

Professional tryout, game a “life-changing experience” for Grizzly players

CASPER, Wyo.—On Wednesday, Grizzly players got the opportunity to live out life-long dreams.

The full-day event included a morning tryout in front of two Rockies scouts and several team representatives and an evening game against the Rookie-level Casper Ghosts, a minor league affiliate of the Colorado Rockies.

“It was great, you dream about this as a kid,” said pitcher Willie Vizoso. “It was a life-changing experience for me.”

“The whole day was fun,” said outfielder K.C. Judge. “If you don’t get drafted, nobody gets the opportunity to do what we got to do. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I was just happy to be out there. I didn’t really care about the outcome, but just to be out on the field with that caliber of players was awesome.”

The day began at the crack of dawn with the team meeting at Pioneer Park at 5:30 a.m. From there, three vans transported the team north on Interstate-25 177 miles to Mike Lansing Field in Casper.

Upon arriving, the players registered and checked in before proceeding to the field to get warmed up. In all, there were 56 players trying out from Colorado and its surrounding states.

“This is the second year they’ve run the open tryout here in Wyoming,” said Chris Maxwell, assistant general manager of the Ghosts. “We get people from all over who come to this tryout. The odds are long but it’s good for everybody—it gives players a chance to be seen and gives the Rockies a chance to see players that might have been overlooked originally.”

The History:

The tryout and game between the Ghosts and Grizzlies began in 2009, and, due to success, was brought back this summer.

“At the baseball winter meetings in December, the general manager, myself and the director of player personnel sat down and we talked about things for the upcoming year,” Maxwell said. “One of the things we discussed is if we could do an open tryout. Obviously, it’s great for us because it’s good publicity, our name is out there and a lot of people come into town for a few days.”

The Ghosts’ responsibility is to notify the Rocky Mountain region of the tryout through press releases and on their Web site.

“We have people call here and we book them if we believe they’re legitimate prospects and then set them up for coming in,” Maxwell said. “The Rockies bring in coaching staffs for the Ghosts, professional scouts and, today, we had the assistant director of player personnel to evaluate the talent.”

The combination of the tryout and the game is a good opportunity for both sides, with the Ghosts receiving some similar competition before their first game on June 21.

“Being a wood-bat league, it gives us (Ghosts) good competition for a preseason game,” Maxwell said. “It gives us a team to play with a similar age range and it also gives the Grizzlies a chance to judge their competition versus guys that have been drafted. It gives them a chance to see how close they are and what they have to do in order to get to this next level.”

The Tryout:

The players were split up into three groups (pitchers, infielders and outfielders) and the tryout was divided into three sections (running, fielding/pitching and hitting).

“It’s not that we don’t have enough players in the organization,” said Butch Hughes, one of the Rockies scouts on hand. “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.”

Part 1: Each player was timed running the 60-yard dash. They lined up with their right foot on the left-field foul line in the outfield grass and took off when the scout waved his hat down.

Part 2: Outfielders went first, being placed in right-field and 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 right-center gap. Outfielders were instructed to throw to third base, allowing the scouts to see 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 you, one was to your forehand side, another to your backhand and the last a slow roller you had to run in on and throw to first off-balanced,” infielder Taylor Fallon said. “I felt pretty good about how I did; I felt like I was chucking my throws over to first base pretty hard.”

The pitchers were given a chance to warm up and throw pitches on the visitor’s bullpen before moving to the Casper bullpen to get clocked and critiqued. They were told beforehand that what the scouts are looking for is speed and off-speed pitches.

“I felt like I threw well,” reliever Chad Correa said, “but I don’t throw 90 mph or anything, so I’m not sure what their take was. I threw strikes and had good movement, though.”

Part 3: Hitters saw around 10 pitches, depending on what the scouts were seeing and how long they wanted them swinging. The pitches came from a pitching machine.

“Usually at every ballpark, we allow a tryout like this,” Hughes said. “We have six minor league teams and we either have a tryout at spring training, which is usually limited to invitation only, or throughout the year like this. And usually, we sign two or three guys at our tryouts throughout the year. 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 AAA, 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.”

Once the tryout was complete, the team got the afternoon to relax, spending several hours at a local restaurant, Sidelines, and several hours hanging out in the clubhouse or watching the Ghosts take early batting practice.

“It was a great opportunity to get out there and get noticed,” said pitcher Ryan Schwenn. “I enjoyed watching them (Ghosts) practice before the game and see the similarities and differences between how we do things.”

The Game:

The game gave Casper’s Legion seniors a chance to face minor leaguers with the first five batters being from the Legion team. They also played in the field for the first inning. After the first five batters, though, it was purely Grizzlies vs. Ghosts. And while Cheyenne fell 6-1, each player saw action in the game and all saw it as a valuable experience.

“It was definitely an experience I will cherish and be able to look back on someday and say I played against professionals,” Schwenn said.

“I’ll take that any day,” said Stephon Parker, who recorded the Grizzlies’ only RBI. “It was great.”

The game was especially moving for pitcher Willie Vizoso.

Vizoso was brought in to face one batter in the seventh. The one batter happened to be former University of Miami star, David DiNatale.

“He went to Miami and I’m from Miami,” Vizoso said. “I went to all of his games when he played. Me and him had a neat conversation before the game.”

Vizoso struck out DiNatale, leaving him with a lifelong memory.

“I’ll remember that moment forever,” he said. “Somebody that I had seen so much, to actually get to do that and strike him out. It was awesome.”

The Waiting Game:

“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.”

For many, the likelihood of getting a call back is slim, but the opportunity that the tryout presented is getting them on the right track.

“For me, I was able to see what the scouts like and what they are looking for,” Vizoso said. “Right now, unfortunately, I’m not there, but I’m going to keep working at it to hopefully be at that point sometime soon.”

Grizzlies’ head coach Aaron Holley also saw the tryout as a learning experience for his players.

“A lot of our guys are younger so they still have a few years of school ball left,” he said. “It’s good to go out and see what’s expected of you at the next level. It allows you to put in perspective what you’re

playing for or what you might be playing for in the future. It gives them a good grasp of what they need to work on or what they need to do in order to make it to the next level.”

Baseball at altitude:

The Casper Ghosts, then the Casper Rockies, were formed in 2001, and to this day, remain the only current professional sports team in the state of Wyoming.

“We’re the only affiliated team,” Maxwell said. “Minor league baseball fits in perfectly here; it’s great for the state. One of the great things is we’re a Rockies affiliate. We could be, if fate were different, a Yankees affiliate or a Florida Marlins affiliate. But we’re lucky that this is Colorado Rockies territory and we’re a Rockies affiliate and I think that is a big part of our success.

“We have a great thing going here and I think it’s in the spirit of all of us to promote baseball in Wyoming.”

For more on the tryout, look for the second installment of the Nic Knows series, giving fans a behind-the-scenes look at different aspects of the Grizzlies organization, set to be published on Friday, June 25.

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