

HERALD NEWS

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I HREE STRIKES | SAINTS OF THE STORM

Stadium's destruction deals a crushing blow



HEATHER HADDON/Herald News

Antony Roque, 5, and Alfredo Valga Las Caceres, 9, walk through the former Piedra Blanca stadium in the storm-ravaged Dominican Republic. The crushed bleachers and barren pitcher's mound appear in the distance.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Dominicans living in New Jersey have mounted an impressive effort to raise money and donations for the thousands displaced by Hurricane Noel, for whom makeshift shelters and desperation are daily realities. Herald News reporter Heather Haddon is reporting from the Dominican Republic on the damage from the storm and relief from North Jersey.

ON THE WEB

Log on to northjersey.com/dr to follow our ongoing coverage from the Dominican Republic including stories and photos.

By HEATHER HADDON
Herald News

PIEDRA BLANCA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC --

The stadium here, with its manicured outfield and roofed bleachers, was the pride of this rural province.

Dominican baseball greats such as Juan Marichal and Pedro Martinez visited, as did Paterson expatriates who returned out of love for the game and a devotion to their hometown.

But overnight, the stadium vanished, swept away by Hurricane Noel. Now, the eight local teams must hunt for practice space in surrounding towns.

"We are like birds flying everywhere," said Jose Fernandez, a mechanic from Piedra Blanca and captain of the town's Los Astros team. "Our field was beautiful, but the river took it all."

Paterson residents with Dominican roots also mourn the loss of a stadium that was a symbol of their cross-Caribbean exchange.

Now, some of them hope to help resurrect it.

"After getting food and clothes to people, we need to focus on the stadium," said Miguel Diaz, a Paterson resident originally from Piedra Blanca.

Last month, flooding from Hurricane Noel reduced the stadium to a featureless mud patch.

The storm stripped away every inch of turf and crushed the two viewing stands. On Saturday, only dirt, dead palm trees and rubble remained. Some had started dumping garbage there.

Local children continue to play on the dirt surface. Boys run haphazardly in their bare feet around the baseless field, sliding into troughs of mud.

Built about two decades ago next to the Rio Maimon, the complex was open to everyone in Piedra Blanca, a town of 23,500 people an hour north of the country's capital. The stadium featured separate baseball and

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Fields: Paterson barnstormers hope to help restore stadium

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softball fields, combed dirt and two sets of bleachers seating hundreds of fans. A volleyball court was under construction next to it.

"It was the best place to play baseball," said Nelson Jimenez, a 41-year-old manager of two adult softball teams in Paterson, while in the Dominican Republic on Friday. "They maintained it well."

Roberto Liranzo, president of Piedra Blanca's sports association, solicited funds from an area mining company to pay for renovations and maintenance. Local players paid annual dues and volunteered to help with upkeep.

An adult softball league in Paterson, the Liga Dr. Almanzar, also brought baseball greats and North Jersey players to the stadium. The league, started in 1995 by Dominican immigrants, hosts six teams of 120 players. Each player pays \$100 in annual dues. Every fall, that money sends the team that wins the championship on a barnstorming tour of the Dominican Republic.

For five days, players travel across the country playing eight games in four towns. In Piedra Blanca and surrounding towns, hundreds of fans came out to cheer Paterson's players.

"It's like a family reunion," said Nicolas Payano, a 44-year-old pharmacist in a nearby city, who came out to watch friends such as Jimenez, the Paterson team manager.

When the visiting teams left to return to North Jersey, they'd leave behind bats, gloves, uniforms and catcher's equipment for their countrymen. 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 Fernandez, of Los Astros.

Since the hurricane, the Piedra Blanca league must use the fields in other towns. The municipal government doesn't intend to rebuild the stadium. Every penny of its \$21 million budget is going to resettle displaced residents, according to Dr. Carmen Garcia,

Hometown heroes

For years, the Piedra Blanca stadium hosted exhibition softball games that attracted players from Paterson and across the Dominican Republic. Overnight, Hurricane Noel destroyed it. Now, Piedra Blanca and Paterson leaders hope to rebuild.



WENDI SEBASTIAN/Herald News

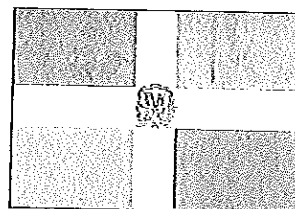
HOW TO HELP

Local Dominicans are continuing to send money and containers full of goods to the thousands affected by Hurricane Noel.

Miguel Diaz, of Paterson, has started collecting funds to rebuild the Piedra Blanca stadium. For more information, call him at **201-247-8793**.

A statewide disaster relief association is collecting donations of money and goods before bringing them to the island Thursday. For more information, call Elsa Mantilla at **973-955-4678** or **973-345-2326**.

Ocosfos Unidos, a Paterson-based civic association, is filling a container bound for the hard-hit province of San José de Ocoa. Items sought include clothes, bedding, canned food and medical equipment. For more information, call Milagros Rivera at **973-851-3685**.



Piedra Blanca's mayor.

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.

He estimates construction will cost \$150,000, but local companies have expressed an interest in helping. Diaz, the Paterson resident, also intends to collect money to help.

In a county where dozens huddle in even the smallest corner

bodegas to watch televised baseball games, 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 baseball field in nearby Bonao. "For me, it's just part of my life."

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