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Wednesday, June 18, 2008

## Three players, one goal

Ripken baseball league prepares players for professional ranks

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

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Look around the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League and what you'll see are differences. Different people of different ages, from different parts of the country. They're all at the two-month wooden-bat league for the same reason — simply put, to get better. But their routes to their summer teams are usually just as dissimilar.

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That's certainly the case for a trio of Montgomery County products, who all have professional aspirations, but currently suit up for the Rockville Express to improve upon different skills.

Temple (Pa.) catcher Kyle Obal (a Derwood native), Towson senior pitcher Austin Hurd (Gaithersburg) and rising Mississippi State freshman Nick Routt (Silver Spring) are three of several Ripken Leaguers that fit the same, but different mold.

"I've been in baseball for long time, and what I've seen is that young kids have tendency to rise up at different times," said Express manager James Pereira, who was a scout for the Cincinnati Reds for nearly 20 years, and also an assistant coach for two teams in the Cape Cod Baseball League. "You see it in Major League Baseball all the time, people just developing at different rates. Some people take years and years, and then there are some people like an Andruw Jones [Los Angeles Dodgers center fielder] or Robin Yount [former Milwaukee Brewers standout] who come up at 18 or a very young age."

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who come up at 19 or a very young age.

Obal

Obal fits the former portion of Pereira's statement, as he's preparing for his fifth year in college. And, of anyone on the Express roster, no one has developed as gradually.

An All-Gazette first-team catcher as a senior in 2004 with a .420 batting average, the Sherwood grad Obal signed with Division I Winthrop (S.C.). But he never put it together for the Big South power — after taking a redshirt in his first year, his contributions were minimal on the 46-win 2006 team, going hitless in nine at-bats and only 14 appearances for the NCAA Regional-qualifying Eagles.

But midway through the season, he made the decision which jumpstarted his career, transferring to a Temple team in need of a catcher. By 2007, he started behind the plate in 42 of 53 games, hitting .268. And after making the All-Star team last summer with the Carolina Sox — a South Carolina-based team in the wooden-bat Southern Collegiate Baseball League — he starred in 2008 for Temple. He hit .304 in 46 starts, and had just three passed balls all the season. Two weeks ago, he was named to the All-Philadelphia Big 5 First Team.

The coaching staff felt the Ripken League was a perfect intermediary for Obal. It's a notch above the league he played in last summer, and while he had a terrific 2008 season, he can still improve in areas such as his power (he hasn't homered in his college career).

"Personally I'd like to go to the next level and play professionally, so this league is one of those stepping stones because I know there's very good caliber ball here," Obal said. "It's getting better every year and that's why I'm here. I've got some things I need to work on defensively and definitely offensively. I know, like me and Austin, we're never satisfied and always think we can get better. This is where you can work harder."

Hurd

Hurd's progression was similar, though at a different position. After two dominant seasons on the mound at Gaithersburg High, where he set a school record with 14 victories, he made just nine appearances (four starts), going 1-3 with an 8.13 earned-run average as a freshman at Towson.

Like Obal, he's steadily improved every year though — in 2007, he lowered his ERA to 6.56 in seven appearances. And he arguably became Towson's best overall pitcher this past season, topping all starters with a 4.85 ERA, while logging 52 innings as a starter and a reliever.

But he also has a major issue to work on this summer — his control — and that's why he's spending his second summer in the Ripken League (he pitched for Youse's Maryland Orioles in 2007). Despite solid numbers at Towson and in Pereira's words, "excellent stuff," he is still not consistent in the strike zone. Though he was among Towson's leaders in strikeouts (29), he also topped the team in wild pitches (12) and walks (30).

"There are things I need to work on, but mostly just confidence," said Hurd, who struck out seven batters in a 7-5 loss to the Alexandria Aces last Monday. "Right now, the bats are pretty slow with players still getting used to wooden bats, but I figure that facing this competition, it will be harder by the end of the season."

Both Obal and Hurd had known about the Ripken League prior to their arrivals, but say that the league's improvement over the last four years is the major reason why their college coaches sent them. It's a league boasting more professional-caliber talent every year — in fact, 31 league alums were selected in the MLB Draft earlier this month.

Routt

For the early-bloomers, such as the soon-to-be-college-freshman Routt, this summer will provide an early taste of what to expect in the future. Routt is one of the most talented players on the Express roster, while also the youngest. In fact, he's the only Rockville player without college experience.

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But the recent St. John's College High (Washington, D.C.) grad already knows the feeling of playing pitching with the best. The lefty was one of the top arms for the national power Cadets, who went 47-11 in his two years with the squad. And a summer ago, he went 4-1 with a team-leading 1.25 ERA for the Mid-Atlantic Rookies, a local, traveling showcase squad.

He's blessed with all the tools — multiple pitches, with a great fastball and hard breaking ball — and has looked like a future star already with the Express. In his first appearance, a 2-1 loss to the Aces, he threw five innings of two-hit ball with seven strikeouts.

“I'm really surprised he wasn't drafted,” said Pereira. “He's one of those guys that has it early. He's got tremendous upside at the next level.”

If the Ripken League is defined by anything, it's those two words: next level. It's why people come all over the country for non-stop competition in summer's sweltering dog days. Whether it's a grizzled senior or a precocious 18-year old, this is how collegians become professionals.

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