

Overcoming Latitude

By: Sean Darsee, Baseball Factory Player

I live in New York. Many players feel that in the Northeast and in other parts of the country with long cold winters, we have a major limitation because our baseball season has to start so late and end so early. In most of the southern states, they can start playing baseball in January and can play twice as many games as we can - or more. A common misconception is that we cannot really be competitive up here in the North. Here are some of the examples of what people say:

"My team practice all winter but it isn't the same as playing real games against real teams."

"The high schools don't sponsor any major opportunities for playing during the winter except an occasional clinic."

"College scouts don't look as hard at northern high schools as they do at schools in warm climates."

"Look at the teams that play in the College World Series every year and you almost never see one from the North."

The problem is that there is some truth to each of these statements. No, I'm not going to say that these are just imaginary excuses and there aren't really any obstacles to overcome. That simply wouldn't be true; there are some serious obstacles, but they are not insurmountable. There are several effective ways to deal with the obstacles. There are also players like John Flaherty, the backup catcher for the New York Yankees who grew up in a house right behind mine in West Nyack, New York, who have managed to use certain techniques to narrow the margin. Even professional players like Walt Weiss, Alex Rodriguez and Manny Ramirez spent part of their early years in New York - and they didn't turn out too bad!

I think what it really boils down to is that we have a shorter playing season, particularly for school games. This means that school practice starts much later and maybe we don't have the same amount of preparation before the season starts. But that's it - there shouldn't be any other real limitations. Why? Because we can find ways to get the extra exposure and preparation we need. No one is just going to give it to us - it can only come from opportunities that we make ourselves. They're going to be different for each person, but these are the ones that I have used:

Using a local college with an inside field to practice regularly in the late fall and winter

Doing regular workouts with weights, all year round

Running in the gym at school when it was too cold or there was too much snow to run outside

Pitching off an artificial practice mound into a soft net "Air pitching"

Going to the batting cages all winter when no one else is there

Studying videos of well-known pitchers and hitters and trying to see what I could incorporate into my own way of pitching and hitting; watching videos made my successful college coaches

Participating in clinics and tournaments in warm parts of the country during the winter

You're probably thinking, "That would cost a bundle - forget it." It may seem like it, but none of this has to cost very much.

Winter Playing Field

Finding a place to practice in the winter is essential. We typically think of college baseball as something that happens at Division 1 schools or only at large universities. However, baseball is just as important and just as

prevalent at many smaller colleges and even junior colleges. Many of these colleges in the north have built inside playing areas to give the players an opportunity to compete with the same level of preparation as schools from warm states. There are two small colleges and one junior college within 10 miles of my home that have inside playing fields. The Babe Ruth/American Legion team that I play on rents the facility for regular workouts during the winter. We go there on a regular basis, use the live pitching cages, the artificial pitching mounds and the infield to practice. The shortest amount of time we spend there is 3 hours a week on a Friday night, but it is often longer. This allows us to keep our skills sharp, to work on defensive plays and to continue to progress with out pitching and hitting. Because the college teams practice right before or after we do, the college players are often around to give us pointers, pitch to us in the cages or help us with pitching. They don't get paid for this; they do it because they love baseball and they want to help us. Most of my team members are only 15 so getting this kind of instruction all winter long from college players is invaluable. What does this cost? Each team member pays about \$200 for the entire winter season for this - a pretty good bargain.

Regular Workouts with Weights

The nice thing about weights is that it really doesn't depend on the climate. I only have two things to say about this, both of which came from college coaches. The first thing is that baseball players have to work out with weights if they are going to compete. Although the routines are different for pitchers and other players, weights are important for all players. The second thing is probably even more important. You have to make sure you get sound advice on which weights to use and the routines that you go through. I see a lot of guys going to the school gym and seeing how much they can bench press or jerk. That isn't what I am talking about. The weight-lifting routines should be designed specifically for baseball players and have to be done at a pace that avoids getting injured. My coach won't let us lift alone. We have to lift with someone else for safety reasons. I have a workout machine at home, but that is really for convenience and weekends. I can use the weights at school as long as I go with one of the other players, and there is no cost for this.

Running

Maybe it's easier to run outside because the scenery is better. During the winter, we don't have that option. I can run inside at my school gym, at a local junior college that has an inside track, or in the same place where we practice during the winter. There probably aren't many baseball players who actually like to run; but it is something we can do all winter long that acts as a big equalizer. There is no cost for this - only the time involved.

Pitching

There's nothing like pitching off a real mound in a real game. There aren't any substitutes for that and we are limited in how many games we can squeeze in to the regular school spring season in the north. The other aspect of pitching is, of course, mechanics. My pitching coach likes to say that you work on your mechanics when you are not pitching a real game - then when you actually pitch, you have to stop thinking about it and just go out and "get guys out." What this means to me is that the winter is the time to work on pitching mechanics. All you need is something that emulates a pitching mound and enough space. It's nice to have a catcher, but that isn't always possible so we use a soft net that looks like a small tent with the front side open. It is better for the net to be soft so the balls just fall to the ground instead of bouncing back. The tent around it holds all the balls so there is no risk of one flying off and hitting someone nearby. I always seem to have several things that I need to improve and I don't want to be thinking about them during a game. So from late October until March, most of my pitching work is off an artificial mound and focused on mechanics. The charge for using the mound is nothing (at a local college) and the soft pitching net was about \$100 and it can be carried around in a portable nylon bag.

"Air Pitching"

Everyone knows about all the drills you can use for pitching. There are some with towels, others with drumsticks and on and on. My pitching coach has me doing something he calls "air pitching." We don't even use a baseball; we use a soft leather ball filled with Styrofoam. The reason for this is that you need to find a mirror that is at least as tall as you are. Most of these end up being in rooms that are too small to throw a

baseball. We go through the windup and stretch in front of the mirror, but in slow motion. At each critical point in the pitch, I stop and see what I am doing wrong, and then make any necessary corrections. In this way, it is a lot easier to see if you open up too soon, throw across your body or get your hand under the ball. The other way to see these things is, of course, by videotaping yourself and looking at it in slow motion. Air pitching in front of a mirror may even be better because you can see things much closer. The cost for this is only \$7 for the ball and your time.

Batting Cages

I'm not going to say much about this because it is so obvious. However, what surprised me was that as busy as the batting cages are during the baseball season, they are almost deserted during the off-season. This is one of the best times to go and get as many swings in as possible. You can often make deals with the facility for better prices, too, because they aren't making any money on the cages. I think it is best to go with someone else so that you can observe each other and point out problems. You just can't see them yourself. Just hitting every pitch in the cages isn't enough any more. Most of us can do that. You have to be looking at the mechanics. Am I dropping my hands or shoulder? Am I getting my hips around? Am I developing enough torque (courtesy of Matt Schilling from the Baseball Factory)? Am I locking my front knee and bending my back knee at the end? Is the ball hitting the ground first or heading just above the second baseman's head?

Studying Pitching and Hitting Videos

Another thing we can do in the late fall and winter is to "go to school" on our position - and videos made by college coaches are a great way to do that. It's like this becomes the "class lecture" and actual playing becomes the "lab." Many of the high school coaches played baseball in high school and/or college and know a lot about the game. However, if they weren't a pitcher, they may not know a lot about pitching - and this is true for all positions. There are many excellent videos made by college coaches. Although they certainly aren't Hollywood quality, they are full of great advice. They also have a lot of good examples because they get their players to show both good and bad techniques, and then they critique them.

Off-Season Clinics and Tournaments

Getting real playing time during the off-season is difficult for players from the colder climates. There are opportunities to participate in weekend clinics and holiday tournaments in the southern states. My own experience has been through the Baseball Factory. I spent the week between Christmas and New Years at a combined clinic and tournament at the LA Dodger's training camp in Vero Beach Florida. Before the school season started, the Baseball Factory also held a special clinic in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. There are many opportunities like this and they include hitting, pitching, fielding and batting - and a lot of it is actually outside in real playing situations. Something that is a concern for a lot of people is cost. None of us have unlimited funds to be flying around the country attending clinics and tournaments whenever we want. However, if you arrange for these enough in advance, you can get really inexpensive plane tickets as long as you are willing to make a stop in the middle or travel whenever the flight is available. The other way to do this is by using the trains. I had some clinics at the Baseball Factory, which is just outside of Baltimore. I took the Amtrak train from New York and then only had about 10 miles to go by car at the end. This cost about 1/5 the cost of a plane ticket and was worth it.

The Last Word

I think the main message is that just because we live in the north, we don't have to assume that we can't compete with players from the south. Yes, there are some obstacles to overcome, but just about all of them can be dealt with effectively and without having to spend a fortune.

For more information please email Baseball Factory at newsletter@baseballfactory.com or call us at 800.641.4487 to speak with a Player Representative.