

# Independent Baseball Insider

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## Winter Work as Important for Holdzkom and Delabar As for Future \$200,000,000 Man Scherzer

By Bob Wirz

**Max Scherzer** is going to sign a new contract any day now which may be worth as much as \$200 million. If everything breaks just right in the new season, two other onetime Independent Baseball hurlers could earn \$1 million between them for their work in 2015, yet these winter preparatory months seem every bit as important in terms of career success to this pair of right-handers.

Scherzer's destination is not yet known, but **Steve Delabar** is hoping to regain a good chunk of his 2013 **American League All-Star** form and cement a spot in the **Toronto** bullpen while **John Holdzkom** wants to pick up where he left off in '14 as a sudden find for **Pittsburgh's** 'pen.

While Scherzer seemed destined for a big-league future from the time he made his professional debut for the **Fort Worth (TX) Cats** in the **American Association** in '07 while a contract could be worked out worthy of **Arizona's** first-round draft choice of the previous summer, the other two had anything but a clear path to baseball's top level.

Delabar was drafted in the 29th round by **San Diego** in '03 out of the less-than-renowned **Volunteer State Community College**, pitched in two Independent leagues after the Padres dropped him four years later, and had to overcome what some feared was a career-ending compound fracture in his pitching elbow which required a metal plate and nine screws to repair while in the **Can-Am League (Brockton, MA)** in 2009 and missed one entire season before his career got any energy.

Holdzkom was taken in the fourth round by the **New York Mets**, but his journey toward the majors did not find him above Class A until the **Pirates** found him in the American Association after last season had started, then he had a meteoric jump within a few months and found himself pitching in the wild-card playoff against eventual **World Champion San Francisco** two months ago. He used **Sioux City, IA** and especially **Amarillo, TX** as major Independent stepping stones.

"I know I can contribute like I did in the past," Delabar told *Sportsnet.ca* recently. "Physically, I feel now like I did in the offseason leading into 2013." He struck out 82 in 58.2 innings for the **Blue Jays**, making the All-Star team along the way, although he had been with **Seattle** and Toronto most of the previous season, then took a big fall last season, his ERA jumping from 3.22 to 4.91 and being sent to Triple-A from mid-June on. "For the most part, I just didn't feel healthy all year," he told the **Canadian** website. "...I've been able to get a foundation laid down (since the season ended), building strength and speed."



If the 6-foot-9 Holdzkom's finish to last season with Pittsburgh (1-0, one save, 14 strikeouts and only four hits allowed over nine innings in as many games plus the postseason appearance) wasn't enough, he is now on a pedestal back home in **New Zealand** where he is a nominee for that country's **Sportsman of the Year** award. "John's story is a true sports tale of human perseverance and a credit to his talent, his own belief in his talent, and a great deal of hard work," Baseball New Zealand CEO **Ryan Flynn** was quoted by *Voxy.co.nz*.

"During the season I was just trying to play baseball and not think about the external stuff," the 27-year-old told *stuff.co.nz*. "Coming home it has hit me hard." In a separate interview with the local *CBS* radio affiliate in Pittsburgh, he added: "There is a tad bit more certainty (about staying in the major leagues), but at the same time I still have to make the team."

Starting to throw two weeks ago, he said: "The main thing I want to improve on is having a more consistent off-speed pitch so if need-be I can go for it. I just hope my cutter is still there."

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**202 PLAYERS HAVE GRADUATED FROM INDY BASEBALL TO MAJORS**  
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**31 Already Have Spring Training Invitations**

John Holdzkom and Steve Delabar are among 31 players who have spent time in Independent leagues already scheduled to be in major league spring training camps come February. That list will grow considerably as established free agents sign and more non-roster invitations are handed out. The current list with major league affiliation and previous Independent teams, with those who started in a non-affiliated league identified with an asterisk (\*) and non-roster players shown with an "n" before their name:

Pitchers (25)--**Dylan Axelrod**, Cincinnati (Windy City, Frontier League); n\***Greg Burke**, Toronto (Atlantic City, Atlantic League); n**Angel Castro**, Oakland (Lincoln, American Association); \***Aaron Crow**, Miami (Fort Worth, American Association); **Brandon Cunniff**, Atlanta (Southern Illinois and River City, Frontier); **Steve Delabar**, Toronto (Brockton, Can-Am League, and Florence, Frontier); **Jon Edwards**, Texas (San Angelo, North American League, and Alpine, Pecos League); **Luis Garcia**, Philadelphia (Newark, Can-Am); \***Luke Hochevar**, Kansas City (Fort Worth, American Association); **John Holdzkom**, Pittsburgh (Amarillo and Sioux City, American Association, and San Angelo, United League); **Scott Kazmir**, Oakland (Sugar Land, Atlantic); **Brandon Kintzler**, Milwaukee (St. Paul, American Association, and Winnipeg, Northern League); \***Chris Martin**, Colorado (Grand Prairie, American Association); **Vidal Nuno**, Arizona (Washington, Frontier); \***James Paxton**, Seattle (Grand Prairie, American Association); n**Scott Rice**, New York Mets (York, Long Island, and Newark, Atlantic); \***Tanner Roark**, Washington (Southern Illinois, Frontier); **Drew Rucinski**, Los Angeles Angels (Rockford, Frontier); \***Tanner Scheppers**, Texas (St. Paul, American Association); **Bo Schultz**, Toronto (Sioux Falls and Grand Prairie, American Association); **Caleb Thielbar**, Minnesota (St. Paul, American Association); \***Ian Thomas**, Atlanta (York, Atlantic, and Winnipeg, Northern and American Association); **Tom Wilhelmsen**, Seattle (Tucson, Golden League); **Jerome Williams**, Philadelphia (Lancaster, Atlantic, and Long Beach, Golden); **Brad Ziegler**, Arizona (Schaumburg, Northern).

Position Players (6)-- \*1B-OF **Chris Colabello**, Toronto (Worcester and Nashua, Can-Am), nINF-OF **Jake Fox**, Toronto (Somerset, Atlantic); \*OF **Daniel Nava**, Boston (Chico, Golden); OF **David Peralta**, Arizona (Amarillo and Wichita, American Association, Rio Grande Valley, North American); nOF **Antoan Richardson**, Texas (Schaumburg, Northern); C **Rene Rivera**, Tampa Bay (Camden, Atlantic).

### Fox, Colabello Could Compete for Same Job

With 2013 **Atlantic League Player of the Year Jake Fox** signing with **Toronto** and being invited to spring training it is not very far-fetched to visualize he and longtime **Can-Am League** star **Chris Colabello** competing against each other for backup first base duty with the **Blue Jays**.

While Colabello is trying to bounce back from a prolonged thumb problem and somewhat down season after a great start with **Minnesota**, Fox is coming off a 38-homer, 118-RBI campaign split between **Mexico** and **Philadelphia's** Class AA farm club and an end-of-season return for his third stint with the **Somerset (NJ) Patriots**.

### It Is on to Managing for This Duo

The flood of Independent personnel, including players, moving to the affiliated minors as managers continued this week with the announcements of last season's **Atlantic League** RBI king **Chad Tracy** (97 RBI for **York, PA**) taking the **Burlington, IA** job for the **Los Angeles Angels** and **Atlanta** tabbing catcher **Robinson Cancel** to skipper **Danville, VA**.

Cancel had three (of his four) major league stints after playing for **Somerset, NJ**, **Long Island, NY** and the traveling **Road Warriors** in the Atlantic League as well as **Edinburg, TX (United League)**. Ironically, Tracy's dad **Jim**, who led teams for 11 years in the majors, also started his managerial career in the **Midwest League**.

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### Seratelli Latest to Move to Japan

Add versatile **Anthony Seratelli** to the group of onetime Independent players going abroad. He has joined the **Seibu Lions in Japan**, almost certainly for more money than he could continue making in a fourth Triple-A season. Seratelli went straight to the **Frontier League (Windy City, Crestwood, IL)** when he did not get drafted out of **Seton Hall** in 2006, narrowly missing his first major league play in a utility job with the **New York Mets** last spring.

### American Association Has 5 in Australian All-Star League

The **American Association** had five of its current or former players in this week's **Australian League All-Star Game**, led by Aussie strikeout leader **Ryan Searle** of **Grand Prairie, TX** (40 strikeouts in 32.2 innings to go with a 2.76 ERA), who was the starting pitcher for the winning **Team Australia**.

Catcher **Craig Maddox** and pitcher **Morgan Coombs** have both been with **Gary, IN** and hurler **Justin Erasmus** with **Fargo, ND**. Outfielder **C. J. Beatty**, now in the **Chicago White Sox** farm system, also was in the game. Beatty had played in the American Association at **Lincoln, NE** plus **Washington, PA (Frontier League)** and the **Texas** cities of **San Angelo, Edinburg** and **Fort Worth** when they were in the **North American League**.

### Atlantic League Batting Champ Shakes Off Injury Woes

Of all the good news we have seen from winter leagues, nothing seems better than the recovery of

2013 **Atlantic League** batting champion **Jerry Owens** bouncing back to hit .345 (80-for-232) in 56 games in **Mexico**. The former **Chicago White Sox** outfielder ('06-09) had his '14 season with **Lancaster, PA** limited to seven games because of a shoulder injury. He had made all-league honors the year before when he hit .341 and stole 32 bases.

### **East Coast League Likely for 2015**

Not always quick to jump on board because of some big talk and little action about starting new leagues in recent years, this typist is beginning to believe the **East Coast League** has a decent chance of getting off the ground next summer.

After failing to get **Welland, Ontario** into the **Can-Am League**, 1990s **Frontier League** outfielder-turned-player-agent **Colin Cummins** indicates he has four teams lined up and possibly will get more before releasing a schedule of 60 or so games in mid-January. "I'm a little more relieved to know we can start", the **Toronto** resident told me this week.

The ECL has worked out an agreement with the pay-to-play **Myrtle Beach (SC) Winter League** for up to 40 of its players to get guaranteed or training camp invitations in a deal that is similar to what the **Frontier League** has with the **Palm Springs Winter League**. Cummins and his league partners will operate teams in **Newburgh, NY** and **Welland** (the **Niagara Wild**) while separate owners will have teams in **Watertown, NY** and **Waterloo, Ontario**. All players will be paid between \$500 and \$850 a month, and the league believes it will be breaking ground by hiring the first **Japanese** manager in **North America** in **Takashi Miyoshi**, who was a coach in the **American Association (Grand Prairie, TX)**, in 2014.

(Bob Wirz provides supplemental stories about Independent Baseball on his blog, [www.IndyBaseballChatter.com](http://www.IndyBaseballChatter.com). The author has 16 years of major league baseball experience with Kansas City and as chief spokesman for two Commissioners, and lives in Stratford, CT.)