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Ripken League players netting major results

Growth exemplified by success in Draft

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

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The allure of the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League was described two years ago by league commissioner Bill Spencer on the league Web site: "To watch these college stars and future pros play in community ballparks near your home."

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Such words ring truer now than ever before.

Fans still get to see talent from all over the country play for the Montgomery County-based Bethesda Big Train, Rockville Express and Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts, just as they did when the league formed in 2005.

But as the numbers are starting to prove, the league is producing — or at least featuring — more and more talent. In the Major League Baseball First-Year Player Draft earlier this month, six Ripken League alumni were selected on the first day, which included the first six rounds; 31 league alumni were taken overall.

Big Train alum Carlos Gutierrez (2005) of the University of Miami (Fla.) became the wooden-bat league's highest selection ever when the Minnesota Twins nabbed him in the first round at



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our league's highest selection ever when the Minnesota Twins selected him in the first round, at pick 27. Evan Frederickson (Big Train 2006-07) from San Francisco (Calif.) was the second-highest, taken eight picks later by the Milwaukee Brewers in the first supplemental round.

Shortstop Derrick Gibson (Youse's Maryland Orioles 2007-08), second baseman L.J. Hoes (Orioles 2007-08), first baseman Michael Sheridan (Thunderbolts 2006) and Alex Buckholtz (Orioles 2007) were chosen in the draft's second, third, fifth and sixth rounds, respectively.

"We take a lot of pride in the development of our players and I think that the development of our draft classes reflect the development of our league," said Alex Thompson, Executive Director of the Ripken League. "Last year we had 17, this year we had 31 alumni, so it's a jump. It just speaks really well to the coaches really developing their own franchises year to year."

There are practical reasons for the league's rapid growth. Simply because the league has been in existence for four years, more players have had a chance to filter through its system.

But at the same time, that's not the only reason for the Ripken League's growth. Collegiate coaches are starting to build relationships with the summer league managers, based on the improvement their players make from June to early August.

As such, teams develop pipelines to certain schools, being sent multiple players to work with every summer. For example, the 2008 Big Train showcase three prospects from Southern Mississippi (counting first baseman Luke Adkins, who transferred to Mississippi State this year), three from San Francisco, three from St. Mary's (Calif.), two from Michigan State, two from Rider (N.J.) and two from Florida Atlantic.

"Without a doubt, the whole league's getting better players," said Colangelo. "Honestly, I do my homework on the players but it's about the relationships with coaches. I'm only as good as they are."

The Big Train's West Coast pipeline — nine current players play for California-based schools — is best exemplified by Colangelo's relationship with University of San Francisco assistant coach Greg Moore, whom he considers one of the best in pitching tutors in the country. Moore sent two of his arms to the Big Train this summer, junior righty Chase Tigert and redshirt sophomore Matt Hiserman, who pitched for Bethesda a year ago. Colangelo also gives him credit for getting players from other schools to play for the Big Train, crediting "the good word of mouth he's given us."

But there's some reciprocity between the two coaches, as the case of Frederickson demonstrated. The 6-foot-6 lefty played for the Big Train in 2006 and '07 while at Virginia Tech. Last summer, needing a change of scenery, he asked Colangelo for potential transfer opportunities.

The Big Train skipper recommended San Francisco, and Frederickson took his advice. In his first year with the Dons, he struck out a team-high 109 batters and posted a 4.54 earned-run average.

"I wish I could tell you in 25 minutes all the special things Evan did, but for him to go from the struggles that he had to where he arrived at the end of year speaks to the courage it took to travel across the country to play for us," said Moore. "Summer ball has been great for him, and that's one of the reasons I love [the Big Train] so much. We don't have too many in California: Guys can make the pitch in summer ball that they were afraid to throw in college. They come back here in the middle of the seventh inning and say 'Hey, this is same pitch I made all summer.'"

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