



BELIZEAN DOMINOES

By Thomas Kelley
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In South Los Angeles, there is a growing immigrant community from the Central American country of Belize, and they've brought the game of dominoes with them. The Belizeans that have come here are mostly descendants of African slaves. The British brought slaves to Belize in the 17th and 18th centuries from other colonies like Jamaica and Bermuda to cut logwood and mahogany. The game of dominoes followed them and is still beloved by Belizeans today.

Here in Los Angeles, they play in converted garages and front yards, from Monday to Sunday, from mid-afternoon late into the night. It's an obsession that brings friends together to drink, talk and tease.

"Everybody's claiming who's the best," says Eliston Baptis. "So that's basically why it dominates. It's actually fun to sit there and call each other, 'You dunce-y, you don't know how to play this game.' And, 'I'm a dominologist. I put the D in dominoes.'"

Baptis, who came here two years ago and lives near the corner of Budlong Avenue and 36th street, says dominoes also connects Belizeans to their Caribbean cousins from countries like Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Barbados and Trinidad.

"Any Caribbean people you see getting together, on any setting, especially on a barbecue date, dominoes," he says. "That's what we do. I have a Jamaican brother-in-law. I have Jamaican nephews and nieces. And when we get together, that's the first thing we say, man, 'Break out the bones, seeing!'"

Baptis says Belizeans pass dominoes from generation to generation. He grew up in Belize City and fondly remembers the domino club of his youth.

But here in Los Angeles, on Budlong Avenue, just south of 36th Street, is a makeshift domino club that has been running for 25 years. It's run by Pedro Pelayo. He's a Hispanic Belizean who has become a local hero of sorts.

"Because you make mistake, right?" Pelayo explains. "Me and you are partners. You make a mistake—I jump on you. 'Man you never should've done this!' But that's the fun of the game. But when we have tournament, you cannot talk. It's a silent game."

At a tournament held every three months, domino players from around the city converge at Pelayo's converted garage. While music blasts and onlookers chat, the

players engage in a conversation without words, communicating with dominoes' endless combinations of patterns and numbers. The first to match all their dotted "bones" wins.

One of Pelayo's regulars, Ed Gregg, was born in Belize and raised in Los Angeles. He started playing dominoes twenty years ago with his father. He says he plays every day and loves the complexity and fast pace of Belizean dominoes.

"It's the mental aspect of it," he says. "You've got to know how to strategize. It's a game of rules, counter-rules, and a little chicanery."

Gregg goes back once a year to Belize in the spring. No surprise, he plays dominoes every day when he's there. As Baptis explains, home is never far from the hearts of these domino men.

"Even though when you're here, it's nothing like home," he says. "And in a setting right now as we speak, my dad, my nephews and my brother, should be playing dominoes right about now. They do that every evening. They sit down after everybody come from work and do what they do. They come out in front of the yard on the street corner....and there's a lamppost light right there in case it gets dark and that's what they do, 'til everybody decides to go to bed."

In garages and front yards, the sound of connecting dominoes grows louder when night falls. Laughter and drinking continue into the late hours. In both worlds, Belizeans match dominoes just as they have for generations. Los Angeles may never be like home. But at the domino table, it's as close as it can get.