

Trying for 'one more summer in the sun'

Josh Chetwynd, a 21-year-old graduate of Northwestern University, gives a first-person account of his efforts to realize his dream of playing professional baseball.

By Josh Chetwynd

On May 28, my girlfriend, Jen, and I hopped into a rarely washed 1990 red Plymouth Sundance and left Chicago in search of extending my life as a baseball player.

The dream was simple. After playing four years at Northwestern University, I wanted one more summer in the sun, a chance to play pro ball.

During my four years at Northwestern, I was a backup catcher. I posted a .297 career average and always could attribute my reserve status to the misfortune of having played behind four players who are now in the minor leagues — Tom Dodge (with the Palm Springs Angels), Joe Perona (London Tigers), Brett Wyngarden (Osceola Astros) and Tom Sandt (Waterloo Diamonds).

When I read about the Frontier League, a new independent minor league starting up, I headed for the nearest tryout, eight hours away, in Zanesville, Ohio.

About 50 people came to this two-day tryout for the Zanesville Greys. Most of the players came dressed to impress, either in their college uniform or some T-shirt that proclaimed "Conference Champs" or "All-Star."

I felt no pressure. I knew I had things to fall back on. I was going to graduate from Northwestern in two weeks with a degree in journalism. I had an internship lined up in Washington, D.C.

Another guy, Leo Trace, had been away from the game for a year after playing two seasons at Columbus (Ohio) State Community College. He was all ready to hang up his cleats, when Greys manager Tom Venditelli suggested he try out.

The second day of the tryout was one big intrasquad game. I went 2-for-5 with a stolen base. At the end of the 13-inning scrimmage, I told Jen I did my best.

After a long wait, Venditelli read a list of 13 numbers. My No. 24 was the last one called. Leo's number also was called.

They gave me a contract; all I could think was I'm getting a shot at pro ball. For the 8-hour drive home, I couldn't stop smiling.

Life in Zanesville

Zanesville is in the heart of Muskingum County, 55 miles east of Columbus. The small city of 35,000 is spread through a series of rolling green hills. While youth baseball is very popular in the area, the town had not seen pro ball since the early 1950s.

Venditelli called me just once in the two weeks leading up to the June 21 reporting date. All he said was: "Be ready for competition."

Moments after getting my room key, I met Kenny McNeil, an outfielder drafted at another tryout.

Kenny and I both were from Los Angeles and we quickly broke into conversation. He was from South Central L.A. and, at 24, was our team's oldest player.

The conversation shifted and Kenny dropped the bomb on me. He said the team had signed 30 players, but still had to cut to 22.

My stomach dropped. "I gave up my job in D.C. for another tryout?" I thought. "What if I got cut before the season? I couldn't even say that I played professionally."

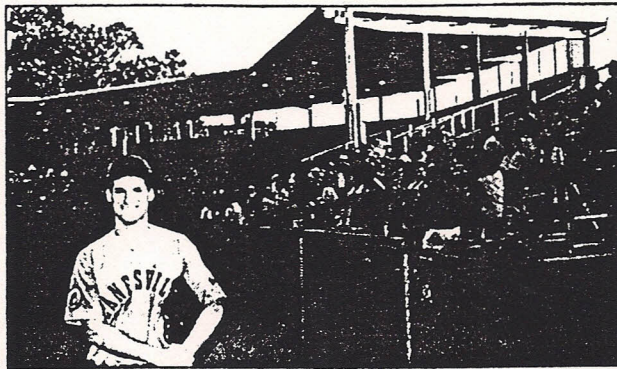
Kenny and I were placed in the home of the Greys' Booster Club president, Dianne Gill. We were joined by two others, pitcher Kevin Smith from Louisiana Tech and third baseman Kyle Shade from Northwestern (La.) State.

Dianne's home was about 10 winding miles from the field. Kenny, Kyle and I bunked in one room, while Dianne gave up her bedroom to Kevin. She slept in the living room with her son, Ryan, 9, and daughter, Janee, 2.

Every day was practically the same during that first week. We would play an intrasquad game in the morning and sometimes take batting practice in the afternoon.

At Northwestern, I had played with a half-dozen players who were drafted and against dozens of future pros, including A's second baseman Brent Gates and Reds catcher Dan Wilson (from the University of Minnesota). By comparison, three or four Greys could have been drafted.

Still, there were only a couple guys who weren't solid ballplayers. Unfortunately for me, one of the best prospects was also a catcher, Sergio Izquierdo, who graduated from St. Thomas (Fla.) University with a degree in criminal justice. He had a cannon for an arm, was a good receiver and decent hitter. Despite our rivalry, Sergio was supportive and friend-



HIS SHOT: For the author, here at the stadium in Chillicothe, Ohio, four years on a college team wasn't enough. He wanted to play pro ball.

ly.

Then came D-Day. In the middle of practice the day before Opening Night, the coaching staff called eight players into the office to tell them their dream was over. I made it, but Kenny and one of our other roommates, Kevin, didn't.

Kenny was hurting after he learned the news. I felt his pain.

The way it is

Venditelli has been in baseball all his life. He coached at Denison (Ohio) University and Columbus State and has scouted for the past 25 years for the Pittsburgh Pirates. He also likes to point out, "I played 10 years of pro ball," which always leads to his second favorite phrase, "That's just the way pro ball is."

He put together a team that went 7-1 in its first eight games. My roommate, Kyle, who was sixth in Division I batting with a .453 average last season, picked up where he left off. He hit well above .400 the first few weeks. The pitching — led by University of Virginia grad Tom Crowley, an All-ACC pick — was solid.

We drew 1,787 fans on Opening Night and most stayed until the end. Tied 1-1 in the eighth inning, Michael McGuire came off the bench to hit a game-winning, two-run homer. The fans went wild and the Greys' front office was quick to capitalize on the hysteria.

Assistant general manager Chris Sabo came down to the dugout and had Mike sign a bat he had broken early in his at-bat before the home run.

Two minutes later, the P.A. announcer exclaimed, "The bat that Mike McGuire chipped just before he hit the first home run in Greys history has been signed and is now on sale at the gift shop for the low, low price of \$10!"

The fans loved the team from the start. For them, having a professional team was a matter of civic pride and they showed every player respect. Although I saw action only twice in the first 10 games, fans asked for my autograph as often as crowd favorite Jim "Big Daddy" Wambach's.

However, the team's early success meant few opportunities for me. I had one at-bat — a walk — the first week. In one of my two

defensive appearances, I was charged with the first catcher's interference in Greys' history.

I sat in the bullpen during games with relievers Don Melroy and Guy DeMutis. Melroy lamented, "I'm probably the only closer in the world who has a 78 mph fastball."

Troubling signs

On Friday, July 16, the Zanesville *Times-Recorder* reported the most tragic sports news of the summer. Two teams in the league — the Tri-State Tomahawks and West Virginia Coal Sox — folded. The teams cited poor attendance and financial difficulties. The league announced that the remaining six teams would have a supplemental draft July 19 for players from the Tomahawks and Coal Sox.

Since our torrid 7-1 start, we had gone 1-3 and the coaching staff seemed nervous.

Sergio had played well and McGuire's hot bat had earned him starts behind the plate as well. I knew I was the odd man out. I got my last shot on Monday, July 19.

Early in a game against the Chillicothe Paints, Sergio was kicked out of the game for arguing a close call. I was beneath the stands at the time, calling my girlfriend on a pay phone.

Then in the sixth inning, our shortstop, Fernando Perez, was ejected for cursing an umpire. The coaches had no choice but to shuffle the lineup and put me in.

I came to bat with one out in the eighth inning and runners on first and second. We were leading 8-7.

I wanted to pop a ball into the gap, but I got the bunt sign. I laid down the sacrifice, moving the runners over.

End of the road

There was no word about roster changes for the next few days and I got my hopes up. We had overcome our short losing streak and were 12-7.

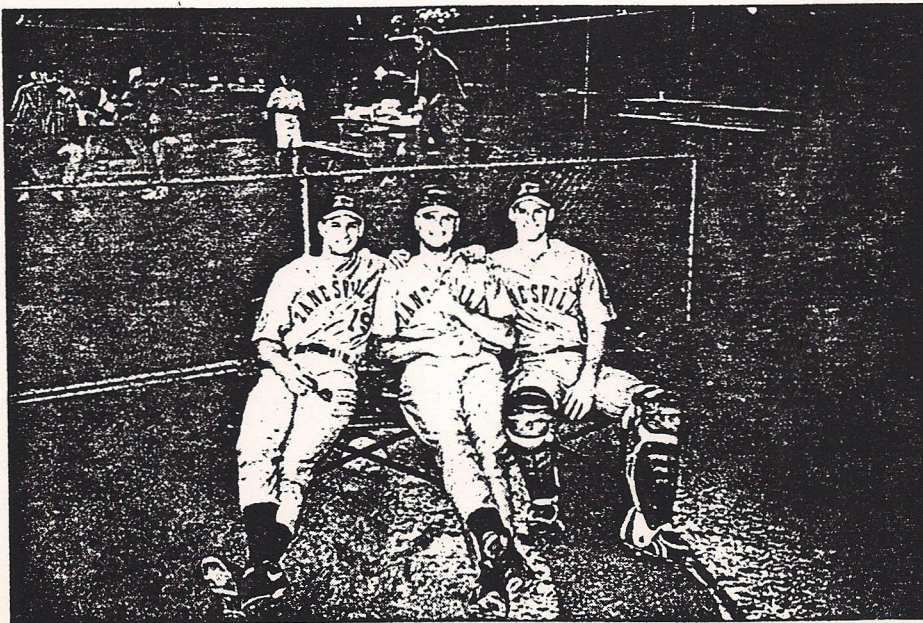
But on July 21, I found out the hard way that my baseball career was over. While signing an autograph before a game, I noticed my name in the scorecard roster had been replaced. No meeting with Venditelli, just a change in the program.

My pro career lasted 19 games. I played in three of them and got two at-bats. I was hurt that I wasn't told of my release personally, but my dad put it in perspective when I told him how I felt.

"Look, son, don't judge this by how far you fell short, but by how far you came," he said. "And anyway, you can always say you played pro ball and that's more than most."

Sound advice. After all, I did get a chance to live the dream.

Josh Chetwynd is spending the rest of the summer relaxing in Los Angeles. He will start a 10-week internship with the *American Bar Association Press* in Chicago on Sept. 13.



THREE FOR RELIEF: Waiting in the bullpen in Chillicothe are, from left, pitchers Guy DeMutis and Don Melroy and catcher Josh Chetwynd. DeMutis and Chetwynd have since been released from the Greys.