

Independent Baseball Insider

Vol. 11, No. 40, December 19, 2013

Wirz & Associates, Inc. 665-A North Trail, Stratford, CT 06614 TEL: 203 380-9931 Email:RWirz@aol.coms

Daniel Nava Discusses It All From Being 4-Foot-8 to Red Sox Championship

By Bob Wirz

This column has talked about **Daniel Nava** for what feels like several years now because of his made-for-the-theatre story of not being big enough to do anything but serve as a manager his first two years of college to the point last summer when he was being called "the best bargain in the major leagues".

Everyone who follows our sport knows him today because of that sweet swing that got him a career high 458 at-bats--he only came close one time in the minor leagues--and led to a .303 average and so many clutch hits as the **Boston Red Sox** made their way from the **American League East** basement to a **World Series** championship last season.

We also recognize the 30-year-old switch-hitter with the baby face as one of the best players ever to climb the unbelievably difficult ladder from starting a career in Independent Baseball to ending up in the big time. He is at the very pinnacle among those swinging a bat with **Kevin Millar** and the equal of relievers **George Sherrill** and **Jeff Zimmerman**. Only 40 players have made this climb for even a few days.



So, with the help of the **Red Sox** public relations staff, I tracked Nava down at his home in **Arizona** where he is enjoying the offseason with wife **Rachel** and their four-month-old daughter **Faith**, almost certainly the youngest person ever to ride in a duck boat down the **Charles River** as part of the latest Boston championship celebration.

He was as affable as I had hoped, willing to discuss everything from being a 4-foot-8, 68-69-pound lad when he started high school in **California** and later was rejected as too small to play his first two years at **Santa Clara University**. He had to settle for coed softball just seven years ago when two Independent teams rejected him at tryouts.

"I sent emails to a lot of teams", he said, identifying the **Frontier** and **Atlantic Leagues**, as among those he contacted, and was feeling "it (probably) wasn't meant to be" for him to play professional baseball even though he had developed a collegiate swing that produced at a .400 clip (196 for 490) in two years at the **College of San Mateo** and a second try at Santa Clara in '06.

But a high school opponent and Santa Clara teammate, **Jason Matteucci**, put in a good word for Nava with the **Chico (CA) Outlaws**, where he was playing. The **Golden League** team's hitting coach, **John Macalutas**, reached Nava when he was on the way to the beach and told him the Outlaws were holding a tryout the next day. It was three hours away.

By **Labor Day**, the previously unwanted switch hitter had won the Golden League's batting and Most Valuable Player honors by hitting .371 and he had accounted for 117 runs (12 homers, 59 RBI and 70 runs) in only 72 games. He even stole 18 bases in 20 attempts.

I asked him how it seems now when he looks back to joining the Outlaws in '07. "Wow" and "Oh, my goodness" were two of his responses. "I was grateful to be signed."

The prodigious averages continued in the first two seasons in Boston's farm system, .341 and .339 with two Class A teams and .364 with a tremendous .479 on-base percentage in a 32-game trial with Double-A **Portland, ME**.

Nava's historic first pitch grand slam in his major league debut came the next season, although it was supplanted, in the outfielder and part-time first baseman's mind, by a round-tripper he hit in the very first game after the **Boston Marathon** bombing early this season "because of what it meant to the city".

Major league teams, including the Red Sox, are offering multi-million dollar contracts almost as if they were candy bars this offseason but Nava does not have enough service time to be in that category just yet. So, he is spending his time with family and working out regularly at a well-known athletic facility in **Phoenix**--he has not yet picked up a bat--in preparation for another year of probably sharing left-field with **Jonny Gomes** and helping the Red Sox try to repeat as World Champions.

I got a chuckle out of the way he discussed his World Series check as "a nice blessing", explaining he had no clue until a couple of years ago that players got more than a ring for being part of a championship team. That 'blessing' would buy 307,322 lottery tickets worth \$1 apiece.

* * * *

ANXIOUS FOR MORE INDEPENDENT BASEBALL COVERAGE?

We Have It at www.IndyBaseballChatter.com

* * * *

Twins, Nationals Take Two of Indy's Best Power Hitters

With so much talk in the baseball universe about the lack of power hitting prospects, it is good to see that people in the **Minnesota** and **Washington** scouting departments have been paying attention.

They have grabbed two of the best long-ball artists the Independent leagues have produced recently.

The **Twins** stepped up to ink the **American Association's** new home run record holder, **C. J. Ziegler**, who also was named that league's Player of the Year, then was tabbed by *Baseball America* as Independent Player of the Year. The **Washington Nationals** signed free agent **Brock Peterson**, who hit 25 homers and drove in 86 runs in less than a full season for **St. Louis's** top farm club in **Memphis, TN**.

While neither has been invited to a major league spring training camp, it seems logical both players, primarily first basemen, will get some looks during camp. This is especially true for Peterson since the former **Atlantic Leaguer (Bridgeport, CT, '11-12)** got his first major league opportunity last season, going 2-for-26 with two RBI while being used primarily as a right-handed pinch hitter as the **Cardinals** were bidding for their eventual **National League** title.

Ziegler toppled the American Association home run record (**Brandon Sing, 27, Sioux Falls, SD, 2010**) when he hit 30 for **Wichita, KS** while driving in 99 runs in 100 games. It is not out of the question that the 28-year-old Ziegler, who also has played in the **Frontier League** and the **North American League**

for four consecutive seasons, could end up at some time in the future battling long time **Can-Am League** first baseman **Chris Colabello** for playing time with Minnesota. Their stock could have actually improved somewhat earlier this week when veteran **Ryan Doumit** was dealt to **Atlanta**. While Doumit is a switch-hitter, his absence opens the door at least a crack for either player to replace his power potential as a designated hitter. Incidentally, Colabello has been struggling in the **Dominican Republic**, going without an extra base hit in his 16 games and hitting only .164.

Power hitters still available who have been in the Independent ranks also include **Jake Fox**, who slammed 25 homers for **Somerset, NJ (Atlantic League)** last season and is leading the **Mexican League** this offseason with 46 RBI and is third in homers (10); **Ryan Harvey** and **Tim Pahuta**, who both hit 29 homers while at **Lancaster, PA (Atlantic)** and **Sioux Falls, SD (American Association)**, respectively, and **Jon Myers**, who went yard 25 times while playing for **Gateway (Sauget, IL)** in the Frontier League.

Robinson Cano's Cousin Also Joins Seattle Organization

Seattle made another interesting signing only days after inking **Robinson Cano** for \$240 million. The **Mariners** have given his cousin, third baseman-outfielder **Burt Reynolds**, a minor league deal. The 25-year-old **Dominican** native has shown some power by hitting 26 home runs in three Independent seasons, 2011-12 with **Newark, NJ (Can-Am League)** and last season with **Camden, NJ (Atlantic League)**. Reynolds has never played in more than 71 games in any of six minor league seasons with his best batting average of .289 in a rookie league in the **Tampa Bay** minor league system his first season ('08).

Another former Camden player, outfielder **Felix Pie**, who logged some time with **Pittsburgh** last season, is going to give the **Korean** league a shot, signing with the **Hanwah Eagles**.

Sioux City Goes All Out to End Its Title Drought

Give credit to the **Sioux City (IA) Explorers** for an exhaustive search for a new manager to help end that community's 21-year drought without a championship in Independent Baseball. After all, Sioux City is one of three remaining franchises from the **Northern League's** startup in 1993, and it trailed every other team in the **American Association** in attendance last season.

After interviewing what they said were 22 candidates in an initial foray, calling five of them a second time around and bringing three finalists to town, the Explorers have hired former pitcher and recent pitching coach **Steve Montgomery** as their manager.

"There's no question we need a winning culture in Sioux City," General Manager **Shane Tritz**, the American Association's Executive of the Year, told the hometown *Sioux City Journal*. The 6-foot-7 Montgomery has been a part of winning teams the last 10 years as pitching coach at **Fargo, ND** in the same league where the **RedHawks** were in the playoffs nine times, won three championships and saw the pitching staff lead the league in earned run average on five occasions.

While the 39-year-old Montgomery said he could not guarantee a title, he told *The Journal* "we'll spend 20 hours a day on it", following the pattern he and Manager **Doug Simunic** had at Fargo. "We track players down, whether it takes calling them 10 times or staying up till two in the morning. I've learned from the best (Simunic)".

Loudoun County, Joplin Still Working Toward Franchises

In other franchise news, the **Loudoun (VA) Hounds** have formally made the announcement many expected that they will not be ready to join the **Atlantic League** at any time in 2014 because of stadium delays and senior management changes, and **Joplin, MO** continues to inch closer to a determination it will be part of the **American Association** as early as 2015. Joplin City Attorney **Brian Head** told the City Council this week only a performance agreement and a lease detailing use of the stadium still are needed with the league-supported **WLD Suarez Baseball LLC** group before it will commit to substantial funds to add seating and make other improvements at venerable **Joe Becker Stadium**.

Nuno Credited With Best Control Among Yankees

Southpaw **Vidal Nuno**, who remains on the **New York Yankees'** 40-man roster and could be a sleeper to get into the **Bombers'** rotation next season, has been dubbed by *Baseball America* as the pitcher with the best control among the team's prospects. The 26-year-old, who started six games in the **Frontier League (Washington, PA)** in 2011 (2-3, 2.83) after being in the **Cleveland** organization and before signing with the Yankees, had a 2.25 earned run average in five games, including three starts, with New York last season.

(Bob Wirz also writes about Independent Baseball on www.IndyBaseballChatter.com. The author has 16 years of major league baseball public relations experience with Kansas City and as spokesman for two Commissioners, and lives in Stratford, CT.)