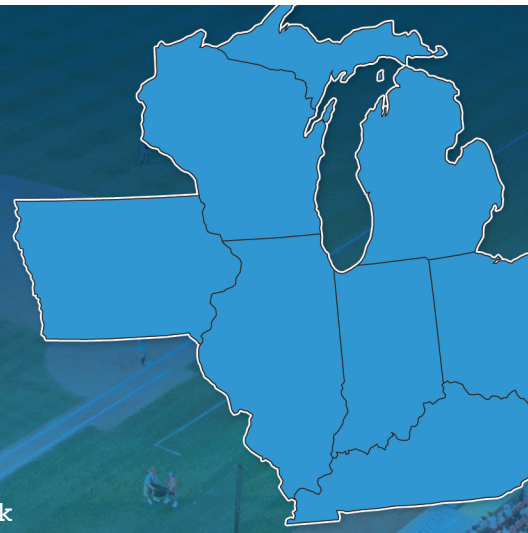


GROWING UP IN



Eager to climb their way to the Majors, young Whitecaps players adjust to the baseball lifestyle in the Midwest League

By Ben Chiswick

The Midwest League is a game changer.

Since 1956, young ballplayers with dreams of major league stardom have come to the Midwest League to begin their professional baseball careers. In turn, it has provided invaluable experience to those players, introducing them to the reality of the game – and lifestyle – of baseball.

Even after a half-century of Midwest League baseball, the revered developmental league still offers today's players many of the same things it provided players of the 1950s and 1960s. While the structure of affiliated professional baseball has been refined and improved over the decades, the Midwest League remains an integral entry-level minor league.

Though many players get their feet wet in short-season leagues intended to transition the youngest and least-experienced minor league ballplayers to the professional landscape, the Midwest League and the South Atlantic League represent the first full-season leagues in Minor League Baseball. All thirty major league clubs have a minor league affiliate in one of the two leagues at the low Class-A level, with 16 teams in the Midwest League and 14 in the South Atlantic League.

For many players, especially those drafted out of high school or with limited collegiate experience, these affiliates represent a number of firsts in their professional development.

For starters, the Midwest League is described as the first “full-season” league for a reason. As the name suggests, the league begins play in early April with games scheduled nearly every day through Labor Day weekend in September. The 140-game schedule is played out over a 152-day span, offering players little respite in a spread-out league that extends as far as Cedar Rapids, Iowa to the West; Cleveland, Ohio to the East; Appleton, Wisconsin to the North; and Bowling Green, Kentucky to the South.

While the demanding schedule is a precursor of things to come for players with aspirations of advancing to higher levels of the minor leagues and, eventually, the majors, it also offers a sharp wake-up call to the new professionals.

West Michigan Whitecaps' first baseman James Robbins, 20, was drafted by the Detroit Tigers in the 30th round in 2009 out of high school in suburban Seattle. His high school baseball season was approximately 20 games. Third baseman Nick Castellanos, 19, was also drafted by the Tigers out of high school. The supplemental first-rounder in 2010 played a high school season in South Florida that consisted of 25 regular season games and 33 contests total, including playoffs.

“When you have a high school game you play on Tuesday and then you might not play until Thursday and Friday,” said Castellanos. “You have those days in between to work on the stuff you thought you did wrong or thought you could do better. When you play every day – say you had a 7:00 game last night – and you don't perform to the best of your ability, you get a very small amount of time to correct it before tomorrow's game.”

The grueling schedule creates additional challenges caused by the travel. Long bus trips through the night are frequent, and the team routinely stays at hotels selected more for convenience than quality.

“It's definitely an impact, having five, seven, eight, nine hour bus rides,” said Robbins. “Sitting on a bus for that long can definitely take a toll. And then having to get right off the bus and two hours later you're stretching and getting ready to play a game. But it's just one of those things that goes along with it. You just try not to really worry about.”

Nineteen-year-old pitcher Kyle Ryan, a 12th-round pick in 2010, is well aware that on long trips, having a seat to yourself is a valuable commodity. Seat selection on the bus is determined through the time-honored tradition of baseball's unwritten rules, giving older players with more years of experience first pick at open seats. While that typically leaves the younger players doubled up with a teammate, one exception to the rule is preferential treatment given to the scheduled



Whitecaps infielder James Robbins had to make the transition from high school straight to the pros, going from 20 games a season to 140.

starting pitcher for the upcoming game.

"A lot of time you don't get your own bus seat," said Ryan, as the 19-year-old's matter-of-fact facial expression gave way to a sly grin. "If you're starting the next day it's always nice."

"The travel takes a toll also because some nights you don't get your best sleep," added Castellanos. "You have to get acclimated to a lot of different places. You've got to pretty much deal with what you're given. If the hotel is not great you've got to suck it up and deal with it. If you have a 10-hour bus ride through the night and you've got to get up and play the next day you've got to suck it up and deal with it."

Of course, the minor league lifestyle does have its moments.

"For me it's fun because I didn't get to experience it in college," admitted Ryan, who jumped straight from high school to the professional ranks. "That's where you get to experience the bus rides, the clubhouse talk, and the hotel fun. Most guys go through college and they get to experience that. It was a little bit of an adjustment, but for me it's fun."

Another unique aspect of the Midwest League is that, for many players, it is their first exposure to playing in cold weather. Ballplayers are disproportionately drafted out of warm-weather states, with baseball hotbeds in California, Arizona, Texas, Florida and other southern states offering the opportunity to play year-round in ideal conditions. A key part of a player's development is learning how to prepare mentally and physical for the chilly weather that is common in Midwestern cities at the big-league level in April and May.

For Southern California native Rob Brantly, the Whitecaps' 21-year-old catcher who was the Tigers' third-round pick in 2010, this proved to be an uncomfortable adjustment.

"Oh my gosh!" he exclaimed. "I showed up to Grand Rapids the first day [of the 2011 season] and it was the first time I've ever seen snow fall. I showed up in swim trunks and a t-shirt with my Oakley's on and my host family was laughing at me."

"I got out on the field and that was a whole new experience. You had to make sure that you ran a little bit more to actually build up that sweat and get you loose for the game. And then there's the whole obstacle of staying loose during the game. We were putting gloves underneath our batting gloves to make sure that our hands would be OK when swinging. I made sure to do a lot more things to build up a sweat. Whether it would be jump rope in the training room before I actually headed out to the field or, when stretching out with the pitcher before a game, I ran sprints to try to build a sweat – which wasn't easy in 20-degree weather."

The cold weather was also new to Castellanos.

"Some guys are used to it, some guys aren't," he said. "I'm from Miami so that was a little bit different. I've never played in weather where I could see my breath before. It's different. Not sweating, not having your body temperature up, the ball stinging off the bad part of the bat."

So, other than staying loose, what is the toughest thing about playing in the cold weather?

"Probably trying to catch the baseball with [hard-throwing pitchers Bruce] Rondon and [Ramon] Lebron, when it is 20 degrees and your hand is cold and that ball is coming in pretty hard," said Brantly with a chuckle. "That was a fun experience. You know its coming and you just have to squeeze it – POW! – and hold it."

With all of the new experiences for young baseball players in the Midwest League, there is one that stands out as the consensus favorite – the crowds.

The Whitecaps attendance at Fifth Third Ballpark annually ranks among the Top-40 in all of Minor League Baseball, outdrawing numerous Double-A and Triple-A teams. In 2010, Fifth Third Ballpark hosted an average of 5,385 fans per game for a total of more than 370,000 over the course of the season, routinely drawing weekend crowds of close to 10,000.

"When I went to Venezuela [with USA Baseball's 18-under team for the 2009 Pan Am Games] we had 2,500-3,000 fans," noted Ryan. "In high school we might have gotten a couple hundred at the most. At our high school All-Star Game we got three or five hundred. But going from 200 to 10,000 – that's awesome."

Robbins, who also bypassed college on his way to the pros, experienced a similar transition.

"When you see a big crowd you definitely get up for the game," he said. "Especially at the beginning of the season, [the adrenaline] is definitely flowing. You're pumped up. Then as the season goes on you're a little calmer. But it always gets you going."

Unlike Robbins, Ryan and Castellanos, who were all drafted out of high school, Brantly came to the Whitecaps after two college seasons at the University of California – Riverside.

"When I first got [to West Michigan] last year – you know, actually having a fan base like that – I wasn't used to it but I enjoyed it," said Brantly. "I think that kind of helped lift my spirits as far as playing aggressively my first year and having fans there to back me up."

Another element to the great fan support at Fifth Third Ballpark is the Whitecaps' affiliation with the Detroit Tigers. While the big-league club chases pennants on the eastern part of the state, the next wave of Tigers are getting their first taste of big-time baseball on the western part of the state – under the watchful eye of rabid Tigers fans.

"That's cool to have people that are paying attention to you and paying attention to your career," added Brantly. "It kind of makes you feel that you're not only important to your affiliate organization, but you're important to the major league organization as well."

After all, starting baseball players on their path to the top is what the Midwest League is all about. ●



Whitecaps catcher and Southern California native Rob Brantly saw his first snowfall when he arrived in West Michigan.