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Low A Notebook

compiled by Josh Cooper

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Host families bond with players during summer months

By Dan Friedell

ABERDEEN, Md.--Kyle Dahlberg is living every 12-year-old boy's fantasy: He gets paid to play baseball and lives above a chocolate factory and across the street from an ice cream store.

The Aberdeen IronBirds catcher, a 13th-round pick by the Orioles in this year's draft out of Texas Christian, is spending his first summer of professional baseball living with Jean and Barry Bomboy, who run Bomboy's Home Made Candy and Ice Cream in Havre de Grace, Md. The living situation makes him one of the most popular players in the clubhouse, given that his locker is always stocked with chocolate-covered pretzels, cashew turtles and assorted cream- and nut-filled candies.

"You never know what you're going to get," Dahlberg said, sounding a little bit like Forrest Gump. "I didn't share too much at first because I wanted to try it for myself, but then I (also) didn't want a stomach ache so I started to share it with some of the guys."

Host families are a staple throughout short-season baseball, and present (though less prevalent) in full-season ball as well. Fans of the local team provide room and board for players, saving them money and helping them with the transition to professional baseball, while feeling like part of the team and occasionally sharing breakfast with a future major leaguer.

Dahlberg's Aberdeen teammates were concerned that the lean, 6-foot-3 Texan might gain a little weight during the season, with all of the candy and ice cream that's just a staircase away, but after catching all 14 innings of a 2-1 IronBirds win in July, Dahlberg is not worried.

"Fortunately, I'm on the baseball diet right now, where you sweat a bunch," he said. "I was a little sore (afterward), but I didn't feel too (guilty) putting down the ice cream."

While other IronBirds living situations aren't quite so sweet, the families and players become fast friends through sharing meals, bathrooms and postgame talks. In the best situations, the players are treated like adopted brothers and sons, with families quickly adapting to a new member.

Jo Ann Reynolds, who supervises the host family program for the IronBirds, asks only that potential hosts fill out a one-page questionnaire, and show they can support the added cost of supporting a professional athlete's eating habits. She also tries to put the players--almost all of whom are in their

late teens or early twenties--into friendly homes, which may eventually lead to emotional breakups at the end of the season.

Homesick For Their New Homes

Mark Stiffler and his wife Terry and three children Jeremy (23), Jason (19) and Samantha (15) have welcomed Aberdeen players into their home for the last three years. The experience has been straight out of a television sitcom, including unexpected car repairs (second-round draft pick Nolan Reimold couldn't remember the last time his beat-up Chevy had an oil change), an Amish buggy-spotting outing, injury rehab, Mother's Day phone calls, house parties and tearful goodbyes.

"Some guys don't have the best family situations at home," Stiffler said. "So they can get really attached. I wasn't sure if one player was going to be able to make it out of the driveway because he was crying so much."

With the object being to make it out of short-season ball as quickly as possible, many players don't come back to Aberdeen for a second summer. But because the Orioles have three other affiliates in Maryland, it's easy for families to stay in touch with ex-IronBirds.

John Reimold, who made a midsummer trip to Aberdeen and was in the stands to see his son throw out a runner at home from right field, said the only problem with the host family program is that they treat the players too well.

"They treat them like kings when they're here," he said. "And when they come home, they want us to treat them the same way."

Short-season players earn about \$300 a week, and spend half of the summer on the road, making it a waste of money for them to try to find an apartment for three months.

It's also nice for the players to have a financial safety net. Stiffler let Reimold borrow \$400 to get his smoking, burping Corsica back on the road. "It cost more than my first paycheck," said Nolan Reimold, who does have the benefit of a \$590,000 signing bonus to fall back on.

Logistical Issues

While living with a local family is better than hunkering down in a hotel room, as 2004 fourth-rounder Brad Bergesen did during extended spring training this year, players still sometimes have to make tradeoffs.

Though Spanish-speaking players have been placed in English-speaking homes in the Aberdeen area in past years, four players are living with Puerto Rican pitcher Henry Lozado and his uncle about 60 miles south of Aberdeen this year. Their travel time to Ripken Stadium is more than an hour.

Lozado, who speaks Spanish and English fluently, said he could have found a host family closer to Aberdeen, but he feels a responsibility to look out for the players who don't speak English, which is why the players are living so far away.

"It's rough since we have to drive an hour each way," Lozado said. "We can't sleep late like the other

guys can, and after road trips, getting back at three in the morning, we have to drive another hour to get home. But I'm always with them, so it makes some things easier."

Lozado said were considering renting a house closer to Aberdeen for the rest of the season.

Aberdeen fans are accustomed to welcoming players from around the world into their homes. They also have a host family program during the Ripken World Series, an annual international tournament for 11- and 12-year-olds. During that series, local families must go through more stringent background checks before being allowed to host players.

The system has worked well both for the youth tournament and the IronBirds, keeping local families involved and giving the players something more significant than a roof over their heads.

"My grocery bill was \$100 higher this week," Terry Stiffler said, "but they're good, polite kids and they really do let you know that they appreciate what you're doing."

NEW YORK(-PENN) STATE OF MIND

- A couple of two-way college stars are going in opposite directions. The Indians' third-round selection, **Stephen Head** out of Ole Miss, was off to a hot start, going 4-for-6 with two home runs and seven RBIs in his second game for Mahoning Valley. In his professional debut, Head was 10-for-23 with three homers and nine RBIs.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, first baseman **Mike Constanzo**, the Phillies' first selection (second round) out of Coastal Carolina, was having some initial difficulty adjusting to pro ball. Constanzo was hitting .196 and had struck out 21 times in 56 at-bats at Batavia.

- Extra innings? Try extra days. That's what the Auburn Doubledays and Batavia Muckdogs are going to need after their July 7 matchup, which saw the game suspended after 20 innings with the score tied 5-5. The league does not allow innings to start after 12:50 a.m., so the game will pick up when the teams meet again in August. Auburn forced extra frames with two runs in the ninth and almost won, but **Matt Cooksey** was thrown out at home by right fielder **Jordan Szabo** to end the inning. Auburn's leadoff man got on base in seven of the 11 extra innings.

NORTH BY NORTHWEST

- Rockies prospect **Shane Lindsay** has been showing Northwest League batters some thunder from down under. In his first three starts with the Tri-City Dust Devils, the Aussie gave up only one earned run, while ringing up 41 strikeouts in 23 innings. Though his breaking stuff is mostly an unknown commodity, Lindsay usually works in the mid-90s with his fastball and has been known to touch 98.

- Former Tennessee teammates **Josh Alley** and **Chase Headley** helped Eugene to an 11-7 win against Spokane, and they led the Emeralds to a 10-7 record, second-best in the league. Headley, a third baseman and second-round pick in June, had three hits to improve to .419 in 31 at-bats, while Alley scored twice and reached base twice. He led the league with a .509 on-base percentage and 11 walks while batting .395.

- Mariners outfielder **Michael Saunders** signed for \$237,500 as a draft-and-follow, and the Canadian

was starting to come around for Everett. Playing center field, Saunders went 2-for-3 with three RBIs in a 7-1 win at Boise to improve to .261-1-8. He struck out at least once in his first 10 games but hadn't whiffed in two games (driving in six runs in the process).

APPALACHIAN TRAILS

- The Devil Rays drafted **John Matulia** in the 10th round in June out of Eustis (Fla.) High, and he was performing like a first-rounder in the opening weeks of his professional career. Matulia was batting ___-___-___ at Princeton and showed strong defense in the outfield. "He knows how to play the game," Devil Rays scouting director **Tim Wilken** said. "He really caught my eye at a (pre-draft workout at Tropicana Field.) He was over in right-center field and (Pirates first-round pick) **Andrew McCutchen** was over in left-center and I don't think anything fell between them or to their sides . . . He's instinctive and I think as he gets stronger he's going to be even better. He can play center field and has a real good bat."
- When the Bristol White Sox take on the Johnson City Cardinals, people looking at the rosters might have a sense of deja vu when they see the sons of major leaguers **Frank Viola** and **Andy Van Slyke** on the field. Though **Frank Viola Jr.** is not considered a premium prospect, **A.J. Van Slyke** was using his quick hands and strong knowledge of the strike zone to his advantage. Van Slyke was batting .391-2-14 in 46 at-bats for Johnson City.
- Scouts thought **Daryl Jones** was going to honor his commitment to Rice, but the Cardinals lured the former football star with \$450,000 and he has been producing for Johnson City. The 18-year-old was hitting .295/.340/.477 with two homers in 44 at-bats for Johnson City.

PIONEER SPIRIT

- It took Pioneer League teams two games to finally get out Ogden Raptors outfielder Sergio Pedroza, the Dodgers' third-round pick in June out of Cal State Fullerton. Even after that, though, Pedroza continued his hot hitting. He was 17-for-31 with three homers in his first eight games and was batting ___-___-___ overall. Pedroza was the second of 14 Cal State Fullerton players chosen in this year's draft.
- Angels live-armed righty **Jose Arredondo** struck out six over six shutout innings, surrendering just three hits, in Orem's win against Casper. Arredondo features a fastball that has touched the upper 90s and helped him earn a taste of Double-A last month before he reported to the Pioneer League. The 21-year-old was 2-0, 2.93 with a 16-1 strikeout-walk ratio in 15 innings at Orem.
- Missoula lost 11 of its first 13 games, but got a pair of four-hit efforts in a 14-3 win over Billings to try to turn things around. Missoula left fielder **Oswaldo Diaz**, 22, went 4-for-4 to raise his average to .357 (15-for-42). First baseman **Will Crouch**, 22, also went 4-for-4, including his first home run and five RBIs. Twenty-year-old righthander **Ramon Sanchez** struck out six and allowed an earned run off five hits over seven innings to earn the win. Righthander **Sam LeCure** made his professional debut for Billings, striking out two and surrendering a hit in 1 1/3 innings. LeCure was drafted in the fourth round by the Reds this year after missing all of his junior season because of an academic issue at Texas.

COMPLEX ISSUES

- One scout said before the draft that **Jeff Bianchi** has a more polished bat than **Justin Upton**. While Upton hasn't signed yet, Bianchi is working to make his end of the comparison look good. The Royals'

second-round selection has been ripping Arizona League pitching, batting .489-4-17 in his first 13 games.

- Righthander **Brad Sullivan** had his best start of the year in the Arizona League. The 2003 first-round pick out of Houston is recovering from shoulder and back problems, as well as offseason surgery to alleviate headaches stemming from a childhood car accident. Sullivan pitched five shutout innings before giving up a three-run homer in the sixth to Padres draftee **Will Venable**, and the Padres rallied for an 8-5 victory.

- The Gulf Coast League was welcoming a bumper crop of talent from the 2005 draft, highlighted by Yankees first-round pick **C.J. Henry** and Pirates first-rounder McCutchen. Henry went 5-for-9 to raise his average to .308 (12-for-39). The Yankees chose him with the 17th overall pick this year after Henry boosted his stock with a .481-13-41 senior season at Putnam City High in Oklahoma City, picking up first-team All-America honors. He had five stolen bases in six attempts, with three doubles and two triples to go along with two errors in nine games at shortstop.

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