

The Release Of A Dream

Written by {ga=consigliere}
Wednesday, May 14 2008 7:00 PM -

Super piece here from Tony that has been in the works for some time now. In it, our Consigliere offers up an expose on the release process in the minor leagues. Tony contacted a handful of minor league players, all of whom we kept anonymous, and all of whom have been released over the last two years in spring training or the offseason. The interviews provide great insight into what happens to the vast majority of minor league players that don't make it to the bigs. And how the Indians organization handles breaking the news to these players.



Ever wonder how the release process works in the minors? Well, I am here to hopefully shed some light on the topic.

Many fans probably never think twice about it, but there is some interesting drama in the offseason and in spring training when players in the minor leagues are released. Many of these players are young men out on their own or away from a school environment for the first time. They are really experiencing success and failure on their own for the first time. By playing in the minors, they all have obtained the golden ticket for a chance in a lifetime many of us always dreamed of getting:
to be a major league baseball player.

The release process has always been a mystery to me, and after all the intensity I witnessed during the near two weeks I was in Winter Haven for spring training this year, I ventured to find out more on the process on how it is communicated to them. Also, I was curious about the personal aspect of it in how players take the news, the flurry of emotions that race through them when they are told, and what they do after they are released.

With the help of three former Indians minor league players who have been released over the last two years in spring training or the offseason, I was able to answer a lot of the questions I had about the release process in the minors. In addition, since one of the players I talked to was an offseason release casualty, not only was I able to find out about the spring training release process, but I was also able to get a little insight into how players are released in the offseason as well.

Their responses are provided below in a Q&A format, which I preferred mostly because I

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wanted to keep it direct and to the point. I wanted it to be more raw, and with most of the words coming right from them. Also, while some of the questions were laid back "softball" type questions, there were others that were more to the point put them on the spot.

It should be noted that the identity of the players is not provided here, and the reason for that is when I contacted them I told them I would keep their responses anonymous. Most were fine with using their names, but in the end I felt it best not to use them.

However, when you read their responses below, if you are pretty knowledgeable of the players in the Indians minor league system over the last three years, there is a good chance you will be able to figure out who the players are (they know some of their responses may be self-incriminating).

Player 1 and Player 2 were spring training releases, and Player 3 was an offseason release. This is important to note as they answer questions about the release process, as there are some differences between the offseason and spring training release process.

Each one of these players had a different experience in the Indians farm system, so having three viewpoints to the process was something I wanted in order to help cover most of the angles.

Plus, when reading their replies you can see how some players know more about some situations than others, or some players had much better (or worse) experiences with some aspects of the Indians minor league system.

With that, onto the Q&A...

Going into the offseason and spring training, does the organization give any hint that you may or may not be released? Do they prepare you for it? If so, how? Or, are you kept in the dark?

PLAYER 1: There is a preliminary meeting each player has with the big guys, but they keep it very broad and leave the skepticism to the player. They try to combine telling you what they expect out of you during spring training without guaranteeing anything.

PLAYER 2: Going in you don't really know what to expect until you have your one on one meeting with Ross Atkins.

PLAYER 3: Going into the offseason I did not have any indication from the organization that I was going to be released. As the [2007] season came to a conclusion, I had a feeling that being released was a possibility, but I was hoping that they would at least give me a chance in spring training to prove myself again.

What are the meetings like when you first come to spring training where the organization sits down to discuss what they expect from you in the upcoming season?

PLAYER 1: They don't actually discuss the upcoming season. It's more about spring training and what they want you to focus on.

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PLAYER 2: Within the first few days you meet with Ross and Dave Miller (if you're a pitcher) or Bruce Fields (if you're a hitter). They tell you what their plans are for you in the upcoming season, and what they expect you to do during spring training and what they want you to work on. They did tell some guys they didn't know if they would have a spot for them. In my meeting they told me I didn't have to worry about getting released because they liked my stuff, but I needed to stay healthy. They said I needed to have a year like my first year and that I was fighting for a spot in the bullpen in Kinston. That's where they wanted me.

PLAYER 3: N/A (question not asked)

Is there any point where you start to feel/realize the pressure that you may be released?

What is that like?

Can it be overwhelming?

PLAYER 1: Yeah, we all know when the cuts are coming. And speculation begins to swirl. Everybody loves trying to guess who is next, hoping it's not them. I would actually say we all get a little closer as friends during this time period. We play golf to release the tension. Video games and March Madness help too. It's only as intense as you let it be.

PLAYER 2: I didn't really feel any pressure. I'm pretty laid back and was just trying to enjoy my time there with my friends. Guys will start to talk and guess who they think will get released and who's going to end up playing where.

PLAYER 3: Yes, throughout the season my opportunities began to get limited after a few rocky outings early on. I began pitching once every three days, then four days, then my time between appearances kept increasing. Each time I had an extra day off the other bullpen guys would get rested and they were taking priority over me. It was tough to go out and pitch with confidence when it felt like no one had confidence in me. It seemed like I was watching my career unravel right before my eyes and there was nothing I could do about it.

Was it a complete surprise when you got the news? Does the staff communicate with you that "hey you need to pick it up", or are you completely blindsided?

PLAYER 1: I knew all offseason I was in jeopardy. I hit the gym and the food (6000 calories a day) with every intention of proving I deserve to be there. There really is no communication whatsoever and the releases are always a blindsided action. You don't want to believe it's going to be you. Especially not being an 8th rounder with not too bad of stats.

PLAYER 2: I can't say I was completely surprised, because I knew my age, arm trouble, and previous year were all going against me. I was also a guy that didn't get a lot of money when I signed, so they didn't really have a lot invested in me. But, I know I was well liked in the organization as far as being a guy that got along with all the coaches and players. I was also told I had some of the best stuff on both the teams I played for so I was a little surprised they didn't give me another year to see if I could fix things. I had a really good first year so I just think it really came down to my health.

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PLAYER 3: There wasn't much communication from the staff about what I needed to do, but I knew what I needed to do and the bottom line was that I just wasn't getting it done.

How does the release process work? What do they say when they contact you? How do they contact you?

PLAYER 1: You get to the clubhouse and your laundry loop is missing. It's like our "red card" from [the movie] *Major League*. The clubhouse manager tells you to see Ross Atkins. There's no doubt anymore. You're gone. May as well say the goodbyes now. Then you sit in the Minor League office waiting room for what feels like an hour, but is only really five minutes. Walk upstairs, sit in the chair. They say see ya later.

PLAYER 2: They get the clubhouse guys to hold your practice clothes so when your laundry loop (holds our day to day practice gear) isn't in your locker you know you have a meeting with Ross. After that you go into a one on one meeting with Ross and Dave and they explain why they are releasing you.

PLAYER 3: In the offseason, Ross Atkins, farm director, called me up and informed me that the organization was going to let me go. He said, "We aren't letting you go because you aren't good enough to pitch at this level, we are letting you go because there were a lot of guys ahead of you."

What were your initial feelings when you were released? Have those feelings changed at all a month later?

PLAYER 1: I tried to be cooperative with Atkins because I understand it's a business for him. But the way they told me (very nonchalant and without a care) and the fact that I wasn't given a second chance to prove I can compete has left me feeling disappointed. Not in the way I went about my career, because I gave it 100% all the time and did everything I could have done to get better. Rather, the fact they just shoved me out the door like I didn't belong in the first place.

PLAYER 2: When I was first released I wasn't too upset. I have felt like I was ready to move on with my life if my arm kept hurting me. It is a little sad thinking that they didn't want you anymore or didn't think you were good enough to keep pitching for them.

PLAYER 3: My initial feelings were extreme disappointment, my stomach just dropped. I just wanted to go back and change an outing or two from the season that may or may not have led to being released. After all the dust had settled, my feelings changed from disappointed to relieved.

That may sound a little erratic, but when I caught wind of some of my buddies that were released during spring training it made me feel better.

Not because my friends were released too, but because they all had better seasons than me and I knew that if I would have put in all the effort in the offseason preparing for spring training, I still may have been released.

What do you do when you are released? Do you immediately clean out your locker? Do

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you talk to any players?

What are their reactions like?

What happens?

PLAYER 1: Clean out your locker right away. Linger around while we wait for our exit physicals so we can't blame them for any injuries that may occur. Every player you say bye to shows shock, but underneath they all have to have expected it. We all know who's on the bubble. I left the field, packed my hotel room up, and drove home immediately. Most guys who fly get driven by van to the airport almost immediately. Their flights leave that day.

PLAYER 2: We sat around in an empty meeting room and played cards until the guys all went out for morning stretch, then cleared our lockers out and waited on our exit physical and flight information. I did talk to a lot of my friends and just wished them good luck on the season and told 'em I'd be checking their stats from time to time and if they ever came down to Louisiana or wanted to just give me a call. You don't know how to act around guys that are being released. The locker room is a little more quiet than usual on release days. After you get all your paperwork done they drive you to the hotel to pack and drive you to the airport. They make your flight as soon as possible so you don't have much time to sit around usually.

PLAYER 3: At the end of the season, all the players took exit physicals. After Ross called me and told me the news, that was it. I think that I may have received a letter in the mail a few months later stating that I have officially been released from the organization. I still stay in contact with some players. When I first talked to them after I was released, they were disappointed for me and wished me the best of luck.

How much accountability do you, as the player, take for being released? Or do you put sole responsibility on the team for not giving you a "fair chance"?

PLAYER 1: It's a combination for me. I don't feel I was given the full opportunity to prove myself, but at the same time I understand it is a cutthroat business. No time to lag behind and catch up later. I knew my stats weren't great and there were things I could have done better on the mound. Though I did feel my worst days were behind me and even those days weren't that bad. But I take responsibility for my life and understand that in the end, I didn't have what it took to make it as an Indian.

PLAYER 2: I feel a lot of it is on me. I know the majority of the problem was my arm trouble and that's something I couldn't control. It is tough being a guy that didn't get a lot of money cause you have to stand out twice as much to make a name for yourself. If they don't have anything invested in you they will push a guy that did get a lot of money regardless of how well he's playing.

PLAYER 3: I take the majority of the accountability for being released. I didn't perform up to my potential and I had a disappointing season. As far as a "fair chance", I may not have been given as many chances as some

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other guys, but I was a low round draft pick with not much money invested in me.

It is a business and I was pretty expendable.

On the flip side of things, I have seen some low round or free agent guys perform outstanding and move up the organization.

How would you evaluate the level of coaching you received in the professional ranks compared to college/high school?

PLAYER 1: Absolutely hands down phenomenal. I'm preparing to go back to Marietta College and be the pitching coach if the spot opens up soon like I think it will. I've learned so much about pitching I never knew before pro ball. Ken Rowe is the smartest man alive I genuinely believe it.

PLAYER 2: I was a pretty "raw" talent. I had never really had anyone that knew a lot about pitching teach me until I got to the professional level. I went to a small college so I didn't have a pitching coach. I really value the things I learned while I was with the Indians. I kept a notebook of mental approaches, how to fix problems if I was struggling, and basic information on opponents. It is something I'll always have and be able to pass on to my kids.

PLAYER 3: I would say that the knowledge of coaching in minor league baseball was just as good or better than my college experience. The amount of individual time and attention that I received was far less in minor league ball than in college, but that is expected due to the fact that there are over a hundred pitchers in the organization. Additionally, I would say that in my experiences, the professional coaches focus more on the mental & strategic approaches to pitching more than mechanics. While in my college experiences, I received even focus on all three.

How did your approach change as you advanced, and what did you attempt to do to compensate for ability shortfalls to allow you to remain in the organization? For example, did you try to follow advice that you did not agree with to try and stay with the team? If not, did you find that being "independent" after declining to make suggested adjustments (assuming you tried it and found it not to be comfortable) result in less further interaction with the coaching staffs?

PLAYER 1: I always tried to do whatever the pitching coaches suggested. The problem is, the number of changes grew and grew and grew. Eventually I forget what got me there in the first place. And now I'm struggling to find that pitcher I used to be. So many changes and tweaks along the way have gotten me lost.

PLAYER 2: My approach didn't really change for how I attacked hitters. I did learn a lot about mechanics though and fixed several problems I've had for years. I was open to changing my mechanics because I trusted the pitching coaches, and I just wanted to be the best pitcher I could. My first year I threw well so my first pitching coach said if it is not broke don't fix it. My second year I struggled so we changed a few mechanical things.

PLAYER 3: I did seek advice from pitching coaches and tried it. As it did not feel comfortable, I

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tried to go back and do the things that had gotten me to professional baseball. Unfortunately for me, I did not get back on track fast enough.

Do you think you improved as a player during your time in the minor league system?

PLAYER 1: I did not improve as a player physically. Mentally, though, I am ten times smarter and ten times more of a pitcher now. I understand the game.

PLAYER 2: I don't think I improved pitching much, but I did learn a lot. Like I said I had a really good first year, but fell off my second year due to injuries.

PLAYER 3: I feel that I did not improve in the minor league system. Maybe that is why I was released.

Do you feel that you played up to the potential you were scouted at?

PLAYER 1: No.

PLAYER 2: My first year I got a promotion from rookie ball to High-A because I had such a good season, so my first year I would say yes.

PLAYER 3: In my first year, I do believe that I played up to my potential. As for my second year, I did not meet the expectations that the organization had for me.

How does someone that was released get other teams to give them a chance? Do you have agents pounding the phones? Or do you just sit by the phone and wait? Did you contemplate retirement rather than moving to another organization?

PLAYER 1: Independent league teams call. Maybe some major league orgs call my agent. But for the most part you just join an Indy ball team and try to make the most of it and hopefully you'll get picked up later. I thought about every option. But I know that I can still pitch and I don't want to cut a career short no matter what path it may lead me.

PLAYER 2: When you're released they send out a notice to all the other teams with your contact information. Also your agent will set up try outs or send out stats to other teams. I'm pretty sure I'll just retire because I don't want to have to have another surgery.

PLAYER 3: Once I was released, I called my agent and informed him of the news. He asked me my feelings about the situation and we decided to make some calls to some other organizations.

Some organizations had some scouting reports on me, but none of them were strong enough to put myself in a situation where I was going to be somewhat of a prospect/priority.

After hearing that it was going to be an uphill battle that may not be possible to conquer, my agent and I both agreed that it was in my best interests to retire from professional baseball.

What is in store for you now? Will you look to continue your baseball career and try and

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**latch on elsewhere?
baseball and do something else?**

Or, have you decided to move on from

PLAYER 1: Washington Wild Things are my new team. Hopefully I can be successful as I already know I'm going to enjoy playing. They win. They play as a team. And it's about winning as opposed to just personal gain. I'm excited.

PLAYER 2: I'm ready to move on with my life and start making a little money, so I think I'll just hang up my spikes. I will miss the competition of baseball, but I'm glad to be back home with my family and friends. Now I just have to start working for retirement.

PLAYER 3: I have retired from professional baseball. I am going to take this summer off and enjoy golf, grilling out and boating. In the years to come I will probably start playing some recreational baseball for the love of the game.

A special thanks to all three players who contributed to this Q&A. You know who you are, and I appreciate all of you taking the time to do this while you are going through a big transition from one organization to another or moving on with your life.