

Jose Rafael “Pantalones” Santiago (JS)

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interviewer Franklin R. Otto, Puerto Rico (translated)

We're here in Puerto Rico talking with former big league player Jose Santiago. In a few words, can you tell me when and where you were born and how did you get interested in baseball.

JS- Well, I was born in the town of Juanarias, August 15, 1938. From the early age of eight I was interested in baseball. It was part of my life. In my town there was what was known as the Police Athletic League where Sergeant Lopez, whom I'll always remember with great fondness, directed the Police Athletic League program. I became part of that team. I played that category for eight or nine years. There were several teams. Eight and nine. Ten and eleven. Twelve thirteen. Fourteen fifteen, until age sixteen when you reached the superior category.

So you played in different levels in the Police League and also the Superior League in Puerto Rico?

JS- No. I played there until sixteen years old. I was never able to play amateur Double A baseball. From the Police Athletic League I went to Class A and from that league I signed professionally at only seventeen.

Who signed you?

JS- Alex Pompey signed me. He was a Cuban who worked in the San Francisco organization for many years. He had an assistant in Puerto Rico by the name of Ted Marburg, who also played professional baseball. The two of them came to my house and signed me after a tryout in Juanarias.

For how much?

JS- I think for the small amount of \$4000. Four thousand dollars in those days was an envied amount, but for the most important thing for me was getting a chance to play in the United States and they gave me a good contract for Class D ball.

Did you have the support of your parents?

JS- No, unfortunately I did not have the support of my father because he always wanted me to get a career first and afterwards to play professional ball. I went to Catholic University in Ponce. I studied for two years, but I left to sign the contract. Frank, the funny thing about this is when I got very excited and introduced my father to the two individuals who wanted to sign me, he said "I'm the one who's going to sign you." He was mad because I had abandoned the family business.

What was your major at Catholic University?

JS- I had a baccalaureate in art. I had a lot of talent and wanted to be an actor. But, in those times people thought you were strange if you recited and had a good voice as if you were a bit effeminate. So I decided to study for two years and then to go play professional baseball because I believe I had the talent to reach the big leagues.

I know you began as an outfielder. When did you make the transition to pitcher and who helped you make that transition?

JS- Well, all my life I had played centerfield. My dear father knew I had a powerful arm and that I was not particularly a fast runner. He said, "Why are going to play outfield if you can't run well? I'll make you into a sure-bet pitcher with that arm of yours." It wasn't an easy transition. I had a good, straight fastball but I didn't know the mechanics of a curve or slider. I then come into contact with Mr. Sefajino Conda Efaría, who was another person who helped me a great deal. He was from my town. He played professional ball although he never reached the big leagues because in his time it was difficult for a colored person to reach the big leagues. He taught me all the fundamentals of pitching. So, I owe a debt of gratitude to him and to my father.

When did you begin to play winter ball in Puerto Rico?

JS- I began with the Ponce Lions. A strange thing happened during that transaction with Ponce. Martiniano Garcia was the owner. He was a person who everybody loved and who obtained a great number of championships with Ponce's manager George Scales. He had a righthander named Posegiermo Pontalones Santiago, who was colored, and he had an exceptional lefthander who pitched for the Yankees named Luis De Arroyo. So he said he had gotten a lefthander and a righthander pitcher as good as these two, but it was backwards. The righthander was white and the lefthander was black. That year he had signed Ramon Hernandez who played with Pittsburgh, and me. So then he said I've gotten two Santiagos, one "pants" and the other "stick."

You didn't play exclusively with the Ponce Lions. You also played with Caguas.

JS- I played two years with Ponce and then they traded me to Caguas in 1959. Victor Peyote was the manager, another great star from Puerto Rico. For me, the best first baseman in the big leagues. I spent a year with Caguas and Victor game me a great opportunity there where I made part of my reputation. Then I went to San Juan in a transaction still remembered in Puerto Rico where Roberto Clemente, Marcial Allen, and I went to the San Juan Senators for Emilio Cortez and \$30,000. Thirty thousand in those days was like a hundred thousand today. In those years, many North American players came and played in Puerto Rico.

What did you think they learned about the Puerto Rican society?

JS- Well, the Americans learned a lot in those years. We did with them what we wanted them to learn about us. Let me explain. The Americans came here and lived in the houses in which we lived.

You mean, more integrated into the society?

JS- Yes, already integrated into the society. They went to the places we went to. They ate in the places we ate. It gave fans a chance, even if they didn't know English, for the Americans to learn our language. If they didn't know English by using signals or whatever, the Americans learned to speak Spanish in two or three years and be able to communicate with the Puerto Rican. Furthermore, there were business centers where they would get gifts and sign autographs. In that way the fan would learn about the imported player. Besides that, in those years, the imported player came here for three, four, or five years. You began to know them and expected to see Thurman, Willard Brown, or Wilmer Fields and all those grand players that came to Puerto Rico. In that way, the Puerto Rican was able to integrate and to know both races and all its aspects and material. But unfortunately all that has been lost because today they live in hotels far away and

they can't share with the Puerto Rican. We have lost that manner whereby both races bind and learn each other's language and way of thinking.

What did you feel you learned from the Americans in terms of culture and in terms of baseball skills?

JS- Well, I learned many things. But the one that I remember most and which has been most important in my life was being punctual. I learned to arrive on time. I learned to leave for an appointment an hour or two ahead of time in case of delays. What I learned from the American culture was to be on time. I also learned the language. I would talk with the American; learning the rapport of American baseball, which was different than the baseball played here. The knowledge and the fundamentals of the game. I learned the wonderful companionship that existed between us and the first Americans who came here. I learned countless things such as how to dress, how to express oneself, the camaraderie. So there were many things I learned from the Americans and which I value. Even today I come across great friends at the ballparks, such as Deacon Jones. He was one of the great colored players from the United States who came to Puerto Rico. A horrendous arm, he didn't even know how to throw. An exceptional batter. He learned Spanish here and could speak it like we are doing right now. A perfect Spanish. And he tells me that he learned all this in Puerto Rico. I feel like a Puerto Rican with all that I have learned here. And that gives me great pride to know that individuals who shared experiences with us feel so Puerto Rican themselves. Frank, you were born here of American parents and lived here for 20+ years and know the culture and are almost as Puerto Rican as all of us. Unfortunately, that rapport and mutual fraternity does not exist anymore between us and the Americans.

I think the fans in the United States would be interested in your impressions and recollections of Clemente and Peyote in those days.

JS- Well, they were my idols. Clemente and I played with San Juan and Clemente was my manager. Unfortunately, Clemente couldn't do all he wanted to do. Before the fatal accident, we talked quite a bit. During that time he stayed home quite a bit with his family. I told him, "Why are going over there to Nicaragua? I know you want to help those families and all those people." And he said, "The products that we are sending are not getting to them." Well, what will be will be. He taught me that baseball was played when you wanted to play it. What you were paid to play was not that important. It was to give the fans the best that you could give. To go to the ballpark and give three hours of hard work to the fans. When you left, you said, "I leave with my head high because I did the best that I could. If it wasn't enough, I'm sorry." That's a good philosophy. It's a good philosophy that I learned from him and from other players like Victor Peyote.

Describe how you made the transition between playing in Puerto Rico and the minor leagues in the United States. Was it easy or difficult?

JS- Well, the big problem with all of this was that I made myself, my reputation here. Here I took my first steps. I have to greatly thank the baseball of the United States because I also began over there. So then how do you say no to those that saw my birth? To those who guided my first steps? It was problematic. It was tiring. Having to pitch 200+ innings in the United States and then come over here and pitch 100+ more. Well, I always did it. All of us knew that we had to give our best to Puerto Rico. It didn't matter whether your arm was tired. If you did not play winter ball in Puerto Rico I thought that I was cheating my people. And that is why all of us, Terin, Ruben,

Clemente, and I played both in the United States and here because we owed that to the Puerto Rican people.

Did the managers of the clubs you were playing for in the United States advise you to take it easy?

JS- Well, they always said to me that since you've pitched so many innings here in the United States, why don't you try to pitch only once a week down there? We tried to do just that but it was difficult. There were times when you got tired but it never bothered me to play in Puerto Rico. I can't blame playing in Puerto Rico on why I hurt my arm. I always took at least three or four weeks off before the beginning of the season to prepare myself. The only thing I couldn't do here in Puerto Rico was to pitch half-heartedly. I never could do it. If they were paying me I gave the best of my ability. That was the problem I had in Puerto Rico. I pitched 100% in the United States and the same way I pitched in Puerto Rico, also 100%.

When you got to the minor leagues in Texas, what was the greatest adjustment for you to make? Were there good relationships between the American and Latin ballplayers?

JS- Well, in those times there were good relations. The most serious problems that I had were my children and my wife. I was raised by my parents as a family man. Having to leave behind my family to go and play baseball elsewhere was the greatest adjustment I had to make. I almost gave up baseball one year in order to be with my family. I still maintain that mentality of taking my family wherever I go. If I go somewhere in Puerto Rico, my wife and family have to come with me. I don't know. Maybe I was born in an era where I did not belong. It's very difficult for us as Puerto Ricans to be united as family in the same manner suitable to us.

From the minor leagues, was there a manager or player who helped your development?

JS- Well, I think the man who helped me the most in my development was Dick Williams. When I was in Boston he helped me the most. But in the minor leagues, Haywood Sullivan was one of the people who helped me the most. Haywood Sullivan was manager at Boston and was my manager in the minor leagues. He was the one responsible for bringing me from Kansas City to Boston. I owe thanks to Haywood Sullivan. With Dick Williams I learned many things. He was a good manager, an aggressive manager, a manager who wanted the best from you. If he had to agitate you to get the best of you, he would do it. One day I almost threw a punch at him because I did not understand what he wanted to tell me and I got upset and almost hit him. But afterwards I realized that dammit, he wants to win, the same as I do. We're all on the same team and we have to be united.

How many years did you play in the big leagues?

JS- I played 8 and a half years.

Did you go up and down or were you up the entire time?

JS- I came up in 1963 and spent seven years in the minors. I had some terrific years in the minors but going up to the major leagues in those days was very difficult. I had a 13-0 season in Triple A and they didn't bring me up. They waited until the season with Kansas City that was over before bringing me up. So it was not as easy to get up to the major leagues as it is today. When I was in my eighth year at my best point, then came the arm operation and I had to retire in 1980.

In the major leagues, what was your best year?

JS- Well, 1967. I won 12 and lost 4 with Boston. I was chosen to pitch the first game of the World Series. That was the most important moment of my life.

The most outstanding moment?

JS- Of yes, definitely. Of course, besides the day I was born.

Did you win the game?

JS- We lost 2-1 and the run we got was a home run that I hit off Bob Gibson.

What do you think the Puerto Rican players can learn from the experiences of yourself, from your generation?

JS- Well that's a good question and a question I have asked myself a thousand times. If we had so many problems and the example is evident of the problems we had, why don't our boys from Puerto Rico come and consult us? There is no consultation between today's players, who are making good money with the players of before. We're the ones who can help those boys. I would like any boy who signs to come to me. I would tell him what's in his best interest. I'm not interested in their money. Now, many ballplayers are already taking money from those boys. I would like for them to come to us so that the experiences that we suffered through could help them. I'm willing and available to help a boy in anything that he would need.

Are you still involved in baseball today?

JS- Yes, I'm associated with Little League as director of the big league category in Puerto Rico. With Youth Double A as team manager for Conerijo and I have a baseball school in Carolina where I instruct boys from eighteen to sixteen years old. I've never been apart from baseball. I have four sons, three of whom are playing baseball. One is studying in Iowa and has signed with Catangno of Double A. I have one with Huncos, also with Double A, who could have signed professionally but was never interested. And I have a seventeen year old who is playing junior Double A who will be going back to school again. You'll see. I'm not interested in that he necessarily becomes a good player but a good citizen. That is my worry, that they be good examples for youth.

Has baseball helped you in the ups and downs of life?

JS- I would say that I could never repay baseball all that it has done for me so that what I can do for baseball is so small compared to all that it has given me. Although economically, baseball does not give me anything, I go on loving baseball and I keep on helping it in the same manner that I had always have. Unfortunately, in Puerto Rico, with all that one gives it, one is never called. For ten years I was a broadcaster with Santurce and one year they didn't pay me and they let me go. I have been out three years because one fellow did not pay me and they didn't want me. Unfortunately, that's the way it is. And in baseball today, the same thing is happening. I'd say about seven or eight years ago baseball had a big rapport where those connected with baseball were not doctors or lawyers. They were people who knew and felt a moral responsibility. They allowed a player to develop himself. Today, they are lawyers. Any little thing and they are already in court. So that professional baseball has lost so much because the owners are not of the same character as before. Emilio Bonomo from Ponce. The people before were not thinking so

much economically as they are today and that has led to the downfall of professional baseball in Puerto Rico. I would like to see how I could help to sustain it again. I think that this should be the final year of professional baseball in Puerto Rico and I save this with great remorse but I cannot see how the fans will attend games unless they are offered a cheap concession stand. That you could go three or four times a week to attend games on eight or ten dollars. A game today costs you twenty five or thirty dollars.

So how many games can you go to during the week?

JS- Unfortunately, with the country's economy, you can only go to one. Now, if you let a family in for five dollars, and buy a hot dog for seventy five cents and a beer for seventy five cents or a dollar, and with things at a reasonable price, you could have that family three or four times a week. If they spend fifty dollars on four games, there you have a family supporting teams for many seasons. But, unfortunately you go there and your car is gone or the batteries or tires are stolen—if the game costs me sixty dollars, I can't go anymore. I have to wait another week or two. That's what is happening to baseball.

And television has also affected baseball attendance.

JS- The television from the United States, with the quality that it offers, and you compare it with the television coverage of the games here, it's not the same. Now logically, the fans complain. But television acts as a promotional vehicle. If done well, television is a promotion for professional baseball. What you have to do is cut the prices. Provide a family plan. Do other things that will generate fan interest to get the to the park.

Has there been some part of your career that we have not touched on as part of this conversation?

JS- Well, one of the most interesting things is my family. We've touched on it, somewhat. I have to greatly thank my wife. I have a delight for a wife. If I haven't married the wife that I have, I'd have been out of baseball. So then I talk with my wife and my family and I am saddened. Without them I would not have accomplished anything. That is why I love and admire them. That is one of the things I always emphasize in the things that I do. I would like the ballplayer to be more family oriented. To share more with the fans. To give more rapport to their families through the medium which we encounter. Unfortunately, it can't be like that. My wife always tells me, "You can never change the world. You can try, but you won't change. You want everyone to be like you, to arrive at four in the afternoon when the game is at five."

But I imagine you have helped ballplayers with aspects of their lives.

JS- Oh yes, yes. I've helped many ballplayers. Ruben Sierra has been a man under my tutelege. Benito Santiago also. There are many present day big leaguers who have passed through my hands whom I've been able to give advice. That gives you a lot of satisfaction, that they can be good citizens by the example you have set.

I want to give you my sincerest thanks for this interview and I'm going to place you in Cooperstown, by way of this interview.

JS- Frank, it has been a pleasure. I hope you have the opportunity to do with others what you have done with me. There are many of them about which we know very little because no one like you has bothered to capture parts of their lives in the United States. Well, I think it's important

that Americans know more about the Puerto Rican players that they saw play in the United States.
Thank you again.

-Transcribed by J. Thomas Hetrick, Nov, 2004.