

Independent Baseball Insider

Wirz & Associates, Inc. 665-A North Trail, Stratford, CT 06614 TEL: 203 380-9931 Email:RWirz@aol.com

It Really Is Spring, At Least for Ticket Buyers; Independent Map Seems Set With 50 Teams

By Bob Wirz

The scent of spring is indelibly in the air, and not merely because the calendar says so.

Attendance giant **Long Island, NY** is staging its annual festival signaling the start of single-game ticket sales on Saturday, difficult as it might seem in some parts of the Independent Baseball world. The **Ducks** already had fans lined up outside their **Atlantic League** ballpark in **Central Islip** some 75 hours ahead of the ticket windows sliding open at 10 o'clock Saturday morning.

Well, there were at least two fans in line. The father-son team of **Charlie** and **Ryan Kamer** became first in line for the third consecutive year, although they must have felt confident of retaining the honor since their sleeping-bag odyssey started 143 hours early one year ago. "The Kamers are like our own version of **Punxsutawney Phil**," quipped Ducks President/General Manager **Michael Pfaff**.



Not surprisingly, **Bridgeport, CT**, also owned by Atlantic League Founder **Frank Boulton**, will have a similar day of "a fun and fan-friendly atmosphere" on the same day to launch ticket sales, including the serving of hamburgers, hot dogs and Italian sausage plus beer for those of age or soft drinks.

The Atlantic League will open the Independent Baseball season April 26.

50 Teams on Indy Map for Its 20th Year; Outcalt Leaves NAL

It now seems pretty certain the 20th season of Independent Baseball, which started with two leagues in 1993, will consist of 50 teams, not counting any late-developing circuits or pay-to-play leagues.

The final tally includes the return of **Orange County (Fullerton, CA)** to become the fourth team in the second-year **North American League's Northern Division**. That portion of the NAL will play a 72-game schedule from June 4-August 26. The six-team **Southern Division**, all based in **Texas**, will play 96 games apiece.

The **Frontier League** is senior in service time to all other circuits since it started in '93, and it also is the largest with 14 teams spread from **Missouri** to **Pennsylvania** and into the upper Midwest. The **American Association** has 13 teams, the **Atlantic League** eight, including its first voyage west (**Sugar Land, TX**) and the **Can-Am League** has five teams.

Missing from the North American scene is CEO **Kevin Outcalt**, who also was commissioner of the **Golden League** from its start until it was folded into the new league. "I left the company a few weeks ago and am no longer involved," Outcalt said in an email, offering that he may still end up in a baseball job. The league website does not give any hint as to who is in charge going forward, and numerous calls to others in the NAL went unanswered or could not shed light on the situation.

Finding Players

With the season bearing down, it would be a major understatement to say that player signings have picked up even though there will be two future waves before all leagues are under way in May because major league farm systems are only at the very beginning of their stage of releasing players who will want a second opportunity in professional baseball and college seniors will not be available until their season has run its course.

Teams reach far afield to find players, but Manager **Eddie Dennis** of the **North American League's Rio Grande Valley (Harlingen, TX)** picked up what could be at least one-third of the **WhiteWings** roster in the pay-to-play **Arizona Winter League** where he led the championship team in the month-long league. Dennis corralled nine players although only three have previous pro experience so the players will have to prove themselves all over once they get to training camp.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, among the most "tenured" players back for another go, third baseman **Jeff Nettles**, has signed on for his ninth season in a 10-year span with **Somerset, NJ** in the **Atlantic League** and pitcher **Ross Peeples**, who has been around so long they call him "The Mayor", has just signed on for an eighth consecutive year in the same league with **Lancaster, PA**.

One veteran who will not be around is **Washington, PA** outfielder **Chris Sidick**, whose retirement after seven years with the **Wild Things** was announced Thursday.

"It took me the entire winter to come up with the answer (to retire)," said Sidick, whose **Frontier League** records include 588 games, 2,667 plate appearances, 414 runs, 635 hits, 56 triples and 328 walks. He decided it was time to concentrate on his sports academy and other business interests. Sidick played in three **College World Series** for **Marietta (OH) College** before joining the pro ranks.

* * * *

FOR ADDITIONAL INDEPENDENT BASEBALL COVERAGE

www.AtlanticLeagueBaseball.com ADDED TO www.IndyBaseballChatter.com

* * * *

Castillo Out, But '11 Atlantic Leaguer Rice Could Stick With Dodgers

These final 13 days before the major league season opens April 4 (not counting the March 28-29 set between **Oakland** and **Seattle** in **Japan**) create major nervousness for every player not certain of his status, and that includes many of the 36 former Independent players (out of an original total of 53) we still show as being in **American** and **National League** camps.

Veteran lefthander **Alberto Castillo** has suffered the worst fate of those already trimmed in that the **Los Angeles Dodgers** gave the 36-year-old his outright release. Castillo first played in an Indy league when he was with **Schaumburg, IL (Northern League)** in 1999. He was a frequent **Atlantic Leaguer** from 2002-07, playing with four different teams, but has gotten into 79 major league games (3-0, 4.33) with **Baltimore** and **Arizona** since. It is difficult to imagine he will not sign with someone again soon.

Ironically, another southpaw, **Scott Rice**, who was in the Atlantic League as recently as last season,

is edging closer to nailing down a bullpen job with the Dodgers. *The Los Angeles Times* reports the 30-year-old Rice, a reliever at **York, PA** early last summer (1-0, one save, 2.45 ERA in 15 appearances), is one of eight candidates (three left-handers) for seven jobs.

“I finally know what kind of pitcher I am,” he told *MLB.com*. “I’ve got to get ground balls, stay low in the zone and ahead of hitters.” Rice, who also made Atlantic League stops at **Long Island, NY** (’08) and **Newark, NJ** (’09), has allowed only three hits (no walks) and struck out five in 5.0 innings so far this spring. He has never played in a regular season major league game.

The only two other players who were in Indy leagues last season and still are in major league camps played for **Lancaster, PA** (Atlantic League). They are starting pitcher **Jerome Williams** with the **Los Angeles Angels** and first baseman-third baseman **Terry Tiffie** with **Miami**. Williams is making progress from a hamstring strain that has kept him out of any games so far, but he may be losing ground to touted rookie **Garrett Richards**. Tiffie has been in a dozen games with the **Marlins**, but only has three singles in 29 at-bats (.103).

Seattle and Oakland were allowed to take 30 players apiece when they left for Japan since they also will be playing some exhibition games before trimming to the 25-man opening day limit. **George Sherrill** and **Tom Wilhelmson** seem certain to be around after the shutdown with the Mariners, and rookie **Steve Delabar** is very much in contention as is **Travis Schlichting**, making the trip with the Athletics.

These 36 Have Made the Cut—So Far

The players believed to still be in major league camps, with their current and Independent affiliations (n=non-roster invitee; *played first pro game in an Independent league; #was in an Indy league in 2011):

PITCHERS (26)—**Dylan Axelrod**, Chicago-AL (Windy City, Frontier League), **Craig Breslow**, Arizona (New Jersey, Can-Am League), **Tim Byrdak**, New York-NL (Gary, IN and Joliet, IL, Northern League), **nJuan Cedeno**, New York-AL (Rio Grande Valley, North American League), **nRobert Coello**, Toronto (Edmonton and Calgary, Golden League), ***Aaron Crow**, Kansas City (Fort Worth, TX, American Association), **Steve Delabar**, Seattle (Brockton, MA, Can-Am; Florence, KY, Frontier), **nNelson Figueroa**, Toronto (Long Island, NY, Atlantic), ***Luke Hochevar**, Kansas City (Fort Worth), **n*Chris Jakubauskas**, Arizona (Lincoln, American Association; Orange County, Golden; Florence and Ohio Valley, Frontier), **n*Josh Kinney**, Seattle (River City, Frontier), **Brandon Kintzler**, Milwaukee (St. Paul, MN, American Association; Winnipeg, Northern), **nMitch Lively**, San Francisco (San Angelo, TX, United League), **nMatt Meyer**, Los Angeles Angels (St. Paul, MN, American Association), **nMike O’Connor**, New York-AL (Southern Maryland, Atlantic), **n#Scott Rice**, Dodgers (Long Island, York, PA, Newark, NJ, Atlantic), **n*Tanner Scheppers**, Texas (St. Paul), ***Max Scherzer**, Detroit (Fort Worth), **nTravis Schlichting**, Oakland (Kansas City, KS, Northern League), ***George Sherrill**, Seattle (Evansville, IN, Frontier, Winnipeg and Sioux Falls, SD, Northern), **Joe Thatcher**, San Diego (River City), **nRaul Valdes**, Philadelphia (New Jersey and Nashua, NH, Can-Am), **Tom Wilhelmson**, Seattle (Tucson, AZ, Golden), **#Jerome Williams**, Angels (Lancaster; Long Beach, CA, Golden), **nClay Zavada**, Cincinnati (Southern Illinois, Frontier), **Brad Ziegler**, Arizona (Schaumburg, IL, Northern).

CATCHERS (5)—**nPat Arlis**, Milwaukee (Kansas City; Calgary and Orange County), **nCody Clark**, Kansas City (San Diego, Golden), **nMike Rivera**, Milwaukee (Atlantic City, NJ, Atlantic), **nRene Rivera**, Minnesota (Camden, NJ, Atlantic), **nJose Yopez**, Atlanta (Pensacola, FL, American Association; Gary).

INFIELDERS (4)—**nErick Almonte**, Milwaukee (Long Island), ***Stephen Drew**, Arizona (Camden), **nMike Hollimon**, Minnesota (Grand Prairie, TX, American Association), **n#Terry Tiffie**, Miami (Lancaster).

OUTFIELDERS (1)—**n*Justin Christian** (Southern Maryland, River City).

Zavada Still Hopeful With Reds

Among all players still grinding for major league opportunities, count **Cincinnati** reliever **Clay Zavada** as among the most determined.

“Last year, I didn’t have the opportunity to fight for a job because of my (elbow) surgery,” the onetime **Frontier Leaguer (Southern Illinois)** lefty told *MLB.com*. “This year, I have a fighting chance, which feels good. If you can’t fight, they’ll bury you. You have to scratch and claw every day. That’s how I’ve always worked—scratching, clawing and fighting every day.”

Catcher **Cody Clark’s** fortunes toward landing a backup job in **Kansas City** in his 11th pro season looked better for a time because **Salvador Perez** and **Manny Pina** both are on the 60-day disabled list with knee problems, but the **Royals** traded for **Houston** veteran **Humberto Quintero** so Clark, the onetime **Golden Leaguer (San Diego)**, faces an uphill battle again even though he is hitting .313 (5-for-16) in 11 spring games.

Nava, Others Get Into Major League Exhibitions

It is nice to see that **Boston** has not completely forgotten **Daniel Nava**, who made such splash with a grand slam on the first major league pitch he saw back in 2010. Although not even invited to camp as a non-roster player, the onetime **Chico, CA (Golden League)** outfielder has gotten into three spring training games (0-for-3) with the parent **Red Sox**.

Other players like Nava who started their career in an Independent league and have seen action in one or more major league games this spring include infielder **Dan Kaczowski (St. Paul, MN, American Association)** with **Arizona** and pitcher **Brandon Kloess (Windy City, Crestwood, IL, Frontier League)** with the **Chicago White Sox**.

Brief action also has been given to infielder **Anthony Seratelli (Windy City)** with **Kansas City**, infielder **Argenis Reyes (New Jersey, Little Falls, Can-Am League)** with **Cleveland** and catcher **Zach Zaneski (Midwest, Frontier League)** with **Texas**.

(Bob Wirz also writes about Independent Baseball on two other sites, www.IndyBaseballChatter.com and www.AtlanticLeagueBaseball.com. Fans may subscribe to this *Independent Baseball Insider* column, which will be published 41 times in 2012, at www.WirzandAssociates.com or comment to RWirz@aol.com. The author has 16 years of major league baseball experience with Kansas City and as spokesman for two Commissioners, and lives in Stratford, CT.)