

Going After My Big League Dreams

A Short Story by Michael G. Lortz

I always thought I was a good pitcher when I was younger. One season, in my under-12 league, I pitched three games without giving up an earned run. In another memorable start a few years later, I was out-dueled by a future major league draftee 2-1. I was so enamored with “the art of the pitch” I used to practice my wind-up while standing in right field.

(Rumor has it baseball legend Ted Williams used to practice while playing the outfield as well.)

Sadly, my dreams of playing baseball professionally were nearly curtailed in high school when I failed to make the junior varsity team. Even after impressing the head coach with a private practice I still didn’t make the cut. I guess they had enough left-handed fireballers on the team already. Maybe the head coach wanted someone more versatile, as even in little league I was a walking advertisement for the designated hitter. But I was a pitcher, not a hitter.

Seven years later, my dreams of playing pro ball had all but died. I was 23, living in Tallahassee, Florida, and a student at Florida State. Then one day, in the summer of 2001, the tinder of my big league aspirations were rekindled. While browsing the major league baseball web site, I found an entire page of open tryouts, two of which were scheduled for Tallahassee. Scouts for both the Atlanta Braves and Milwaukee Brewers were visiting my area to find the next baseball superstar.

Although the rational side of my brain thought it would be a great idea to go and talk to the scouts while they were in town and hope to network for future employment, the curious side of me couldn’t help but wonder, what if? Did I still have potential? Could I make it? Aren’t teams always clamoring for left-handed pitching?

A couple of weeks later, on the eve of the Braves’ tryout, I could hardly sleep. Thoughts of baseball fame danced in my head. As I eventually dozed off, I made sure to sleep on my right side, careful to avoid waking with a dead left arm.

Despite my excitement, reality set in as I arrived at the Florida A&M baseball field for the tryout. After looking at the dozens of true athletes preparing for their shot, I opted to leave my baseball glove in the car. Unlike me, a majority of those already

at the tryout looked as if they had played in the last seven years. I decided on the practical approach, to watch and ask the Braves' scouts for possible employment leads after the tryout.

As I sat among the disinterested girlfriends and curious onlookers, a member of the scout team asked if I was there for the tryout. Although I answered in the negative, the scout then asked if I had a glove.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Well, go get it and get out here on the field," the scout said.

I guess he saw potential.

In all modesty, I assume it is a baseball scout's sworn duty to evaluate the big league mettle of every warm-blooded male. No scout dare be the one to pass on a great talent due to reluctance, even if it meant putting me out in the field with a group of ex-high school all-stars, former college ballplayers, and travel team members, most of whom probably had the date circled on their calendar months in advance. Then, of course, there was me, who had only learned about the tryout weeks prior and whose training consisted of beating the dust off my glove and throwing accurately to my roommate in a game of catch.

So after deciding the outfield was probably my best place to hang out until the pitching tryout, I joined the rest of the prospects in right field for the first test of our wannabe big league skills. Our task was to catch a flyball and throw to home plate and then field a second ball and make a throw to third base. Sounded easy enough, I thought.

When it was finally my turn in the outfield I had no problem catching the first ball or fielding the second. Nor did I have any problem "crowhopping" and getting into position to throw. My attempts to get the ball to its intended target, however, weren't exactly big league "frozen ropes". They were more like soaring rainbows, taking to higher altitude for the sake of possible distance. Former Brave outfielders Brian Jordan or Ron Gant I was not. But then again, I was a pitcher. Throws to third and home are much easier when you are on the mound.

The next task towards making the Braves was running. And unfortunately not just the ability to run. The Braves representatives were looking for that sudden acceleration, that cat-like speed, that sheer athleticism that made for a quality prospect. Similar to the scene in the movie *Major League* when Willie Mays Hayes

runs in his pajamas, we had to sprint a distance in the outfield equivalent to the distance from first to third base.

Having watched the often-replayed scene of former Brave Sid Bream sliding into home against the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1991 playoffs, I assumed the Braves' standard for running ability wasn't among the highest. Truth be told, I thought of myself as quite the runner in my military days, and hoped that experience would carry me to prospect status.

Not so fast (pun intended). Apparently, the Braves had raised their standards since the days of Sid Bream and were looking for real runners, or at least athletes who could complete a 120 foot dash to a professional standard. Proving no one will ever confuse me with former Braves Rafael Furcal and Otis Nixon, my running failed to wow those who held the key to my potential big league career. Once again, however, I was a pitcher, not a speedy base stealer.

Finally, as we prospective major leaguers completed our drills, those with hopes of taking the mound were herded away from the group. This was our time to shine. Time for the golden arms of tomorrow, the future Greg Madduxes, Tom Glavines, and John Smoltzes to prove their potential. In all honesty, however, I would have settled with being the next Greg McMichael, but it was not the time to be humble.

A short while and several pitching hopefuls later, it was my turn to shine. As I walked towards the mound the lead scout told me the procedure. I would get three warm-ups, three fastballs, a breaking ball, a change-up, and a wildcard whatever-I-wanted pitch. And if I didn't break at least 80 miles per hour with a fastball, then the scouts weren't interested.

Admittedly, I was nervous. Eighty miles per hour? I knew I could drive it, but could I throw it? So what if I hadn't pitched in over five years. Wasn't it a scout's job to find that diamond in the rough?

Having not pitched in quite a while, I used the first three pitches to find the strike zone. Nothing fancy, just strikes. On the fourth pitch, my first "official" fastball, I wound up, reared back, and fired. A strike on the inside corner. Surprised I didn't hear the loud pop of the ball hitting the catcher's mitt, I eagerly awaited my pitch speed.

"Seventy-two," yelled the scout's assistant from behind the backstop. Not bad, but not good enough.

Pitch two was in the exact same location as the first. “Seventy-three,” the assistant scout yelled. Still under 80.

I had one more chance to make the cut. I quickly recalled every pitching lesson I had ever heard. Bend the back leg, drive off the rubber, follow through. I even thought about trying to pump myself up a la Al “The Mad Hungarian” Hrbosky or Rick “Wild Thing” Vaughn, but thought better of it. I don’t know much about scouting, but I doubt they look approvingly towards a gimmick, even if it got me that much needed seven miles an hour more on my fastball.

Gimmickless, I toed the rubber for a third time. A simple rock back, wind-up, and pitch ...

“Seventy-five,” came the call from behind the backstop.

“Let’s see your curveball,” the head scout stoically said. His tone of voice made it clear he was just going through the motions and that barring a miracle, I wouldn’t be pitching in Turner Field any time soon.

“I don’t throw a curve,” I embarrassingly replied. Things could not get worse.

“How about any breaking pitch?” he asked.

“Well, I know how to throw a slider,” I said. I lied. I had never thrown a slider in my life, although I did know the correct grip and release of the pitch.

Thinking fast, I strode back upon the mound and threw the best slider I knew how. Surprisingly, my wanna-be slider actually acted like a slider, breaking about four inches or so before reaching the catcher’s mitt. Unfortunately, the pitch traveled at only about 60 miles per hour – minor league fodder and hardly the stuff of a future Brave.

“Ok, what else can you throw?” the scout asked.

“I have a change-up,” I admitted. Hardly one to blow people away, I was actually quite proud of my ability to throw a circle change. After learning how former Brave Tom Glavine gripped his all-star caliber change-up, I learned to master the deceptive arm speed necessary to strike out everyone on my block. Unfortunately, games on my block were played with a tennis ball, not a baseball.

Using Glavine’s grip on an actual baseball, I hurled my change-up towards the plate. Good location – lower outside corner with a little sinking action at the end. I was proud of myself. But a good change of pace does not a major leaguer make. I still had to break 80 with a fastball.

After receiving the ball from the catcher one last time, I took a deep breath. This was it. All my baseball aspirations coursed through my veins. Long hours of practicing. Years of little league semi-dominance. Thoughts of pitching Game Seven of the World Series. It all hung on one pitch. One fastball.

The slow, easy, rocking wind-up ...

The pitch ... a strike.

“Seventy-three.”

The four syllables that crushed my big league dreams.

With a look of disappointment, I slowly walked off the mound.

Sensing my sorrow, the head scout turned to me.

“You know you could always pitch in a local adult league if you still want to play.”

After the tryout concluded, my practical side re-emerged and I asked the scouts for any contact information they could provide that might lead to a job with the Braves. At least I succeed somewhere, scoring an address and an email to the big league Braves human resource officer.

A few months later, acting on the scout’s advice, I signed up for the Tallahassee Adult Baseball League. Without even trying out, I played a season and a half of adult baseball before my academic commitment forced me to prematurely retire. During that time, I found myself back on the mound twice, pitching two innings, allowing three runs on four hits and five walks. It was the end of my baseball career. But although I haven’t set foot on a pitcher’s mound since, I still haven’t given up hope.

One day the Braves may call.