

Independent Baseball Insider

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Latest Rash of Player Sales (10 in Two Weeks) Reinforces Some of Independent Game's Best Attributes

By Bob Wirz

Even though there is an urge this early to focus on spring training because of so many promotions to 40-man major league rosters and earlier-than-usual non-roster invitations, truth be told the big story right now is the rash of signings of Independent players to affiliated contracts.

This corner can pinpoint 10 such signings to major league farm systems in the last two weeks alone; 21 since the 2012 Indy season ended and it is likely there have been others that have not come to light.

These happenings cannot be anything but music to the ears of everyone involved in the non-major-league-affiliated game since they reinforce why more than seven million fans turned out to enjoy the win-first, develop-second approach to the game and the reason players eagerly sign on with the 50 or so teams playing throughout the country.

Enter **George Tsamis**, the decade-long manager at **St. Paul, MN**, one of the best producing franchises of major-league-worthy talent year in and year out with 107 player sales since the **Saints** and the Independent game got going two decades ago.

Two recent sales by the **American Association** team drive home a pair of prime examples why Independent talent is attractive to many of the 30 big-league organizations.

Example A is southpaw hurler **Caleb Thielbar**, discarded by one organization only two years ago, who meteorically climbed through the Class A, AA and AAA levels of **Minnesota's** farm system last summer and now owns a spot on the **Twins'** 40-man winter roster. He needed a second chance, capitalized on it as a 24-year-old in 2011 and now is a solid major league prospect.

Example B is **Robert Coe**, now 24, who spent his college days primarily as a catcher at a college not greatly known for its baseball, got a chance to convert to pitching as a non-drafted free agent at St. Paul one and a half seasons ago, and impressed the **Arizona Diamondbacks** to the point he will have his first opportunity in a major league farm system next season.

"A lot of people had written him (Thielbar) off (after his release from the **Milwaukee** farm system)," Tsamis said from his **Connecticut** home this week. "He wasn't even going to spring training with anyone that year ('11)." As for Coe, Tsamis said the Saints' pitching coach at that time (**Jason Verdugo**, now athletic director at **Hamline University** in St. Paul) "remembered him from college (**University of Wisconsin-Whitewater**, where he had pitched all of 12.1 innings)."



St. Paul gave Coe an opportunity when it was somewhat desperate for a player in late June, and he became a decent replacement (3-1, 4.93) in 18 appearances, including one start. He became a starter this season when all he did was tie for second in the American Association with 12 victories (12-5) and third in earned run average (2.91.) “He’s not even finished growing”, Tsamis explained, and once he adds to his 6-foot-4, 180-pound frame “he’s going to get better.”

The St. Paul skipper praised both hurlers for their willingness to “challenge” hitters. Neither overpowers hitters with their natural talent, which some scouts virtually insist upon. Tsamis also praises Thielbar’s “real good curve” while the hurler himself said much of his concentration in the **Arizona Fall League** as well as when he reports to spring training in **Fort Myers, FL** will be “making my slider sharper.” Thielbar considers his fastball command his primary strength today.

Growing up as a lifetime Twins fan since he lives some 40 minutes south of the **Twin Cities** excites the **South Dakota State** product on his new opportunity. But he has not forgotten St. Paul. “I had a ton of fun; it was a pretty diverse group of guys,” he said, while taking a month off from throwing.

Teammates helped with his development in other ways during the 2011 campaign when he was 3-3, 2.54 in 43 relief appearances and struck out 62 hitters in just under 50 innings. “We had some really good left-handed hitters,” the lefty said, so he picked the brains of the likes of **Jason Cooper** and **Jonathon Van Every** for tips on what they looked for when they faced other southpaws.

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MLB Organizations Take Eight From American Association

While six Independent leagues can take credit for at least one of the players picked up by major league organizations since the end of the 12 season, the **American Association** stands the tallest with eight of its players joining the affiliated ranks.

Five of the 21 players got their very first professional opportunity in an Independent league, with the American Association producing right-hander **Robert Coe** (see story above) and **Fargo, ND** outfielder **Buddy Sosnoskie** (for **Baltimore**). In addition to Coe, **Arizona** also signed righties **Chris Cox** from **Quebec (Can-Am League)** and **Kyle Schepel** from **Rockford, IL (Frontier League)**. Baltimore inked catcher **Jim Vahalik** from the Frontier League (**Washington, PA** and **London, Ontario**).

Both Baltimore and Arizona purchased six players out of the Indy ranks, a trend that seems likely to continue now that longtime scout **Mal Fichman** has joined the **Birds** (after being with Arizona) and former Can-Am Manager and Owner **Chris Carminucci** will be tracking down talent for the **Diamondbacks**.

Fargo Closer Boleska’s Journey Continues With Orioles

American Association Reliever of the Year **Tom Boleska’s** career took one more turn this morning (Thursday) when the 26-year-old **Canadian** was one of three players with Independent ties selected in the Triple-A phase of the Rule 5 draft as the **Winter Meetings** wound down in **Nashville**.

Boleska, a right-hander, now belongs to **Baltimore**, where he will be on the **Norfolk, VA** roster. Somewhat remarkably, the **Orioles** are the fifth major league team to have a direct line to Boleska in little more than a year. He spent almost five seasons in the **Pittsburgh** farm system (9-9, 12 saves in 103

appearances) before finishing the '11 season putting up impressive closer numbers with **Edmonton** of the **North American League**.

After that, it was a quick we-are-interested-no-we-aren't with **San Francisco**, the one-year-and-done **Independent Baseball Prospect Tournament** late last winter, a brief look from **Miami** and a summer in **Fargo, ND** which resulted in a franchise-record 29 saves (2-1, 1.76) along with 58 strikeouts of American Association hitters in 46 innings. **Minnesota** purchased his contract only to have Baltimore draft him. A fastball that registers up to 95 miles per hour and a good curve will get a pitcher noticed every time. Let us hope the **Orioles** give him time to produce.

Third baseman **Marquez Smith**, 27, was drafted by **Texas** after he had hit at a .363 clip (.422 on-base percentage) in 23 games last spring for **Camden, NJ (Atlantic League)** and .293 in 71 more for **Boston's** Double-A farm club. Lefty **Efrain Nieves**, originally slated for **Bridgeport, CT (Atlantic)** last season but eventually a strikeout-per-inning reliever for **Detroit's** entry in the **New York-Penn League**, was selected by **Toronto**. Indy players were not touched in the major league phase of the Rule 5.

28 Headed to Major League Camps So Far

Veteran major leaguers **Stephen Drew (Camden, NJ, Atlantic League)** and **George Sherrill (Evansville, IN, Frontier League, and, Winnipeg and Sioux Falls, SD, Northern League)** are still on the free agent roster—Drew is one of the major names—but even without them we can already identify 28 former Independent Baseball players with major league spring training trips a certainty.

An impressive total for early December, this group includes 20 on major league rosters, the most recent of whom are pitchers **Greg Burke (Atlantic City, NJ, Atlantic League)** with the **New York Mets** and **Brandon Sisk (Bay Area, Continental League)** with the **Los Angeles Angels**. Burke, now with a submarine delivery, was Reliever of the Year in the **Baltimore** farm system. The non-roster invitations will be more abundant between now and reporting dates in mid-February, but additions since our last column already include pitchers **Shawn Hill**, a 2012 standout in the Atlantic League (**York, PA**), with **American League** champion **Detroit**, and veteran major leaguer **Tim Byrdak (Gary, IN and Joliet, IL, when both were in the Northern League)** and rookie **Scott Rice (Atlantic League cities of York, Long Island, NY and Newark, NJ)** both with the Mets.

Catcher **Eddy Rodriguez (Sioux Falls and El Paso, TX, both American Association)** will report to **San Diego**, infielder **C. J. Retherford (Fargo, ND, American Association)** with the **Los Angeles Dodgers** and outfielder **Felix Pie (Camden)** with **Pittsburgh**.

Is 36-Homer Season Good Enough for John Lindsey?

Whether he will get one more major league look at 36 (2013 playing age) is not known, but it is still good to see onetime **New Jersey Jackals (Can-Am League)** first baseman-DH **John Lindsey** get another contract with Triple-A **Toledo, OH (Detroit)**. Big, friendly Lindsey joined Toledo midway in last season, and still hit 15 homers. Combined with early-season prowess in the **Mexican League**, Lindsey slugged 36 round-trippers and drove in 111 runs in 141 games last season. His only 12 major league at-bats were with the **Los Angeles Dodgers** in 2010.

Sparky Lyle Leaves Major Feats in Manager's Chair

The biggest headline involving managers in recent days had to be **Sparky Lyle's** move to “manager emeritus” status at **Somerset, NJ** after 15 years of leading the **Patriots**, including a record five **Atlantic League** championships. It couldn't be clearer that Lyle was nudged—if not totally pushed—to give up

managing since Owner **Steve Kalafer** told *MyCentralJersey.com* “sometimes you have to tell people what might be best for them when they’re not always aware of it themselves”, but the onetime major league relief ace of the **New York Yankees** took the change graciously. “I’m fine with what we’re doing,” he told longtime beat writer **Ryan Dunleavy**. “If Steven hadn’t made this proposal to me, I’d probably want to still manage, but I think it will be good for me and the team.” He was out of baseball for about 15 years before accepting his first managing job.

Matching Lyle’s record will be a challenge for his replacement, longtime pitching coach and the team’s player personnel director **Brett Jodie**, because his teams won 1,024 regular season games, had 12 consecutive seasons without a losing record (1999-2010) and enjoyed one stretch where Somerset won 10 of 11 playoff series.

(Bob Wirz also writes about Independent Baseball on www.IndyBaseballChatter.com. Fans may subscribe to this *Independent Baseball Insider* column, which is being published 41 times in 2012, at www.WirzandAssociates.com or comment to RWirz@aol.com. The author has 16 years of major league baseball experience with Kansas City and as spokesman for two Commissioners, and lives in Stratford, CT.)