

LOCAL LOOK

Life on the Farm

In the minors, the term dirty work can mean far more than tough play. It could mean laundry duty.

- By Matt Wood -

You're starting your first full season of Single-A ball after being drafted the previous summer. Pro ball. Spring training just wrapped. You got a taste of the big time working out in the same camp as the major league players. They were right there. Not so different; so distant. You figure that with some hard work and a few good breaks, you'll soon be one of them too. So you walk into your new team's clubhouse and the trainer hands you a sheet of paper. Perhaps a training regimen. Maybe a dietary approach to pro ball. A little Nutrition 101.

But it's not. It's a list of assignments for an upcoming road trip.

Item 1: "Clean the team bus every night."

Life for the players on the Kane County Cougars, a Single-A affiliate of the Oakland A's located in west suburban Geneva lacks glamour. The Cougars are Oakland's "low" A team in the Midwest League, one notch above the short-season team in Vancouver where prospects play immediately after the amateur draft. For many of the players, this marks their first full season of professional baseball, a 140-game grind over 150 days that tests both their physical and mental stamina. They're just kids, a few years out of high school or college; the average age on the roster this season is about 22, the oldest

player is 25, the youngest, 19. The whole season is an adjustment process. Not only is the competition tougher than anything they've faced before, but players must learn how to make ends meet on a meager salary and manage their personal lives while traveling, working out, and playing baseball nearly every waking hour. The payoff is obvious—a chance to play baseball for a living—but the incentives are much more tangible in an

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Oakland organization that has adopted a philosophy of promoting young talent from within. Here, there's a notion that becoming a major league baseball player isn't just a far-off dream; if they do their jobs, it's inevitable.

In reality, the numbers say that baseball-wide, closer to 1 in 13 makes that final journey, to "The Show." Not quite eight percent.

Game Day, Without Nook Laloosh

But this is not Bull Durham either, where humor counters the lingering fear of maybe-not-me. There's no time for horsing around after games and faking rainouts, no cavorting with another breed of cougar and learning how to pitch wearing garters. These Cougars barely have time to pick up their dry cleaning. On a typical game day, players begin their morning at 10:00 a.m. with

age day," said manager Aaron Niekula. "It's not just 'show up to the ballpark and play a game for two and a half, three hours.' It's show up to the ballpark four, five, six hours before a game, get ready to practice and make yourself a better player. And that not only takes a lot of physical stamina, it takes a lot of mental stamina."

Players might not leave the ballpark after games until almost midnight, and then it's time for a few hours of sleep before starting all over again. Road trips are even more demanding. After the last game of a road series, the team immediately boards the bus and drives through the night to the next city, pulling in to tropical summer locations like Lansing, Michigan, and Dayton, Ohio at 6:00 or 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

Players say this kind of day-in, day-out grind over nearly six months makes them pace themselves so that they'll still be at their best when the summer heats up in July and August. James Heuser, a 23-year-old starting pitcher for the Cougars, says this is the most important trick he's learned for dealing with the grind. It's his fifth year as a pro.

"First it was pretty exciting because that's all you have to do is play baseball. But you just kind of have to pace yourself, because every day you're doing pretty much the same thing, and you get pretty worn out," he said.

Outfielder Matt Sulentic is the team's

a workout at the gym. The team has a contract with gyms and YMCAs in all of the league's cities, so home or away, every day begins by hitting the weights. For evening games, they report to the ballpark by 2:00 p.m., or even sooner if they're assigned "early work" to practice specific skills, work on mechanics, or do special conditioning.

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(PHOTOS COURTESY OF KANE COUNTY COUGARS)

youngest player at 19. He had a brief stint with the Cougars last season after a swing through Vancouver.

"I came from high school, and it was tough to figure out how to pace yourself, and when to do work and when to kind of take a break," he said.

The Oakland organization takes care of the players, but they don't exactly coddle them either. Players often stay with host families arranged by the Adopt-a-Cougar program, where local empty nesters and families with a room to spare agree to rent rooms to the players at a reasonable rate. This way they get a nice place to call home and, when they're around to eat it, a good meal. Players are responsible for paying the rent and negotiating other expenses out of their own pockets. The team pays a per diem for meals on the road and covers all healthcare costs, but beyond that, players are expected to budget and save just like everyone else. This real world skill is even more important at the single-A level, where the league minimum salary is a mere \$1,050 a month, and the paychecks stop when the season is over.

Many of the players work part time in the off-season.

The Team Mom

While the Cougar players might get to sleep at a nice local family's house, their real home is the clubhouse. The Cougars' clubhouse at Elfstrom Stadium is located behind the grandstand on the first base side, a few flights of stairs up from the dugout. The players spend much of their time here between workouts and games, relaxing by playing cards or lounging on a couple of couches and watching a flat-screen TV.

Justin Whitehouse, is the team's trainer. He calls himself the "team mom."

"I think what ends up happening for the baseball player, your clubhouse becomes your home. That's where you spend most of your time. When they're with their host families, they can just sleep, wake up, and leave, come here, and at their lockers and in this facility, this is where their home is."

Whitehouse handles many of the logistics for the team, from medical care to arranging the pre-game meal to as-



Trainer Justin White House. (PHOTO COURTESY OF KANE COUNTY COUGARS)

signing road trip duties like which unlucky player gets to clean the bus. He also serves as the bailiff for the team's kangaroo court, where players are tried by their peers for minor infractions like wearing the wrong batting practice jersey or letting a cell phone ring unattended in their locker. More serious fines are meted out by the coaching staff and posted on a bulletin board: \$10 for missing a workout, \$25 for a missed sign.

Whitehouse said he relishes telling the players stories about former Cougar players who have moved on to the A's, like Huston Street and Joe Blanton. He said last year, the Cougars had an off day when the A's were playing the White Sox in Chicago, so the team went to see the game. Whitehouse said he went into the A's locker room afterwards, and, "As I walked through the clubhouse, there were nine guys on that roster that had been on one of my low A teams in the last five years," he said. "So that right there is enough to tell these guys that, hey, it's gonna' happen, and if you're good enough, you're gonna' play on our major league team, or we're gonna' find a place for you to play."

And that's really what life as a Kane County Cougar is all about: that brass ring waiting in Oakland. "You look at the light at the end of the tunnel and you see a majority of our Oakland A's are home grown. That should provide you motivation as a player that, hey, if I perform well and have success, I may get an opportunity to get to the big league with the A's. And if you do not, then you have 29 other teams in the major leagues that you may have an opportunity to crack the big leagues with," Nieckula said.

"The guys that are gonna get promoted, the guys that are going to have success, are the guys that figure out what it takes to be successful."

He likens the players to entrepreneurs, running their own personal baseball franchise. What does that make him?

"We as a staff, as an organization, are like a franchiser," he said. "We have all the tools, we provide all the necessary elements to help them be successful, but that's all we have. They've gotta go out there and execute it."

Part of building any business is doing the dirty work. In Oakland, that might mean a well-executed take-out slide at second. It could mean the same here.

And laundry.

A Cougars player may not think about this when Whitehouse tells them they're in charge of the laundry bag marked "Personals" on the next road trip, but it's all part of the minor league experience. Given the same opportunity, it's fair to say most of us would haul the dirty jock straps and clean out the team bus any time.



OF Matt Sulentic (top) and pitcher James Heuser. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF KANE COUNTY COUGARS)