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How About Fielding a Major League Team Made Up Entirely of Independent Baseball Managers?

By Bob Wirz

The success of modern day Independent Baseball can be measured any number of ways. The record 8.4 million paying customers of 2007 is impressive; so are the hundreds of millions of dollars poured into building or upgrading stadiums. The 20 or so current players who have climbed all the way to the major leagues make a powerful statement and so does having another 200 in the affiliated minor leagues.

Another measuring stick has been looming in my mind because I know it is getting bigger and more impressive.

That is the undeniable fact people with major league playing resumes, including some whose pensions probably would allow them to play golf 365 days a year, are choosing to manage Independent teams.

Back in 1993 when all of this started, **Tim Blackwell (St. Paul, MN)**, who had a respectable catching career with the **Chicago Cubs** and three other teams, was the only major leaguer calling the shots unless one counts **Frank Verdi (Sioux Falls, SD)**, who got into one game with the **New York Yankees** 40 years earlier.



Into the *Total Baseball* encyclopedia we went to check on the credentials of 2008 Independent managers, and we came up with 30 skippers who reached the majors as players with a few jobs still open. This does not count the numerous coaches or **American Association** Manager **Terry Bevington (Shreveport, LA)**, who managed but did not play in the majors.

How does a roster that starts with **Hall of Fame** catcher **Gary Carter**, 288-game winner **Tommy John** and superb reliever **Sparky Lyle** sound?

The research turned out to be so intriguing we decided to select our own starting lineup. Catching is the deepest position because of Carter (2,296 games, 324 homers, 10 **All-Star** selections), but when he needed a day at first base to rest his knees four others who averaged well over 1,000 major league games would be waiting. One could choose from **Steve Yeager**, **Rich Gedman**, **Joe Ferguson** or **Chris Hoiles**.

Marshall, Backman, Hobson, Lanier on Infield

It will no doubt start some debates, but here is our hypothetical starting lineup of major

leaguers with their '08 Independent affiliation and some key playing achievements:

Starting pitcher—John, **Bridgeport, Atlantic League**, 26 seasons, 46 shutouts
Relief pitcher—**Sparky Lyle, Somerset, NJ, Atlantic**, 222 saves
Catcher—Carter, **Orange County (Fullerton, CA), Golden League**
Infield—**Mike Marshall, 1B, Yuma, AZ, Golden**, who played in the postseason five times; **Wally Backman, 2B, Joliet, IL, Northern League**, 1,102 games, key No. 2 hitter who led **National League** with a .985 fielding percentage in 1985; **Butch Hobson, 3B, Southern Maryland (Waldorf), Atlantic**, 30 HR, 112 RBI in 1977; **Hal Lanier, SS, Sussex (Augusta, NJ), Can-Am League**, paced NL shortstops with .979 fielding percentage in 1968
Outfield—**Von Hayes, Lancaster, PA, Atlantic**, topped NL with 46 doubles, 107 runs in 1986; **Rick Miller, Nashua, NH**, superb in CF, 1,482 games; **Pete Incaviglia, Grand Prairie, TX, American Association**, 206 home runs

While position players account for 23 of the 30 slots, a three-game series would not present a problem on the mound since another lefty, **Dave LaPoint, Long Island, NY, Atlantic**, won 80 games and had three 10-win seasons, and either righthander **Les Lancaster, Sioux City, IA, American Association**, 41 wins, or southpaw **Butch Henry, El Paso, TX, American Association**, 33 victories, could go in Game 3.

1,000-Game Man Cory Snyder Comes Off Bench

The bench—or replacement starters—would be fortified with the likes of outfielder **Cory Snyder, St. George, UT, Golden**, with 1,068 major league games, and infielder **Curtis Wilkerson, Tarrant County, TX, Continental League**, who played in 972 contests.

Here is the remainder of the “team” of major leaguers now managing in Independent Baseball:

PITCHERS—**Steve Shirley, Sioux Falls, American Association**; **George Tsamis, St. Paul, American Association**.

CATCHERS—**Chris Bando, Aiken, SC, South Coast League**; **Doc Edwards, San Angelo, TX, United League**; **Joe Ferguson, Camden, NJ, Atlantic**; **Rich Gedman, Worcester, MA, Can-Am**; **Chris Hoiles, York, PA, Atlantic**; **Steve Yeager, Long Beach, CA, Golden**.

INFIELDBERS—**Mike Busch, Calgary, Alberta, Golden**; **Greg Jelks, Washington, PA, Frontier League**; **Tim Johnson, Lincoln, NE, American Association**; **Wayne Krenchicki, Newark, NJ, Atlantic**.

OUTFIELDERS—**Brent Bowers, Edmonton, Alberta, Golden**; **Tom Goodwin, Lewisville, TX, Continental**; **Phil Plantier, Macon, GA, South Coast**.

Jeffrey Leonard, who played in 1,415 major league games and was a two-time All-Star, is managing **Blythe, AZ** in the **Arizona Winter League**, and has been mentioned for a possible Golden League job. We did not count Leonard just yet.

Indy Grads Sweep Dominican Honors

A pair of 31-year-olds, who have extensive Independent Baseball and Triple-A experience but have been virtually ignored when it comes to major league playing time, may have helped themselves for the long run by earning important honors this winter in the **Dominican League**.

Juan Melo, who has been in four separate Indy leagues including the **Golden** and **Northern** last summer, fought off a number of current major leaguers to win the batting title while playing for **Escogido**. The switch-hitter, who can play all four infield positions, hit .318 in a season in which only three batters with enough plate appearances to qualify for the title reached the coveted .300 level. He was declared both Batter of the Year and Veteran of the Year.

Melo was released by **Washington** after playing 54 games at Class AA **Harrisburg, PA** last summer, then finished the campaign by appearing in 20 games (.262) for **Fargo, ND** in the **Northern League** and 23 (.330) for the **Golden League's St. George (UT) Roadrunners**. He was in Fargo for a time in 2003, then saw duty at **Quebec**, now in the **Can-Am League**, in 2004 and at **Lancaster, PA** in the **Atlantic League** the next summer. His only big-league experience was for 11 games (1-for-13) with **San Francisco** in 2000.

Giron, a slender righthander who turned in a 2-5 record and a 3.71 ERA in 39 relief appearances for **Kansas City's** Triple-A club at **Omaha, NE** last summer, earned Pitcher of the Year honors by posting a 5-0 record and a 3.73 earned run average for Escogido. He struck out 92 **Pacific Coast League** hitters in only 85 innings.

Giron was a major league spring training invitee with the Royals last spring, but has yet to get into a regular season game despite pitching exclusively in Class AA and AAA the last six seasons. His extensive Independent experience came from 1997-2000 in the **Frontier League (Kalamazoo, MI)**, **Northern League (Duluth, MN)** and the **Texas-Louisiana League (Rio Grande, Harlingen, TX)**, and **Springfield-Ozark, MO**.

Garces, Two Other Hurlers Doing Well

It seems unlikely **Rich Garces** is going to get back to the major leagues after a five-year drought, but the roly-poly reliever still compiles huge numbers in the **Venezuelan League**, including 19 saves for **Zulia** (1-2, 3.86) this winter. That follows his 17-save season in the **Can-Am League**. He went 6-4, 4.42 for **Nashua, NH**, where the 36-year-old remains on the roster.

Lefty **Luis Arroyo** of **Laredo, TX (United League)** was recently honored as Pitcher of the Week in the **Colombian League**, where he has gone 6-0, 0.88 ERA for 51 innings. That follows an 8-4 record at Laredo and a Can-Am win for **North Shore (Lynn, MA)**. Now 34, Arroyo spent 2004-06 hurling for four different **Atlantic League** teams.

Ned Darley, expected back at **El Paso, TX** after his 18-save season in the **American Association**, only has 15 innings in Venezuela, but has won his only decision while running up a 1.20 ERA.

Would You Keep Playing?

To that frequently asked question "why players keep going after their major league star has seemed to fall", try this for an answer. The minor league contract **Edgardo Alfonzo** signed recently with the **Texas Rangers**, which includes a major league spring training invitation, gives him "a base salary of \$650,000" if he plays in the **American League**, according to *MLB.com*.

Alfonzo, who will play at 34 in 2008, probably made \$3,000 a month for the **Long Island (NY) Ducks** last summer, where he went .266-5-56 in 384 at bats.

Tryout Camps Fast Approaching

Is it my imagination, or are tryout camps coming earlier than ever? The **Atlantic League** has two tryouts in a little over four weeks, January 11-13 at **Surprise, AZ** and February 1-3 at **Tigertown in Lakeland, FL**. **Gary Carter's Orange County Flyers** will be looking at talent for their **Golden League** team in **Fullerton, CA** January 26-27 .

Coaching Seems Better Than Playing

Two very intriguing stories out of the **Frontier League** crossed this cluttered desk recently. **Ralph Santana**, a lefty-hitting infielder-outfielder, decided to stay at **Southern Illinois (Marion)** to coach first base and teach base-running when he exceeded the league's 27-year-old age limit rather than keep adding to his totals of 220 stolen bases and a .298 average in another league.

Even though Santana hit .342 last season, third best in the league, he must feel that after seven years and not getting beyond Class A it is time to start building a different future.

Then there is the case of onetime **University of Michigan** player **Jason Wuerfel**, who has become the hitting coach for hometown **Traverse City, MI**. He had to give up his previous position as **Jazzy Jay**, the on-field personality for Beach Bums games.

The explanation was straight forward: "Baseball is my passion, and if I can't play anymore, I want to be coaching," Wuerfel said. It seems like the right choice to me.

(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 consulting company in Stratford, CT. He is the author of a new book, *'The Independent Minor Leagues: 2007 Season in Review'*, and a blog, www.IndyBaseballChatter.com. Subscriptions to the book and this *Independent Baseball Insider* column are available at www.WirzandAssociates.com.)