

Independent Baseball Insider

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Indy Club Could Not Promise a Rotation Job, Now Jerome Williams Might Start for Angels and Pujols

By Bob Wirz

Since this is the final column before the calendar turns to 2012, I cannot help but wonder if Independent Baseball can top this season when a record 40 of its former players wore a major league uniform?

I know this much: **Jerome Williams** has to be about as happy as anyone in this elite group where his fortunes stand as we look down the road toward the new season.

Williams had two stints in Independent leagues while trying to get his career back in the direction of where it was in 2004 when, as a 22-year-old, he won a career-high 10 games (10-7) for the **San Francisco Giants**.

Now 30, the right-hander never won that many games in a single season again until 2011 when he was a brilliant 22-2 spread among four teams to put himself in the running for the No. 5 starting job with the **Los Angeles Angels**. By the way, he will share a dugout with one **Albert Pujols** and the second expensive free agent, projected No. 4 starter **C. J. Wilson**.

Williams will be “one of the best athletes on the field”, praised **Butch Hobson**, who should know something about it since he manages the **Lancaster (PA) Barnstormers** in the **Atlantic League**, where the **Hawaiian** native posted the first six of his 22 victories (6-0, 2.91) this past season. Williams had an earlier Indy stint at **Long Beach, CA** in 2008.

There was irony to that brilliant five-week stretch because Hobson told Williams when he reported to Lancaster he would have to work out of the bullpen until a spot opened up. He relieved exactly once, then made seven starts and the Angels purchased his contract. The hurler went 7-2 at Triple-A **Salt Lake City**, won four in a row (10 appearances, six starts) with the **American League** club and prepped for about a month in **Venezuela** this fall, going 5-0 with a brilliant 1.00 earned run average, which likely will stand up for his work until he reports to spring training in **Tempe, AZ**.

“He knows what he’s doing (on the mound),” lauded Hobson, reciting such keys as being quick to the plate and understanding how to hold runners on base.

Grube, Savage New Names to Watch in Spring Training

While admittedly early in forecasting success stories for the new year much beyond the previous



accolades for possible rookie pitcher **James Paxton (Grand Prairie, TX, American Association)** with **Seattle** and **Chicago White Sox** starter **Dylan Axelrod (Windy City, Frontier League)**, two new names to the major league scene are another pair of right-handers, **Jarrett Grube** of **Southern Maryland (Atlantic League)** and **Will Savage**, who had a full season at **Wichita, KS (American Association)** in '09 followed by a brief stint at **Lancaster, PA (Atlantic)**.

Grube and Savage are among 10 Independent products we have spotted as early non-roster invitees with the **Mariners** and **Los Angeles Dodgers**, respectively. Both put up some nice numbers this past summer. Grube was a combined 9-6 with Seattle's top two farm clubs while Savage was 12-6 with **Chattanooga, TN** in Double-A.

Many among non-roster invitees should be taken seriously Seattle General Manager **Jack Zduriencik** pointed out to *MLB.com*. "Guys can get a non-roster invite and still make the club," he said. "We'll be fair. That's been our stance all along: Let the best guys in camp make the club." This should be sweet music to Grube as well as to the Mariners' other non-40-man roster guys, including relievers **Scott Patterson** (Lancaster and **Gateway**, Frontier League) and **Josh Kinney (River City, Frontier)**. Four non-roster players made Seattle's opening day roster one year ago and two others came up during the season.

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Marlins Dip Into American Association for Trio of Players

The **Miami Marlins** are not limiting their signings to those expensive major league free agents. They have inked three players out of the **American Association** in recent days, which is not entirely surprising since the team's new VP of Player Development, **Marty Scott**, managed in **Lincoln, NE** this summer.

Scott had both versatile **Curt Smith** and right-handed pitcher **Garrett Sherrill** with the **Saltdogs** while infielder **German Duran** was a late-season standout who helped **Grand Prairie, TX** take the league title. Smith hit .335 with nine homers and 48 RBI for Lincoln, then led the **Netherlands** to a surprise championship in the **World Cup**, where he was awarded Most Valuable Player honors.

Sherrill went 2-1, 3.52 in 30 games, and Duran hit .536, drove in five runs and scored 10 even though a rib injury limited the 27-year-old to playing in six of nine postseason games. All three players have previous affiliated experience.

Lincoln has sold eight players to major league organizations this year, almost certainly the Indy high outside of the **Atlantic League**.

Outcalt Still Believes NAL Team Lineup Will Grow for '12

North American League CEO **Kevin Outcalt** is playing it close to the vest on specifics, but he told us this week he still expects the second-year circuit will increase from the eight teams we can identify to "10 or 12" and the league should have a draft schedule by the end of the month.

"It has been a challenging offseason for all of Independent Baseball," the veteran executive said a few days after a NAL meeting during baseball's Winter Meetings in **Dallas**.

Maui Out to Make It a 'Community Deal'

It is no secret within baseball circles that **Maui** is still trying to connect with its fan and business bases in order to be strong in the **North American League**, and this corner salutes the so-called "strong warriors", who, *The Maui News* reports, only averaged 320 fans last season.

"I am the type of guy who listens to what the community wants," General Manager **Dan Partney** told the newspaper. "Make this a community deal", he was advised "and that is what I've done." Partney started by hiring **Brendan Sagara**, the team's former pitching coach and a local product, to manage **Na Koa Ikaika**.

"In 2010, I think at one point we had 12 of the 22 players on our roster who were from Hawaii, and it is probably going to be something similar to that (in 2012), said Sagara, who knows the ropes from also handling pitching duties for teams in the **Frontier** and **Northern Leagues** as well as scouting for multiple major league organizations.

Laredo Lands a Naming Rights Deal

The latest milestone for the **American Association's** new **Laredo (TX) Lemurs** was the announcement locally built and operated industrial importers **Uni-Trade Forwarding** had signed on for naming rights to the \$18 million **Uni-Trade Stadium** which is expected to be ready to open May 17.

Ventura Sports Group has former major league slugger **Pete Incaviglia** as its manager.

Indy Trio Shines in Australia

Winter baseball opportunities seem pretty plentiful for Independent players these days. The major attention falls to the **Caribbean** and **Mexico**, but **Australia** also is a player.

We have tracked down three Indy vets who are doing well in Aussieland, starting with **Mike McGuire**, who played for **Sussex (Augusta, NJ)** in the **Can-Am League** in 2010 and now is part of the **Philadelphia Phillies** farm system. McGuire sports a 2-1 record and nifty 1.11 ERA after 32.1 innings down under.

Atlantic League vet infielder-outfielder **Brian Burgamy**, who had three double-digit home run seasons for **Camden, NJ** and also played for **Newark, NJ**, is hitting .359 with three homers, 14 RBI and a .462 on-base percentage after 78 at-bats while infielder **Dominic Ramos**, who was in the Can-Am at **Worcester** and **Brockton, MA**, is at .295 after the same number of at-bats.

Names in the News

Winning the **Frontier League** championship in their first season seems to have only increased the appetite for the **Joliet (IL) Slammers** who already have league-leading moundsman **Jake Renshaw** (13 victories) among several returnees for the new year. Meanwhile, league newcomer **Schaumburg, IL** has signed **Matt Collins**, who led all **NCAA** divisions with 14.4 strikeouts per nine innings.

Longtime major leaguer **Lenny Randle** has signed on as a coach under **Chris Bando** with **Washington, PA** in the Frontier League. The **Goldklang Group**, best known in the Indy game for owning the **St. Paul (MN) Saints**, has won the right to operate the new collegiate league team that replaces the **Can-Am League** team in **Pittsfield, MA**.

Peppery **Kevin Hooper**, who led **Wichita, KS** to a divisional title in the **American Association** this summer, has signed a new two-year deal with the **Wingnuts**. **John Harris** has a one-year extension with **Amarillo, TX** in the same league. **Jason Lane**, the major league vet outfielder who was at **Southern Maryland (Waldorf)** for a time in the **Atlantic League** in 2010, has moved from the **Toronto** organization to **Arizona**, and it would not surprise if Lane, who turns 35 next week, would continue to make some mound appearances. The southpaw struck out 12 and walked only two in 13 innings spread over six outings for **Las Vegas, NV** this summer.

100 Ways to Use Season Tickets

Any business that doubts it can utilize baseball season tickets should look at the **Lincoln (NE) Saltdogs'** list of 100 various ways to use them.

After a myriad of community, business and personal options, I especially like No. 99. "Use them yourself," the **American Association** team suggested.

(Bob Wirz also writes about Independent Baseball on two other sites, www.IndyBaseballChatter.com and www.AtlanticLeagueBaseball.com. Fans may subscribe to this *Independent Baseball Insider* column for 2012, which will be published 41 times, 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.)