

Independent Professional Baseball: A Helpful Report For College Baseball Coaches And Players

By: IndependentMinorLeagueBaseball.com

<http://www.IndependentMinorLeagueBaseball.com>

You are welcome to send this report, as is, to any friends, teammates, coaches, parents, or others who would like to become involved in independent professional baseball

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USEFUL RESOURCES

If you or any friends are best described as one of the following then click the link which best fits:

- Someone who wants general information about independent baseball:
<http://www.independentminorleaguebaseball.com/>
- College baseball player whose eligibility ends this year and wishes to play in the independent minor leagues:
http://independentminorleaguebaseball.com/prospective_players_non_pro.html
- Someone who recently finished college baseball (and never signed a pro baseball contract) who wishes to play independent baseball:
http://independentminorleaguebaseball.com/prospective_players_non_pro.html
- Someone who was recently released from an “affiliated” organization and wants to play in the independent leagues this upcoming season:
http://independentminorleaguebaseball.com/prospective_players_pro.html
- College baseball coach or the parent of a college baseball player:
http://independentminorleaguebaseball.com/for_college_baseball_coaches_and_parents.html
- A college undergraduate (or graduate) student who wants a professional baseball internship:
http://independentminorleaguebaseball.com/independent_baseball_jobs.html
- A current or former baseball player who actually spent time on an independent baseball team/league roster:
http://independentminorleaguebaseball.com/for_current_and_retired_independent_players.html

Why I Am Qualified To Talk About Independent Baseball

My name is Matt Mc Dermott, and I want you to have this report in order to break apart common myths regarding independent baseball and how you can benefit. It is my hope that this short report helps you better understand the “big picture” about independent baseball and gives you the reality of what you can (and cannot) expect.

First, you probably want to know why I am qualified to write about this topic. That is only fair, and I want to share my unique perspective on this sport to help you whether or not you ever put on a professional baseball uniform.

Here are a few quick notes about my background:

- Served as the bullpen catcher for the Waterbury Spirit (Northeast League) in 1997-1998 (Waterbury, CT)
- Gave post-game lessons to the kids remaining after games in order to help with marketing. This was my first taste of the “business side” of professional baseball
- Left the game in 1999 for a career in the financial services/software industry
- Came back to independent baseball as a bullpen catcher for the Fort Worth Cats in 2005 (at the time, part of the Central League and now part of the American Association), and continued the tradition of post-game lessons for the kids after games
- Bullpen catcher and active catcher for the 2007 Lewisville Lizards of the Continental Baseball League + served as team media relations director, MySpace page coordinator, league statistician, and league communications assistant
- In 2008, I served as the bullpen catcher for the McKinney Blue Thunder (Continental League) + served as assistant general manager, backup public address announcer, backup statistician, director of sales, handle in-game promotions, community relations director, game day operations coordinator, and numerous other duties

In 2007-2008 I also had the opportunity to attend several league/owners’ meetings, solicit owners to join the league, attend prospective owner meetings, work on league scheduling, consult on web marketing, address player issues at the league level, structure playoff formats, and communicate with local, regional, and national media.

If you join the independent baseball ranks, you will meet **far more experienced** executives; and many of them have experience in Major League Baseball. Should you have the opportunity to work and learn from them then do so! I look forward to working with some of these executives in the future because I will learn from them as well!

You will learn much about professional baseball which you never knew, especially how teams and leagues operate as well as each executive’s perspectives about the “on-field product” they offer the fans. Many are qualified to teach you about:

- Marketing
- Public relations

- Promotions
- Ticket Sales
- Sponsorships
- Community Relations
- Entertainment business
- How to evaluate players
- Trading players and trade deadlines
- E-mail marketing
- Website/blog design and marketing
- Evaluating and creating multiple revenue streams to become profitable
- League-level decision making
- Meeting with prospective owners and investors
- Meeting with civic leaders
- Stadium construction or renovation
- Field maintenance
- Scheduling
- Dealing with local and national media
- Radio broadcasting and television (regular, cable, online)
- Purchase of league/team equipment such as balls, bats, uniforms
- Management of concessions and souvenirs

They also can offer you the insights which will make many of the stories and decisions you hear and read about pro baseball become MUCH clearer very quickly! You will finally understand WHY certain teams make certain decisions even if the reasons for the decision are not clear at first.

All of this background is useful to you because you will gain insights which are common to the various personnel across independent baseball. Whether you join an independent baseball team (or league) in uniform or in a suit and tie, I want you to understand the big picture so that you enter the situation aware of what is happening around you.

A Quick History About Independent Baseball

Independent baseball took on its current version starting in 1993 with the Northern League and the Frontier League. It grew out of restrictions established by the “affiliated” organizations (those minor league teams with ties to Major League Baseball franchises) in 1991. Through the mid-90’s independent baseball grew, with several leagues opening and folding within one to three seasons.

Here is a more complete history about independent baseball:

http://baseballhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/a_guide_to_independent_baseball

Bob Wirz was involved with independent baseball from the mid-1990’s, so read the archives on his blog (<http://www.IndyBaseballChatter.com>) or get even more information on his weekly column at <http://www.wirzandassociates.com/>

You also may listen to a podcast (either online or download as a MP3 file) about independent baseball’s history and future potential by going to: <http://www.mefedia.com/entry/independent-baseball-podcast-with-bob-wirz/14032663> or <http://independentminorleaguebaseball.com/blog/2009/01/29/independent-baseball-podcast-with-bob-wirz/>

Independent baseball offers players the opportunity to be professional baseball players and, at the same time, offers communities who want to have professional baseball the opportunity to offer their residents summer time entertainment. As a “professional” baseball player, remember that you now are part of the professional sports and entertainment business; and you are now more than “just a ball player.”

Whether a player was overlooked, considered too small/slow, or was given a negative “label” early in his college career, many quality baseball players are not drafted or signed to affiliated teams... at least initially! Keep this in mind and stay encouraged as you begin your pursuit of becoming a pro baseball player. Just because one scout or manager does not want your services at this time, remember that other teams exist and might need your services at some point during the season.

Stay healthy and ready to play, even if the independent baseball season starts without you. Injuries, players being moved up, or players being released free up roster spots during the season. These opportunities exist throughout the North America, so make sure that you are in contact with the independent teams/leagues even after the season starts if you truly believe that your skills are good enough to play at the next level.

How You, As A Player, Can Benefit From Independent Baseball

Even though you may have been overlooked or “fell through the cracks” during the scouting process, there are opportunities for you to play. Remember that independent professional baseball is just that: PROFESSIONAL! You have to become more than just a regular college or semi-pro player if you want to join AND remain on an independent baseball team.

While you may be All-Conference, hit .650 with 30 home runs or throw no-hitters every game, or won the conference championship with a dramatic performance, very little of that matters when you go to the next level in independent baseball. If you have such accomplishments then you should be proud of them, and at the same time realize that they will not do you a bit of good if you wish to stay on an independent baseball team for an entire season.

If you were overlooked as a player during the season and did not get drafted, it is nothing personal. The few scouts who saw you may have been looking at someone else; or they may not have needed someone at your position.

If you went to a prospects’ tryout camp and the scouts didn’t talk to you it could have been due to the fact that you weren’t at your best, they had their focus on someone else, or they already signed someone at your position. Remember that scouts for affiliated organizations have to compete with OTHER scouts, both from other teams AND within their own organization, so their reputations are on the line when they sign a player. This is why great players sometimes fall through the cracks and end up being overlooked.

Bob Wirz (who tracks independent baseball players in Major League organizations) commented in a February 2009 blog that over 50 players who have independent baseball experience were in Major League camps. The blog can be found at:
<http://indybaseballchatter.blogspot.com/2009/02/forget-rod-and-cheer-for-56-independent.html>.

In addition, many independent baseball players now comprise a significant percentage of the rosters in the affiliated minor leagues. The exact percentage can vary week-by-week, but the Major League organizations understand that the independent baseball leagues produce some terrific talent as some of the players on those Minor League rosters never were with a previous affiliated team.

To answer your “Big Question”: yes, it is possible to make the Major Leagues if you start your career in the independent leagues. The odds are reduced significantly, but it does happen!

Independent Baseball Is A Business

While each team in the affiliated minor leagues has its own arrangement with the parent Major League organization, independent baseball has no affiliation with the affiliated teams or leagues. That is why they are called “independent.” As such, each independent baseball league (and its teams) has to operate as a profitable business.

This is important!!

While you may care about what kind of spikes you wear, the weight of your bat, winning championships, and getting noticed by scouts, the front offices of independent baseball leagues and teams have vastly different objectives. While they, too, want to win championships you have to understand that virtually every independent baseball team and league needs to be **profitable**. This is what they need to focus on in order to stay in business long after you retire!

Each league, and each team within an independent league, operates in a unique manner. Some are focused only on getting fans in the stands (sometimes called “butts in the seats”); others focus on getting several large corporate sponsors; and others focus on cost-cutting wherever possible. You need to know this because you have to become PROFESSIONAL enough to have the flexibility to adapt to each team’s culture.

If you are used to being the star on your team, having all of your laundry done for you, having terrific meals provided to you after games, lots of local media attention, and everyone congratulating you for a well-played game then you may be in for a “reality check” when you get to independent baseball. The talent level is terrific (each independent league has different talent levels) and the talent improves in independent baseball each year. You have to be willing to learn from quality managers (no longer “coaches”), many of whom have Major League experience.

At the independent level, you are expected to be on time, act professionally, and help out with events around town or at the stadium. Unlike college baseball, the team needs to turn a profit as quickly as possible; so you may be asked to help out when not on the field by shaking hands with sponsors, going to promotional events around town, and adjusting to schedule changes or other team/league decisions which you may not like. All that I can say is that you are wearing a professional baseball uniform, so remember that it is a privilege which can be taken away at any time. Yes, even if you are not on the starting roster for the first time in your life!

With that said, the camaraderie and “brotherhood” is terrific. Once you become a pro baseball player no one can take it away from you! You will learn an amazing amount about baseball, especially if you have a good manager and coaching staff; and you will play in front of affiliated scouts. While many independent players never get signed to affiliated contracts, the opportunity and time invested is worth your effort. If you make it, remember that it’s a business - one which you might be able to join once you decide to end your playing career!

Independent Baseball Leagues For The 2009 Season

- American Association: <http://www.americanassociationbaseball.com/>
- Atlantic League: <http://www.atlanticleague.com/>
- Can-Am League: <http://www.canamleague.com/>
- Continental League: <http://www.cblproball.com>
- Frontier League: <http://www.frontierleague.com/>
- Golden League: <http://www.goldenbaseball.com/>
- Northern League: <http://www.northernleague.com/>

Visit these league websites for:

- which teams are in the league + team websites (which often have tryout information)
- tryout camp information
- average salaries for the players
- names of the managers and general managers
- which players have moved onto Major League organizations
- stats and standings
- league roster requirements (e.g. minimum number of rookies per team, etc.)
- job and internship opportunities
- league news
- recent transactions

What Prospective Independent Professional Baseball Players Should Know When Looking For Tryouts

If you want to play independent professional baseball this year, consider the advice from former players, managers, and front office decision makers in independent professional baseball. Do what you can to prepare **before** you attend any of the independent baseball tryouts. This is so that you give yourself the best odds of being noticed, assuming you have the minimum required level of physical talent and skill they seek.

Here are some suggestions:

- Go to the individual independent baseball league and team websites in order to determine their requirements for the number of rookies and veterans allowed on any given team roster. Some do not have restrictions; instead some leagues have a salary cap.
- Determine if you can live on the minimum contract amount offered by the team or league. If you cannot make ends meet with the minimum salary - factoring in your meal money, team-provided apartment (or host family living situation), and player appearance fees then talk with the general manager after they express interest in you. Discuss what else you can do to survive financially.
- Go to multiple tryouts provided that you have the time and budget to attend these events. Remember that each tryout usually will require an attendance fee as well as money for food, gas, rental car/airfare (if applicable), hotel stay, and incidental expenses.
- Attend third-party tryouts which target several independent baseball leagues as well as the occasional non-U.S. team.
- Bring extra food and water to the tryout as well as your own equipment. Many times nothing is provided by the team hosting the tryout other than practice baseballs and field equipment.
- Get the names of those running the independent baseball tryout camp. A day or two later send a physical thank you note. This is rarely done, especially by a prospective player who does not get signed. It is a mark of class and helps you stand out when independent baseball decision makers talk about extra players on which to keep tabs during the season.
- Bring a few copies of your career bio information. Much like someone on a job interview should bring extra copies of his resume to the interview, you should bring multiple copies of your information. Include all of the basic information like height, weight, from which side you bat, from which side you throw, links to your recent stats (usually a link to your college team's stats), third-party respected references (like a pro scout with whom you have worked), and any academic or civic awards you earned.

Do this and you will be better prepared than the majority of the guys who will be attending the independent baseball tryout with you.

Independent Baseball Tryouts - What Teams Seek in Players

If you plan to attend an upcoming independent professional baseball tryout then there are a few things you should know. The major items you should know are what the general managers, managers, coaches, directors of player operations/procurement, or other team and league representatives seek. This will help you focus on your training and give you the best odds of showing the teams what they want to see in prospective players.

For all position players, perhaps with the exception of catchers, teams are looking for speed. Unless a first baseman or designated hitter shows impressive power at the plate, speed is what is sought. The professional level is much faster than the college level, and teams need athletes who are quick.

From there, overall arm strength is sought. Catchers are going to be judged on their "pop time" throwing to second base, outfielders will throw from right field to third base, and infielders throw all the way across the diamond. Arm strength and accuracy are what the team representatives seek.

Hitting may not come into play until the afternoon scrimmage. Sometimes, those running the tryouts eliminate a large percentage of prospects before they even have a chance to showcase their hitting skills.

The representatives figure that if adequate speed and arm strength are not present then the player is already a liability. Many share the philosophy that they need quality pitching, defense, and speed in order to win championships; and they believe that they can go out, if necessary, to find hitting power from players who are released by the affiliated organizations or right after the college draft. This is not to say that someone with dramatic power won't get signed out of a tryout camp; just know that is usually not the first skill that they evaluate.

Pitchers need to show command of their fastballs in terms of location, movement, and velocity. The representatives want to know that their pitchers are athletic and in command of good pitches because such skills are required at the higher levels. While a pitcher possibly can improve by working with a team's pitching coach, few teams believe that such a pitcher could be valuable if he doesn't demonstrate at least a high level of command. The same applies for a pitcher's second and third pitches.

Finally, if you make the afternoon scrimmage then the team representatives will evaluate several factors. They want to see how you carry yourself and if you can be a leader during one of these independent tryouts. Leadership, body language, hustle, and baseball instincts are all evaluated so remember that you are always being evaluated even if you are not playing at that time.

If you master these skills you will give yourself, at least, the best possible chance to get a second look from an independent baseball team. Many guys with great baseball talent never made it to the independent level because they failed to acknowledge what teams require. Learn from their mistakes and give yourself the best odds that you can.

Intangibles Which Can Make A Difference

You may have heard these before, and they often bear repeating. “Intangibles” can make the difference in your professional baseball career.

If you were to take all of the general managers across independent baseball and ask them their ideal team, many would likely say that they want every player to be:

- top caliber athletes
- willing to do whatever it takes to win a championship
- worthy of affiliated scouts’ attentions
- willing to do community service
- articulate and intelligent enough to speak in the community (for example in front of kids at schools, with sponsors, etc.)
- intelligent enough to understand the business needs of the team so that a player can help the front office improve profitability during the season AND be worthy of offering employment during the off-season

Unfortunately this is not always the case with every player, especially regarding the last few traits. If you have gifts in these areas, be sure to showcase them to the manager and the front office.

Be prudent when making these gifts aware as you could face backlash from players, your manager, or certain members of the front office as they could perceive it that you are “showing them up” or threatening their positions. While such concern is not always warranted on certain teams, this is part of the “professional” part of baseball which is a high-risk, high-reward strategy. Seek career mentors both involved with baseball and those with no involvement in baseball to coach you on how to show management that you’re “more than just a ball player.”

Video Resources For You To Visit:

- Independent Baseball Tryouts - What Teams Seek In Players:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnX9B7MJnq0>
- Independent Baseball Tryouts - Factors To Consider:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYrBGr_Wp-8
- Independent Baseball Tryouts - What Happens After The Tryout:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3V9SQzpoVM>
- Independent Baseball Tryouts: What To Do If Not Signed:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4jse8TcSQU>

As a reminder, when you are ready to start your pursuit of joining the independent baseball ranks then visit: [**http://www.IndependentMinorLeagueBaseball.com**](http://www.IndependentMinorLeagueBaseball.com)