Alumni

Baselines

By
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|
Fall 2007

Fernando Perez in 2008 (Keith Allison).

An ability to craft a fine sentence was not among the talents the Tampa Bay Devil Rays were seeking when they signed Fernando Perez '04CC in the seventh round of the 2004 baseball draft.

But now that Perez has made the pros, he is also making prose.

This past season the 24-year-old switch-hitting center fielder with the Montgomery Biscuits in the Double-A Southern League kept an online "players journal" for the official Minor League Baseball Web site.

"It's supposed to chronicle what's going on in the day of the life of a minor leaguer," Perez says. "I wasn't interested in writing about my life, so I kind of turned the thing on its head."

The three other players chosen to keep journals began their first entries on April 4 in a "Hi, my name is..." vein. Perez, meanwhile, came out swinging: "Some time in February, the few and the proud ball-playing snowbirds just quit on winter altogether and head south to play ball for free."

Encouraged by his Columbia coaches, Perez committed himself to becoming a professional ballplayer after his freshman year. When teachers in the creative writing program caught wind of his talent on the diamond, they advised him "to let go of existentialism and write about baseball," Perez says.

If Perez's life as a professional player, which began when he signed a $200,000 deal with the Devil Rays after his junior year, were a book, it might spawn a new literary subgenre: baseball beatnik.

"The life of a nomad has always been the life for me," he writes in a June 16 entry. "I have a backpack of clean clothes that I take on road trips, and that becomes my sock drawer when I'm at 'home' in my apartment with nothing but windows on the walls."

Perez's Minor League wanderings (his e-mail moniker is Juandrelust) have taken him on the road westward from New York City before rerouting to the South. His favorite book is Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, and poetry is his reading of choice when fatigue shortens his attention span during the season. Perez recently finished the collected poems of Beat affiliate Robert Creeley, and before games he likes to warm up with a chapter from Lyn Hejinian's *My Life.*

But the speed with which he tears through books is nothing compared to how fast he moves around the bases.

"If there's one tool that Fernando has above average, even at the Major League level, it's that he can run," says his former Columbia coach Mik Aoki. "He can really,

really run."

A sportscaster for the Biscuits recently said that Perez can steal a base "as quick as a hiccup."

Perez's father, Fernando Perez, Jr., also is a fan of Perez's speed-oriented game. Never one to critique his son's playing, the elder Perez, who emigrated with his wife from baseball-obsessed Cuba, did offer one piece of criticism concerning Fernando's July 30 journal entry, which began: "The trade deadline is near, and we're in the clubhouse in Birmingham watching the ticker reel off trade news. We had been watching a horrible action movie until the guy on the other side of the love seat, Shaun Cumberland, was summoned into the manager's lair."

Cumberland was traded to the Reds, which set Perez off on a tangent about the harsh realities of the business of baseball and how a player's value is the sum total of his stats, minus his salary.

"He was getting in depth about how tough it is," Fernando, Jr., says. "I told him to lighten up."

It would be easy to get down on baseball if Perez did not have such a great 2007 season. He batted over .300 and led the division-winning Biscuits in on-base percentage, triples, walks, and stolen bases. He is considered a player who could be called up to the Major Leagues next season, and his affable personality and thoughtful demeanor have made him a fan favorite as well.

Paul Fernandes, Columbia's associate athletic director who was the baseball coach for 23 years, has seen a small handful of Columbia players drafted by professional ball clubs. The most recent was Greg Mullens, a six-foot-six-inch pitcher who signed with the Mets organization in 2005 and now plays for the Single-A Savannah Sand Gnats in the South Atlantic League. But the number that have made the big leagues since Lou Gehrig retired as a Yankee in 1939 is exactly two: Gene Larkin, who drove in the winning run for the Minnesota Twins in game seven of the 1991 World Series, and Frank Seminara, who debuted as a pitcher for the San Diego Padres the following year.

"Now it comes down to continuing to produce and being at the right place at the right time," Fernandes says of Perez. "Right now he's knocking on the door."

Having a Columbia alumnus wear a Major League uniform would surely help the University recruit top talent, Fernandes says. Likewise, a Columbia degree helps when it's time to take off the cleats. Both Seminara and Larkin have gone from baseball to finance. If he weren't a professional ballplayer, Perez's dad says his son might be a teacher. Perez, on the other hand, treats baseball as the only job he could do - as if, like so many of his teammates, he didn't have any other options.

"It's kind of what you need to do to make it work," he says, adding: "If I wasn't playing baseball, I'd probably be writing for a magazine."

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