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THE LEAD

The dreams of Al Avila

Cody Stavenhagen (/author/cody-stavenhagen/) Jul 23, 2020

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The campus chapel at St. Thomas University in Miami hosts a daily mass, and in 1983-84, when the school was still called Biscayne College, there was a first-year student sitting in the pews. He was 25 years old, he had no income, and he lived with his in-laws. His wife, Yamile, was working, and he was clinging to a dream. His name was Al Avila.

Avila was working under Paul Mainieri — now the legendary coach at LSU — as a student assistant for the St. Thomas baseball team. He was the pitching coach and Mainieri's right-hand man, but he was not getting paid. So on this

morning, in the faint glimmer of the breaking Miami daylight, Avila sat in the chapel, looking above, wondering where exactly this was all heading. He pondered whether he was doing the right thing, whether it was all worth it.

“Sometimes your mind would be a little bit everywhere,” Avila said. “There was a lot of guilt.”

In truth, Avila loved what he was doing. He was coaching, having fun, around baseball even if it was at the Division II level. But he wasn’t able to help his wife financially, wasn’t on track to provide for a family. The pressure was building. He worried what his in-laws thought. He began hearing it from his own parents. *What the hell are you doing?* Sometimes, he thought about moving on and finding a real job.

Mainieri, only one year older than Avila, noticed something was wrong. “What’s going on?” Mainieri asked one day.

“Where’s the light at the end of the tunnel?” Avila said. “I’m here, I’m having a ball, but I don’t know where it’s going.”

“I notice you go to church every day,” Mainieri said. “Don’t you have faith in God?”

Avila considered the question. It took him by surprise. Of course he believed in God, he finally said. Why else would he be waking up and attending mass every day?

Mainieri nodded. Told him to have a little faith. Then he gave Avila a few more sage words. *Whatever job you have, do it like it is your first job and last job, the job you want to do forever. Do your best wherever you’re at, and things will work out.*

Before he was a scrutinized general manager, Avila coached for free, trimmed newspaper clippings, sold ads on outfield fences. He carried cameras, coached cross-country, managed a budget crisis and traveled alone through war-torn countries.

The soul of his baseball journey, one now reaching a crucial point in the Detroit Tigers’ rebuild, starts at St. Thomas.

“It was,” Avila says, “probably the happiest I’ve ever been.”



<https://theathletic.com/75691/2017/07/14/strang-the-tigers-must-confront-reality-and-sell/detroit-tigers-spring-training-workout-session>

It's February, and the sun is shining through the window, casting a different light. Baseball season has yet to be postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic. Hope is alive.

Al Avila is sitting here, up in his squeaky-clean office. His desk is not yet cluttered. The weight of a long season is not yet felt. He is wearing a golf polo and khakis, a ballcap and sunglasses, the unofficial baseball-executive uniform of spring training. He is the general manager of the Detroit Tigers. He makes a lot of money, has this office overlooking a glorious field. It is a dream job but also one with complications.

The Tigers were the worst team in baseball last year. They lost 114 games, one of the worst records in the history of the American League. Whether it's in the papers or on social media, Avila gets criticized every day. People think he's an idiot, unqualified, clueless. He sees and hears it all. Maybe too defensive, maybe too aware. It gets to him.

“This job, with all its complexities, the worst thing is probably the criticism,” Avila says.

Avila is MLB’s first Cuban-born general manager, one of only a select few minority executives in a sport increasingly run (https://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/29369890/inside-rise-mlb-ivy-league-culture-stunning-numbers-question-next) by white men from prestigious schools. Avila, who is most himself when wearing a Hawaiian shirt, does not cast the suit-and-tie vibe of most modern big-league general managers. Theo Epstein can give and take in good humor, but you feel the power of World Series rings. Others, like Jon Daniels in Texas, can be personable, even funny, but the distinguished vibe of a Cornell degree is still palpable. Those guys became GMs at age 28. Avila was 57.

At MLB’s annual Winter Meetings, some even newer-wave GMs hole up in hotel suites, guarding every conversation like a state secret. Avila is not above taking the elevator down to the bar. At least one agent has walked away from a meeting with Avila and thought, *Wow, he’s not like these other guys*. No interest in bullshit. A handshake is as good as a contract.

On occasions last season, Avila would grab a glove, take the stairs down from his office and take throws during pregame infield drills. Before he was a GM, he was a guy who loved the game.

These traits, however humanizing, have not led to the assembly of a winning baseball team in the past three seasons. People criticize — often fairly — his trade record, his acquisitions, his overall vision. But Avila’s job description these days calls for patience. Waiting for prospects to get to the majors. Waiting for the payroll to open up. Trusting and believing that these painful few years of an elongated rebuilding plan will pay off. If there is anyone who would prefer to fast-forward through all the losses, all the misery, it is the man in this chair, hands folded over his desk.

He took the long road to this seat, to this job, to this tipping point in the trajectory of a major-league franchise.

He has a few more stories most people don’t know.



(Carlos Osorio / Associated Press)

(<https://theathletic.com/115390/2017/10/01/tigers-interviewing-in-house-candidates-for-managers-job/al-avila/>)

Al Avila never had a chance. Try as he might, he was never going to get away from baseball. The game is part of him, fused to his bones, running through his blood, coded in his DNA.

He is the son of Ralph Avila, a Dodgers scout famous for his contributions to the international game. Before he was a revered baseball man, Ralph was a semipro player in Cuba, and he lived a complex Cuban political identity. As chronicled in multiple (<https://books.google.com/books?id=GfrnCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA106&lpg=PA106&dq=ralph+avila+fidel+castro+dodgers&source=bl&ots=zBw>

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 about Latin American baseball, Rafael Avila was once a young militant worker,
 involved in a plot against Cuban leader Fulgencio Batista. He later joined
 forces with Fidel Castro. Eventually soured by Castro's revolution, Ralph
 defected from Cuba when Al was a baby, then joined in the Bay of Pigs
 Invasion. When the unrest dissipated, Ralph was a sheet-metal worker in
 Miami and ran baseball clinics for other Cuban refugees. He finally became an
 international scout for the Dodgers, baseball a way to give his family a much
 different life.

The job meant Ralph was busy, always on the road, so Al would often tag
 along. He studied as his father watched players, took notes, graded their
 abilities. When Ralph started the job, he was still learning English. The family
 would gather around a table and help Ralph translate his scouting reports.

When Avila was still young, Ralph would drive for legendary Dodgers manager
 Tommy Lasorda and general manager Al Campanis. Avila sat in the back,
 listening to the old-school men curse and argue and howl with laughter. He
 was a little in awe of all the stories, all the wonder.

Avila grew up to be a decent player but hardly a professional. He spent a year at
 Miami-Dade Community College, coached by junior college legend Doc
 Mainieri, Paul's father. He signed with the Dodgers the next summer as an
 undrafted free agent, played with the club's rookie team in Lethbridge, a city in
 the Canadian province of Alberta. Stats on baseball-reference
 (https://www.baseball-reference.com/register/player.fcgi?id=avila-001alb) list
 Alberto Avila with one hit in two plate appearances and two passed balls. He
 attended one spring training, caught a few bullpens, got cut as soon as camp
 ended. And then he did not know what to do.

He thought about other avenues. Considered a normal 9-to-5 life. Instead, he
 kept trying to play. The gravitational pull finally led him to Biscayne. The
 school had recently become the first in the country to offer an undergraduate
 degree program in sports administration.

Trying to become something, or maybe just hoping to get by, Avila enrolled in
 classes. On a whim, he walked into Paul Mainieri's office and introduced
 himself. Their relationship at the time was nothing more than name
 association.

"Do you need any help with the team?" Avila asked.

Mainieri was honest. Biscayne was a small school. Budget was shoe-string tight. He relied on student coaches, and he certainly could not pay anyone else.

But damn, did he ever need help.

“The answer,” Mainieri said, “is yes.”

Biscayne did not have the athletic budget for club carts or Gators or anything else you might imagine a baseball grounds crew driving around. But for some reason, they had a Toyota Tercel.

The subcompact car was just small enough to navigate a baseball diamond. They hitched a metal drag to the back and made circles. On one field, they built a fence with T-posts and plastic construction fencing. The first year, before Mainieri raised the money, they didn't have dugouts.

“You really had to hustle to build a program,” Mainieri said.

That's not to say St. Thomas was all bad. This school was in the heart of the South Florida sports boom. The Miami Dolphins practiced only a few yards away. Mainieri stressed over the thought of a Dolphins player stepping on a foul ball that had gone over to the football field. Imagine what Don Shula might say if Dan Marino ever rolled his ankle.

The Baltimore Orioles had their minor-league spring training on campus, so scouts were always popping in and out. St. Thomas had good players because of the weather, and the sports administration program, and the natural influx of baseball talent in South Florida.

Near the end of Avila's first season with the program, there was an article in the Miami News, an evening paper at the time. It featured pitcher Bruce Fichter, whose shoulder tendinitis got so bad the previous season he couldn't lift his arm. Fichter credited psychological healing tapes and hours of playing “Space Invaders” to his success in 1984, the whimsy of Division II sports. The Bobcats had a 32-14 record and led the Sunshine State Conference. Avila was the pitching coach, and Mike McGarrell led the staff with a 2.11 ERA after an origin story much like Avila's: He showed up at a fall tryout and said he wanted to play baseball.

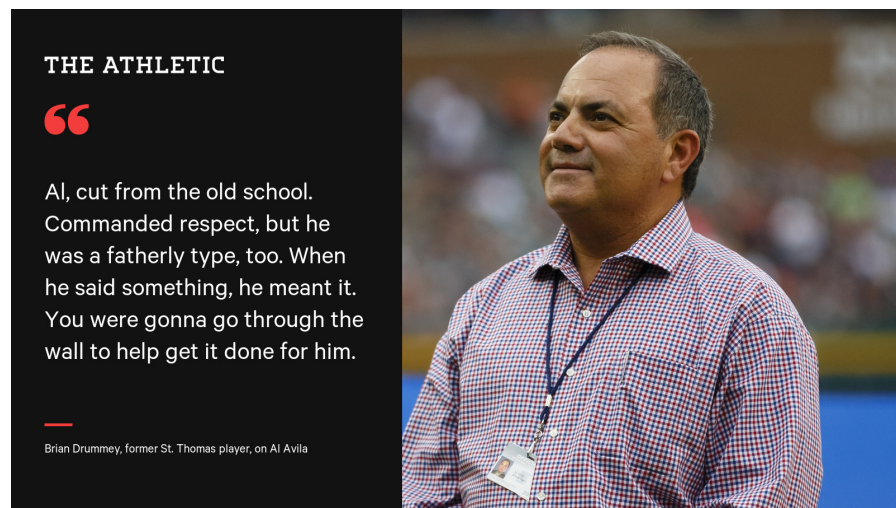
In the story, Mainieri praised the way his pitching staff had improved. He also credited Al Avila.

“I can’t pay him enough for the job he’s done,” Mainieri said. “There are a lot of guys getting paid \$20,000 a year that don’t know as much about pitching as he does. As it is right now, I can only give him a pair of spikes and two shorts.”

At St. Thomas, they took winning seriously, but they didn’t treat the whole operation like life or death. Dave Schrage, another student assistant and now the head coach at Butler, showed up at St. Thomas and viewed Avila and Mainieri as giants. He was intimidated, until he came to know Avila’s sense of humor, the way he always talked about his wife and his family.

“I want to say this the right way: Both Paul and Al are kind of salt-of-the-earth types,” Schrage said. “They’d do anything for you. They have big hearts. They mean well in everything they do and what they try to do. I was really, really fortunate to have that be my first year in coaching. I wouldn’t be coaching today if I had a different experience.”

On the field in 1983, the team won 37 games, a school record.



The education of Al Avila was also formal.

At St. Thomas, students worked the annual Doral Open golf tournament and the Miami Grand Prix. Classes focused on all areas of running a sports organization — promotions, sales, management, law. Avila took a class taught by CNN correspondent John Zarrella. In another classroom project, Avila was tasked with outlining what an expansion MLB franchise might look like, how it might operate. In a speech a few years ago, he joked he got a B for his work.

The program at St. Thomas was founded by Dr. Joseph Hoy, a former athletic director at Western Michigan. By the time Avila was taking classes, Andy Kreutzer, also St. Thomas' athletic director at the time, was in charge. Kreutzer and Avila developed a tight relationship that continues to this day. "I remember him as a student," Kreutzer said. "Very strong, attention to detail, very good analytical skills."

One year, Avila scored an internship at Channel 6 in Miami, working under popular anchor Tony Segreto. He ventured out to Dolphins practices, holding a camera and a microphone, gathering sound.

Avila earned his undergraduate degree, then stuck around an extra year for his master's in 1986. At the conclusion of the year, Kreutzer drove Avila to Vero Beach to discuss an internship with the Dodgers. Although he was the son of a Dodgers scout, Avila was not going to be handed any sort of job. Kreutzer knew the director of DodgerTown and told him: *You have to hire this guy.*

"You look at him, he hasn't jumped any rungs. He climbed the ladder," Kreutzer said. "They do an autopsy on him, they won't find an ounce of arrogance."

Avila began his work with the Dodgers assisting with media relations in spring training. He arrived at the team complex every day at 6 a.m., grabbed a cup of coffee and got to work, cutting out newspaper clippings to hang on a bulletin board for team employees. It was a strange experience, because sometimes he would see Dodgers catchers heading out to the fields in the mornings, getting in their early work. Avila was only a few years removed from his own playing dreams, and every now and then he'd look at the ballplayers and think ...

Damn.

Avila worked in Vero Beach that summer, doing it all for the Dodgers' Florida State League team. He helped the grounds crew and sold ads on the outfield fences. Each night after the game, he recorded a postgame show up in the press box, alone. On the drive home, he would drop a cassette tape off at the radio station to be played the next morning.

The job was challenging at first, but Avila kept Mainieri's words in the back of his mind.

"That's what changed me," Avila said. "In Vero Beach, it took me a little while, but I realized, 'OK, this is my job now, and I got to do it.' And eventually I enjoyed that."

By the end of the year, Avila was still with the Dodgers, now working with his father in the Dominican Republic, where the Dodgers were preparing to open the first major-league academy in Las Palmas. It's where Ralph eventually

discovered and signed players such as Pedro Martinez.

In 1986, the site was like a jungle. There were cows and horses and roosters crowing in the background. Avila would take a Land Rover offroad to reach the construction site. It cost \$400,000 to build the academy, and it ended up changing baseball. The Dodgers offered Avila a job and a chance to run Campo Las Palmas with his father. But back in Miami, Avila's wife was pregnant, due to give birth at the end of January.

Avila now had a master's degree and some experience, and he wasn't looking to begin his career in the Dominican Republic. He turned down the job and was eventually hired as the general manager of the Daytona Beach Admirals, a low-level White Sox farm club. Being the GM of a minor-league team is a vastly different job than being a GM in the big leagues. The responsibilities were more like what Avila did the previous summer — PA announcing, ad sales, pulling tarps.

Avila's first child was born on Jan. 29, and Yamile spent the first part of 1987 driving nearly four hours back and forth from Miami to Daytona with an infant in tow. The boy's name was Alex, and he would one day become a major-league catcher.



John Racoux / Associated Press

(<https://theathletic.com/418073/2018/07/02/breaking-down-the-tigers-international-free-agent-signings/al-avila-3/>)

Midway through the summer, Paul Mainieri called again. He had done the impossible: Grown the budget to the point they had room to hire an assistant coach.

The job — a real job this time — paid \$18,000. It came with only one caveat: If Avila returned to St. Thomas to be an assistant baseball coach, he would also have to coach women's cross-country. The idea sounded nice, but Avila was conflicted all over again. He worried returning to college would be a step backward. He took the job anyway.

"At that point in his life," Mainieri said, "I don't think he knew what he wanted to do."

Not much changed in Avila's short absence from the baseball program. St. Thomas still won a lot of baseball games. It kept getting good players, like Brian Drummey, a New Englander who started his career at a junior college, didn't get along with his coach and quit. Drummey showed up at St. Thomas and walked on to the team. Starting in 1986, he went on to become a four-year starter and set school records.

"Coach Mainieri and Al, they had that aura about them," Drummey said. "You knew you were in something special. It was the ground floor."

The years all blur together, but after the 1988 season, Mainieri left to become the baseball coach at Air Force. He might have brought Avila with him had the job been anywhere but Air Force, where Mainieri was the first civilian coach. Instead, he wanted Avila to be his successor at St. Thomas.

"I could think of no other choice, no one I would rather have," Mainieri said.

Avila coached through a rebuilding year in 1989, then became the athletic director while still coaching baseball soon after. As athletic director, he navigated an eight-sport department in the midst of moving from NCAA Division II to NAIA. The school at large was confronting a budget crisis, and Avila helped steer through turmoil. He hired people and fired people. He honed what might be his biggest strength to this day: the ability to delegate, to trust others, to manage.

St. Thomas won conference championships in baseball in 1991 and 1992. In '91, Avila was named the conference coach of the year. In '92, the team reached a No. 3 national ranking.

"Al, cut from the old school," Drummey said. "Commanded respect, but he was a fatherly type, too. When he said something, he meant it. You were gonna go through the wall to help get it done for him."

Most of all, Avila reveled in the sense of community. Before games, as part of the sports admin program, there would be fun promotions, like airplanes flying over the stadium carrying banners that read *Beware the Bobcats*. They had barbecues after games with players and their families. Sometimes they invited the opposing team, too.

Avila was inducted into the school's hall of fame in 2016. He still talks with several former players. He always sees Drummey when the Tigers play in Boston. And he always enjoys when he picks up the phone, decades removed from St. Thomas, and hears a familiar greeting. *Hey, Coach*.



(https://theathletic.com/976582/2019/05/14/forty-thoughts-on-the-tigers-entering-their-40th-game/detroit-tigers-workout-11/)

It took fate to bring Avila to St. Thomas and faith to keep him there. The whole time, it seemed like so many forces were working in the background.

Toward the end of Avila's time at St. Thomas, renowned Latin American scout Julio Blanco Herrera was trying to assemble a U.S. team for an international tournament in Nicaragua. Herrera ended up approaching Avila, asking if he would take a few players down to the tournament. They ended up taking the entire St. Thomas team.

It was good fun and great publicity for the program. They played teams from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Panama and Chinese Taipei. Avila had a field-level seat to watch and compete against players hardly anyone had ever seen before.

The timing could not have been better. In the fall of 1991, an expansion franchise — not unlike the one Avila once dreamed up in a class project — was coming to Miami. They were going to be called the Marlins, and they were hiring a staff.

Angel Vazquez, an early member of the Marlins' scouting department, started asking Avila what he thought about players, both locally and internationally. Casual conversations turned into an extended job interview. The Marlins were considering hiring Avila as an international scout, a position they would groom to one day replace Vazquez.

Throughout the elongated interview process, Vazquez began quietly testing Avila's Spanish — though he was born in Cuba, Avila grew up in an American school system and hardly used the language anymore. Finally, the Marlins offered Avila the job.

The early assignments were unlike anything Avila had ever done. Vazquez had a grasp on the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, the two biggest hot beds of baseball talent. As the assistant director of Latin American operations, Avila spent the early 1990s traveling through Central America, by himself, with no contacts.

He had to work the locals, making connections with whoever ran nearby baseball leagues. He had to learn the dialects, too. Avila made cold calls, setting up times to go see players. He organized tryouts and clinics. He traveled through Nicaragua and Panama, El Salvador and Honduras. There were communist regimes and political revolutions and a rising state of uproar throughout the region. Today, Avila could practically teach a history course. In the moment, he says there were times he feared for his life.

"Gilligan's Island," Avila says. "There's an episode where he's dreaming. He's the president of this Latin republic. He's the dictator. He's got an adviser telling him, 'It's a mess out there.' He opens the window, and there's all this shit going on. He's got another adviser that says, 'Everything is great.' The reason I mention that: Because outside of my hotel room, it looked like mayhem."

Much of the scouting, too, was a fool's errand. The Marlins had to have boots on the ground in these countries, lest another club discover another Dennis Martinez or Mariano Rivera first. But the talent wasn't always exceptional. The leagues played odd schedules because of rain-filled summers.

He stayed in hotels and he says he often heard gunfire in the night. This was before cell phones or the internet. He could communicate only through an AT&T card that required dialing a 20-plus-digit number. Sometimes he would wonder: *Does anyone know where I am?*

“I went from being the happiest guy you could ever imagine, the greatest job in the world, to a very lonely job,” Avila said.

Avila spent two years as an international scout, and the best player he signed was Earl Agnoly, most famous for later colliding with Marlins first-round pick Jaime Jones and breaking Jones’ wrist in 1996.

But day by day, small decisions added up to larger progress.

In 1994, Avila was promoted to director of Latin American operations. He was instrumental in signing players like Edgar Renteria and Livan Hernandez. In 1997, with those two players in starring roles, the Marlins won the World Series.

In 1998, Avila became the Marlins’ director of scouting, where he drafted players such as Josh Beckett and Adrian Gonzalez and signed Miguel Cabrera. In 2002, Avila followed Dave Dombrowski and became the assistant GM of the Tigers.

On Aug. 4, 2015, Dombrowski was fired, and Avila was named general manager.

“I can honestly tell you, I’ve never thought about my second job,” Avila said.

“Never. Throughout that whole time, I could tell you it was not, ‘Oh, I want to be a general manager.’ I always looked at what I was doing right now. Things came along and developed, and everything that I did before helped me get that next job.”



Tigers owner Chris Ilitch, manager Ron Gardenhire and Avila. (Robin Buckson / Detroit News via AP)

He is here now, in the boss' chair, absorbing both the power and the tolls of such a position.

Avila received a contract extension from the Tigers last July despite losses of 98, 98 and 114 games in the past three seasons. The extension happened because Avila achieved what ownership asked — he hired smart people to build an analytics team, he improved the farm system to the point it is stocked with pitching, he helped strengthen scouting and overhaul the franchise's infrastructure.

This offseason, Avila signed five veterans — pitcher Ivan Nova, catcher Austin Romine, first baseman C.J. Cron, second baseman Jonathan Schoop and outfielder Cameron Maybin — to one-year deals, a way to make the team at least slightly more competitive in 2020. This summer, Avila built a draft class that was widely praised by analysts across baseball.

The real defining moves of his tenure, though, are still to come. The tear down is over, and soon, Avila and the Tigers must find ways to win. There will be fans who want him replaced with some Ivy League whiz. There will be more days like all the ones last year, when the Tigers would lose again and Avila's temper would slip and his mind would spin. More times when he will watch minor-league games or read prospect reports and wish he could fast-forward three years. More nights when he'll drive home from the ballpark, call Yamile and admit, like he said simply this winter, "This is hard."

But today, up in his office, he is reflective. Today he is hopeful, projecting a defiant belief in himself. The first week of spring training is almost over, and Avila sits at his desk, hands folded again. He is explaining his career, how a man gets from one place to another. And in the midst of this soliloquy, he opens his hands wide, then points at his desk. College coach, athletic director, minor-league GM, international scout, scouting director, assistant general manager.

"This right here," he says. "If you look at my history, who's done as much?"

The question hangs in the air for a moment. He did not know it at the time, but this MLB season will be only 60 games. Anything can happen. The future is wide open.

Avila is looking out at Publix Field, sun high in the afternoon sky. He glances at his watch. It is 1:52 p.m. This is his job now, and he has to get back to work.

"At the worst moments, you learn how to deal with things," Avila says.

"Because at some point, it will turn around."

(Top photo: Courtesy of Paul Mainieri)



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