

# Independent Baseball Insider

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## Sparky Lyle Is One Joyful Man, Happy for a Fourth Title and for Some Player Successes

By Bob Wirz

For a guy who had enough thrills during his 16-year, 222-save major league career to satisfy most people forever, I would not expect **Sparky Lyle** to sound so full of joy these days. After all, the cheering for this left-handed relief standout, now 64 years old, ended 26 years ago.

He was full of laughter, almost giddy, perhaps much like the young dude from the **New York Yankees' Bronx Zoo** days over the telephone from **Somerset, NJ** this morning.

Who wouldn't be happy?

Lyle still is celebrating the **Somerset Patriots' Atlantic League** title, earned earlier this week when an unlikely power source, catcher **Travis Anderson**, blasted a walk-off home run in the deciding game. Sparky Lyle, the only manager to work all 11 Atlantic League seasons in the same job, now has four championships notched in his belt. Only one other franchise, **Newark, NJ**, has even half that many.

And, Lyle had just learned that one of his former players, catcher **Michel Hernandez**, was officially on the postseason roster of the surprising **Tampa Bay Rays**. He is one of four former Somerset players who finished the season in the majors, which is more than any other Independent Baseball franchise had.

"Everybody stepped up", a laughing Lyle said of this year's championship run. He had special praise for **Brett Jodie**, the Patriots' pitching coach and for the last two summers the player recruiter, a role which came about on a tip from Lyle's son **Scott**. "(We had) just a good mix of guys, and a little more speed", said Lyle, who said a handful of replacements Jodie brought it when the Patriots lost some key players in mid-season was key to the success.

Lyle's lengthy run in Somerset seems to stem not just from the talent of the players, but also from their desire. "I don't make any decisions until I see them in spring training," he told me. "It is important to me how they play." He also leans on something he learned with the Yankees, for whom he spent the heart of his career (1972-78). The veteran players take care of the clubhouse, he explained, setting the tone for the determination as well as mentoring the younger players.

Interestingly, neither Lyle nor Anderson fully watched the game-winning home run,



which broke a 2-2 tie and sent **Camden, NJ** home, still looking for its first title. They pretty well knew it was gone, even though Anderson, a six-year Atlantic League vet, only hit four round-trippers and drove in a mere 20 runs during the regular season. “Oh my God,” Lyle remembers saying, as he turned to an excited dugout the second the ball was hit. “I put a good swing on it,” said Anderson. “I just watched the leftfielder. It was a big moment.”

### Lyle Praises New Tampa Bay Catcher

“I just love it when that happens,” Somerset Manager **Sparky Lyle** said when he learned **Michel Hernandez**, a Patriots catcher for 29 games in 2007, was officially on **Tampa Bay’s** postseason roster. “He was such a good guy. He’s good at everything...so smooth.” Lyle believes the 30-year-old Hernandez, who had only four major league at-bats until September, frames pitches so well he may get his pitcher “eight to 10 (extra) strikes a game.”

Hernandez’s story is a great one. Even though Tampa Bay bought his contract from Somerset in June of 2007, he became a free agent in late October, signed with **Pittsburgh**, and played for the Pirates’ Triple-A club in **Indianapolis** virtually all season. His contract was sold to the Rays’ organization August 31, but he did not join the big-league club until September 9, and now is one of only two backstops on the roster.

Not bad for someone with 10 major league games in his career, and only 15 at-bats (three singles) for his five games with the Rays.

“He is a really, really nice guy,” praised **Travis Anderson**, his fellow catcher at **Somerset**. “I learned from him. He talked (a lot) about the game.”

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### Trio of Indy Catchers in MLB Postseason

Every catcher in Independent Baseball should be thrilled. Three backstops they would love to emulate are on major league postseason rosters.

The best known of the group is **Philadelphia’s Chris Coste**, the much talked about 33-year-old rookie of two seasons ago who finally got in a full major league season this summer (.263-9-36). We have documented so many times how his first five campaigns were as an Independent, primarily in his hometown of **Fargo, ND (Northern League)**.

**Mike Rivera** (.306-1-14) is the backup to durable **Jason Kendall** with **Milwaukee**, three years after he was with **Atlantic City, NJ**, and **Michel Hernandez** (.200-0-0) replaced the injured **Shawn Riggans** in **Tampa Bay**. The other player with actual Indy game experience is **Boston** outfielder **J.D. Drew** (**St. Paul, MN**). Three others signed or trained with Independent clubs, but did not play regular season games with them. They are **Red Sox** catcher **Jason Varitek** (**St. Paul**), **White Sox** reliever **D. J. Carrasco** (**Johnstown, PA, Frontier League**) and **Los Angeles Angels** hurler **Jered Weaver** (**Camden, NJ**).

### Ottawa Ownership Issue a Problem in Can-Am

The **Can-Am League** resolved one potential void for its 2009 lineup during this week's owner's meeting in **Brockton, MA** by accepting new ownership in **Nashua, NH**, but left with a new issue when **Ottawa Rapidz** ownership declared bankruptcy.

"We would like to keep the team in Ottawa," Commissioner **Miles Wolff** told us. "We want to see if there are potential owners", said Wolff, while admitting there is not a wealth of time. Wolff seems confident a stadium rental deal similar to this season (\$108,000) can be achieved despite a printed report the fee would escalate to an unacceptable \$1 million.

Ottawa's first season in the Can-Am after leaving Triple-A resulted in a decent average of 2,197 fans (101,073 total), fifth best in the eight-team circuit. Wolff also frets that losing Ottawa could damage the league's chances of eventually getting into **Montreal**, where the issue is lack of a suitable facility.

It seems a bit ironic that with **Boston** defending its 2007 World Championship this week the big name in the new Nashua group is onetime Red Sox General Manager **Dan Duquette**. The new owners plan to move away from the nickname Pride, and call the team the **American Defenders of New Hampshire** because of a military link.

"I think this tie with the military is going to be key," former Owner **John Stabile**, told columnist **Tom King** of *The Nashua Telegraph*. "The tie they're going to have with defense contractors...and the fact that they're in here for a three-year stay."

The cynic in me wants to hear more about the plan for fatigue-colored uniforms?

### **Experienced Operators Named in Victoria, BC**

As suggested here a couple of weeks ago, **Victoria, British Columbia**, is the second new member of the **Golden League** so far for 2009. The Seals, to be operated by longtime Triple-A owners **Darren** and **Russ Parker**, join **Tucson, AZ**. The league says it expects to have from eight to 12 teams next season, which is interesting since I count nine teams now without **reno, NV**, most likely out with a new Triple-A team coming into that market. From what I understand, one more Canadian franchise and at least one more in the United States are possible.

### **Two Players of Year Sold So Far**

Two very interesting facts jumped out when we compared some key statistics on the eight Player of the Year (or MVP) selections in Independent Baseball. Six of the stars eventually helped their teams win postseason championships (the other two also made the playoffs), and virtually everyone is at a prime age for having better things in his baseball future.

The group averages just over 26, with the **United League's Danny Bravo** (31) the only player even close to his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Two of the three outfielders among the MVPs have already signed with major league organizations. **Beau Torbert** of **Sioux Falls, SD (American Association)** has joined **Detroit** along with the **Canaries'** standout left-handed closer, **Kris Regas**, and the **Can-Am League's Scott Grimes (Worcester, MA)** was purchased by the **New York Mets**. Regas's signing is one to be saluted since the 28-year-old had spent all seven of his professional seasons in the Independent ranks, including the **Northern** and **Frontier Leagues**. He struck out 72 hitters in

only 42 innings while saving 30 games for American Association champion Sioux Falls.

It would not be a shock to see the **Golden League's Patrick Breen** sign soon since the centerfielder broke league records in home runs (28), extra base hits (56) total bases (227), on-base percentage (.509) and slugging percentage (.825) and barely missed winning the Triple Crown. The 26-year-old also started **Orange County's** winning rally in the playoffs even though it was mere days after he broke three ribs and his nose, separated a shoulder and suffered a concussion in going after a ball in the outfield.

#### The Players of the Year:

<u>League</u>	<u>Player</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Pos.</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>HR</u>	<u>RBI</u>	<u>Avg.</u>
Amn. Assn.	Torbet, Beau	Sioux Falls	OF	25	19	71	.324
Atlantic	*Pressley, Josh	Somerset	1B	28	++30	101	+.354
Can-Am	Grimes, Scott	Worcester	OF	24	21	57	.365
Continental	Wells, Kyle	Bay Area	C	23	2	30	.315
Frontier	*Hawke, Phil	Windy City	1B	25	22	73	.309
Golden	*Breen, Patrick	Orange Co.	OF	26	+28	94	+.396
Northern	Townsend, Tanner	Gary	3B	28	++14	84	.371
United	#Bravo, Danny	Amarillo	SS	31	18	90	+.372

Ages are as of September 1

\*Left-handed hitter; #Switch-hitter

+Led league; ++Tied for league lead

#### Indy Sightings at Shea Finale

It seems virtually impossible to set foot on any baseball diamond these days without finding some of the game's luminaries who now have key Independent Baseball roles. The final event at **Shea Stadium** was a prime example with such prominent former **New York Mets** as **Bud Harrelson**, a part owner of the **Long Island (NY) Ducks** as well as the first base coach, plus managers **Gary Carter (Orange County, Golden League)** and **Wally Backman (Joliet, IL, Northern League)** all adorned in their old uniform tops to be introduced.

(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 the book, *The Independent Minor Leagues: 2007 Season in Review*, and two blogs, [www.IndyBaseballChatter.com](http://www.IndyBaseballChatter.com) and [www.IndependentBaseballClassifieds.com](http://www.IndependentBaseballClassifieds.com). Subscriptions to this weekly *Independent Baseball Insider* column are available at [www.WirzandAssociates.com](http://www.WirzandAssociates.com).)