

PIEDRA BLANCA, Dominican Republic—The rain came down hard as Nelson Jimenez CQ packed up his softball gear last month, his Paterson team having just finished a series of games in the Dominican Republic.

Little did Jimenez know that he barely escaped Hurricane Noel. Not so fortunate was the softball stadium in the town of Piedra Blanca, a beloved complex Jimenez stood near just days before.

Once boasting manicured lawns and tournaments attracting teams from Paterson, the hurricane reduced the stadium to a featureless mud patch. The storm crushed the stands, ripped the grass from its roots, and scattered dead palm trees onto the turf.

For a country of baseball fanatics, losing the stadium has left local children with few diversions and sent municipal teams traveling miles away to practice. Paterson players have also grieved alongside their fellow batters. Many played on the Piedra Blanca field through ongoing cross-Atlantic trips for softball.

"It was the best place to play baseball," said Jimenez, a 41-year-old manager of two softball leagues in Paterson, while in the Dominican Republic on Friday. "They maintained it well. But there's no more field."

Built about two decades ago next to the *Rio Maimon*, the stadium featured baseball and softball fields, two sets of bleachers and combed sand. The complex was open to anyone in Piedra Blanca, a town of 23,500 people located an hour north of the country's capital. On Sundays, the municipality's eight adult leagues played games that attracted dozens of fans.

"It was the nicest field in the whole municipality," said Roberto Liranzo CQ, a local professor and president of *Fuentes del Deportivo*, Piedra Blanca's sports association. Most public fields don't receive much care, but Piedra Blanca's complex benefited from extra help. Liranzo, an energetic 55-year-old with family living in Paterson, solicited funds from an area mining company to pay for renovations and maintenance. Local players paid annual dues and volunteered to help with upkeep.

Liga Dr. Almanzar, an adult softball league in Paterson, also cared for the stadium. Started in 1995 by a Dominican immigrant living in Paterson, the league's eight teams play weekend games from May to September. In October, the dues contributed by each player sponsor a free trip back to the Dominican Republic for championship teams. Here, players keep pitching.

"It's like a family reunion," said Nicolas Payano CQ, a 44-year-old pharmacist, standing next to Jimenez, the Paterson player. The two grew up playing softball together in the Dominican city of Bonao CQ, and continue to bat together during the October visits. For Piedra Blanca and surrounding towns, the arrival of the championship teams brought out crowds. Some Dominican fans followed the teams as they bounce between municipalities. Local players also looked forward to the bats, gloves and uniforms that the American teams donated upon leaving. Most Dominicans can't drop one month's salary on a \$100 baseball glove.

"We have no uniforms. We share each other's gloves," said Jose Fernandez CQ, a mechanic from Piedra Blanca and captain of the town's *Los Astros* team.

Since the hurricane, the Piedra Blanca league also must solicit use of fields in other towns. The teams now travel miles away for practice.

"We are like birds flying everywhere," said Fernandez, of *Los Astros*. "Our field was beautiful, but the river took it all."

The municipal government doesn't intend to reconstruct the stadium. Every penny of the its \$21 million budget is going to resettle displaced residents, according to Dr. Carmen Garcia CQ, Piedra Blanca's mayor. Plus, the stadium area is flood-prone, she said. But Liranzo, the league president, remains determined to bring it back. Engineers have started drawing up plans, and could start work as early as next month. The estimated cost of \$150,000 is steep, but local companies have an expressed an interest in helping, Liranzo said.

In a county where baseball games play in the smallest corner bodega and Yankees-themed license plates hang from cars, Piedra Blanca residents sorely miss the stadium. North Jersey players understand that devotion.

"The three most important things for me are my wife, my family and softball," said Jimenez, strolling through a field in Bona0. "For me, it's just part of my life."