

John

FYC 13100

Professor Clauss

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### College Degrees Travel Further Than Baseballs

Situation: As a baseball player at the University of Notre Dame, I am writing a letter to all high school baseball players who will be selected in the 2011 Major League Baseball Draft. I have been exposed to many opportunities of being a collegiate student-athlete, such as the chance to play college baseball while earning a degree. Although many of those I am writing to may have dreams of signing a large MLB contract, I would like to help them reassess their options. My ultimate goal is to influence these players that playing college baseball and getting an education is often a smarter choice than entering the MLB directly out of high school.

To the elite players of high school baseball,

As a member of the University of Notre Dame baseball team, I would personally like to congratulate you on being selected in the 2011 MLB Draft. From our experiences in baseball, we can agree that this is an extraordinary accomplishment, and one that you may hold dearly for your entire life. However, this achievement also involves a tough decision, a choice between playing baseball at an elite university and signing a contract with a Major League Baseball team. It is my intent to help you make the decision that will ultimately create the most opportunities for you not only in these next few years, but also for the rest of your life. Through my personal experiences at Notre Dame, choosing to play college baseball is often a more advantageous decision athletically, academically, and financially. College baseball will provide you with a few more years to further develop your baseball abilities, a backup plan in the scenario that baseball does not become a long-lasting career, and an invaluable education.

Choosing to play college baseball will allow you to gain at least three more years of experience to develop as a player and also an opportunity to be selected in the 2014 MLB Draft,

following your junior season. As you are well aware, three years of baseball experience at a highly competitive level makes an immense difference in the improvement of a player's talent. For instance, think about the physical and mental improvements you have made since your freshman year of high school, and imagine the improvements you will be able to make after three years of college baseball. Regardless of the prospect's talent level, a 21-year-old college baseball player will always enter the minor leagues with more experience than an 18-year-old out of high school. Keith Law, senior baseball analyst for Scouts Incorporated and a journalist for ESPN, noticed the differences between college and high school prospects while working as an assistant to the Toronto Blue Jay's general manager. He noted, "The typical college prospect is a 21-year-old junior who has three years of experience playing Division I baseball. The typical high school prospect is only 18 (and occasionally 17) and has never even lived away from home" (Law). The difference in age and experience can be noticed in the typical prospect's physique, maturity, and understanding of the game. In addition, this inevitably puts a college player at an advantage, and is an explanation for why college prospects advance through minor league systems nearly two years quicker than high school prospects. According to Law, "The age, experience and maturity issues all contribute to shorter incubation periods for college prospects" (Law). As a baseball player with high ambitions, I am confident that your ultimate goal is to reach a Major League team. If you decide to play Division-1 baseball, you will have the opportunity to gain the experiences that are necessary for success in professional baseball.

Although deciding to play at a Division-1 level often facilitates the progression and success of professional players, I am aware of several arguments which are commonly made in support of prospects signing MLB contracts out of high school. For example, players such as Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez both entered the MLB out of high school, and are currently two

of the most successful players in baseball. Both players have numerous awards to their names, and for the 2010 season alone, the two have a combined salary of \$55,600,000 (“New York”). Even with the degree I will earn in my four years of college, it is very unlikely that I will ever come close to matching either player’s financial success. It is undeniable that Jeter and Rodriguez have already had legendary careers; however, these two individuals are extreme exceptions to the patterns traced in professional baseball. Not only are the salaries of Jeter and Rodriguez significantly larger than the majority of Major League players, but the longevity of their careers is also very rare. According to baseball analyst John Farrell, an expert on Minor League Baseball, only “10 percent of [all] players are productive players who play anywhere from three to four years in the big leagues” (Carfagna, Farrell, and Hazen). Consequently, 90 percent of all players drafted—regardless of going to college or not—will never make it to the Major Leagues. The successes of Jeter and Rodriguez are very deceiving to all those who aspire to play professional baseball, especially to those who consider signing out of high school. For every individual who has achieved great feats in the Major Leagues, there are several hundreds of players who quietly faded out of the professional baseball system. It is true that the very best will make unbelievable sums of money throughout their careers; however, until a player proves himself he is making just enough money to get by. Sports agent and lawyer Jason B. Wolf reported, “The first contract season for a Minor Leaguer allows him to make about \$1,100 a month [...] which totals to just \$22,325 annually.” To make matters worse, this annual sum assumes a twelve-month work year, which Minor Leaguers do not have. Instead, players are only paid during the months they play, which for a typical player is seven months. The prospect of five winter months without a paycheck forces many players to find other low-paying jobs in the offseason. Furthermore, the typical minor leaguer lives off of his signing bonus, as his salary

is often less than that of a high school graduate entering the workforce. It is easy to be captivated by the tremendous stories of those who made it big without acquiring a college degree, but you must evaluate the reality and probability of your own long-term success in the Major Leagues.

After analyzing the slim likelihood of a professional baseball player's lasting success in the MLB, deciding to play college baseball provides a much-needed backup plan. Making the decision to play baseball in college will create an opportunity for you to receive a college education that will prove to be very beneficial, both on and off the field. Further evaluating the impacts of college on an athlete, Wolf claimed, "the student-athlete is receiving a scholarship set at a specific value, earning a degree, gaining an invaluable college education, and is in the environment to facilitate an increased level of maturity and independence" (Wolf). Whether or not baseball becomes a lasting career, you will always have your degree. Especially in today's economic recession, the value of a college degree is at an unprecedented high. According to reports by the U.S. Census Bureau, "a Bachelor's degree will earn, on average, almost twice as much as workers with a high school diploma over a lifetime" ("Value of Education"). On the other hand, if you do make the decision to sign with a professional baseball team out of high school, the numbers predict that you will be done playing baseball within three or four years. In addition, "There is the most risk for a player with just a High School diploma to accept an offer to play professional baseball. They must, in this case, be placing all their baseballs into one basket" (Wolf). In this case, you would have no secondary education to fall back on, and no degree to help you when your baseball career is over.

There are particular scenarios, however, it may prove to be beneficial for a high school prospect to immediately sign with a professional baseball team. When a high school baseball player becomes a standout prospect for the Major League Draft, many college programs also

compete in the recruiting process. Due to this heavy recruiting, the demand for the high school prospect will rise, causing him to be drafted in an earlier round. Especially for high school players, earlier rounds normally generate larger signing bonuses. In this occasion, the player's options must be closely analyzed. When draft expert Mike Hazen was questioned about the general amount of money he would sign directly out of high school for, he asserted that "I would assume it would be somewhere [...] in the area of what the overall cost of my schooling would be...But it would probably be a little higher than that, considering the importance [...] placed on education" (Carfagna, Farrell, and Hazen). Although the price of a college experience is incalculable, it is an essential aspect of education that also should be compensated for. Therefore, it may be beneficial for a high school prospect to sign a professional contract if they are offered somewhere around a million dollars, which is usually first round money. To be a first round draft pick, a player is generally within the top thirty players selected in the draft.

Although statistics may impact the way you perceive the draft, I am aware that personal accounts of players weigh much more. For that reason, I met with my good friend and teammate Dan Slania to speak about his decision to play college baseball, rather than signing a contract out of high school. In the fall of 2009, Slania signed his National Letter of Intent with the University of Notre Dame, committing himself to play college baseball for the Fighting Irish. However, following an outstanding senior baseball season, the Boston Red Sox selected Slania in the 42nd Round of the 2010 MLB Draft. Despite the honor and excitement of his selection in the draft, Slania thoroughly evaluated his options. Nearly one year ago, Slania dealt with many of the same pressures and decisions that you are facing today.

In my interview with Slania, we discussed numerous different arguments for each option that was available to him. While making his decision, Slania weighed out the appeals and

benefits of playing for the University of Notre Dame vs. those of signing with the Red Sox.

Slania mentioned, “From the very beginning, I was pretty set on going to college and getting an education. However, the moment I picked up the phone and heard the news from the Red Sox organization, it greatly complicated my choice” (Slania). Although playing professional baseball is one of Slania’s lifelong dreams, he did not allow his emotions to make the decision for him. Drafted in the 42<sup>nd</sup> round, Slania became aware that his signing bonus would not be worth the value of a Notre Dame education. With his priorities in line, Slania affirmed, “At some point in time, whether in a month or in years down the road, my baseball career will come to an end. I have to get a quality education, because someday I will have a life after baseball” (Slania). In addition, even if his signing bonus would have paid for the Notre Dame tuition in full, Slania kept the invaluable college experience in mind. When I asked him to try and explain his college experience, he replied “It consists of living away from home for the first time, meeting a wide variety of people, and playing baseball for a nationally recognized team. In my opinion, being removed from my comfort zone will also improve my performance and maturity on the baseball field” (Slania). If he had signed a professional contract with the Boston Red Sox organization, he would have instantly lost his amateur status and been shipped to Florida to play for a minor league team. This would require him to live on his own in a region that he is unfamiliar with, at the age of only 18. He was also aware of harsh minor league environment, including the possibility of being released or injured within his first few seasons. Fortunately, Slania decided to attend Notre Dame to work for a degree, become exposed to the college experience, improve his baseball skills, and preserve hopes of being drafted in 2013.

As one who has invested a great deal of time into competitive baseball at a Division-1 level, I am aware that your selection in the MLB Draft is a result of your hard work, aspirations,

and baseball prowess. My stance on playing college baseball is not meant to take any of the honors away from being drafted as a high school prospect. However, I am trying to help you evaluate your options in order to make the decision that will prove to be most beneficial for you. It is not all too uncommon for prospects to look at players currently succeeding in the MLB, and desire to accomplish what they have. Unfortunately, it is this aspiration to succeed that gets the best of many prospects, creating a minor league system full of players with only a high school diploma to their names. Jason B. Wolf stressed that there is an “always present reality that they [players] may never go very far and might even have to explore the job market one day if it [baseball] does not work out.” I do not want you to have to look back four or five years from now, wishing that you seized the opportunity to earn a college degree. Choosing to play college baseball will allow you to gain necessary baseball development, a college experience, and a degree for when your days of playing baseball are over.

Best Regards,

John ----

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