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Player who stayed behind in California joins his World Series teammates just in time

When the players and coaching staff the team from El Monte, California, arrived at Taylor's Heritage Park for the 30th annual Junior League World Series, they were missing two of the parts that got them there.

Ricardo Perez – the team's lead-off hitter, shortstop and pitcher – was attending school. Power hitting outfielder Noeh Martinez was at high school football practice.

In the case of Perez, his mother wanted him to concentrate on his education and bring up his grades. In Martinez's case, his football coach told him to make a choice: attend football practice or quit the team.

Manager Sergio Juarez and the rest of his players were devastated – but perhaps not nearly as much as the teen-agers who would be missing out on what could be a once-in-a-lifetime experience in a world series.

"They're two of the reasons we got her," Juarez said. "We're basically here without part of my full team. It kills me, but I couldn't do anything about it. We had to move on with the kids that could make it."

Perez watched California's games on the Internet via Youth Sports Live and would call and text his teammates after games.

"We never thought we were going to make it this far," Juarez said. "No one counts chickens before they hatch. Ricky's mom didn't want him to miss classes, so he was watching it at home online. You know how bad the kid was feeling it? He was one of the starters – one of the kids who got us here. But his parents were more concerned with his education and him starting the school year out right."

As the El Monte team won and got into position to qualify for the United States championship and perhaps beyond, Perez's mother relented and said he could join his team. But funding for the trip was an issue.

The El Monte American Little League, Juarez and others came up with some money to help Perez afford a plane ticket to Detroit Metropolitan Airport. He flew out of California at 7 a.m. Thursday and arrived in Taylor in plenty of time for California's game that evening.

"I was ready to jump for joy," Juarez said Thursday. "You would not believe how happy I was. Now I have my team that got us here. The rest of the team got fired up."

When Perez was dropped off at Game On Sports Center, he was mobbed by his teammates, who were taking batting practice.

When the game against Virginia got under way, Perez was in his usual place in the lineup. He batted lead-off and was playing shortstop. He wound up going 2-for-4, scored two runs and even pitched the bulk of the game – 4 1/3 innings – scattering four hits, striking out two and allowing one unearned run.

California was down 8-3 in the game and rallied for a 12-9 victory.

"Ricky held Virginia at Bay," Juarez said. "He turned a double play. He's a big part of my team that got us here and I couldn't be happier that we're almost complete."

With another player on the team, it raised El Monte's total to 13 and allowed Coach Armando Verdugo to be in the dugout and on the baseline. A team needs to have at least 13 players to have a manager and two coaches participate. Less than 13 and the team can only have a manager and one coach.

As for Martinez, he's back in California and following his teammates.

Juarez said he talked to Martinez's father, who tried his best to get the football coach to change his mind.

"He wished us luck," Juarez said, "and was disappointed he couldn't make it."



Ricardo Perez comes to the plate for the first time for Team California against Virginia. He wound up with two hits and scored twice.



Perez (7) and his California teammates are happy after winning the game and qualifying for the USA championship game Friday night against Texas.

