Averell “Ace” Smith, *The Pitcher and the Dictator: Satchel Paige’s Unlikely Season in the Dominican Republic*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. xii + 212 pp. (Cloth US\$26.95)

Baseball fans and historians tout the 1937 Campeonato Nacional Pro-Reelección Presidente Trujillo (National Tournament for the Reelection of President Trujillo) as the best baseball in the American hemisphere. Renowned players from the U.S. Negro Leagues joined the best of Latin America in the Dominican national tournament named in honor of dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. The conflation of national politics and the national pastime in the tournament has intrigued historians and baseball fans despite its riling of fans and Negro-League team owners at the time. Several U.S.-based historians of Latin American and Negro-League baseball have included the 1937 Dominican season in their narratives surrounding the talent and ingenuity of individual players and owners, the precariousness of black businesses, and the transnational exchanges surrounding the shared national pastime. While these writers—including Robert Peterson (*Only the Ball Was White*, 1970), Donn Rogosin (*Invisible Men*, 1983), Neil Lanctot (*Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, 2004), and Adrian Burgos, Jr. (*Playing America’s Game*, 2007)—offer glimpses of the season, baseball fan Averell “Ace” Smith is the first to present a book-length narrative centered on the 1937 tournament with *The Pitcher and the Dictator*. To these earlier studies and Satchel Paige’s autobiography (*Maybe I’ll Pitch Forever*, 1962), Smith adds newspaper accounts of the tournament and its U.S. players as well as work by Dominican baseball chroniclers and early studies of the Trujillo era.

The Pitcher and the Dictator alternates the perspectives of various actors from the tournament, beginning with Paige, Trujillo, and Dr. José Enrique Aybar, the dentist and Trujillo sycophant who worked to ensure that the capital-based Dragones de la Ciudad Trujillo (Trujillo City Dragons) won the championship. The first seven chapters describe Trujillo’s Dominican Republic and provide the backstory for the way the hemisphere’s most famous ballplayer came to play for the team representing one of the region’s most infamous dictators. The tournament unfolds in the next group of chapters as Smith details how team organizers increasingly looked to U.S. players to bolster their chances for Dominican baseball supremacy. Here, Smith’s desire to show U.S. readers the “mighty and heroic struggles of African Americans in the United States” (p. xii) peeks through as Paige’s fear of the omnipresent security forces, whom Aybar charged with ensuring that the U.S. players upheld their curfew and limited their carousing, contrasts with the early excitement over his relatively free movement in the Dominican Republic. On his arrival in the Dominican capital

with the \$30,000 cash Dr. Aybar offered him to jump from the Pittsburgh Crawfords, Paige relished his freedom to “eat, drink, carouse, and sleep anywhere” (p. 1), a contrast to the “whites only” signs he encountered in the U.S. South (p. 63). The book’s final six chapters narrate Dominican political history and more explicitly demonstrate the struggles of Negro-League players through profiles of prominent characters, including Cuban Martin Dihigo, Dominican Tetelo Vargas, and Paige, after the 1937 tournament.

By imagining what historical actors such as Dr. Aybar, Trujillo, Paige, and others were thinking and feeling, Smith effectively communicates the rising stakes of the 1937 tournament as Dominican team organizers crossed borders in search of U.S. reinforcements. He correctly portrays this competition as a process that unfolded throughout the season, which to readers already familiar with the Trujillo era reveals the contingencies behind popular manifestations in support of the dictator.

Smith’s narrative of the tournament reads like historical fiction, though repeated paragraphs and other redundancies sometimes break the spell. Likewise, the chapters centered on individual players and Dominican politics after the tournament lack a narrative thread and drag a bit. Those interested in a more analytical but highly readable narrative of the tournament may find Jonathan Blitzer’s 2015 essay, “Satchel Paige and the Championship for the Reelection of the General” (*The Atavist* no. 57) more compelling. Smith’s narrative offers a meeting point for much of the earlier writing about baseball in the Americas in the 1930s without adding significantly to it.

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