

High Stakes in Baseball's Annual Lottery

David Owen

Writer's comment: I have always felt that the Major League Baseball draft was one of the most fascinating processes in the game, as well as one of the most important. While commissioner Bud Selig tries to convince us that "small market" teams must be relocated or disbanded in order for the game to survive, the draft provides these clubs with an opportunity to prove him wrong. The idea of distributing the "rights" to young men to each of thirty franchises may seem barbaric, but it is the American pastime's version socialism, a crapshoot in which every player faces equally long odds. In writing this article I wanted to place the draft within such a context, to highlight its significance as a means of subversion, and even revolution, for the teams in Oakland, Pittsburgh, Montreal, and Milwaukee. As long as the draft exists, insight and ingenuity can overcome money and power, the A's can overcome the Yankees, and baseball can thrive.

– *David Owen*

Instructor's comment: In my advanced writing journalism course (English 104C), I encourage students to imagine themselves as professional journalists, to pick a beat that they would like to cover, to research and write for specific publications, adopting their style and format, and finally to write a query letter to pitch the final feature and to send it out. For most, this is a hypothetical exercise, at best. But sometimes a student who aims to become a journalist—maybe someone who has both talent and experience—takes me seriously. A sophomore majoring in Communications and the former Oakland Athletics editor of the online magazine *OaklandSportszone*, David Owen wrote this feature on the baseball draft for *Sports Weekly*. Following my instructions, he adopted a hybrid method of citing his sources, using journalistic conventions of attribution in the text and appending a list of Works Cited, appropriate for an academic course. Stylistically, he worked hard on the organization and the tone of voice, aiming to integrate the information and explanations that a relatively uninformed reader would need, without insulting or boring more knowledgeable readers.

– *Gary Sue Goodman, University Writing Program*

In the sixty-second round of the 1988 amateur draft, the greatest offensive catcher in major league history was drafted as a favor from then Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda to the boy's father. Fifteen years later, Mike Piazza has more home runs than anyone at the position and is a lock for the Hall of Fame. The lesson: baseball's June draft is a crap shoot. Throwing millions of dollars at players who have yet to suit up as professionals is risky, but it remains one of the most important aspects of a general manager's job. With this year's draft only weeks away, scouts are scrambling to make a case for their favorite player, GM's are weighing their options, and decisions are determining organizational futures all over the majors.

The first draft, held in 1965, aimed to help distribute talent more fairly amongst the clubs. Previously, all players not signed to a professional contract were considered free agents, and a team like the Yankees could easily dominate, spending more money and attracting more top talent than any other organization. The draft gave every team a chance to sign the top amateur players; it even further boosted the league's weakest teams by having them pick in reverse order of their final record for the previous year. In that first draft in 1965, the Kansas City Athletics, long ridiculed as a glorified Yankee farm team, selected Arizona State outfielder Rick Monday first overall. The very next season those same Athletics selected Reggie Jackson, another ASU outfielder, who, after the team's move to Oakland in 1968, would become the cornerstone of three straight world championship teams. The draft was working.

Today the format of the draft is the same, and it remains the primary resource for small market teams' struggle to compete with the wealthier clubs. Free agency has created an even greater imperative for teams to draft well because now their successful draft picks will hit the open market after six years of major league service, and may jump to, say, the Yankees, just as they enter their prime. Thus, it is more important than ever for teams constantly to produce major league-caliber prospects. Of course, the more important these draft-day decisions become and the more it costs to sign top draft picks, the more disastrous it becomes for an organization to strike out on a pick.

This dilemma has raised the hotly debated issue of the relative value of high school versus college prospects. Draft eligibility rules dictate that all graduating high school players may be drafted, as well as all junior

college players. College players, however, must be at least 21 years of age and have spent three years in school—requirements that many teams and athletes find discouraging.

Drafting younger players has a few advantages. First of all, most scouts consider high school players to have higher ceilings than their older counterparts. This is, in part, based in simple logic: if two players are rated equally by your scouts, but one is three years younger than the other, it is reasonable to expect that player to develop further than the other, and thus become a better major leaguer. “We draft for ceiling,” says Mike Arbuckle, assistant GM of the Philadelphia Phillies. “We’ve had very good luck taking high school pitchers.” As firm believers in this approach, the Atlanta Braves built a dynasty in the nineties, drafting Tom Glavine, Steve Avery, Chipper Jones, and Kevin Millwood out of high school, and teaming them with Gregg Maddux and John Smoltz to dominate the National League for over a decade.

General managers who prefer high schoolers also stress the benefits of getting a young player under the tutelage of the organization’s own instructors as quickly as possible. This way they can oversee the player’s development themselves, instead of leaving this important responsibility to college coaches, who have been known to overwork ace pitchers. Former Detroit first-rounder Kenny Baugh, for example, came out of Rice University having taken on an abusive workload in the Owls’ quest for a postseason title, and was essentially damaged goods by the time he signed with Detroit, going onto the disabled list almost immediately.

Simple risk and reward analysis argues against high school prospects, particularly high school pitchers. The most basic fear in drafting a young pitcher is injury. Drafting college pitchers allows the organization to monitor a prospect’s health throughout three more years of physical development in college, letting the risk fall to the colleges during this “injury nexus.” High school studs from Kerry Wood and A.J. Burnett to Rick Ankiel have fallen victim to injuries early on in their careers, and, while most pitchers recover, the teams lose millions while they rehabilitate their injuries. Mitigating this risk is important for all clubs, especially those who cannot afford a failed pick. One injury to a top prospect could set the organization’s rebuilding process back years.

College talent also tends to be more polished, understanding better how to pitch to good hitters or approach a tough at-bat. College prospects have likely played before larger crowds, against teams stocked with future professionals. They have had better instruction than high school prospects and can be expected to be more major league ready. In last June’s draft, for example, two first round pitchers, Ryan Wagner of

the Reds and Chad Cordero of the Expos, used wicked heat and advanced sliders to leap from college to the major leagues before the season was even out. A third, San Francisco's David Aardsma, made his team out of spring training. Such immediate contributions from high draft picks are strong endorsements for teams taking the college approach.

Oakland Athletics assistant general manager, David Forst, emphasizes this point by comparing two players drafted by the A's three years ago with back to back first round picks. One, a high school pitcher named Jeremy Bonderman, was traded and now pitches for the Detroit Tigers. The other player was Long Beach State shortstop Bobby Crosby, who took over at short this year for Oakland. Forst points out, "Bobby Crosby, as a zero [big league] experience rookie, is going to hit twenty home runs. Jeremy Bonderman has an ERA over five. By the time they reach [salary arbitration], Bobby will have given us three years of solid contribution, and Bonderman may just be reaching his potential. It's about value."

Because college pitchers play full schedules against top competition, the statistics accumulated in those games speak volumes. This means a shift away from traditional scouting, a highly subjective process that favors hard throwers and big "projectable" bodies. Modern baseball organizations feel that they can no longer afford to be subjective in evaluating talent, and thus statistical analysis and Sabermetrics are slowly infiltrating the draft process. According to Forst, the Athletics do not even attempt to use statistics in assessing high school prospects because a .400 batting average or 2.00 ERA posted by a California high schooler cannot accurately be compared to that of a kid in Idaho, given the different levels of competition and the overall talent gap between high school and the pros. Led by Oakland's Billy Beane, probably the strongest advocate of college level talent, general managers seek to reduce their risk by becoming more objective and by learning as much as they possibly can about all of their prospects. The higher level of structure and competition makes this much more possible at the college level.

In *Baseball Prospectus 2003*, the annual Sabermetrics statistical guide, the editors pointed out that the preference for college pitching was "being put to its sternest test in years." One of the all-time great high school pitchers, Josh Beckett, had just pitched the Marlins to the World Series. Many of the top pitchers in the minors and majors coming into the season were former high school draft picks, including the consensus top two: Los Angeles' Jackson and Kansas City's Zach Grienke. However, since that book's publication another high school stud, LA's

Gregg Miller, a lefty considered to be Jackson's equal in all respects except for major league readiness, has gone down for Tommy John surgery, and Florida's Jeff Allison has left the team, seeking treatment for dependence on the pain killer, oxy-contin.

Each organization will balance these risks and rewards, knowing that bad draft day decisions can turn five year plans into ten year plans.

While the basic structure of the draft is the same, it has changed in some important respects. The cost of high draft picks has skyrocketed to the point where some cash-strapped organizations hope not to get picks early in the first round because of the financial burden. Last year's first overall pick, high school outfielder Delmon Young, received a major league contract from the Devil Rays worth more than \$5 million. Young is a very strong prospect with a bright future but, given these figures, it is clear why teams are so wary of their draft day decisions.

In many cases, talented players will slide down the draft boards because of high contract demands, so the best talent may not go to the teams that need it most. In this sense, the draft has begun to work more like the free agent market. For example, in 2001 the consensus top draft prospect was University of Southern California righthander Mark Prior. The Minnesota Twins held the top pick in the lottery that year, but were convinced that Prior would hold out for more cash than they could afford to pay, so they let him slide to the Cubs at number two. Instead, Minnesota selected high school catcher Joe Mauer, a local product who may now be the best minor league prospect in the game, but Prior has dominated professional hitters right from the outset of his career, leading his team to the NLCS before Mauer's first big league at bat.

Little can be done about escalating contract demands, but Major League Baseball has proposed a few changes to the draft in recent years, and the players' union may soon agree to some of them. Most drastic of these changes would be the inception of a worldwide draft. As the rules stand now, international prospects are free agents, and the signing process works much as it did for all players in the pre-draft days. Many teams that have invested in international scouting have been very successful in finding good prospects, but big name free agents are still only available to a handful of teams. The Yankees, for example, have shelled out eight figure deals for Cuban defectors like Orlando Hernandez and JosŽ Contreras, as well as Japanese All-Star Hideki Matsui. Other teams who have monopolized the international free agent market include the Mariners (Ichiro, Kazuhiro Sasaki) and the New York Mets (Kazuo Matsui). Requiring these high profile rookies as well as other foreign prospects to enter the draft would allow teams with tighter

budgets the opportunity to negotiate with them and hopefully level the playing field a bit.

The Player's Association would like to eliminate draft pick compensation for teams losing free agent—a provision nearly included in the last collective bargaining agreement. As the rules stand now, teams that lose players to free agency are compensated with a first round pick from the team that signed their former player, as well as an extra pick in a “supplemental first round,” held between the first and second stanzas. Players feel that this system rewards teams for not retaining their top players, and may drive the price of free agents down. From a club official's perspective, this system is the only way that small market teams can recover from the loss of free agents. This effect was illustrated after the 2001 season, when the Oakland Athletics lost three top level free agents: MVP first baseman Jason Giambi, center fielder Johnny Damon, and closer Jason Isringhausen. Thanks to draft pick compensation the team had seven selections in the first 39 the following June, and those picks restocked the farm system and helped the team absorb its losses.

So what will happen this year on draft day?

Holding the first overall pick in what is generally considered a weak draft, San Diego is likely to draft Long Beach State righthander Jared Weaver, according to Baseball America. Weaver has been phenomenal this year, perhaps dominating college hitters more than any pitcher since Prior. Considered very nearly major league ready, Weaver could contribute to a fast-rising Padre team by 2005. The Minnesota Twins hold five picks before the start of the second round, compensation for losing relievers Eddie Guardado and LaTroy Hawkins to free agency. They will look to beef up their already strong farm system in the early rounds. The defending college champion Rice Owls may lose the front three from their rotation all within the first round, as Jeff Nieman, Wade Townsend, and Phillip Humber all project as top prospects. Texas Longhorns reliever Huston Street has one of the best names in the draft, and is the prospect most likely to follow in the footsteps of Wagner and Cordero. He could be a significant pickup for a contender in need of late season relief help.

Of course, if history has taught us anything it is that we should reserve judgment on the players drafted this June. For every Alex Rodriguez or Mark Prior there is a Jeff Allison, not to mention a Mike Piazza. When will they call the name of the next Hall of Famer? It's a crap shoot.

Works Cited

Anastasia, Phil. "Phils Won't Shy Away from High School Talent." *Courier Post Online*. June 7, 2004. June 9, 2004. www.southjerseynews.com/issues/june/s060704c.htm.

Armour, Mark *et al.* *Baseball Prospectus 2004*. New York: Workman Publishing, 2004.

Callis, Jim. "Does Polish or Stuff Mean More in the Long Run?" *Baseball America*. May 15, 2004. May 15, 2004. www.baseballamerica.com/today/columnists/040515callis.html.

"Draft Pulse: the Rise and Fall of Stephen Drew and Jeff Nieman." *Baseball America*. May 20, 2004. Accessed May 20, 2004. www.baseballamerica.com/today/2004draft/040520pulse.html.

Forst, David. Statements made at "Sabermetrics Day With the A's." June 6, 2004.

"How the Draft Works." *Baseball America*. May 17, 2004. Accessed May 17, 2004. <http://baseballamerica.com/today/2004draft/2004draftmech.html>.

Lewis, Michael. *Moneyball*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003.