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01/16/2008 12:45 PM ET

## 'Sugar' debuts at Sundance

### New baseball film follows a Dominican player's dreams

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

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When Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden began trying to cast their new baseball movie, "Sugar," they probably didn't count on hiring chickens, cows and goats as extras.

But that's life in the rural Dominican Republic, where the co-writers and co-directors centered a drama around the character of Miguel "Sugar" Santos, a hot Dominican pitching prospect for the fictional Kansas City Knights who has a dream to make it in the big leagues.

"Sugar" marks Fleck and Boden's second straight nomination in the general dramatic category at the esteemed Sundance Film Festival that takes place in Park City, Utah, this week. They had success there last year with the drama "Half Nelson," which featured an Academy Award-nominated performance from actor Ryan Gosling and put them on the big-time Hollywood map.

While brainstorming new ideas for films, they found they couldn't avoid something that's been burning inside them for a long time: baseball. In fact, Fleck said he loves the Oakland A's, follows their games religiously on MLB.com Gameday, and finds tons of movie-quality drama in the space of nine innings.

"There are lots of different things that fascinate us and get us excited about telling a story," Fleck said. "We like to make films that we'd want to see as an audience. And as baseball fans, learning about the Dominican academies every team has was a fairly new thing.

"We became really fascinated by the players who don't quite make it as far as Pedro Martinez and Sammy Sosa."

"Sugar" tracks Santos' career from the makeshift fields of his native country to Spring Training in Arizona to a small fictional town in Iowa where he plays Single-A ball to New York City, where the one-time future prospect must adjust to a more realistic end result of his diamond dreams.

Along the way, we see the character struggling with a new language and culture while trying to impress scouts and ultimately defy the huge odds by playing in the Major Leagues.

The key to succeeding with a story like this one is making it as realistic as possible, Boden and Fleck said. To that end, they spent a lot of time in the Dominican Republic and conducted countless interviews with baseball people from all levels.

"Once we had the idea, we went down there and talked to as many players as we could, whether they were active or retired," Boden said. "We started to piece together their stories, and the movie is really a combination of everybody's experience that we talked to.



Lead actor, Algenis Perez Soto, fires in a fastball in the new baseball movie "Sugar." (Fernando Calzada/HBO)

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"The movie is about this one player figuring out his identity and learning about himself. It's a coming-of-age story in a lot of ways."

To make the baseball as authentic as possible on film, the directors consulted former players such as 1990 World Series Most Valuable Player Jose Rijo, who now works as an assistant for the Washington Nationals. Rijo served as the film's consultant and also scored an acting role as Alvarez, director of the Knights' fictional academy.

Also, Junior Naboia, a former player who is now assistant general manager and director of Latin American operations for the Arizona Diamondbacks, helped out with the baseball aspects of the film.

As far as casting actors, the directors said it was almost impossible to find accomplished thespians in the Dominican Republic, so they held auditions for baseball players and regular people. They ended up with many pleasant surprises, including the lead actor, Algenis Perez Soto, who shines as Sugar.

"Algenis got the role not because he was a good pitcher, but because he is a good actor," Rijo said. "But he's also a good athlete, which made it easy for me. In the film, he looks like a professional pitcher. To have two months to do this role and to be this ready for it, he has to be a gifted player."

And those who are lucky enough to see "Sugar" in its world premiere at Sundance will witness how gifted this young tandem of filmmakers is, although Fleck and Boden insist that the subject matter and the unique baseball mecca that is the Dominican Republic made their jobs easy.

"What I'll take away from the experience is just how pervasive baseball was there," Boden said. "Driving through places where you rarely see people and a few small hosues on the side of the road, and then next to a mountain in the middle of nowhere is a community baseball field.

"It's everywhere."

*Doug Miller is a Senior Writer for MLB.com/Entertainment. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.*

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