

# MLB's International Signing Practices Under Investigation by Federal Grand Jury

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Jeff Passan, MLB columnist for Yahoo Sports, reported on September 28, 2018 that [“\[a\] federal grand jury is looking into Major League Baseball teams’ international dealings](#) and has issued subpoenas to club officials and other personnel involved in the transactions.” The transactions no doubt involve signing practices laden with corruption. Per Passan’s reporting, the FBI is leading the investigation alongside lawyers from the Department of Justice specializing in the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Certainly, the FBI and DOJ can (and presumably will) cut a wide swath in its investigation, but a question to ask is--why now? What now has the FBI/DOJ’s ear?

MLB has a longstanding presence in Latin America with all 30 MLB teams featuring academies in the Dominican Republic with scouts staking a presence in Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil and elsewhere. Such international players are not subject to MLB’s amateur draft and thus, clubs race to sign the young talent. The competition to sign international players inevitably leads to (and has lead for numerous years) corrupt practices that include bribery, kickbacks, bonus-skimming, “inflating” bonuses, and as to Cuban players, clandestine smuggling efforts and falsifying documents.

Most transactions involve complex schemes concocted and implemented by front-office officials, agents, *buscones* (trainers for young talent) and anyone else wanting a piece of the multi-million dollar signing bonuses doled out. However, such corruption is not a new phenomenon and it certainly has been no secret (some may say it is the cost of doing business). As far back as 2007, certain player agents were convicted of conspiring to smuggle and harbor Cuban players. In 2010, scouts and front-office executives for one MLB team plead guilty to kickback schemes involving player bonuses that took place between 2004 and 2008. Most recently, the former General Manager of the Atlanta Braves, John Coppolella was banned from baseball for life by MLB due to his involvement in circumventing international signing rules from 2015-2017. Are these convictions or lifetime bans “one off” cases, or are they merely a reflection of a more pervasive practice in the international scene? I suggest the latter and more importantly, that these types of actions have been going on for many years.

On point and back to the Atlanta Braves referenced above--while the former general manager was given a lifetime ban, the former Atlanta special assistant and international scouting chief, Gordon Blakely, was suspended from baseball for one year by MLB. Yet, MLB had been aware of Gordon Blakely and his presence in the international scene many years prior to his work with Atlanta. In 2004, Blakely was deposed in a grievance brought by the Yucatan Lions against the New York Yankees. This was a matter involving a Cuban defector, Michel Hernandez, and how he came about signing with the New York Yankees in 1996. Therein, Blakely (an international scout with the Yankees at the time) spoke of his

involvement and workings in signing the Cuban defector, all in violation of Major League rules. His deposition was taken in MLB's offices. I know this because I deposed him. The grievance and the inner-workings of that particular transaction are the subject of the book [Pinstripe Defection](#), released in 2010. Even more, Michel Hernandez's agent in 1996 (and who worked closely with Blakely on his signing) was Gus Dominguez, one of the agents convicted for conspiring to smuggle and harbor Cuban players in 2007. Questionable tactics in the international arena have been going on for years. Something more compelling must have garnered the FBI and DOJ's attention now, I guess.