

IMMIGRANT BATTLE STAYS OFF THE FIELD

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Body

Omar Minaya said he would have given any player the day off, if somebody stepped forward and asked. But nobody asked. On this Day Without Immigrants (Un Dia Sin Inmigrantes), when Hispanic farm workers and landscapers, among others, across the nation skipped work, all 14 foreign-born Mets on a 25-man roster showed up at Shea to play last night against the Washington Nationals.

"I try to accommodate my players," Minaya said before the Mets won, 2-1, on a throwing error by reliever Gary Majewski in the ninth. "This is part of everybody's life, and it's developing more all the time. Did you see the crowds, the demonstrators? I have never seen anything like it. But I don't think anybody asked the players not to work, and I think there was more pressure on the Cubans."

Minaya was talking about April 2000, when Rey Ordoñez of the Mets and Orlando Hernandez of the Yanks were among the players who boycotted games to protest Elian Gonzalez's return to Cuba. That issue hit the anti-Castro Cubans square in the gut. "It was more concentrated," Minaya said.

This time around, the debate is complex and there is more of a disconnect between the major league millionaires and grassroots political organizers.

The call for a work stoppage was somewhat fractured, ambiguous. The Met players aren't immigrants, they are special-skill visitors. And the pending legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives that would criminalize illegals has little effect on the world of these ballplayers, who are welcomed and worshipped in their communities.

The same fans who might object to a collection of Mexican day laborers on Long Island have little problem cheering like crazy for Pedro Martinez or Carlos Beltran.

There are foreigners, and then there are foreigners.

"It's a tough cookie," said Martinez, from Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. "We certainly talk about it. We're in such a different position. We don't fit. We're more comfortable than 90% of citizens here. I'm a role model. I'm admired by blacks, whites, everyone. We have the best jobs ever. So we're not the right people to protest or say anything. But we feel for these people. We were there where they are, and we know what they went through."

Martinez is a thoughtful guy, in addition to being an unparalleled pitcher. It would have been quite the statement by him to ask to leave the ballpark, even if it meant being docked a day's pay.

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But that is not the way of the modern ballplayer, whether he is homegrown or imported. There is always the fear of a backlash, of taking a stand. "It's not my position to have an opinion," Martinez said. To be fair, these players are not U.S. citizens and it is more than a little intimidating to meddle in the politics of another nation. They are accidental tourists here, and rich ones at that. A comment might appear presumptuous.

Carlos Delgado, from Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, learned all about such a backlash with the "God Bless America" nonsense, and now he is a bit gunshy. Despite the reputation that Delgado brought with him to Shea as an outspoken, political maverick, he has curbed such inclinations.

"I know what's going on from what's on the news," Delgado said. "But it's a very sensitive issue."

The Mets have become famous for their international flavor, for the Latin beat in their clubhouse. There are four Puerto Ricans, six Dominicans and a Japanese second baseman on the current roster.

They were all manning their positions last night, playing before a relatively small crowd at Shea that has yet to catch pennant fever. Victor Zambrano from Los Teques, Venezuela, started and got into a pitching duel with Ramon Ortiz from Cotui, Dominican Republic.

A big play happened in the fifth, when Jose Reyes from Santiago, Dominican Republic, lined a ball into left misplayed by Alfonso Soriano from San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic. Reyes was caught in a rundown stretching, and then Ortiz survived the jam when Carlos Beltran from Manati, Puerto Rico, flied out to center.

Delgado tied the game with a solo shot in the sixth. Pedro Feliciano from Dorado, Puerto Rico, and Duaner Sanchez from Cotui did a fine job in relief.

Back in March, we learned a lot about the origins of these players during the World Baseball Classic. On a day like yesterday, we needed to be reminded again.

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