

So You Want to Play Professional Baseball?

By Matt Schilling, Director of On-Field Instruction at Baseball Factory, professional scout and former college coach

When you talk to most amateur baseball players they will tell you that they want to play professional baseball. I certainly did and my colleagues at the Baseball Factory who didn't play pro ball dreamed of it. I often wonder what it would be like to get paid to play the game I love, and better yet, to have had a chance to make it to the Major Leagues. All through my high school and college years I worked as hard as I could to reach that dream. Most of the players that we have at the Baseball Factory are doing exactly the same thing. There is nothing like working your butt off to make a dream come true. But exactly what is it like to play professional baseball? This is not going to be another article about the endless hours spent on an old bus driving from Butte, Montana to Boise, Idaho. Or about the endless amount of fast food meals you eat or the cheap rundown apartment you share with four other guys because that's all you can afford. This article is about the mental side of professional baseball that is all too often overlooked.

What mental side you may ask? Recently I did some research and spoke to a number of friends and former players who have been playing pro ball. It dawned on me that playing pro ball would have been a huge adjustment for me - and I'm not talking about going from a metal bat to a wood bat. When I ask the high school and college kids that I work with how their season was or how they did, nine out of ten times they answer with the team in mind. They say "ok, but we lost in the playoffs" or "great, we won the conference championship and made it far in the state tournament." The pro players I talk to answer the same question with "pretty good, my average was around .300, but I didn't hit enough homeruns" or "great, my ERA was under three."

What is the reason for the differing answers? In high school and college, we are taught to be team players. It is ingrained in our heads that the team always comes first and that we must do what is best for the team. In pro ball, however, the mentality is reversed. The objective of the minor leagues is to develop each player's talent to make him the best he can be so that he can some day become big leaguers. As a player your goal is to perform well so that you can continue to advance and ultimately reach the majors.

Day in and day out players in the minors, and even the majors, battle to perform well enough to advance to the next level, stay in the big leagues, or get a better contract. This attitude is fueled by incentive plans that are included in some players' contracts. For example, a player's contract may state that if he drives in 100 runs he gets a \$250,000 bonus. With a man on second and nobody out in the ninth, do you think he is looking to hit a ground ball to the right side to move that runner along in a tight ballgame, or is he looking to drive that run in himself?

The bottom line is that professional baseball is focused around doing well personally, not as a team. This contradicts everything that I was taught growing up and everything that I try to instill in players that I deal with. Most players have heard a coach say, "I don't care if you go 0-4 with an error, as long as the team wins, it was a good day." Although I do agree with that mindset, that same type of thinking in professional ball will get you released quickly.

I am not trying to paint a negative picture of professional ball; I am simply trying to enlighten people to the fact that players in amateur ball and pro ball define success in two very different ways. Very often players quit pro ball after a year or two because they don't really like it. Other players figure out how it all works and adjust very well. I'm certain that I could have made the mental adjustment, but it would have been tough.

One former player I spoke to recently told me that his team could be winning by 10 or losing by 10 - it really doesn't matter to him. What does matter are the statistics he accumulates when he gets the chance to play. This statement was made by the best TEAM player that I ever coached. Keep in mind the next time you criticize a big leaguer for being a "selfish" player that throughout the minors, and even into the majors, it has been ingrained in his head that he has to perform well in order to stay in pro ball. There are tons of guys in the big leagues who never went to college and never had time to mature and grow. They learned about life in the professional ranks and they are learning that a strong performance will produce a greater reward. The next time you feel like a pro has his priorities out of line, take a moment to consider why. I think you'll find that for a lot of guys it wasn't until they got to the majors and their team got into a pennant race that winning became their first priority again. Many organizations try to make competitions between their affiliates to give players incentives to win, but let's face it, professional players put up with a 10-hour bus ride to play the Boise Hawks because they all want to make it to the big leagues, not because they have a burning desire to win.

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