

## Little big league

### The tale of a little leaguer trying out for the big leagues

It is every young boy's dream to become a professional athlete when he gets older. For me, it was baseball. Baseball wasn't merely a game or a sport that I idolized; it was a lifestyle and passion. My every thought, action and breath involved the innocent bliss that baseball offered. I loved the sound of the bat connecting with the ball, the smell of the freshly cut grass and the feel of lathering up a new baseball, getting ready to throw a pitch. For me, baseball was my paradise, my escape and the foundation of my biggest dreams.

At my elementary school graduation we were told to write down what we aspired to be when we got older. Most boys my age said an athlete. I tried to hide my desire and said pediatrician, but who was I kidding? Secretly, I didn't even know what a pediatrician was. I, too, wanted to be an athlete.

Not just an athlete, but a professional baseball player.

I wanted to hear my name announced as I walked to the plate in front of a sold-out stadium. I wanted to connect on a fastball and line it into the gap, taking a wide turn around first and sliding into second, popping up to see the umpire signal me safe. I wanted to hit a towering home run and be greeted by my teammates at home plate to celebrate a walk-off victory.

Growing up, we all had these dreams of one day having that chance to play in the big leagues. A 2003 study by the New Jersey Institute of Technology reported that for every 500,000 males in the world, one will successfully play baseball professionally. In comparison, a person has 1:6,250 odds of being struck by lightning in his or her lifetime.

Yes, it's *that* difficult to live out these dreams.

But all that we dreamers can ask for is a shot, and on June 16, 2010, my shot came . . . Who knew, though, that my call would come more than five years after I hung up my spikes and sold all of my gear away—literally.

### The Call

In April, while searching for a summer internship, I came across the Cheyenne Grizzlies, a summer collegiate baseball league across southern Wyoming and northern Colorado. With a major interest in media and writing, and still holding on to my love for baseball, it seemed like the perfect fit. I would get real-world experience in my desired field while still being part of the game I loved.

I was talking with owner Ron Kailey and was ready to accept the position when he threw a curveball at me.

"There are lots of great stories you could write for us. For example, there's a tryout this summer with scouts for the Colorado Rockies. I think it would be a fun story for you to write about the tryout process."

Seeing a real professional tryout? Sign me up!

“Actually,” Ron continued, “what would real neat is if you tried out with the players and wrote about the experience of trying out.”

I almost dropped the phone in shock. I assume Ron must have thought he was getting a bad signal because I fell silent. Finally, I told him what an opportunity that was and that I was in.

## **The Preparation**

Nine months out of the year I’m a student at Colorado State University, studying journalism. But once final exams were complete and summer break was officially underway I got my priorities straight. Throw the books out the window, I had to get ready for my professional tryout.

I was getting the opportunity to do something that so many men dream of but so few get to actually experience. As Grizzlies outfielder K.C. Judge said after the tryout, “Unless you get drafted, no one gets to experience trying out in front of professional scouts.”

So since the opportunity arose for me, I was going to take full advantage of it. What’s that saying? Grab the bull by its horns? Forget the story I was instructed to write, I was determined to try out and make the squad.

So I called up my old baseball coach and mentor, Leighton Thorne. I told him about what I was doing and I’m sure, deep down, he wanted to laugh at me. Even my mom laughed at me every time I talked about the tryout. But Leighton was kind of enough not to let it show. He also kindly agreed to work with me on my swing to get it back to where it was during my prime. You know, when I was 15 years old.

So for three weeks leading up to the tryout, I went over to Leighton’s house to hit in his batting cage.

That’s where I hit my first detour.

I showed up for my first hitting lesson on May 27. He greeted me and told me to grab my bat and follow him over to a screen where we were going to do some soft toss drills. He took one look at my bat and looked at my peculiarly.

“It’s the only bat I still have,” I mumbled to him. “I sold the rest of my gear.”

Leighton went back into his garage and brought out a couple adult-sized Akadema wood bats. He had me swing a few and see which one felt best. I found one I liked and tossed my 29-inch Louisville Slugger youth bat to the curb.

The first detour was solved, at least the bat part of it (I still needed the rest of my gear), and I was ready to start swinging.

That lasted about three swings before Leighton told me to sit down with him and we spent the next half hour or so talking about the basic fundamentals of hitting. He reminded me of things once engraved in

my memory. Things like the positioning of my feet and the movement of my hands during my load; he reminded me to swing through the ball and keep my swing short.

With each hitting lesson, things started coming back to me and my swing became more and more comfortable.

We worked on pitch sequences and off-speed pitches; hitting the ball to opposite field and tracking the seams from the pitcher's hand.

By my final lesson, I was even hitting line drives back to the L-screen on occasion rather than being laughed at by the 10-year-old kid who had a lesson after me.

I owe a lot of my baseball success, both during my playing days and leading up to my tryout, to Leighton. He is an incredible coach, but also has been influential in my life.

## **The Preparation, Part Two**

I mentioned above that Leighton let me use his bat (two, actually. He jammed me and I cracked the first one). But I still needed the rest of the gear that I had gotten rid of after my playing days were finished (or so I thought).

My mom is a school teacher and one of her teaching partner's sons plays college ball in Nebraska. She casually mentioned the tryout to her one day and a few days later, Sandy had brought me Bryan's old cleats. Sure, they were his football cleats, but they were cleats nonetheless. Again a few weeks later, Sandy came back in with a pair of Bryan's baseball pants.

As each day passed I was beginning to look more like a true baseball player.

After my first hitting lesson I went to Sports Authority and got myself a pair of batting gloves. Batting gloves were never an essential I used back in the day, but that big blister on the inside of my thumb that was beginning to bleed didn't make me think twice this go around.

The day before the tryout I went back to Sports Authority and got the remaining needs.

I picked up a couple wood bats as backups in case my other bat broke during the tryout. I purchased a pair of baseball socks so I could wear them like stirrups as players used to do. I even had to pick up a new protective cup, for goodness sake. I know some players can go without this piece of equipment, but when you don't know what you're doing out there, like myself, you don't take any chances.

I still didn't have a baseball bag but I figured I could do without that. I had all my gear and was set for the tryout.

## **The Glory Years**

Before I go any further, I think it's imperative to explain that I haven't always been such a baseball slouch. I began playing T-ball at the ripe age of six and played for more than a decade before throwing in the towel my sophomore year of high school.

During my career, I played competitive baseball at the highest level possible all throughout little league. One year, I was the No. 1 pick in the city of Fort Collins for my age group and the last year I played, I laid down a bunt that scored the game-winning run of the state championship. I played at a school that has won four consecutive Colorado high school state championships and have batted alongside players who now play ball at schools like Southern California, Stanford, Nebraska and Kentucky. A couple former teammates have even been selected in the Major League Baseball Draft.

But who was I kidding? I was past my prime.

## **The Big Day**

The night before, I got to bed by 10 o'clock sharp. It's something I haven't done in three years of college, but since I had an early tryout and a big day ahead of me, I figured sleep was important.

So much for that idea, though. I was like a little kid again on Christmas Eve, not being able to sleep because I was anxious about the next day.

I'm not sure how much sleep I actually accumulated, but the blaring sound of my alarm woke me up promptly at 3:30 a.m. Yes, 3:30 in the morning. We were meeting in Cheyenne at 5:30 and with me living an hour away, I still had to make the morning commute.

I set two alarms and seven reminders on my phone to make sure there was no way I missed this day. The first alert was the only one I needed to get me out of bed, though. I was exhausted but eager at the same time.

Putting on my gear that morning brought back memories—memories of being up early for weekend tournaments, sitting on my floor as I pulled my socks up and threaded my belt through the loops of my pants. Polishing my cleats and adjusting my cap. I even considered the notion of sleeping with my bat like I used to do from time to time.

I stopped shaving for a week and a half leading up to the tryout—although I had little to show for it—to try to hide my baby face and “look the part” of a big leaguer. I looked at myself in the mirror and figured it was now or never.

I walked downstairs and poured myself a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios. Only today, I pretended like those Cheerios were Wheaties, “The Breakfast of Champions.”

My mom always talks about renovations she wants done to the house and yard—things like building a deck or adding more hardwood floor. Before I left the house, I told her not to worry, that I'd be back with a contract in hand and a signing bonus in my pocket.

This was my one shot, my 15-minutes of fame (more like embarrassment). I wasn't going to let being cut from my jayvee baseball team and not swinging a bat for more than five years (besides that yellow, plastic wiffleball bat in the backyard with friends on summer evenings) stop me from becoming a Major League Baseball player.

## The Drive

**4:34 a.m.** – I start up my car and head out onto the dark, lonely streets. The streetlights are still flashing and hardly a single car is on the road. I listen to the radio as the deejay voices, “This is after midnight on K99.” The normally dull drive from Fort Collins to Cheyenne is a bit more exciting in anticipation of seeing the sun rise, but unfortunately, I make it to Cheyenne before the sun actually rises. In the 46-mile stretch of highway, I see a mere eight other cars driving north on Interstate-25. Oh yeah, and a fox.

**5:23 a.m.** – I arrive to Pioneer Park only behind Stephon Parker (he must be a morning person). At 5:35 the third person arrives and moments after the cars start piling in.

**5:55 a.m.** – The three team vans are packed and ready to go. We hop in and are off to Casper, a 178-mile road trip along I-25.

**6:10 a.m.** – The ride is pretty quiet. We see a sign that reads, “Casper, 170 miles” and I realize it’s going to be a long drive.

**6:59 a.m.** – We stop for gas in Wheatland and several players go inside the gas station to pick up breakfast. They come out with muffins, breakfast sandwiches and energy drinks. I bet they wish they had the “Breakfast of Champions” like I did.

**7:14 a.m.** – The ride starts to liven up as the team talks about Coach Luke Wetmore’s coffee addiction and they start playing a hunting game, pretending to shoot deer as we pass by open fields and grasslands.

**7:41 a.m.** – At this point, the hunting game is in full swing and I’m pretty sure pitcher Ryan Schwenn has the lead. Josh Boyer fires at a false target and loses two points.

**8:12 a.m.** – The deer hunting game is still going strong and has now expanded from shooting deer only to deer and hawks.

**8:33 a.m.** – We reach the top of a hill and can see the city of Casper out the front windshield. It’s at this point that I realize that my dreams are becoming actuality. I start to think about the scenario and realize this would be one heck of a Hollywood movie: A kid goes from being cut from his jayvee baseball team and being out of the game for five years without any gear to trying out in front of professional scouts and getting signed.

Disney loves these types of feel-good movies. I needed to get them on a flight to Casper immediately so they could document this.

**8:44 a.m.** – We take exit 188B and are moments away from Mike Lansing Field, home of the Rookie-level Casper Ghosts, a minor league affiliate of the Colorado Rockies. I’m surprised to realize that not once during the nearly three-hour drive was the tryout mentioned. That’s all that was consuming my thoughts during the car ride but the players didn’t seem a bit nervous about what was about to take place.

“I think part of it was being tired,” Schwenn said afterward. “Also, I was going out there knowing that I’m the player I am and I’m not going to try to fake that. There’s no need to be nervous; all I can do is go out there and be me.”

Judge added, “I was nervous up until the day before. But then I realized that this is a game I’ve been playing my whole life. I can’t let who is on the field with me change how I approach it.”

Still, I was eager to learn more about the structure of the tryout, but I didn’t dare be the first to bring it up.

### ***The Rookie***

We unloaded the vans and started walking toward the registration tables. My stomach began to turn when Taylor Fallon turned to me and asked if I was excited?

I told him I was, but that I was going to make a fool out of myself.

“Don’t be so sure, haven’t you ever seen *The Rookie*?”

I had seen the movie, which portrays a true story of a former minor league baseball player who has to give up on his dream of playing professionally when an arm injury arises. Twelve years later, he makes a bet with the high school team he coaches that if the team wins districts, he’ll go to a professional tryout.

As I proceeded to the registration table it got me thinking, *Maybe this dream of mine is possible . . .*

### **The Tryout**

Ron gave me the signal that I was checked in and good to go. I approached the field and paused in admiration as I looked out at the diamond. The grass so plush, the dirt perfectly raked. I took my first step onto the field and was drawn back, realizing I was about to play on a minor league baseball field. I set my gear down on the visiting dugout bench and took a couple deep breaths, fully absorbing the moment.

I laced up my cleats and grabbed my glove to start warming up and getting loose. I spent the next 15 minutes or so stretching, lightly throwing and adjusting my uniform to make sure I looked good.

I was interrupted by the voice of one of the scouts.

Quickly, the 56 tryout hopefuls and myself formed a semicircle around him. I made sure to get near the front where I could see and also be seen.

“Welcome to Mike Lansing Field, the baseball stadium of the Casper Ghosts. Today you will have the opportunity to compete in front of us and we will have the opportunity to evaluate you. Before each drill, I want you to yell out the number that was assigned to you at check-in so we know who you are. Let’s have some fun, and good luck.”

**Part 1:** The first station was running the 60-yard dash. As I mentioned before, I haven't always been a slum when it comes to baseball. When I was 11 years old I was the team's leadoff hitter, many games trying to get the game started with a drag bunt. That year I led my team in bunts for hits, triples and was among the team leaders in stolen bases. Since then, however, I have been a hazard on the base paths and running has been a hazard to my health.

I stood in one of the three lines along the left-field foul line of the outfield grass as thoughts raced through my head, desperately trying to remember advice on good form to run faster. I needed it quickly. The line kept moving and I kept thinking but nothing came back to me besides keeping my head down.

I looked up and realized no one was standing in front of me, anymore.

I took a couple steps forward and placed my right foot on the white line, called out my tryout number, "Media 1," and waited for the scout to wave his hat down, signaling *go*. I was in the far right line and looked at who my competition would be. I lucked out, running against two other media members, both older than me and in much worse shape than I was.

The scout's arm lowered down in a brisk motion and I was off, careful not to slip and fall.

I got out to an early lead and never looked back, racing past the finish line to a tune of 7.8 seconds.

A good time? Absolutely not. But hey, I beat both of my competitors so at least I looked kind of fast.

**Part 2:** At this point, we were split up into three groups: pitchers, infielders and outfielders.

I wanted to pitch, but considering I spent the last month working on my hitting, I needed to make sure pitchers were allowed to hit.

"Yeah, we'll let pitchers take BP," Butch Hughes, one of the Rockies scouts said to me.

I lined up in foul territory near the visiting dugout with the rest of the pitchers and we watched the outfielders get critiqued.

They were placed in right field and were given the chance to showcase their fielding and arm strength. One of the scouts would hit three balls, the first a fly ball, the second a roller and the third a ball the fielder had to chase down in the gap. Outfielders were instructed to throw to third base, allowing the scouts to evaluate their throws across the entire field.

The tasks performed by the infielders were similar. The players stood at shortstop and received four groundballs. One was a grounder to the fielder, one was to the fielder's forehand side, another to his backhand and the last a slow roller he had to run in on and throw to first off-balanced.

I then went with the pitchers to warm up in the outfield and off of the visitor's bullpen mound before moving to the Casper bullpen to get clocked and critiqued. We were told beforehand that the scouts would be grading us based off of our speed and off-speed pitches.

*Perfect*, I thought to myself.

I always considered myself a decent pitcher. Not to sound cocky, because I wasn't a star or anything, but pitching was my strength growing up.

The thing was, though, I never threw hard. I was probably the softest-throwing pitcher on all of my teams, but I had the accuracy and pitch location to fool hitters, especially when they brought me in to relieve a hard-throwing starter.

But now that they were telling me they were looking for speed (something I've never had) and off-speed pitches (something I barely learned considering I gave up on the game shortly after curveballs were deemed acceptable for my age), I knew pitching would no longer be my strength.

I stayed positive, though, thinking this would be just another roadblock in the script of my Hollywood movie. Now, not only was I out of the game for five years without any gear, but I also threw two-thirds the speed of the rest of the competition. I was convinced this story would win an Oscar and inspire thousands of youths all across the nation.

My turn to warm up on the visitor's mound had arrived. I don't remember how many pitches I threw but it wasn't many. I figured throwing an additional five or six pitches wouldn't exactly give me an extra 10 mph of velocity or add an additional six inches of break to my curve by the time I relocated to the scouts.

I was ready to move on to the real deal.

I jogged over to the mound (my coach always taught me to hustle and I figured this was an appropriate time to run, showing the scouts I had good work ethic and was eager to begin) and approached the pitching scout. Trying to hide my heavy breathing from running across the field, I introduced myself. He didn't seem too interested in knowing who I was, though. Or maybe he noticed my scrawny 170-pound frame and had already written me off? Either way, he proceeded to tell me to begin throwing.

"Just throw?" I asked. "Throw my fastball or what?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Throw. I'll tell you when to switch it up to your off-speed stuff."

So I did just that: I threw. I threw like I always did, not trying to overpower the pitches but instead focusing on my control and pitch location.

The first pitch was in there for a strike.

*Hey, I thought to myself, I've still got it.*

Pitch Two was also in there and I was feeling pretty good about myself. Maybe this dream of mine wasn't so far-fetched after all.

I continued to throw and continued to be impressed by the fact that I was throwing strikes after pitching off a mound for the first time in a half-decade.

Sure I had played catch with friends since then, but never throwing off an elevated mound or to my full ability.

The scout had me switch to my curveball, where I threw two pitches with poor movement and poor location, before he told me to finish up by throwing two fastballs.

The last two were in there for strikes, and, according to my strike zone, I threw 11 of 15 pitches for strikes.

I shook the scout's hand as he told me, 'Good job,' and I proceeded to the man holding the radar gun.

I don't think he was supposed to tell me how hard I threw, but since I told him I was writing a story about my experience, he cycled back through the gun's readings and looked at me saying, "73."

73 mph?

OK, who cares if that's 20 mph less than what they're looking for. I figured I never threw harder than mid-60s during my playing days and after collecting rust on my arm for the past five years I'd be lucky to make it the full 60-feet, 6-inches from the rubber to home plate.

But 73 mph? Maybe it was purely the adrenaline pumping through my body, but consider my day a success, so far.

**Part 3:** It was time for the area I had prepared for most, but the same area I knew I would have the most trouble with. It doesn't matter how much you practice, either you can hit a 90 mph fastball or you can't. Hitting a baseball is no easy feat and not everyone can do it. I guess that's why the best hitters fail 70 percent of the time.

Each hitter saw around 10 pitches but it really depended on what the scouts were seeing in you and how quickly they wanted you to get out of the cage. Some guys were told to stay in there and swing the bat a few more times, giving the scouts more time to evaluate them.

I wasn't asked to perform an encore, though. I had to settle for 10 pitches.

I walked to home plate more nervous than at any other point of the tryout. This is the area where I envisioned myself getting sawed off on the first pitch and shattering my bat. Or never adjusting to the speed and whiffing on all of my pitches.

*Pffffffft.*

Before I knew it, the first ball came firing out of the pitching machine and sped toward me.

I started to load my hands back, tracked the ball all the way in and pulled the trigger on the bat toward the ball.

*Crack.*

I looked up and was pleasantly surprised to see the ball tailing down the left-field line into the grass. Assuming there would be a shift on me since I'm a left-handed hitter, I figured the drive would be good enough for a double in an actual game.

Not a bad start at all.

It took me several pitches to adjust to the speed, though, as I was late on the second and third pitches, fouling them up into the screen. I was again late on Pitch 4, but I put it in play, grounding out to the shortstop position.

Looking back, this was the time where I needed to step out of the box and take a deep breath. I needed to relax and think about some of the things my coach had been telling me. Things like keeping my hands loose and getting them going early.

Everything went so quick, though. I never stepped foot out of the box. I'm not even sure if I took a breath during the entire sequence. I barely had time to push my helmet up, which was too big on my head, after each pitch so the bill wasn't covering my eyes. I was so tense my knuckles were probably white from gripping the bat so tight.

By Pitch 5 I started to get my timing down, lining the ball to right field for a base hit. I hit another grounder and a foul tip before singling up the middle for my third solid hit.

Pitch 9 was a swing and a miss, which gave me one last chance to put the ball in play. I was convinced to finish on a strong note, but instead grounded out to first base.

Just like pitching, though, I was pleasantly surprised by my performance in the cage, hitting better than I thought I would. But no power means no interest.

## **The Waiting Game**

I talked with Hughes after the tryout about what he saw and what he and the other scouts were looking for.

"A misconception I think a lot of players have is that they will walk out of the tryout and be handed a contract," Hughes said. "It's more of a chance for scouts to see the players, and if they like what they see, get them on the radar and make sure a scout is out there evaluating them."

Hughes also made it clear that the purpose of the tryout wasn't to sign a certain number of players, but instead to see what type of competition is out there.

"It's not that we don't have enough players in the organization," he said. "We're just always looking to upgrade. The things you look for in these tryouts are how fast the young man can run and we look at his arm and we look for power. Those are the tools that we look for."

"You never know where you can find somebody. We have a philosophy of bringing kids in and seeing how they can do. There's a kid right now in Triple-A, his name is (Nick) Bierbrodt, and we signed him out of our tryout during spring training. I expect him to get to the big leagues."

Still, the chances of getting picked up are very slim and it was at this point that I came to full realization and acceptance to the fact that my baseball career was done, for real this time.

I guess there would be no fairytale ending to this story.

## **Back to Reality**

The Grizzlies played the Ghosts that evening in an exhibition game that gave the Cheyenne players an opportunity to compete against professional competition. Once we arrived back to Cheyenne, it was past midnight and I still had the hour drive back to Fort Collins.

I got back on to I-25, this time to make the trip home, but found the drive eerily similar. Again, the sun had set behind the mountains and the streetlights were flashing. There were a total of four other cars visible along I-25 South as I came home, and on the radio the voice of the deejay still rang, "It's after midnight on K99."

I woke up Thursday morning with my legs brutally beaten from the tryout the day before. I walked into my bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror once more, this time without my baseball gear on and the optimism within me.

I shaved away my scruff, ridding myself of the baseball identity I tried to restore back in me, and walked downstairs. There, I grabbed a bowl, spoon, carton of milk and a box of cereal and sat down to enjoy a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios, this time, just plain old Honey Nut Cheerios. No "Breakfast of Champions" today.

I ate my breakfast realizing there would be no big contracts—in a few hours I would be back to my regular job, making regular (more like no) pay. There would be no bus rides across the country. No early morning wake-up calls to button up my jersey for a big game. No signing autographs for eager fans or playing in front of packed stadiums. I would never hear the sweet noise of my metal cleats hitting the cement as I walked up the dugout steps or feel the power in my hands as the barrel of my bat connected with a low-and-inside fastball.

My fairytale ride was over.

Instead, I was left with the chance to check something off of my bucket list that not many others can say they have accomplished. I got back into the game that I had loved so much growing up. I never thought I'd miss it so much after being burned out of it when I left the game. I played in a beautiful stadium and got to watch minor league baseball players practice and play all day. I spent the day playing the game I loved and got to shag flyballs in the outfield as players hit, just like I see before professional games. I was given the chance to be a kid again and was reminded not to give up on my dreams. I wasn't given a contract or signing bonus, but was left with a memory and experience that I'll tell the rest of my life.

I guess there was a fairytale ending to my story after all.

*This was part two of Nic Knows, a weekly series that gives fans a behind-the-scenes look at different aspects of the Cheyenne Grizzlies organization. From the sights and sounds of a game inside the*

*dugout to traveling with the team on a road trip; from the role of the grounds crew to what it takes to try out for the big leagues, fans will feel so close it's like they're actually with the team.*

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