, and no education is provided for the players. Those who come to the US often have very little schooling and do not speak English. If their baseball career does not work out, they have nothing to fall back on.

Signing bonuses are much lower for Dominican players. David Ortiz signed for $25,000 in 1992 when he was 16 years old. A comparable American player, Lance Berkman, signed in 1997 at age 21 for one million dollars—40 times as much. Manager Steve Phillips of the Mets was quoted in the Chicago Tribune as saying you can sign 30-45 players in “the Dominican” for what it costs to sign one second round draft pick in the US. Because Dominican players can be signed so much more cheaply, today more than 10% of MLB players are from the Dominican Republic and Dominicans comprise 30% of all players in the minor leagues. Major League Baseball admits 90-95% of the players it drafts for the minor leagues never make it to the major leagues, so most players end up being sent back to the island.

Many Dominicans dream of becoming major league baseball players. But only a very few actually realize that dream. For many, the cost of that dream is very high. For Yewri Guillén, it cost him his life.

“These star American and Dominican players have a lot in common—except the age they signed and the bonuses they got.”

**Mark McGwire vs Sammy Sosa**

- **McGwire’s Bonus:** $145,000
- **Sosa’s Bonus:** $3,500

- **Age: 20 (1984)**
- **Age: 16 (1985)**

McGwire’s and Sosa’s pursuit of the single-season home run record in 1998 brought baseball a whole new generation of fans.

**Mike Mussina vs Pedro Martínez**

- **Mussina’s Bonus:** $225,000
- **Martinez’s Bonus:** $6,500

- **Age: 21 (1991)**
- **Age: 16 (1988)**

Two dominating pitchers, Mussina and Martínez were selected for a combined 13 All-Star Games and faced off in the playoffs in 2003 and 2004.

**Byron Buxton vs. Amed Rosario**

- **Buxton’s Bonus:** $6 million
- **Martinez’s Bonus:** $1.5 million

- **Age: 18 (2012)**
- **Age: 16 (2012)**

Buxton, a teen outfielder from Georgia, was the highest-paid 2012 draft pick; Rosario, a shortstop, got the largest bonus of any Dominican last year.

“There isn’t anyone who speaks for the players, who are giving up their childhood in search of a dream that few realize.”

- **Arturo Marcano, Author**
In the upcoming issue of Mother Jones, the magazine will publish a story titled “Inside Major League Baseball’s Dominican Sweatshop System” about issues surrounding Dominican baseball academies run by major league teams, highlighting the talent scouting industry and health care system for players. One of the cases referenced in the story is that of Yewri Guillen, the Nationals’ 18-year old budding prospect who fell sick while at the team’s Dominican academy in early April 2011 and later died of an aggressive sinus infection that was misdiagnosed.

The main points of the story echo what was originally reported in the Post in April 2011. The Post report detailed when Guillen got sick; how his contract had not yet been approved by Major League Baseball and thus precluded him from using its health insurance at the first clinic his family took him to; and the changes in medical protocol sparked at academies by his death.

After the Post story was published, Major League Baseball released a statement saying the Nationals took the proper medical procedures concerning Guillen and needed steps to prevent the spread of meningitis among other players. The Post reported that doctors in the Dominican, not Nationals officials, originally ruled that Guillen died of bacterial meningitis. The Nationals paid for Guillen’s medical bills in the Santo Domingo clinic where he was treated and covered his funeral and burial expenses.

According to the Mother Jones story, there were no board-certified athletic trainers or doctors at hand in the Nationals’ academy to treat him. They found that 21 of 30 major league teams, including the Nationals, don’t employ certified trainers at the Dominican academies. The story will also state that the Nationals didn’t pay Guillen’s signing bonus or insurance money until his family signed a release waiving their right to sue the team.

Perdomo said she and her husband, however, aren’t interested in pursuing the issue. They understand that they signed away their right to sue and wanted to move on. “I left it all in the hands of God,” she said.

“TWO YEARS LATER, NEW REPORT ON NATIONAL’S PROSPECT YURWEI GUILLEN’S DEATH

By James Wagner , Updated: March 3, 2013

Guillen’s mother, Sandra Perdomo, told the Post in telephone interview from the Dominican Republic on Sunday that she did indeed sign paperwork that promised the family wouldn’t sue the Nationals. She said she was presented papers after Guillen’s death by Fausto Severino, the coordinator of the Nationals’ Dominican academy, and asked to sign them.

According to Perdomo, she was told that she needed to sign them in order to receive her son’s $30,000 signing bonus. She didn’t read the paperwork, assuming that’s all the documents were for. She and her husband checked the paperwork three days later and discovered that they contained a clause that promised they wouldn’t sue the Nationals, she said.

“I could have investigated it,” said Perdomo, who didn’t sound remorseful when talking Sunday. “But I wanted to leave it like that. Why continue with it? That’s what I told my husband. Nothing that we do would have brought him back.”

A Nationals spokesman chose not to comment Sunday.

Perdomo said her family is doing well and at peace but, to her, the loss of her son still lingers. MLB had not officially approved his contract, which meant his health insurance policy, standard in every player’s contract, had not yet kicked in. (There had been a misunderstanding about Guillen’s middle name when the Nationals tried to sign him in 2010 and that sparked another investigation when he agreed to terms in Feb. 2011.)

Guillen was sent home to Nigua, about 90 minutes west of the academy, after he felt a headache and fever, symptoms thought to be the flu. Perdomo acknowledged that her son’s contract had not been approved and prevented his health insurance from being used. The family couldn’t afford health care at the first clinic they visited in Santo Domingo. She still wonders why her son was sent home to her sick.

“In reality, I wanted to find out really what happened,” she said. “And I was bothered by it. The team because the kid got sick and they sent him home like that. That headache. That’s what bothered me about it, that they sent him to me like that. And that they didn’t send him to a doctor.”

Perdomo said she and her husband, however, aren’t interested in pursuing the issue. They understand that they signed away their right to sue and wanted to move on. “I left it all in the hands of God,” she said.

“It’s hard because [Guillen’s death is] something that I’ll never recover from,” she added in Spanish. “And I think about it daily. I’m trying to keep going.”