

Tuesday, June 2, 2009

## Ripken baseball: A major league

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

The Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League promotes itself with keywords such as "local," "Maryland and the District of Columbia," and "in the area."

It is selling itself short.

Yes, the wooden-bat summer league is local, with eight teams from the metropolitan area. But it is also proving to be a factory for professional talent.

The recent numbers are overwhelming. In the June 2008 Major League Baseball First-Year Player Draft, a record 31 Ripken League alumni were selected. Bethesda Big Train alumnus Carlos Gutierrez (2005) became its highest selection ever when the Minnesota Twins nabbed him with the 27th pick in the first round.

The Ripken League's biggest coup came early last month. University of Maryland graduate Brett Cecil, who pitched for the Silver Spring-Takoma Thunderbolts in 2005, made his Major League debut for the Toronto Blue Jays on May 5.

Managers league-wide are adjusting their rosters to account for the league's new national scope.

"You know, the biggest thing for us was being able to get players from all over and from some of the bigger conferences, instead of just the Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania area," said first-year Thunderbolts skipper Jason Walck. "The way the talent is improving and the amount of guys that going to the majors, you better look everywhere if you want to win."

At the same time, the CRSCBL will still feature plenty of home-grown products to cheer on this summer, including 20 Montgomery County natives.

The Bethesda Big Train have two of them, with one being the greatest hitter in the history of the league. Bethesda was the big winner of the offseason, acquiring 2006 Quince Orchard High alumnus and two-time Ripken League batting champion Mike Celenza, formerly of the College Park Bombers.

Accolades have become superfluous to describe the rising senior at Salisbury University, but a few numbers demonstrate why: .469, .357 and .412, his batting averages during his American Baseball Coaches Association All-American season with the Sea Gulls and his two summers in the Ripken League.

"This kid could play at Maryland or anywhere in the country and hit .330 or .340," said Bethesda skipper Sal Colangelo. "I think he wanted to play a little closer to home and not hit that Beltway traffic, and he also wanted to play for me. Let me tell you, I couldn't be happier."

The Big Train figure to post astronomical hitting numbers once again this season. Celenza joins a lineup that posted the highest team batting average in the four-year history of the league last summer (.278) and

already included San Jose State (Calif.) first baseman Danny Stienstra (.391), runner-up to Celenza in the 2008 batting race.

To knock off reigning champion Youse's Maryland Orioles, the Big Train — who finished second at 29-13 a year ago — hope one or two arms can mirror its hitting production. Colangelo expects Bethesda native Hugh Adams, a four-year veteran of the league, to make a "big, big, big, maybe even biggest contribution."

Silver Spring-Takoma is on the other side of the fence, right down to their second-from-the-bottom finish in 2008. The Thunderbolts' strength is their pitching; Louisiana State reliever Matty Ott recently won the Southeastern Conference Freshman of the Year award, Slippery Rock (Pa.) righty Vince Lloyd led his team with eight wins and George Washington's Ryan Lapointe led the Colonials in appearances and saves.

Though the question marks may be at the plate, the T-Bolts' lineup does feature a couple of answers. Center fielder Matt Hillsinger, who Walck said runs a 6.5-second 60-yard dash, should lead off, while first baseman Daniel Kassouf (29 home runs, 90 runs batted in for Belmont Abbey) could be one of the league's premier power hitters.

"I'm certainly excited to get this thing started," said Walck. "I think we have a lot of versatile guys and our pitching is definitely going to be our strong suit."

Like the Thunderbolts, Rockville won just 15 games last year, a far cry from their 27-win Ripken league championship performance the summer prior. The Express have mostly new faces, and a big Montgomery pedigree.

One of the few mainstays, 2005 Gaithersburg graduate Austin Hurd, was one of the league's best pitchers a year ago. The rising Towson University senior was unhittable all summer, finishing with a 1.58 ERA in seven starts. He will be complemented by teammate and fellow local product, '07 Northwest alum Charlie Cononie, a 6-foot-7 right-hander.

A third Towson Tiger, center fielder Kevin Collins (Quince Orchard), joins after an outstanding junior campaign in which he hit .335 and stole 11 bases. He figures to be a key cog in the Rockville lineup, as will Southern Connecticut first baseman Ryan Geffert, the Owls' leader in nearly every statistical category this season.