



The Trenton Thunder – Double-A affiliate of the Yankees - have drawn over 7 million fans in 17 seasons at Waterfront Park

MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL FINDS NICHE IN MANY AREAS

By JED WEISBERGER

www.sbrnet.com

Day after day, whether in the newspaper, on television, on Facebook or Twitter, the message is reported loud and clear.

A certain city official, or an enterprising businessman, calls a press conference or simply makes an announcement:

“The process is under way to bring a minor-league baseball team to our area. “We’ve seen what’s been done in Reading and Trenton. We want a team.”

Minor League Baseball in the United States is flourishing. In 2010, 176 cities hosted teams affiliated with Major League Baseball, while 60 were home to independent clubs, not affiliated with organized baseball. This includes 16 leagues whose teams are affiliated with Major League Baseball and eight others who feature non-affiliated independent teams.

Fans enjoy attending the games for many reasons:

- The stadiums are much closer to home than big-league stadiums.

- The tickets are much cheaper and the seats are better.
- A chance to see big-league players coming back from injury playing with a farm team. For instance, Yankees pitcher Andy Pettitte got back into shape by appearing with the Double-A Trenton Thunder.
- Minor League Baseball caters to youngsters, whose parents like the idea of a smaller ballpark.
- Many feel they are supporting their local team, whether they care who actually wins the game. It's a night out with a ticket price equal to a movie.
- There are many special giveaways.
- The ballparks lend themselves to birthdays, or other celebrations, at an affordable price.

According to Sports Fan Market 2010, a nationwide survey of fan media and spectator patterns, including attendance, TV viewership and online computer and mobile viewership and sports apparel purchases, sponsored by Princeton, N.J.-based Sports Business Research Network and compiled by Irwin Broh Research of Des Plaines, Ill., data reveals, unlike other sports, just how little television impacts the minors compared with other sports.

Table 1 below shows the total number of fans for each of 14 different leagues and sports. It also shows the % of total fans for each sport that (1) attend only (2) view on TV and/or online only and (3) view and attended. As the table shows, over 90% of all sports view on TV and/or online, compared with 40% for Minor League Baseball and Minor League hockey.

Table 1

TOTAL FAN MARKET: Total Viewed or Attended only vs. View and Attend % of Total Fans Age 16+ For Sport						
Number viewed/attended at least once in 2009	Female (51.6% of total Pop)	Age 50+ (39.8% of total Pop)	Viewed only (TV and/or online) (Age 16+)			
Sport					Attended Only Total Pop)	Viewed and Attended
NFL	110,872,000	41.7%	38.5%	88.5%	1.5%	10.1%
MLB	83,878,000	42.0%	40.0%	62.0%	8.8%	29.2%
College Football	82,234,000	40.4%	40.4%	77.9%	4.1%	18.0%
College Basketball	47,272,000	35.4%	39.3%	80.0%	4.4%	15.6%
NBA	45,695,000	35.6%	36.3%	83.9%	3.4%	12.7%
NASCAR Cup	45,462,000	40.6%	38.9%	88.4%	2.9%	8.7%
Golf (PGA)	40,978,000	38.9%	53.3%	93.8%	1.5%	4.7%
Tennis	32,099,000	42.9%	45.3%	95.4%	1.0%	3.5%
NHL	29,455,000	36.0%	32.4%	73.6%	7.2%	19.3%
IndyCar	24,847,000	31.8%	45.4%	91.2%	3.9%	4.9%
Minor League Baseball	20,036,000	39.7%	35.2%	29.1%	61.1%	9.8%
MLS	12,345,000	35.2%	28.1%	86.1%	5.0%	8.9%
Mixed Martial Arts	10,542,000	31.1%	15.1%	92.0%	2.0%	6.0%
Minor League Hockey	5,803,000	35.3%	22.3%	28.6%	58.4%	13.1%

The data presented above shows what a ticket, sponsor- and merchandise-based business Minor League Baseball is. A team's success is not determined on the field, but how well a ballclub's staff promotes and sells the product.

“Everybody sells at that level,” said Tampa Bay Rays radio voice Andy Freed, who worked at three Minor League Baseball stops in a nine-year apprenticeship before reaching the majors. “Really it’s a training ground for all of us.

“If everyone on the staff – broadcasters and executives included – doesn’t sell, the team will not be successful.”

Given this, one might figure an affiliated team has an advantage over an independent team because, for instance, a Yankees farm team such as Trenton is licensed to sell Yankees merchandise. Yet, there are independent teams such as the Somerset Patriots (Bridgewater, N.J.) who have developed brand success through grass-roots work.

AFFILIATED TEAMS – WHERE POTENTIAL MAJOR-LEAGUERS LEARN THEIR TRADE

Major League teams have been sending prospects to farm clubs since 1902. The present Player Development System, which ties the majors to the minors with Player Development Contracts – the actual document of affiliation – dates to 1962.

The majors agreed to pay the majority of their prospects’ salaries, and the present system of levels – Class AAA, Class AA, Class-A, Short-Season Class-A and Rookie was established. Since then, Class-A Advanced has been added.

The Player Development System has been modified several times in negotiations between the majors and their affiliates that have at times been contentious. The original system was put in place when the Minor Leagues were in a dire situation.

Since the mid-1980s, Minor League owners more attuned to the overall business of running a team have brought prosperity to the game. Dozens of new stadiums were built.

The majors reacted by handing new stadium requirements to the minors, and also required a share of ticket revenue be paid to their big-league partners.

In recent years, big-league teams have tried to place their minor-league affiliates as close to the parent team as possible. For example:

- The Yankees have their Triple-A affiliate in Scranton, Pa., their Double-A club in Trenton, N.J., and Short-Season Class-A club in Staten Island.
- Boston’s Triple-A club is in Pawtucket, R.I., the Double-A affiliate in Portland, Maine and Short-Season Class-A club in Lowell, Mass. The Red Sox also purchased the Salem (Va.) Club in the Carolina League to assure that affiliate would be in the East.
- Cleveland’s Triple-A team is in Columbus, Ohio, its Double-A club in Akron, Ohio, its Class-A team in Eastlake, Ohio, and Short-Season Class-A club in Niles, Ohio.
- Detroit’s Triple-A club is in Toledo, Ohio, its Double-A team in Erie, Pa., and Class-A affiliate in a suburb.

- “This is the trend,” said Yankees Chief Operating Officer Lonnie A. Trost. “It’s a great advantage in player movement and oversight.”

CLASS AAA

This is the level which features prospects who are almost ready for the majors, along with veteran players who might have big-league experience. It is the top quality of baseball, played in Minor League Baseball.

There are two Class-AAA leagues, the International with 14 teams and Pacific Coast League with 16 teams. Teams aim to draw 500,000-750,000 fans per season. The teams fly to many of the games.

The International League contains these affiliates:

- Buffalo (New York Mets)
- Charlotte (Chicago White Sox)
- Columbus (Cleveland Indians)
- Durham (Tampa Bay Rays)
- Gwinnett (Atlanta Braves)
- Indianapolis (Pittsburgh Pirates)
- Lehigh Valley (Philadelphia Phillies)
- Louisville (Cincinnati Reds)
- Norfolk (Baltimore Orioles)
- Pawtucket (Boston Red Sox)
- Rochester (Minnesota Twins)
- Scranton (New York Yankees)
- Syracuse (Washington Nationals)
- Toledo (Detroit Tigers)

The Pacific Coast League contains these affiliates:

- Albuquerque (Los Angeles Dodgers)
- Colorado Springs (Colorado Rockies)
- Fresno (San Francisco Giants)
- Iowa (Chicago Cubs)
- Las Vegas (Toronto Blue Jays)
- Memphis (St. Louis Cardinals)
- Nashville (Milwaukee Brewers)
- New Orleans (Florida Marlins)
- Oklahoma (Houston Astros)
- Omaha (Kansas City Royals)
- Reno (Arizona Cardinals)
- Round Rock (Texas Rangers)

- Sacramento (Oakland Athletics)
- Tacoma (Seattle Mariners)
- Tucson (San Diego Padres)

The Triple-A level has been quite stable over the past few years, with few franchise shifts. The Pacific Coast League will return to Tucson do to a stadium issues in Portland, Ore., for 2011. Atlanta's farm club moved from Richmond, Va., to a suburb of Atlanta for the 2009 season and the Phillies' Ottawa club moved to Lehigh Valley for 2009. The original Tucson club moved to Reno for 2009.

A first-year Triple-A player is paid \$2,150 per month. Players who have major-league contracts obviously are paid more.

DOUBLE-A

There are three Double-A leagues – Eastern, Southern and Texas. This level is the most important in the system because a player who reaches this level has both parts of his game that are major-league ready and parts that are not.

This is where a player can cement a career or have it go to pieces. There are 12 teams in the Eastern League, 10 in the Southern League and eight in the Texas League. Each has its challenges, with early spring weather a challenge in the Eastern and extremely hot summer weather in the Southern and Texas.

Double-A teams play in stadiums with at least 6,000 seats. Teams aim to draw 275,000-450,000 fans per season. The teams may fly rarely. More in the Texas League than the other two because of distance.

"This is the level that separates the men from the boys," said Randy Knorr, who managed the Eastern League's Harrisburg Senators to a playoff berth in 2010.

The Eastern League contains these affiliates:

- Akron (Cleveland Indians)
- Altoona (Pittsburgh Pirates)
- Binghamton (New York Mets)
- Bowie (Baltimore Orioles)
- Erie (Detroit Tigers)
- Harrisburg (Washington Nationals)
- New Britain (Minnesota Twins)
- New Hampshire (Toronto Blue Jays)
- Portland (Boston Red Sox)
- Reading (Philadelphia Phillies_
- Richmond (San Francisco Giants)'

- Trenton New York Yankees)

The Southern League contains these affiliates:

- Birmingham (Chicago White Sox)
- Carolina (Cincinnati Reds)
- Chattanooga (Los Angeles Dodgers)
- Huntsville (Milwaukee Brewers)
- Jackson (Seattle Mariners)
- Jacksonville (Florida Marlins)
- Mississippi (Atlanta Braves)
- Mobile (Arizona Diamondbacks)
- Montgomery (Tampa Bay Rays)
- Tennessee (Chicago Cubs)

The Texas League contains these affiliates:

- Arkansas (Anaheim Angels)
- Corpus Christi (Houston Astros)
- Frisco (Texas Rangers)
- Midland (Oakland Athletics)
- Northwest Arkansas (Kansas City)
- San Antonio (San Diego Padres)
- Springfield (St. Louis Cardinals)
- Tulsa (Colorado Rockies)

This level has also been stable over the past few years. After Richmond lost its Triple-A team, there was a push to move the Norwich, Conn., Eastern League franchise, which had struggled to draw fans for several years to that market.

Richmond responded by drawing 463,842 fans, leading the EL. Erie and Binghamton (Eastern League) and Jackson and Huntsville (Southern League) where fan levels have been an issue.

A first-year Double-A player could expect to make \$1,500 per month.

CLASS-A ADVANCED

Class A is the level where evaluation is the key. A fraction of these players will make it to the majors. There are three Class-A Advanced leagues, with 12 teams in the Florida State, eight in the Carolina and 10 in the California.

The Florida State League differs from its cousins in a few ways. The games are played in spring-training ballparks and most of the teams are all owned by their major-league affiliates. Not many fans

attend games and promotions are not emphasized. Crowds are a shadow of what they are in spring training.

In the Carolina and California leagues, the teams are privately owned and battle for market share. A draw of 250,000 fans in a season is a realistic goal.

Weather is an issue in all three leagues. The heat sizzles in both the Florida State League and desert cities in the California League, while Carolina League players put up with heat and humidity.

The Florida State League includes these affiliates:

- Bradenton (Pittsburgh Pirates)
- Brevard County (Milwaukee Brewers)
- Charlotte (Tampa Bay Rays)
- Clearwater (Philadelphia Phillies)
- Daytona (Chicago Cubs)
- Dunedin (Toronto Blue Jays)
- Fort Myers (Minnesota Twins)
- Jupiter (Florida Marlins)
- Lakeland (Detroit Tigers)
- Palm Beach (St. Louis Cardinals)
- St. Lucie (New York Mets)
- Tampa (New York Yankees)

The California League includes these affiliates:

- Bakersfield (Cincinnati Reds)
- High Desert (Seattle Mariners)
- Lake Elsinore (San Diego Padres)
- Lancaster (Houston Astros)
- Modesto (Colorado Rockies)
- Rancho Cucamonga (Los Angeles Dodgers)
- Inland Empire 66ers (Anaheim Angels)
- San Jose Giants (San Francisco)
- Stockton (Oakland Athletics)
- Visalia (Arizona Diamondbacks)

The Carolina League has the following affiliates:

- Frederick (Baltimore Orioles)
- Kinston (Cleveland Indians)
- Lynchburg (Atlanta Braves)
- Myrtle Beach (Texas Rangers)

- Potomac (Washington Nationals)
- Salem (Boston Red Sox)
- Wilmington (Kansas City Royals)
- Winston-Salem (Chicago White Sox)

This level has also been stable the past few years. Winston-Salem was one of Minor League Baseball's success stories of 2010 after stadium construction issues that made 2009 a lost year.

First-year Class-A Advanced players can expect to make \$1,050 per month.

CLASS A

This level, in which many second-year players land, is a test. Both the South Atlantic and Midwest leagues play a full (140-game) season. For most players on these rosters, this is the first time they have played as many games.

Attendance at this level fluctuates a lot. The teams in the bigger markets – such as Dayton and Lakewood, near the Jersey Shore, draw huge crowds, near 500,000 in a season. The smaller markets might struggle to draw 100,000 fans.

The South Atlantic League includes these affiliates:

- Asheville (Colorado Rockies).
- Augusta (San Francisco Giants)
- Charleston (New York Yankees)
- Delmarva (Baltimore Orioles)
- Greensboro (Florida Marlins)
- Greenville (Boston Red Sox)
- Hagerstown (Washington Nationals)
- Hickory (Texas Rangers)
- Kannapolis (Chicago White Sox)
- Lakewood (Philadelphia Phillies)
- Lexington (Houston Astros)
- Rome (Atlanta Braves)
- Savannah (New York Mets)
- West Virginia (Pittsburgh Pirates)

The Midwest League includes these affiliates:

- Beloit (Minnesota Twins)
- Bowling Green (Tampa Bay Rays)
- Burlington (Oakland Athletics)
- Cedar Rapids (Anaheim Angels)
- Clinton (Seattle Mariners)

- Dayton (Cincinnati Reds)
- Fort Wayne (San Diego Padres)
- Great Lakes (Los Angeles Dodgers)
- Kane County (Kansas City Royals)
- Lake County (Cleveland Indians)
- Lansing (Toronto Blue Jays)
- Peoria (Chicago Cubs)
- Quad Cities (St. Louis Cardinals)
- South Bend (Arizona Diamondbacks)
- West Michigan (Detroit)
- Wisconsin (Milwaukee Brewers)

This level underwent a major move due to geography before the 2010 season, with Bowling Green and Lake County moving from the South Atlantic League to the Midwest League. The South Atlantic League is still challenged geographically, with Savannah in the south and Lakewood in the north.

A first-year Class-A player might earn \$850 per month.

SHORT-SEASON CLASS-A

This is the level for recently drafted players coming out of college, or players who had issues in full-season leagues mainly due to injury. Both the New York-Penn and Northwest League play 76-game schedules that open in June.

Twenty-two of the major-league teams have opted to affiliate at this level. The other eight teams place recent draft picks in the Rookie Level Appalachian or Pioneer Leagues.

A solid attendance goal is 125,000-150,000 fans for 38 home games. The NYPL teams in Brooklyn, Staten Island and Aberdeen draw particularly well.

The New York-Penn League contains these affiliates:

- Aberdeen (Baltimore Orioles)
- Auburn (Washington Nationals)
- Batavia (St. Louis Cardinals)
- Brooklyn (New York Mets)
- Connecticut (Detroit Tigers)
- Hudson Valley (Tampa Bay Rays)
- Jamestown (Florida Marlins)
- Lowell (Boston Red Sox)
- Mahoning Valley (Cleveland Indians)
- State College (Pittsburgh Pirates)
- Staten Island (New York Yankees)
- Tri-City (Houston Astros)

- Vermont (Oakland Athletics)
- Williamsport (Philadelphia Phillies)

The Northwest League contains these affiliates:

- Boise (Chicago Cubs)
- Eugene (San Diego Padres)
- Everett (Seattle Mariners)
- Salem-Keizer (San Francisco Giants)
- Spokane (Texas Rangers)
- Tri-City (Colorado Rockies)
- Vancouver (Toronto Blue Jays)
- Yakima (Arizona Diamondbacks)

One of the key aspects of these leagues has to do with the switch from aluminum bats to wood bats entails for many players. Many have just received their draft bonuses, which carries them in addition to the nominal salaries at this level.

ROOKIE LEVEL

This level is where most high-school draftees, or players from Latin America making their initial appearances in the United States land. It is an adjustment process for many, playing in small-town rural America.

Many of the Appalachian teams are located within a close distance of each other. The Pioneer League is spread out through Montana, Utah, Idaho and Washington. Several of the Appalachian teams are owned by their big-league affiliates.

The Appalachian League contains these affiliates:

- Bluefield (Toronto Blue Jays)
- Bristol (Chicago White Sox)
- Burlington (Kansas City Royals)
- Danville (Atlanta Braves)
- Elizabethton (Minnesota Twins)
- Greeneville (Houston Astros)
- Johnson City (St. Louis Cardinals)
- Kingsport (New York Mets)
- Princeton (Tampa Bay Rays)
- Pulaski (Seattle Mariners)

The Pioneer League contains these affiliates:

- Billings (Cincinnati Reds)
- Casper (Colorado Rockies)
- Great Falls (Chicago Cubs)
- Helena (Milwaukee Brewers)
- Idaho Falls (Kansas City Royals)
- Missoula (Arizona Diamondbacks)
- Ogden (Los Angeles Dodgers)
- Orem (Anaheim Angels)

The teams play 68 games. The adjustment to professional play is what is evaluated.

The biggest news at this level concerned the Baltimore Orioles, due to a cutback, ending a 53-year affiliation with Bluefield, whose fans will have to get used to their local favorites as a Toronto affiliate. Yet, the town had no worry about losing their team. An affiliate for each team is guaranteed.

COMPLEX AND FOREIGN LEAGUES

At the bottom of the minor-league ladder are the complex leagues, where a lot of free-agents and players making their first appearances in the United States are assigned. The teams that train in Florida field their teams in the Gulf Coast League, while the Arizona-based spring-training facilities.

The leagues play 56-60 games on back fields at the complexes. No admission is charged for these games. These leagues can also be the first stop for major-leaguers rehabilitating from injury.

TELEVISION'S MINOR ROLE WITH THE MINORS

No matter what level of the minors a team resides, it counts on its key three factors – ticket sales, sponsorship sales and apparel sales to survive.

“We are always looking for different ways to add to our sponsorship roster and serve our fans better,” said Bill Cook, who just completed his 10th season as Director of Public Relations for the Double-A Trenton Thunder, which has drawn in excess of 7 million fans to Mercer County Waterfront Park in Trenton, N.J., and is recognized as one of Minor League Baseball’s elite franchises in the business world.

“Put it this way,” said Cook. “If we don’t sell a fan a ticket, we don’t sell hot dogs or caps and jackets (the Thunder has been among the Top 30 sellers of team sports apparel each of its 17 years) or anything. Sports Fan Market 2010 indicates Minor League Baseball apparel recorded sales of \$251,642,000, nowhere near Major League Baseball’s \$2,026,000,000 in sales, but not pocket change, either.

“Our fans and our sponsors are what make us a success. Everybody sells, starting with tickets, said Cook.”

The Thunder used to have one of the most extensive TV packages ever put together in Minor League baseball, beginning with the birth of the franchise in 1994.

New Jersey Network, the Garden State's four-station Public Broadcasting System affiliate and consortium, offered viewers a "Saturday Night at the Minors " package that included most Saturday home games and even some road games.

Quickly, however, NJN, given the low ratings for even a new franchise in its state's capital, bowed out, with Comcast's Mid-Atlantic Regional channel – then known as CN8 and now The Comcast Network - moving in and televising Thunder games through 2008.

Comcast put both money and on-air talent into the telecasts, including teams other than the Thunder beginning in 2000 in attempt to lure viewers. The cable outlet did not stick to a Saturday night format, but took on teams in its region such the Wilmington (Del.) Blue Rocks of the Carolina League, the Lakewood (N.J.) BlueClaws of the South Atlantic League and the Bowie (Md.) Baysox and Reading (Pa.) Phillies, two Thunder opponents.

Games involving the Thunder with Bowie and Reading were featured in the package. Those moves failed to draw viewers as well.

By 2008, the last season in which Comcast televised Minor League Baseball, the Thunder were featured just three times. No Trenton games have been televised live since.

"It became a situation in which production costs didn't justify what was being spent on the telecasts," said Cook. "Other shows, cheaper to produce, drew better viewing audiences and Comcast began using that channel for overflow Phillies, Flyers and Sixers games when needed."

The Yankees Sports and Entertainment Channel (YES) offered to air some Thunder games from Waterfront Park, as long as the team picked up the production costs.

"It wouldn't justify the means," said Cook. "Having the games aired is great, but the costs have to be met."

Sponsors, especially in challenging economic times, do not support a program that does not draw viewers. This has been seen on the national level as well. ESPN used to televise an All-Star Game which involved the three Double-A leagues – Eastern, Texas and Southern.

With the top prospects from three leagues, the game had some allure. That contest was discontinued due to travel expenses and the Eastern League, after having a few of its own All-Star games televised on a regional sports network or two, has not landed a contract since the 2007 game.

The only two Minor League Baseball games televised nationally now are the annual Futures Game by ESPN as part of its Major League All-Star Game coverage, and the Triple-A Championship between the winners of the International League and Pacific Coast League, which was picked up by VERSUS when it was dropped by ESPN.

There are some scattered Minor League Baseball packages around. New England Sports Network (NESN) offers a small slate of Triple-A Pawtucket Red Sox and Double-A Portland Sea Dogs games –

covering Boston's top two affiliates in Red Sox country – while a few teams, such as the Triple-A Lehigh Valley IronPigs in Allentown, Pa., have a package with a local cable system.

Minor League Baseball is expanding its schedule of online televised baseball, charging little for the webcasts, and offers radiocasts of all teams free of charge, but, as the Sports Fan 2010 Market survey confirms, the large proportion of viewers and listeners to these offerings are those who have a friend or family member involved in the sport.

Major League Baseball, according to Sports Fan 2010 Market's numbers, states 62 percent of all fans watched on TV or online, while 8.8 percent attended a live game and 29.2 percent both viewed and attended.

FACTORS THAT WORK AGAINST MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL SUCCEEDING ON TELEVISION

- A. American sports fans are attracted to the elite. They want to watch, and be in touch with, the top-levels of competition. For example, when the NFL had past work stoppages, the networks tried to replace coverage with the Canadian Football League or Replacement Games. Neither drew viewers, not did the XFL on NBC when it debuted, folding in a month,
- B. Most fans of Minor-League Baseball are not hardcore. On a given spring or summer night, two-thirds of the crowd are there for a night out with a group, co-workers or family. Many in the crowd, while rooting for the home team, might not be able to answer who won the game if asked. Development often comes before winning in many situations.
- C. While there is increasing interest in the prospects teams are developing in the minors, and a group of hardcore fans, coverage is limited to a few niche national outlets and local offerings. Bloggers have taken over much of the discussion here, but, with the exception of a few, have not attracted a national following.
- D. The draw and exposure of Major League Baseball is what many fans are much more interested in. cursory mention of prospects are all most require for discussion. If a comparison is made between comments on baseball's two official sites – www.mlb.com and www.milb.com, the number of responses on the former dwarfs what is seen on the latter.

STEPS THAT MIGHT HELP MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL SUCCEED ON TELEVISION

- A. A pregame or postgame mention and highlight package of some of a team's top prospects. In the case of YES, the Yankees' outlet, a breakout season by an under-the-radar slugger named Brandon Laird, who drove in over 100 runs at Trenton and Triple-A Scranton would bring some exposure. The Futures Game, mixed with Major League All-Star coverage, has worked well, Such a mix could help.
- B. Perhaps Major League Advanced Media, the on-line arm of Major League Baseball, could help teams with production costs, promote the telecasts and offer background, both on-line and with MLB Network, interest casual viewers in seeing their team's future players. Baseball took in over \$7 billion this year. There is money there to invest in promotion.
- C. During spring training telecasts, prospects are in many of the games and are talked about. Why not talk about them and educate viewers about who is playing well and who fans might

see. This is not the 1930s in which “mystery farm boys” suddenly throw 98 mph fastballs coming out of nowhere. Catcher Buster Posey was a key to San Francisco winning the National League West in 2010. He developed quickly in the minors. Inform viewers what to expect.

- D. Fans clamor for news about the future during the winter months. That is the time when ESPN and MLB Network, not to mention the regional sports networks, can both talk about and show highlights of top prospects. Don’t leave it all to on-line sources.

Most teams also have to fight for a spot on a local radio station, with many having gone to Webcasts only.

A team’s hardcore fans, or individuals who have a family member involved with a club, will listen via the Web and make up the audience. Rating numbers are often not at a level that would draw an exceptional amount of sponsors.

MERCHANDISING IS MAJOR BUSINESS IN THE MINORS

From his spot just 58 miles from Yankee Stadium, Cook realizes what an advantage he has as far merchandising is concerned. His team more than sells its share of the \$251,642,000 Sports Fan Market 2010 reported in apparel sold to fans.

“The Thunder brand has been well established,” said Cook. “The Yankees brand really helps as well. Given that we can sell Yankees merchandise in an area with both Trenton Yankees fans, and give away bobbleheads of Yankees players is a factor in our success.”

Bobbleheads of present Yankees stars – players such as infielder Robinson Cano, Brett Gardner, Joba Chamberlain – who played with Trenton as recently as three seasons ago, attract big crowds.

“It certainly doesn’t hurt, and the Yankees have been great with the help they’ve given us with the bobbleheads,” Cook said.

Rick Brenner, a past Trenton general manager who now attends to similar duties for the New Hampshire Fisher Cats – in addition to serving as president of the Bowling Green Hot Rods, who are also owned by the group that owns New Hampshire – knows how valuable the Yankees brand is in New Jersey.

“We were able to sell merchandise with both the Thunder and Yankees logos, which moved well with the fans,” said Brenner. “Your affiliation can be very valuable with putting dollars in the cash register.”

The Eastern League Portland (Maine) Sea Dogs have seen a burst in merchandise sales since switching affiliations from the Florida Marlins to the Boston Red Sox. The Sea Dogs are as much in Red Sox Nation as the Thunder are in Yankees Country.

Following the 2002 switch, the Sea Dogs exchanged all their teal uniforms for Red Sox red and white to the delight of both Portland fans and the team’s cash registers.

Teams also change hats and logos for a reason. A new logo will bring in additional sales. In many cities, fans both young and old want merchandise with the latest logo.

Some of the logos and nicknames go well – such as the Casper (Wyo.) Ghosts, while others make one wonder. The independent teams, who need to move apparel even more than the affiliated teams, and have to work twice as hard to establish their brand.

“It’s sell, sell, sell,” said Cook. “It’s like you never sell enough.”

The Thunder, for 17 straight seasons, has earned a spot on the Top 20 merchandise-selling clubs in Minor League Baseball.

A key time for all minor-league clubs arrives right after the season ends. It’s the time to renew all season-ticket plans so the team will have an idea of what it will need to sell during the season to reach its goal.

In Trenton, with a goal of drawing 400,000 in a given season, there’s a chance 250,000 ducats will be sold during the offseason. Many teams aim to have one-third of their stadiums occupied by seats sold by the season or some other multi-game package.

Table 2 gives an overall view of how segments of fans attending Minor League Baseball games purchased sports apparel relative to the teams sold:

Table 2 – Expenditures by Minor-League Baseball Fans on Sports Apparel for 2009

Note: Average prices shown below for demographic segments are the highest within various groupings for that segment i.e. a figure shown below for a particular region means that this is the highest average price of the four regions.

Total Buyers (add 000) 4,567

Total Expenditures (add 000) \$251,642

Average Expenditure for All Sports Logo Apparel Buyer \$55.1

Average Expenditure for Sports Logo Apparel Buyers Who Watched on Online Computer \$65.6

Average Expenditure for Sports Logo Apparel Spent by Those Who Watched on Online Mobile \$53.4

Average Expenditure for Sports Logo Apparel Spent by Those Who Attended 4+ times/yr \$90.1

Average Expenditure for Sports Logo Apparel Spent by Those Who Live In Western Region \$66.0

Average Expenditure for Sports Logo Apparel Spent by Those Who Are Ages 50--64 \$64.5

Average Expenditure for Sports Logo Apparel Spent by Those With \$100K+ HH Income \$60.3

% of Total Logo Sports Apparel Buyers who Attended at Least One Game 94.8

% of Total Expenditures for Sports Logo Apparel Spent by Those Who Attended at Least One Game
93.9

Source: SBRnet

IF YOU BUILD – OR REMODEL - THEY WILL COME



A \$45 million renovation turned Harrisburg's Commerce Bank Park into a showplace and led to an attendance record.

For years, Eastern League teams dreaded their trips to Harrisburg, Pa.'s Metro Bank Park.

Attendance to what was denoted "The Erector Set." was dropping.

So the folks in Pennsylvania's state capital, with some private and public help, used a \$45 million, two-year reconstruction to turn Metro Bank Park into a gleaming 6,187-seat edifice that played host to the 2010 Eastern League All-Star game and received several national honors.

"We couldn't wait for everyone to see what has been done," said Harrisburg Senators Director of Broadcasting/Media Relations Terry Byrom. "We have a ballpark we are very proud of."

Senators fans seemed to agree, as the club drew a record 294,325 fans to its remodeled stadium on City Island. With the two playoff games the team hosted, the club saw 300,000 fans pass through the turnstiles for the first time.

At the ballpark, a fan can walk all around the field on the Boardwalk, which was installed in 2009. Integrated into the structure is a long concourse along the third-base line which is used for birthday parties and the like, bar stools on the Boardwalk where one can sit and watch the action and left- and right-field seating.

“The gate to the park is closed when there is no game,” said Byrom, “but anyone can walk along the Boardwalk if they are visiting City Island (opposite downtown where the ballpark is located). And we love the fact fans can sit in right and left field.”

What remains of the old park are bleacher seats in right field, mostly used for fans who are part of a group eating in the upgraded picnic area. The old concession areas under both the bleachers and the new grandstand have been retained.

“The picnic area now has a tent that is weatherproof,” said Byrom. “If it rains, we can close it tight and a picnic will go on. It’s funny with the old area, we wondered, with everything new, if fans would go down there.

“Yet, it’s proven quite popular.”

So have the new suites on top of the ballpark. These areas have glass entrances on both sides, allowing those watching the game views of both the field and the Susquehanna River and downtown Harrisburg.

Another option is a new club-seat area, which features a revolving menu and two nightly entrees prepared in a special area right behind the seats. A season ticket in this area, which features a wider, padded seat, is \$2,000, including food service.

“We first wondered if this concept would be too expensive,” said Byrom, who mentioned a half-season ticket in this area is available for \$1,100. “It has proven quite popular.”

Two old-line Harrisburg merchants have set up shop behind the plate on the lower concourse, Spots serves outstanding hot dogs and burgers, while MoMo’s has superlative pulled pork barbecue. Teams at all levels have found featuring local merchants have led to increased food sales in their ballparks.

With their refurbished ballpark, the Senators are looking to set another attendance record next season.

Meanwhile, the Winston-Salem Dash saw its attendance skyrocket from 57,665 to 312,313 with the opening of their new downtown BB&T Ballpark.

The question in Winston-Salem, which has never been a Carolina League attendance leader

at Ernie Shore Field, hit the jackpot with their new park, which was delayed from 2009 to 2010 due to funding issues.



BB&T Ballpark revitalized Carolina League baseball in Winston-Salem

A new park, especially one in a downtown area near other attractions, will spur renewed interest.

Both Greensboro, N.C., and Greenville, S.C., also used new parks to get their respective teams back on track.

In this day and age, funding is often tough to come by – BB&T helped save the day in Winston-Salem – funding is often at a premium. A group from West Chester, Pa., is looking to build a stadium to house a Phillies farm team, while several other cities – some seeking independent league teams – are also aiming to build a stadium and land a team.

Some will succeed – like Harrisburg and Winston-Salem – while others will find there are little or no funds for such a project.

THE INDEPENDENT LEAGUES – A WHOLE DIFFERENT BALLGAME

Back in 1993, the Yankees proposed moving their Double-A farm team, located in Albany, N.Y., at the time, to the Long Island community Islip, N.Y. Heritage Field, the ballpark used by the Albany-Colonie Yankees, was outmoded and attendance had dropped to barely 100,000.

The Long Island market was viewed as untapped and quite lucrative for Minor League Baseball, with fans of the Yankees eager to see their prospects.

There was one hurdle. Long Island was also New York Mets territory according to Major League Baseball, and that club did not want a Yankees farm team in its territory at the time – today both the Brooklyn Cyclones (Mets) and Staten Island Yankees exist by agreement in Yankees and Mets territory – and vetoed the move.

The Yankees then moved their Double-A Eastern League farm team to Norwich, Conn., and the Long Island market was closed to an affiliated team.

This situation, along with cities expressing their desire for a team, helped in the birth of independent baseball, which did not have to abide by the territorial and other rules of affiliated baseball.



Citibank Park, home of the Long Island Ducks

The first two independent leagues to take the field were the Northern League and Frontier League in 1993. Both are still operating, but the Northern League is struggling to stay afloat.

On the other hand, the independent Atlantic League, which began play in 1998, has its crown-jewel franchise – the Long Island Ducks in the Islip area the Yankees once coveted and the Mets denied them. That move greatly affected professional baseball in the Northeast.

The Ducks, who drew 410,619 fans last season , have been a major success story for the Atlantic League and their attendance would 26th of the 176 Minor League Baseball teams. The Yankees were correct in analyzing that market.

In all, eight independent leagues played in 2010, with an equal number of circuits scheduled to take the field in 2011. Long Island is one a several independent league teams that are moneymakers, but the road for these operations – without any major-league affiliation or subsidy, has often been rocky.

Since 1995, no less than 17 independent leagues have operated and failed. Some went belly-up due to lack of support. Others had ownership which had no idea what operating a team cost. Still others ran into assorted operational problems.

The following independent leagues are defunct:

- All-American Association
- Arizona-Mexico League
- Atlantic Coast League
- Big South League
- Canadian Baseball League
- Central Baseball League
- Empire State League
- Golden Baseball League
- Great Central League
- Heartland League
- Mid-America League
- North Atlantic League
- North Central League
- Prairie League
- South Coast League
- Southeastern League
- Texas-Louisiana League
- Western Baseball League

Even in the Atlantic League, which has highly successful franchises in Somerville, N.J., and York and Lancaster, Pa., the road has not always been smooth. Franchises in Newark and Atlantic City, N.J., and Nashua, N.H., failed.

The Atlantic League also attempted to place a team in the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania. Construction was started on a stadium but never finished. That area is home to the Phillies' Triple-A farm team today.

These leagues place teams in affiliated baseball territory close to Minor League Baseball farm teams. Curiously no real major drop in attendance has been noted by the affiliated teams.

Independent baseball is presently facing two major issues. One concerns the Northern League, which, after four teams defected to the American Association, another independent league, is left with just four franchises.

Meanwhile, in Amarillo, Texas, the United League club – the Amarillo Dillas – defaulted on their stadium lease. That club is among four bidders for the lease to Potter County Stadium in that city and their future is up in the air.

Independent baseball not only searches for new cities, but is often quick to place a team in an area abandoned by Minor League Baseball. Shreveport, La., Wichita, Kan., El Paso, Texas and Sussex, N.J., are towns that were snapped up quickly by the American Association and Canadian-American League, respectively.

Eight leagues plan to take the field in 2011, including:

- American Association
- Atlantic League
- Canadian American League
- Frontier League
- Golden Baseball League
- Northern League
- Pecos League (new for 2011)
- United League

COMPARING THE INDEPENDENTS WITH AFFILIATED MINORS

- No affiliation, so no players are assigned and no parts of any salary are paid by an affiliate.
- No visits by instructional personnel to evaluate players.
- Control of player movement since independent team, not an organization, holds each individual contract.
- No help with marketing from Baseball Properties.
- Frequent changes in franchises.
- Uncertainty about franchise presence in a city from year to year.
- Ability to sell players to major-league organizations.
- Umpires not sanctioned by the National Association.
- No territorial restrictions. Teams often placed near affiliated clubs.
- Possibility of stadiums being left as white elephants, with Atlantic City, N.J., as an example

- Players can be traded within leagues.
- No clear definition of caliber of play. Only estimations exist.

WHAT PLAYERS MAKE UP INDEPENDENT LEAGUE ROSTERS

As in affiliated baseball, there is a wide range of player experience in the independent leagues. There is no system such as Triple-A, Double-A and the like, but there is a pecking order.

The Atlantic League and American Association are recognized as having the highest standard of play and most stability. The Northern League, Canadian-American League, Frontier League and Golden Baseball League follow, not always in that order.

What separates the Atlantic League from the other leagues is that circuit has no roster limit other than 27 active players at a time. The league looks to recruit former major-leaguers – Ricky Henderson and Jose Canseco – have performed in the loop, minor-leaguers released by affiliated organizations and high draft picks who have not signed contracts with their organizations yet.

On the other hand, players released by major-league organizations can often get a “second chance” in the Atlantic League. Organized baseball has come to recognize this, and Atlantic League teams have profited by the sale of dozens of player contracts to Minor League Baseball’s farm teams.

The American Association also follows that strategy, but to a lesser degree, with a rule limiting its teams to signing four veterans with four or more years of experience and requiring each to sign a minimum of five first-year players.

The Frontier League has also earned a niche. Many players who were bypassed in the draft for one reason or another sign with this league, which has teams spread from Western Pennsylvania through the Midwest.

Eleven players on each roster must have less than two years of experience. No player older than 27 can play in this league, either. The Frontier League has become the development area among independents.

Some players have started in the Frontier League and reached the majors. Two examples are Justin Christian (Yankees) and Morgan Burkhardt (Boston), who were signed by their respective organizations out of the Frontier League and worked their way through their respective systems.

There is a system of trades, sales and player movement in place among the independent leagues. The circuits also have All-Star Games and playoff systems, which often draw the attention of organized baseball scouts.

Independent leagues and their teams planning to operate in 2011:

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION

With the addition of Fargo-Moorehead, Gary Southshore, Kansas City and Winnipeg, this circuit now has 14 teams, spreading from Florida to Texas. Travel is a factor in scheduling.

The league attracts players who have not been drafted, former major-leaguers and those who do not have the ability to play at a higher level. The caliber of play is rated between Class-A and Class-AAA. The league plays a 96-game season.

Former teams include franchises in Edinburg, Texas, and St. Joseph's, Mo. An expansion team in Laredo, Texas, is scheduled to begin play in 2012. Present clubs:

NORTH DIVISION

- Fargo-Moorehead
- St. Paul
- Sioux Falls
- Winnipeg

CENTRAL DIVISION

- Gary Southshore
- Kansas City
- Lincoln
- Sioux City
- Wichita

SOUTH DIVISION

- El Paso
- Fort Worth
- Grand Prairie (Texas)
- Pensacola
- Shreveport

ATLANTIC LEAGUE

The Atlantic League is recognized as the jewel of independent baseball since its founding in 1998. The Long Island and Somerset franchises are flagships of independent baseball.

Many former major-leaguers have played in this league, including Mark Whiten and Edgardo Alfonzo. So have draft choices who have yet to sign,

While the league has been largely successful – and stability is as strong as any independent circuit – there have been many bumps. Defunct teams include Atlantic City, Aberdeen,

Md., Lehigh Valley, Newburgh, N.Y., Nashua and Newark. The league will be forced to go with a road team – the Pennsylvania Road Warriors – in 2011 after the departure of Newark.

The league has plans to expand to Loudon, Va., and Sugarland, Texas, in 2012, and is also exploring the possibility of franchises in Rockville, Md., and Bergen County, N.J. Observers feel the league will also need another team in Texas with Sugarland.

Caliber of play is compared to Double-A or Triple-A, with a 120-game schedule planned for 2010. Present clubs:

FREEDOM DIVISION

- Lancaster
- Pennsylvania
- Somerset
- York

LIBERTY DIVISION

- Bridgeport
- Camden
- Long Island
- Southern Maryland

CANADIAN-AMERICAN LEAGUE

This league is spread through the Northeast and into Canada. It is an entry-level league for a lot of players and has roster limits on experience.

While players in upper-level leagues – especially the Atlantic League, earn a legitimate salary, this circuit is up-front with players, seeking “host families” because their players “are not paid enough to live on.”

The franchise in Worcester, Mass., playing in a ballpark on the Holy Cross campus, has found success in its community.

Stability in the league has been a challenge from time to time, as the league lists nearly 20 defunct clubs. Teams have failed in Glens Falls, Albany, Allentown, Atlantic City, Bangor, Mountaintown, N.Y., Elmira, Lynn, New Haven, Waterbury and Yonkers, among others. The league has also returned to towns like Pittsfield for a second try.

The league plays a 92-game season. Present clubs:

- Brockton
- Newark
- New Jersey (Little Falls)

- Pittsfield
- Rockland (expansion team for 2011 in Ramapo, N.J.)
- Quebec
- Sussex (Augusta, N.J.)
- Worcester

FRONTIER LEAGUE

Founded in 1993, the Frontier League has filled not only a niche, but has earned respect from baseball evaluators at all levels because of its developmental approach and age limit policies.

Players, mostly undrafted youngsters, are paid about \$600 month – each team has a salary cap of \$72,000 – and stay with host families. The games are filled with players with some talent looking for notice. It's almost a throwback to the days when every small town in the Midwest had a team.

Caliber of play is compared to Class A.

The league plays a 96-game schedule and has been a success in the majority of its communities. Teams have failed in several small towns, however. Ashland, Ky., Zanesville, Ohio, Johnstown, Pa., and London, Ont., are among the list of former Frontier League towns.

Presently there are 12 teams, several of which have been cornerstones of the league for 15 years:

EAST DIVISION

- Kalamazoo
- Lake Erie (Avon, Ohio)
- Oakland County (Waterford Heights, Mich.,)
- Traverse City
- Washington (Pa.)
- Windy City (Crestwood, Ill.)

WEST DIVISION

- Evansville
- Florence (Ky.)
- Gateway (Sauget, Ill.)
- Normal (Illinois)
- River City (O'Fallen, Mo.)
- Southern Illinois (Marion, Ill.)

GOLDEN LEAGUE

This league was founded in 1994 by Stanford graduates David Kaval and Amit Patel and was helped by an investment by Cisco official and sports investor Kevin Outcalt, who is now the league's CEO.

Caliber of play falls between Class-A and Class-AA. The league plays a 90-game schedule spread between Hawaii and Western Canada. Whether this remains realistic is to be determined.

Several former major-leaguers, including Darrell Evans, Garry Templeton and Phil Nevin have managed in the league, with Nevin later managing in the Detroit organization.

Teams and agreements have come and gone, often like streetcars, in this league. The league is looking to expand to Palm Springs for 2011. Present teams include:

NORTH DIVISION

- Calgary
- Chico
- Edmonton
- Victoria (British Columbia)

SOUTH DIVISION

- Wailuku (Hawaii)
- Orange County (Fullerton, Calif)
- Yuma
- Tucson (Inactive for 2011 while Triple-A team plays in city)
- Palm Springs (2011 expansion team)

NORTHERN LEAGUE

This league, which was the major independent league when it was founded in 1993 – and grew to have a television contract with FOX Sports North – is struggling to survive as planning for the 2011 season begins.

Once garnering national publicity with the St. Paul Saints, owned by Mike Veeck, playing in outdoor Midway Stadium and attracting the like of Darryl Strawberry and Steven Drew, the league has seen its salad days shrivel.

St. Paul departed for the American Association in 2005, quickly followed by Calgary, Edmonton and Sioux Falls. But the recent defection of Kansas City, Fargo-Moorehead, Winnipeg and Gary-Southshore to the American Association leaves the circuit with just four suburban teams.

League officials are looking for two expansion teams for 2011, while some feel the Chicago-area clubs may join the Frontier League. The caliber of play was rated between Class-AA and Class-AAA for several seasons, with a 96-game schedule. The future is up-in-the-air.

Present teams include:

- Joliet
- Lake County (Zion, Ill.)
- Rockford
- Schaumburg

PECOS LEAGUE

This league is scheduled to begin play in 2011. It lists 10 franchises ready to begin play next May, a 72-game schedule and a commitment to play by National League rules without a designated hitter.

Whether the listed franchise in Amarillo, given the stadium situation mentioned above in that city, or the two El Paso franchises – in competition with the American Association in that town – will actually play is a matter to be determined,

The league is spread through the Southwest:

- Alpine (Texas)
- Amarillo
- Clovis
- Del Rio (Texas)
- El Paso Dragons
- El Paso Suns
- Las Cruces
- Leones (Juarez, Mexico)
- Roswell
- White Sands

UNITED LEAGUE

This is another circuit which, while it will likely play in 2011, has many questions. Will the league have a team in Amarillo? Are the other teams on sound financial footing?.

It has gone through both Chapter 11 and Chapter 7 bankruptcy procedures and has been evicted from the ballpark in Amarillo, threatened in Edinburg and locked out in Laredo. The much-more stable American Association is eyeing Amarillo and has an expansion team set to play in Laredo in 2012.

The United League did attempt to put teams in cities not housing an affiliated team. Of all the independent leagues planning to play in 2011, it is the most nebulous, with stable franchises in San Angelo, Robstown and Harlingen, Texas, only.

Minus an Amarillo team, few observers think this league will survive 2011. Present listed franchises:

- Amarillo (evicted from ballpark)
- Coastal Bend (Robstown, Texas)
- Edinburg (threatened with eviction from ballpark)

- Laredo (locked out of ballpark)
- Rio Grande Valley (Harlingen, Texas)
- San Angelo

WHAT THE INDEPENDENTS PROVIDE FOR FANS

- For the fan looking for a night out close to home, it's live baseball at an affordable price.
- The former major-leaguers, whether playing or managing, interact with fans, sign autographs easily and offer a thrill.
- New ballparks – especially in the Atlantic League – are modern and comfortable and play to the fan experience.
- The chance to be part of something which is totally dependent on community support.
- A replacement community team in cities, like Wichita or El Paso, that have been abandoned by organized baseball.

WHAT COULD ENHANCE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MINORS AND INDEPENDENTS

With the emergence of independent baseball in the late 1990s, and with what was said from boosters of both affiliated and independent baseball, it was no wonder one wanted anything to do with the other.

The situation has changed, however, with so many players coming out of the independent leagues and joining affiliated organizations. It is now recognized players who went undrafted and others who may have been released by an organization deserve a chance,

A huge majority of independent players set a goal to get back to affiliated ball.

"There is a difference in the while operation," said veteran outfielder Noah Hall, who has played in both the Atlantic League and for the Nationals, Orioles and Yankees organization, reaching the Triple-A level.

"A veteran player like me goes to independent ball to try to get another chance."

The Yankees signed Hall out of the Atlantic League twice over the past few years as a fill-in when needed at Double-A or Triple-A. Several pitchers have come out of independent ball and made it to the majors like reliever Scott Patterson, who was signed by the Yankees out of Lancaster (Pa.) of the Atlantic League and pitched with both the Yankees and San Diego Padres.

Christian's case is an example of the player who was not drafted, yet has big[-league speed, a bit of power and can play both the infield and outfield. He was an All-Star in the Frontier League before the Yankees signed him.

"When you are not drafted, and feel you can play, you have to go somewhere," said Christian. "For that reason, the Frontier League was good for me. I knew I could play, and luckily the Yankees noticed me."

Given the examples of Patterson and Christian, could organized baseball ever come to an agreement with the independents.

Such an agreement could enhance the relationship:

- Many players are released after their Class-A season. Perhaps such players could be assigned to the Frontier League, which has emphasized development, and be classified as a free-agent assigned by an organization, but available to all.
- There are players that are missed in the draft-and-sign process. A few organizations are noticing the independents are worth looking at in spots. This can be formalized.
- Players are signed out of the independents. Perhaps this can be more formalized as well.