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**Clutch Hits and .463 Average Still Not Enough for Coste,
While Brian Sweeney Lives the Good Life With Padres**

By Bob Wirz

How do you combine devastation and exhilaration into one story? That is today's task, friends, as I try to do justice to the feelings of two 30-something Independent Baseball originals.

Both stories started when these baseball nomads were in Independent leagues that have long since disbanded. And they are real stories, the kind that inspire players to fight to show they have been overlooked.

Chris Coste represents the devastating side of the tale since his .463 spring training batting average with clutch hit after clutch hit was not enough to give the 33-year-old catcher-first baseman-third baseman his first regular season major league opportunity. The **Philadelphia Phillies** quashed his hopes only hours before Opening Day when they traded for a fifth outfielder.

And riding atop **Mt. Everest** with exhilaration is right-handed pitcher **Brian Sweeney**, a mere 31, who got to experience his very first major league opener this week as a member of the **San Diego Padres** bullpen. Sweeney had enjoyed sips of coffee previously with **Seattle** (nine innings in 2003) and San Diego (14 innings in 2004), but that was before he was introduced to a packed stadium on Opening Day.

Sweeney Empathizes With Coste

"That stinks", Sweeney said, when we discussed the Coste situation, but that was the only time the **Heartland League** graduate mustered anything that tempered his excitement. And this was nearly two full days after the Padres had opened with a 6-1 dumping of **San Francisco**.

Sweeney said Opening Day "was right up there with my major league debut" and his only big league victory, which was over **Randy Johnson** two years ago. "Being introduced, standing there with **Trevor Hoffman**, hearing the crowd...looking up into the stands and seeing my wife (Connie).

"I don't think anything can take away from this feeling.

"I hope they give me a chance to show what I can do," said the **Yonkers, NY** native. He certainly didn't stumble in his first opportunity, hurling two scoreless innings (one hit, two strikeouts) in a 3-1 loss to **San Francisco** Wednesday.

Sweeney believes his journey from that start at **Lafayette, IN** in the Heartland League in 1996 ended up in San Diego this spring because of a mental adjustment “after I stunk it up for three months in **Venezuela**” this winter. Learning that pressuring himself at every step wasn’t working, “I now go out there with a more carefree attitude.”

Everyone knows fortunes change, but for right now Brian Sweeney is wearing a major league uniform while the .463-hitting Coste is back in the **International League** where his **Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Red Barons** were scheduled to open up at **Columbus, OH**, Thursday.

Coste ‘Tearred Up’ Immediately After Getting the News

While neither started out with what one would describe as a “charmed” professional baseball life, **Brian Sweeney** has seemed to have it a little easier than **Chris Coste** all along. Sweeney ran off a 6-0 record in the Heartland League in 1996, and had his contract purchased by **Seattle** that September. He has been with major league organizations ever since.

Coste started a year earlier by getting into 24 games for the long-forgotten **Prairie League’s Brandon (Manitoba) Grey Owls**, who were all of 19-51 that season. Then he put in four developmental years with his hometown **Fargo (ND) RedHawks** in the **Northern League**, first as a second baseman, then as a catcher. He hit .314, .312, .328 and .335 in that stretch (1996-99) and has been in five major league organizations since.

Coste went to bed Saturday night thinking that his sizzling spring hitting and his versatility had finally gotten him his first major league opportunity after more than 3,000 minor league at bats spread over 11 seasons.

Wrong!

When he woke up Sunday morning, the day before the Phils’ opener and the day of the final exhibition game, both at **Citizens Bank Park**, the scrolling news on *ESPN* told Coste the Phillies had acquired **David Dellucci** from **Texas**.

“My eyes immediately teared up and I thought ‘Here we go again.’ Another setback in a long line of setbacks,” he told **Mike McFeely** of *The Fargo Forum*. **Philadelphia** Manager **Charlie Manuel** broke the official news before the exhibition finale that Coste was being sent back to Triple-A **Scranton/Wilkes-Barre**. Adding to the tortured irony, Coste had been the opposing **Boston Red Sox** last cut in 2003.

“Everybody today has asked me how I feel,” Coste told McFeely. “I feel like I had the winning lottery ticket for \$200 million and somebody stole it out of my hands. The whole world knows somebody stole it from me, but I can’t prove it and I can’t do anything about it.”

What Is a Dream, What Is Real?

I feel confident in saying the likeable Coste even wondered if he was dreaming when he saw the ESPN message about the trade which spelled his doom. He had talked at length about his baseball dreams when we spent 90 minutes together over breakfast in **Clearwater, FL** little more than a week before spring training ended. He explained uncertainty at times whether some events were real or imaginary.

In one of Coste's standout games this spring he hit a pair of two-run home runs to bring Philadelphia back from an 8-4 deficit against Pittsburgh to tie the Pirates. The second one came with two out in the ninth inning after new Phillies strongman Ryan Howard had made an out.

"I said to Tomas Perez (who also was cut in the waning days), in Spanish no less, 'this has got to be a dream'", Coste related, while downing an omelet and a stack of pancakes.

Coste has had a lot of troubling baseball dreams. "My hands may go numb," he said, "or I may hit one off the wall and I can't even get to first base, or (it is my turn to bat and) I can't tie my shoes or I am in the bathroom."

Regardless of whether the 6-foot-1, 200-pound Coste ever gets called to the major leagues, no one will be able to erase the standout spring in which he went 19-for-41 and compiled team-leading .805 slugging .500 on-base percentages. Amazing figures. He had five doubles and three homers and drove in 11 runs.

He actually caught a break early on in an intra-squad game. "I wasn't scheduled to play," Coste says, but "Howard had a temperature of 103." This gritty Independent veteran went 4-for-5 with two doubles, a home run and five runs batted in. "If it wasn't for that day I'd probably be sent down by now", Coste said during our breakfast.

He homered in the Grapefruit League opener against the New York Yankees at Tampa (for the second time in two years). "I hit a 1-0 pitch as far as I can hit it," he said, then the next afternoon beat the Yankees with "a line drive down the leftfield line". One day later he had two of the team's five hits against the Venezuelan National Team, and he capped the brilliant four-game stretch with a two-out, bottom-of-the-ninth-inning single against Houston, which tied that game.

Other heroics followed, but that stretch grabbed the Phils' attention. "If I don't make it I'd be incredibly disappointed," the versatile Coste told me, "but for the first time I feel I have put myself in position for a (in-season) callup."

He also is in position when some producer decides to film the sequel to the popular movie "The Rookie".

Harris Makes Climb From Indy to Majors

While **Chris Coste's** magical dream of going from non-roster player to major leaguer out of spring training fizzled, two of the 35 invitees with an Independent Baseball past are in the major leagues.

In addition to **Brian Sweeney** with **San Diego**, **Jeff Harris** landed his first Opening Day opportunity with **Seattle**.

"How dramatic is that," Harris told **Tacoma's News Tribune**. "Two years ago I was released from the **Mexican League** after pitching four innings." The 31-year-old went back to **Quebec (Can-Am League)**, where he had a 9-4 record (2.51) in 2003, then quickly was signed by the Mariners for whom he made 11 appearances last summer (2-5, 4.19).

Harris, who also pitched at **Chico, CA** (now in the **Golden League**) in 2002 and 2003, said just getting to the majors was great, "but this, this is way up there." He learned his fate

Saturday, called his wife, Kimberly, who was in **California** and “I told her (to) get a ticket and come on up, and bring the camera.”

Northern League Has Five in Majors, Atlantic a Trio

Of the dozen onetime Independent players lucky enough to be on Opening Day rosters, the **Northern League** can boast of five of its grads (**Tim Byrdak, J. D. Drew, Kevin Millar, George Sherrill** and the disabled **Bobby Madritsch**). The **Atlantic League** is next with **Joe Borowski, Brendan Donnelly** (who also played in the **Frontier League**) and **Chris Widger**.

There will be more, hopefully including **Chris Coste**.

(The author has 16 years of major league baseball public relations experience with Kansas City and as chief spokesman for two Commissioners and runs his own sports PR/marketing company in Stratford, CT. He is the author of *The Independent Minor Leagues: '2005 Season in Review'* and a new blog, www.IndyBaseballChatter.blogspot.com. Subscriptions to this weekly *Independent Baseball Insider* column are available at www.WirzandAssociates.com.)