

Winding Road

Ozzie Santana's Trip to FPU via Oklahoma and the Dominican

By Amanda Panaro, Athletic Communication Student Assistant, Franklin Pierce University

Not many baseball teams from New Hampshire celebrate Thanksgiving by traveling to the Dominican Republic. And not many of the players on that team would be returning to their homeland on that trip. One did.

Oswaldo "Ozzie" Santana arrived on the campus of Franklin Pierce University in Rindge, N.H. a 6'2" outfielder with two years of eligibility left. Born and raised in the Dominican, Santana's family moved to Lynn, Mass. when he was only ten years old. Contrary to the path most often taken by high school seniors, when Ozzie graduated Lynn High School at age 17 his journey to Rindge was far from beginning. After a summer that saw him fight through tendonitis in his throwing shoulder, Ozzie headed 45 minutes north to Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, Mass. There he spent his redshirt year concentrating on classes and shoulder rehabilitation. However, his recovery would not be complete without a return to his roots.

Just before his 19th birthday Ozzie returned to the Dominican for a total of two years. His rehab work continued along with an intensified training regimen. The goal: "Try to get signed and play

Class A there for an MLB affiliate team," said Santana. Unfortunately for Ozzie his age was an irreversible roadblock. He explained that at 18, he was considered old in those leagues. In the Dominican, players can be signed as young as 16-and-a-half, as long as they make the "Segundo Julio" (July 2nd) cutoff date. For Santana, talent was not an obstacle. He later learned that he had received offers from multiple teams but, as in any business, coaches strive to make money off their players. For this reason, the deals were hidden from Ozzie.

Because he was seen as an "old man" in his home country, Santana packed up and returned to the United States, this time to explore the culture of the Midwest at Western Oklahoma State Junior College. As a freshman, he posted a .329 average with five home runs over the course of his 32 appearances. The following year, his injury bug returned. Just before the start of the season, Ozzie broke the index finger of his throwing hand. By the time he was able to rehab once again and return healthy enough to play, he got into only 12 games, but hit .375.

Despite the lack of game experience, Ozzie's time in Oklahoma was well spent in his mind. His sophomore season was a disappointment athletically after breaking his finger, but it opened up other avenues outside of being an athlete. "Even though I didn't have a lot



Santana bats against the Baltimore Orioles Dominican affiliate.

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of playing time, I learned to play hard every time I step on the baseball field. I also learned to have pride in anything that I do, whether it's playing baseball or working in a restaurant," Santana said.

It was around this time his path diverged to rural New Hampshire. Santana began his research into Franklin Pierce at the recommendation of his high school coach, who had sent alumnus Fred Cole to the program only a few years prior. After being on campus for only three months, Ozzie packed up with the rest of the Ravens and set out for his native Dominican Republic on November 24, 2010. The team spent only five days and four nights there, but in that time faced competition that challenged them to raise their game to new levels. The opposing teams consisted of MLB-affiliated prospect academies including those associated with the Baltimore Orioles, Minnesota Twins, Kansas City Royals and Boston Red Sox.

The team returned with a 2-3 record, but for Ozzie the greatest satisfaction was performing for his family. Both his brother and aunt attended a game and saw him play for the first time in an actual competition, as opposed to a tryout setting. "I hadn't seen my family for three years before that, so being with them was the best part of my trip," Santana said. He was also able to dedicate a short, but valuable, amount of time to family and friends away from the field, going out to dinner and simply enjoying the company of those closest to him.

Franklin Pierce spent its final day in the Dominican giving back to the local community that hosted the team. On a primarily dirt field that was much different from the Ravens home turf, the team hosted a clinic for nearly 100 young baseball stars of Boca Chica. This day was a highlight of the trip for Santana, who said the experience reminded him of his own childhood growing up in the Dominican. "It was really good to watch the kids asking questions to learn as much as they could about the game. They have a lot of hunger for baseball and that's what makes them so good when they are older," Ozzie said.

Santana wasn't the only Raven impressed by the team's trip to the Dominican Republic. Junior left-handed pitcher Gregg Downing of Queens, N.Y. particularly spent a lot of time interacting with the kids. He explained how seeing



Santana (middle) with two of the team's guides during the trip to the Dominican.



Santana (left) with two of his Western Oklahoma teammates. Photo courtesy of Osvaldo Santana



Santana bats in a game against the Dominican affiliate of the Kansas City Royals.



The Ravens and the Red Sox Dominican academy team pose for a group shot after a game on the final day of the trip.



Santana's Western Oklahoma team. Photo courtesy of Osvaldo Santana

the way they share only one glove, play without shoes, use rocks for balls, and yet still have a smile from ear to ear simply because they are playing, was truly an eye-opening experience. "We were there to help teach them the game but they ended up teaching me a lot more than I could have taught them. Their love and passion for the game of baseball was indescribable," said Downing.

Franklin Pierce Head Coach Jayson King was equally impressed with the impact the Dominican had on his players. He said that for many of them the trip revealed a lifestyle they had never experienced, and most likely never would, in this third-world country. From a baseball standpoint, the Dominican as a nation places more players per capita in Major League Baseball than any other country. "They are at another level than the United States, which was good for us all to experience," said King. He anticipates returning sometime in the future, however the earliest this

would be possible is 2014, due to NCAA ruling that allots teams only one international trip every four years.

When the Ravens returned to campus, it was business as usual. After preseason polls ranked them among the top 10 teams in the nation, Franklin Pierce looks to defend the East Regional title it claimed last May, which marked the fifth in program history. Personally for Santana, the current focus is all about getting back to 100 percent healthy to help the Ravens in any way possible.

In the two years Ozzie played at Western Oklahoma he watched his team compete in the World Series, but fall in the final game. He said going to the championship was an unbelievable experience, and one he will undoubtedly look to repeat during his time at Franklin Pierce.