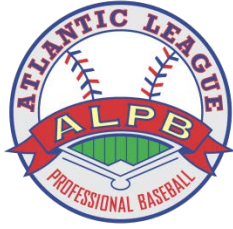


**Independent  
Professional Baseball  
Education**



## Atlantic League

The Atlantic League was founded in 1998 and consists of 8 teams, primarily on the East Coast of the United States. The league is a popular landing spot for former Major League baseball players who are looking to get back to affiliated baseball quickly. Typically, Atlantic League players are a little older and have previous professional playing experience.



## American Association / Can-Am League

The American Association was founded in 2005 and consists of 12 teams in the Midwest and East Coast of the United States. The Association plays an integrated schedule with Can-Am League teams as both league share a commissioner and various front office staff. Typically, the American Association is made up of players with previous professional experience with a handful of rookies on each team.



## Frontier League

The Frontier League was founded in 1993 and consists of 12 teams. It is the longest, continually operational independent league in professional baseball. Most teams in the Frontier League are located in the Midwest of the United States. The Frontier League is viewed as an ideal place to play for younger players with little or no professional experience. Frontier League bylaws state that each team may only have under contract a limited number of experienced players. Because of this, the Frontier League typically sends more players to affiliated baseball than any other independent professional league. The Frontier League also makes a point of signing young, exciting players with bright futures in the game as evidenced by their agreement with the California Winter League to sign players every year during the CWL season.



## United Shore Professional Baseball League

The United Shore Professional Baseball League, or United Shore League for short, was founded in 2016 and currently consists of 4 teams. The league plays all of its games in a single stadium, Jimmy John's Field, in Utica, Michigan. The stadium was built specifically for hosting USPBL games and is a 4,500 seat state-of-the-art facility. The goal of the USPBL is to develop players to eventually move on to other independent leagues or, in some cases, affiliated baseball while giving fans in the greater Detroit area quality family entertainment.



## Pacific Association

The Pacific Association was founded in 2013 and consists of 4 teams, with confirmed plans to add a 5<sup>th</sup> franchise in 2018. All teams are located in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. While the league does sign mostly rookie players, the level of play has kept professional scouts from viewing the league as a true developmental league for players to gain quality professional experience. The Pacific Association schedule is shorter than those of other independent leagues. However, the Pacific Association has proven to be a fun place to play for players and has sent a handful of rookies to affiliated baseball over the years. From a fan experience standpoint, the league is geared more towards entertainment, an example being with former MLB pitcher "Spaceman" Bill Lee played all 9 positions in a single game despite his advanced age.



## Pecos League

The Pecos League was founded in 2010 and consists of 12 teams for 2017. Teams are located primarily in the Southwest, with franchises in Texas and California as well. Most teams in the league are owned by the league itself. While Pecos League players have found themselves being signed by the likes of the Frontier League and other independent baseball leagues, the level of play in the Pecos League is not

nearly as advanced as other professional independent leagues. Therefore, it is not viewed as a good league to sign players from by professional scouts and franchises. In most cases, players who play in the Pecos League find themselves without other options. While there are some financially stable franchises in the league, the majority of the teams have found themselves missing payroll or not being able to fulfill promises related to housing, travel accommodations, and other amenities.



## Thoroughbred League

The Thoroughbred League operates in a single facility in Kentucky. 2017 was their first season, and the league started roughly a week later than scheduled. Additionally, the league concluded three weeks earlier than anticipated due to a lack of funds. Complete stats were not recorded or displayed online for the players in the league, leading to many players being upset that they could not show coaches and scouts from other leagues what they did while playing in the Thoroughbred League. Stats were kept during the early part of the season, however later games display only a final score with no box scores or player stats. Most players were not paid for the last three weeks of the season. The Thoroughbred League has stated that they hope to operate again in 2018.



## The Desert League

The Desert League got off to a rocky start in 2016 with 4 teams. The league has vowed to return in the fall of 2017 despite financial troubles and problems securing lease renewals for fields after missed lease payments and a lack of sponsorship support in communities like Yuma and Somerton after the league did not keep many of its promises to cities, businesses, and players in 2016. The Desert League seems to exist solely as a place for players to be signed to after attending expensive "Desert League" tryouts all over the country in the months leading up to the league. Most players were not paid on time, if they were paid at all, and most were left without housing accommodations and had to come out of pocket for places to stay during the season, with some taking up residence in tents on the fields where teams played. The owner of the league, Luke Powell, has stated that bad luck and false promises from cities, hotels, and sponsors were to blame for the poor playing conditions in 2016 while promising that 2017 will be different.



## 2017 CWL Player Signees

### Major League Baseball



Shao-Pin Ho  
Daniel Hoy

Andrew Alvarez  
Jose Flores

Jarrett Martin  
Jose Flores  
Josh McAdams  
Kyano Cummings

Miami Marlins  
New York Mets

Arizona Diamondbacks (ST)  
Arizona Diamondbacks (ST)

Texas Rangers (ST)  
Texas Rangers (ST)  
Texas Rangers (ST)  
Texas Rangers (ST)

### Frontier League



Blair Beck  
Danny Hoy  
James Ball  
Mike McClellan  
Lucas Hunter  
Adam Falcon  
Peyton Lobdell  
Will Krug  
Joe Webb  
Jose Flores  
Nate Ferrell

Windy City ThunderBolts  
Schaumburg Boomers  
Traverse City Beach Bums  
Schaumburg Boomers  
Traverse City Beach Bums  
So. Illinois Miners  
So. Illinois Miners  
Windy City ThunderBolts  
Evansville Otters  
Florence Freedom  
Lake Erie Crushers

D'Aundray Van Slyke  
Scott Morton  
Brandon Oliver  
Joshua McAdams  
Josh Falbo  
Brandon Maddern  
Tyler Hunt  
Andrew Moralez  
Nick Murphy  
DJ Gee  
Zach Jones  
Nigel Nootbaar  
Joe Mello  
Ryan Rinsky  
Dylan Sprague  
Cody Beck  
Richard England  
Ryan Garvey  
Ozzy Braff  
Bobby San Martin  
Robert Maislin  
Lance Montano  
Nick Berger  
Justin Kovalsky  
Brent Gillespie

Florence Freedom  
Windy City ThunderBolts  
So. Illinois Miners  
Lake Erie Crushers  
Washington Wild Things  
Normal Cornbelters  
Windy City ThunderBolts  
Evansville Otters  
Traverse City Beach Bums  
River City Rascals  
Joliet Slammers  
Normal Cornbelters  
Evansville Otters  
Florence Freedom  
River City Rascals  
Gateway Grizzlies  
Schaumburg Boomers  
Traverse City Beach Bums  
Florence Freedom  
Washington Wild Things  
Lake Erie Crushers  
Evansville Otters  
Washington Wild Things  
Joliet Slammers  
Gateway Grizzlies

## Atlantic League



Kyano Cummings  
Jarrett Martin

So. Maryland Blue Crabs  
York Revolution

## American Association



Matt Silberman  
Casey Upperman

Cleburne Railroaders  
Cleburne Railroaders

Thomas McGuckin  
John Crank  
Lance Van Noy  
Alfonso Reda  
John Menken  
Casey Fletcher  
Dylan Thompson  
Jake Luce  
Quintin Alexander

Texas Airhogs  
Texas Airhogs  
Winnipeg Goldeyes  
Lincoln Saltdogs  
Cleburne Railroaders  
Texas Airhogs  
Sioux Falls Canaries  
Texas Airhogs  
Texas Airhogs

## Can-Am League



CAN-AM LEAGUE  
CANADIAN AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL

Jeff Watkins

Quebec Les Capitales

## Pacific Association



Elijah Briseno  
Matt LoCoco  
Dakota Freese  
Taylor Garkow  
Alex Sawelson

San Rafael Pacifics  
Sonoma Stompers  
San Rafael Pacifics  
Sonoma Stompers  
Sonoma Stompers

## United Shore Professional Baseball League



Thomas Roulis  
John Kraft  
Brent Gillespie  
Tanner Oymaian  
Shane Gonzalez  
Mark Burnside  
Tanner Kiest

Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers  
Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers

Tony Holten  
Kevin Matthews  
Nick Buckner  
Cameron MacKenzie  
Louis Johnson  
Brian Heldman  
Jeremy Scott  
Devin Alexander  
Jordan Pannell  
Myles Richard

Eastside Diamond Hoppers  
Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Birmingham-Bloomfield Beavers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers  
Eastside Diamond Hoppers

## **International Signings**

Joe Wittig  
J.D. Little  
Yusuke Fujiki  
Atsuya Toko

Prague Eagles  
Traiskirchen Grasshoppers  
Vienna Wanderers  
Janossomorja Rascals



# WHAT IS GOING ON WITH THE DESERT LEAGUE?

OCTOBER 22, 2016 INDYBALLISLAND.COM - There have been a lot of questions surrounding the start-up Desert League. Readers of Indy Ball Island have been commenting asking what is going on, but up until now we have received very few answers.

I recently asked owner Luke Powell if he would be willing to address all of the issues that our readers have brought up in previous posts.

Below is the email that I received:

*Kayla,*

*Where do I start? First of all, one of our workers has been fired because he stole money and did not do his job with the host families. We did not have host families. I had to rent 4 apartments and 3 houses for the players. I also have players living at the Howard Johnson hotel, and I have paid all of that. The houses reek of weed and have been trashed so I am sure I will lose deposits, and I may take that out of the player checks I mean, really?*

*I also housed and fed several players during spring training that did not have money. All players have food provided before or after games. We have had 5 players get hurt and go to the hospital and our insurance covered them. We have been current on all payrolls until yesterday. We were short yesterday so everyone got paid roughly half, some got all of their money. I have a wire coming that will be here Monday or Tuesday at the latest and the players will be all paid up. I told all the guys that were dead broke or starving to come see me, and I gave them money to get by on until our wire comes thru on Monday.*

*All the games in Imperial County were cancelled due to fire damage to one field and the city failed to get the other field ready... So I had 21 games cancelled. Those games were made up in Yuma with the 7 inning double headers. I promised the guys 48 games and that is what I intended to do. Imperial county did not return my money, and I had to pay Yuma for the extra games....so basically I had to pay double. All the sponsorships that were sold in Imperial County were returned to the sponsors since we had to cancel the games. We ended up have to play a ton of double headers to make up for that.*

*I also paid for the players to be transported to and from the field for our Mexico games in private taxis. Food was provided in Mexico as well. During the season, several players have come to me broke, and I gave them an advance or gave them a job so they could earn money to survive. We also gave them \$6 all-you-can-eat cards for Golden Corral.*

*Umpires have been terrible. They too were paid upfront in advance ,and they have been late, showed up without a full crew, or failed to show up at all for some games. We have had to reschedule because of that too. We also paid them for 100 dozen baseballs since my Pecos League baseballs were stolen in*

*training camp along with my pa sound equipment. Of the 100 dozen baseballs, we only received 75 but we are going to make it work. I also got a new pa system.*

*Kira Clark, from the Empire League is doing stats. She has them and the league leaders are posted as well as rosters...finally! She is trying her best. All of the stats will be uploaded on our website as well as sports engine. We have them....think about how would we know who the leaders were if we did not have the stats? Next year things will be a lot different...*

*It was the worker who got fired's job to sell sponsorships and get people to the games. In the USA we have sold like 20 tickets all season....people paid for sponsorships and the money came up missing. So no fans and no sponsors means that I am losing money. But that's okay because next year I will handle everything, and we will make a profit....no doubt.*

*All the players for the most part are happy except for the ones playing poorly or the ones that get released. There are a few that are complaining, but that's everywhere right? We have got jobs for guys in affiliated ball, in Venezuela, the Mexican league and with Sioux Falls. People make fun of us for selling guys to Mexico, but those contracts were for 36,000 US dollars and one for 66,000 US dollars...far more than anyone else makes in indy ball...*

*So players are housed, being paid and getting food, and I am doing this out of my own pocket because I got robbed of my attendance and sponsor money. I had to refinance some of my oilfield equipment to make this thing work. I am not mad, not sad, but I will just correct it and make it better and make a profit next year.*

*I just can't believe with all the bullshit in indy league baseball from MRPBL to the Empire to Cummings and the North Coast League of whatever it was to the Ozark Heartland League...that I am getting heat. Our level of play is outstanding compared to Empire and Pecos. We are not going anywhere, and we are only gonna get better. Thanks for giving me a chance to tell my side...*

*As far as Juan working for us and being a felon, it is true. He did his time, and he finished his probation. One of coaches is Lester Douglas, ex-big leaguer and retired probation officer. John Guy is a retired sheriff. They will tell you Juan is a great baseball guy, and yeah he made a few mistakes and paid for them, but he is directly responsible for selling Hoffman to the Phillies and getting the other two guys to Mexico. He has done one hell of a job, and he is working extremely cheap. He even coached 3rd baseball in the Caribbean world series one year...So yeah, I guess you could say we have cops and cons working for us. One of our umpires is a local corrections officer and another one has a record, and they work on the same crew. We are all working together to help baseball players and the league.....*

# **FRONTIER LEAGUE WILL HAVE A LARGE PRESENCE IN THE 2017 CALIFORNIA WINTER LEAGUE SEASON**

November 10, 2016

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. – The California Winter League and the Frontier League will be working together for the third consecutive season this upcoming January. The Midwest-based league has currently committed nine team representatives to act as instructors and coordinators for the showcase league that takes place in Palm Springs, CA during the months of January and February.

The nine representatives are as follows:

- Ron Biga (Windy City ThunderBolts field manager)
- Dan Rohn (Traverse City Beach Bums field manager)
- Dennis Pelfrey (Florence Freedom field manager)
- Cameron Roth (Lake Erie Crushers field manager)
- Boots Day (Evansville Otters bench coach)
- Patrick O’Sullivan (Schaumburg Boomers hitting coach)
- Casey Dill (Southern Illinois Miners)
- Josh Ludy (River City Rascals hitting coach)
- Andrew Cotner (Normal CornBelts pitching coach)

In addition, Frontier League Deputy Commissioner Steve Tahsler is on hand for the entire California Winter League season as a liaison for those clubs not directly represented.

The Frontier League is the longest-running independent professional baseball league in the United States. Since the league’s inception in 1993, 31 players have gone on to play in the major leagues.

Over 50 players from the 2015 California Winter League signed with Frontier League clubs, including All-Star Game MVP Michael Hur (Rockford Aviators), Home Run Derby champion Reggie Lawson (Traverse City Beach Bums), and Rookie of the Year Brandon Tierney (Frontier Greys). Another 47 players from the 2016 California Winter League season signed with Frontier League teams, including Post-Season All-Star Catcher Mike Jurgella (River City Rascals), runner-up for Rookie of the Year Luke Barker (Traverse City Beach Bums), and Ken Frosch of the league champion Evansville Otters. In addition, Matt Pobereyko went from the CWL to the Florence Freedom before being signed by the Arizona Diamondbacks in June.

For more information on the California Winter League or to register for the 2017 season, please contact them at 760-778-4487 or visit them online at [www.californiawinterleague.com](http://www.californiawinterleague.com).

# THE PECOS LEAGUE EXPOSED

DECEMBER 19, 2016 INDYBALLISLAND.COM - The Pecos League is: an independent baseball league with teams in New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas, a show on Fox Sports 1, and about to get exposed.

Even though the league was featured in a six-episode “reality” show earlier this year, you are about to read the REAL stories from the Pecos League. For the last few weeks, I have interviewed over a dozen former players and staff from nine different teams who reached out to me in order to have their voices heard. The stories you are about to read are not being told in an attempt to “shut down the league” but to expose the harsh realities that go on within the Pecos League.

The Pecos League is often called the “Wild West” of professional baseball. Teams play 70 games in 72 days while battling rough conditions on and off the field for little (if any) pay.

The reality is that some players didn’t get paid at all. They actually PAID to play in the Pecos League. “Taxi players” pay the league to put them on a team in hopes that they actually get to play and gain some experience and exposure.

“I signed on as a taxi player with Alpine in 2011 straight out of college. It sucked, but I really had no other offers and knew that I wanted to keep playing” one player explained. “I paid the \$2,200 just to be on the team the whole season. Pretty much the only thing worse than being in the Pecos, is literally having to pay to be in the league.

“I look back on the Pecos and realize how bad things were. I see how the only way the league runs financially is through the taxi players. A lot of times, I had to have my parents or friends send me money.”

Becoming a taxi player is basically a last ditch effort to keep the baseball dream alive. In addition to paying the league a fee, the player must pay for every expense out of his own pocket: food, housing and travel. Even after all of this, taxi players aren’t guaranteed to play.

“We wouldn’t even get to showcase our talents. As taxi players, we spent more time watching and practicing than actually playing in games... When the team left for away games, the taxis stayed where we trained. We went to the gym two times a day, did field work for two to three hours and ran all around the place trying to keep our sanity. On my journey, I was given about six games worth of appearances in a season that lasted from April to August.

“We as taxi players put in a lot of work, effort, and money to try and make a dream a reality. When players didn’t get paid on time or enough, we didn’t feel for them because we never saw a dime. We truly did this for the love of the game.”

It takes a very determined (some might say crazy) player to join a team on the taxi squad in the Pecos League.

But actually getting paid to play isn't so great either. The salary of a non-Taxi squad Pecos League player comes to around \$50 a week, but only if the player is paid in full that week. Players often found their paychecks to be cut short or completely missing. One player who played with the Ruidosos in 2011 went over two weeks without being paid while the team was on the road.

"The GM of the Osos said he would pay us when we got back into town, but our manager disagreed with that and told him that the players needed to be paid first. An hour later, I received a text from the GM. I was the only one out of a group of four players in our room to get the text. The message said that whoever wants to play can meet at a gas station down the road and get fuel to drive their cars two hours to the ballpark.

"I felt like my job was to listen to my manager, so I forwarded him the text... Our manager drove to the gas station to stick up for us. Then he called the league's front office. [The league] told our manager if we don't show up at the ballpark, he would release the whole team, all of the players."

Other players have also experienced issues surrounding their pay, especially towards the end of their playing time in the Pecos. These players ended up with only half of the money they should have been given. "My first professional paycheck was \$55. I only got two of them when I think I was supposed to have gotten four."

Another player noticed that his pay was short half of the money and tried to find out why. "When I asked my coach about it he said 'remember when I told you a few games that you weren't active? That means you didn't get paid for that game.' We had 50 players for, I think, 22 spots, so most of us didn't get paid."

One player who attempted to expose the team and the poor conditions to the town and to the league ended up never being paid and had his stats taken away from him.

All of this could be because of the lack of contracts within the Pecos League. One player claims that he and his teammates never had a physical contract in front of them to sign.

When players were given paychecks, the money often had to go to housing, travel, and food.

Most independent baseball leagues rely on the generosity of host families to take in players and let them live rent free while they play. The concept is great, however, it is hard to find families willing to open their homes to players in the Pecos League. While the teams search for host families, the majority of the players are stuck paying for their own hotel rooms. One player had to pay for his own hotel stay for the entire first half of the season because no host families were available. Another bounced around between hotels, his coach's floor, or crowded in with other players.

Most players who found host families talked very highly of the people they stayed with during the season. These families took them in as adopted sons, cooked for them and gave them a safe place to live without having to worry about anything other than playing baseball. Sadly, everyone's experience wasn't that great.

“After being in an hotel for two to three weeks, I was finally placed with a host dad and mom. There I experienced walking to the ballpark on game days. I had to leave an hour before warm-ups just so I wouldn’t be late. My host family lived two miles from the field, and they would sometimes just leave me at the house without a spare car while they both went to the casino or out of town.”

Some teams did manage to provide their players with housing, but even that was less than ideal. One team rented only two houses for the 50 players they had on their roster, and another team placed players in, what one player called, a “haunted hotel.”

He described what happened when his new team sent him to their “team house.”

“The team didn’t have a host family for me, so they gave me this address to go to. When I arrived, I was kinda scared. It wasn’t a good neighborhood, and there was just this small building that looked run down. Sure enough, it was a run down mental/drug hospital. I walked in there and saw seven guys already there. I just laughed to myself and thought ‘holy shit.’”

Finding housing isn’t the only questionable thing the players have to go through. Traveling to away games can be an adventure too. While a couple of teams have small vans or a bus to transport players, most players have to provide their own transportation and pay for their own gas on road trips.

“Having to pay and provide our own transportation was uncalled for. The roads in New Mexico are not safe or well lit, and to put the lives of others in the hands of young adults is not right.”

Another player described the rough travel conditions they faced: “We stuck five people in cars and drove sometimes ten hours on game day. Imagine sitting in a car going to Alpine, Texas for ten hours then playing a game; Absolutely brutal.”

Sleeping on the road was just as cramped. Players stayed at Motel 6 hotels sometimes with six guys to a room to save the team money. Money is always a factor, and sometimes there just isn’t enough to cover all the players.

“When I was traded to Raton, I pitched 2/3 of an inning and was released that night because they couldn’t afford to put me up in the motel they were staying at.”

What money the players had left had to be spent on food. The teams rarely provided food before or after games for the players. If the players didn’t have host families to help them out with meals, they were forced to put their money together to buy groceries and cook meals for themselves after games. Even then, it was still hard to gather up money for a healthy meal large enough to fully feed all of the guys.

“The only reason I was able to feed myself in Santa Fe was because we had a little boy take a hat around the bleachers to collect money from fans when we hit home runs.”

Complaining did help one team... for a night.

“We complained about the living situation and no meals on the road, so the GM traded one of our starting pitchers to Alpine for two extra rooms and PB&J sandwiches before the game.”

Just like everything else in the Pecos League, most of the facilities and fields are also inadequate for professional baseball. The amenities are worse than normal American high schools.

“We had a shed for a locker room, metal chairs, no showers, and were forced to wash our own uniforms.”

The actual playing fields aren't much better. One team played on a high school field that had gopher holes scattered throughout the outfield. Another team wouldn't allow the players to cut the grass because “they didn't want the grass to die.”

Other fields were so small that players could stand at home plate and throw balls over the outfield wall. Pitchers had to constantly chase down home runs that flew over the small field and landed in the desert behind the fence during batting practice.

The poor conditions and small dimensions of the parks caused problems to players' statistics as well.

“The only reason I have an ERA from there is because two runs scored on a fly ball to first base that went over the lights and dropped in.”

Since every park in the Pecos League is a hitter's park, numbers are extremely inflated and hard to be taken seriously. It makes getting noticed and promoted to a higher league that much harder.

“It's known as a hitters league, so hitters need to put up huge numbers to have a shot. Pitchers can get away with a 4-4.5 ERA and still get promoted. Based on my experience, coaches do try hard and fight for their players, but sometimes it is hard for coaches from other leagues to respect the Pecos League stats. Higher level coaches look down upon the league, and although it gives you an opportunity in pro ball, it is difficult to advance.”

Poor fields aren't the only thing messing up players' statistics. One player saw his ERA skyrocket after a perfect inning. When he looked for the scorekeeper to ask what had happened, he found an 18 year old girl who didn't really know how to keep score and “made a mistake.”

Please note that the following statements represented in bold are denied by the Pecos League commissioner, Andrew Dunn.

The league knows exactly what they are doing to these players. They make promises to players that never come true. They stretch the truth about pay and promotion opportunities. As one player put it, “they like to twist stories to trick kids into going into the league. Many had been given false promises. It was just a mess.”

They try to take advantage of players and their dreams, especially with the taxi squad players. Making players pay to play isn't what “professional” baseball is all about. The league also started taking advantage of players by putting new rules into effect regarding other leagues.

“The league takes advantage of players because they know most guys won’t quit. They have nowhere else to go. They also make them ONLY go to winter or spring leagues run by the Pecos. If they go to the California Winter League, for example, those players cannot be signed. They want all those guys to spend money on THEIR league and nowhere else.”

They also do a good job of stacking some teams with better players and resources. One team was managed by a guy who only had coaching experience in little league.

“He knew nothing on how to coach young and some older men. During spring training, he would leave to watch little league games because he was ‘bored.’ And he was the only one that was a ‘coach’ and supposed to evaluate players.”

Another team’s manager was flat out told not to expect to win more than 13 games all year. Their budget was well below any other teams’ in the league. They had no baseball operations, no marketing and no staff to help the team compete fairly against other teams. The manager compared the Pecos League to the WWE where everything is predetermined in the league’s mind, and if you go against it, you’re gone. The team went on to win 20 games over their “projected” total. The manager and team are both no longer a part of the Pecos League.

Player promotions also seem to be controlled and delayed by the league as they see fit. Players were not traded when they wanted, and some players could guess why.

“Our goal there was to get picked up by better leagues, and rumors circled around that the ownership was dodging calls from teams in other leagues trying to buy our contracts. I was trying to get released so that I could play in the NBC World Series in Wichita, but [the owner] wouldn’t release me from my contract since he had a team playing there too. The team I was going to play with ended up taking his team down, and the next day I had a contract in the Frontier League.”\*

(\*Note: The Pecos League commissioner, Andrew Dunn, has said that all of these statements printed in bold “are outright false.”)

Most of the players agreed that the competition level isn’t too horrible.

“The level of play was definitely better than most people think. A lot of people think that the competition is poor, but it looks that way because of the league and how they carry themselves.”

However, there are guys who obviously have no business being there. As one player explained, “it’s hard to get people to play for \$50 a week while providing their own pants, bats, transportation, and sometimes housing.”

Despite everything: the poor pay, the cost of living, traveling and food, the terrible fields and the unprofessional ownership, there is a silver lining. The players get to play baseball and have a chance to hold onto their dreams just a little while longer. 90% of the players I talked to did find something positive to say about their time in the Pecos League.



One word heard throughout the reality show and throughout my interviews is “brotherhood.” These players became a band of brothers; all playing and fighting for the same goal. To play in the Pecos League, you must truly love the game. They shared each other’s struggles and bonded in ways that others will never understand. Friendships were formed and memories were made that will last a life time.

The players also grew to love the fans as much as the fans loved them. Cities adopted these guys and made the experience worth it. They helped them out when needed and were always there for moral support.

The Pecos League isn’t for everyone, but a player can learn a lot about themselves as a ballplayer and a person.

“Guys just have to look at it as an opportunity. Just a pit stop along the journey. Put up numbers, meet and greet everyone that you can, build up friendships with players and coaches there, and eventually attempt to move up. The Pecos was definitely humbling but made me into a stronger person.”

# THE ROOKIE EXPERIENCE – PECOS VS. FRONTIER

DECEMBER 10, 2014 INDYBALLISLAND.COM - With the recent partnership between the California Winter League and the Frontier League, rookies are getting excited for their shot at a Frontier League roster spot. But is it a realistic goal for a rookie, or are they better off trying out for the often dreaded Pecos League?

While the Frontier League has nice stadiums, thousands of fans and \$600 a month, the Pecos League has fields that are worse than some high schools, a couple hundred fans and \$50 a week. The Frontier League offers opportunities to get noticed by MLB organizations, and the Pecos League offers opportunities to get noticed by other independent organizations.

The Frontier League looks like the clear winner to a rookie, but is it the right move? If you're a great rookie and recent college grad that is already on the radar of indy ball teams, the Frontier League can be a great move. However, baseball is a game of numbers. The Frontier League has a rule in place that each roster must carry 11 rookies. The only problem with that is just how rookies are classified. Rookies can be classified as both R1s and R2s. The Frontier League eligibility rules explain that:

"The Rookie classification will be split into two sub-classifications, Rookie 1 and Rookie 2. The Rookie 1 sub-classification will be for players who made their professional debut in the current season and therefore have no prior professional experience. The Rookie 2 sub-classification will be for players who held the Rookie 1 sub-classification in the previous year in the Frontier League or began their professional career during the 2014 season."

This could make it difficult for a true rookie (R1) to earn his spot on a Frontier roster. And what if you're a true rookie just trying to make it? The Pecos League may be the answer. Their website states that:

The Pecos League is an entry-level league and represents a rookie's best opportunity to get started in professional baseball. Experience has shown that players who sign with higher independent leagues as rookies have a very high probability of being released. An undrafted player with no professional experience will have a much better chance of getting a successful start in professional baseball with the Pecos League than with any other league."

The only catch? Any player that has played in a developmental/showcase league is ineligible to sign unless they also attend the Pecos Spring League.

So is playing in the Pecos League for \$50 a week in rough conditions really the right thing to do for a rookie or should they aim higher and try to stick with a Frontier League team?

I have interviewed true rookies from the Pecos League as well as the Frontier League to get an idea of what life was like for them during their rookie seasons.

## **Playing in the Pecos**

Each player interviewed had the same general consensus about playing in the Pecos League... it sucks. There's really no way to sugar coat rough conditions, minimal pay and relatively poor competition. One player, who was persuaded by his pitching coach to join the Pecos League, described the living and travel arrangements with the Taos Blizzards:

"The owner of our team rented a house and an apartment in Las Vegas, NM for us to use when we weren't on the road. We jammed 50 guys into these two places. Guys were sleeping on air mattresses on the floors with five to seven guys to a room... We didn't have a bus or vans. We stuck five people in cars and drove sometimes 10 hours on game day. When we were on the road, we stuck six guys in each room to save money."

In addition, the fields in the league are in terrible condition. The Blizzards even played two games at Taos High School where there were gopher holes in the outfield.

He went on to talk about his overall experience in the league:

"You don't get a fair shot at moving up at all. The only games scouts come to are the All-Star game and the playoffs... The competition was horrible. Most of the players wouldn't make the D3 college team I played for, and to top it all off, when I got paid, I noticed I was short half of the money."

Another player, who played for both Taos and the Bisbee Blue, described the same poor living conditions. With Bisbee, he wasn't sure where he would be sleeping. He went from a haunted hotel, his coach's floor, a host family that took in eight players at once, and finally a place on his own with five other players.

On top of all that, the players were forced to pay for their own food and sometimes the travel.

Even with everything that happened, this player had a better overall experience. "Despite all the bad conditions, bad umpiring, and bad mascots, we found Bisbee to be our home. We became friendly with some of the locals and embraced the way they lived. When kids asked for autographs, it was an amazing feeling."

But, unlike the first player, he felt as if they do get a fair look in the league, and that the coaches try hard to fight for their players. However even though he made the All-Star team and put up very good numbers, he was never promoted.

As stated above, the Pecos League does not allow players to sign if they have played previously in an instructional league, which is one rule that this player does not agree with.

"[The rule] isn't fair in my opinion because if we really want what's best for each player, the California Winter League is one of the most heavily scouted winter leagues and that hurts a player's future if he can't decide to attend the tryout or not... It's almost a risk if a player is on the edge of getting signed to the Frontier but doesn't make it – then they can't even attend the rookie based Pecos League? Doesn't seem fair.

“I always think players should strive for higher leagues and fall back on the lower ones. If a player is cut from a higher league, there is a good shot a Pecos League team will see their position and, if there is a need, they have a good shot at being signed, especially coming from higher leagues.”

These are only two stories from two different teams. Keep in mind, there ARE success stories from the Pecos League. They just so happen to be few and far between.

According to the Official Pecos League website, from the beginning of the 2014 season (May 12) to now, there have been 30 players “promoted” from the Pecos League to higher organizations. This includes four to MLB organizations; However, two of those were signed after the season, and one never played with the organization that signed him.

Out of the 24 total players who were signed during the season and did see playing time with their new teams, half were released and did not finish the season with that organization.

### **Frontier League Rookies**

Both players interviewed from the Pecos League had an experience with the Frontier League as well. The first player was invited to tryout for the Gateway Grizzlies and the Frontier Greys. Although he was not signed in the end, he raved about his experience before and after the tryout.

The second player tried out with the Rockford Aviators and was invited to the league-wide tryout a week later. He was there along with 400 other players. Each team was required to draft two players, but they were only guaranteed spring training invites, not a spot on the roster. The one problem the player had mentioned about the tryout was the live hitting. All players start with a 1-1 count against them. This speeds up the tryouts but doesn't actually give the players a full at-bat to show their experience. He was also not signed, but has no hard feelings towards the Frontier League.

The league-wide tryout does produce some talent. In all, the 2014 tryout helped sixteen true rookies sign with a team. Out of those sixteen, nine players went on to play with a team during the regular season, and one was signed by the Diamondbacks before playing a game in the Frontier.

So, what happens if you are a rookie that does land a roster spot in the Frontier League? What is the rookie experience like?

Despite putting up great numbers throughout college and even leading division II in home runs and RBIs his senior year, Connor Lewis was overlooked in the MLB draft last summer. After the disappointment, he went to an open tryout for the Kansas City Royals. During the tryout, he received a call from Washington Wild Things manager, Bart Zeller. When the tryout was over, he also received a call from the manager for the Florence Freedom.

After going over the pros and cons, Lewis decided to sign with the Wild Things in the Frontier League. A week later, he showed up in Washington, PA.

“I became acclimated to the environment and met the team, knowing I was a rookie at the bottom of the totem pole. It was cool looking around the locker room at all the different players who got drafted and ended up playing independent baseball. It was a great feeling knowing I was finally a professional, even if I was only making \$600 a month. That was more than I have ever made playing a game that I loved.”

Lewis wasted no time in showing his abilities. He got his first hit in only his second professional at-bat. The next night, he came in to pinch-hit with the team down a run and a man on second. He swung at the second pitch, sending it over the right field wall for his first professional home run and walk-off hit.

For the rest of his time in Washington, he was only given spot starts. During a long road trip that started in Southern Illinois, he was called into the manager’s office and given the news, he had been released.

“They told me that I have been released and that I needed to clean out my locker because I couldn’t participate with the team any longer. They were over salary and needed to cut some expenses. I didn’t know why it was me because I was only an R1 and made the minimum pay. How would cutting me make such a drastic change?”

Lewis was also asked if he wanted to stay with the team for the remainder of the road trip, but he chose to pay his own way back to Washington.

“I couldn’t stand traveling with the team and not even being allowed to cheer them on from the dugout. I jumped on a greyhound the next morning and spent 18 hours traveling all day to Pittsburgh, where I caught a ride back to Washington. That was the longest trip of my life, not knowing anyone and having a lot of time to think about what I was going to do next.”

Lewis is currently finishing up his degree and working to get back into playing shape again. He is open to returning to the Frontier League if he cannot land with an affiliated team, but stated that he would never go to somewhere such as the Pecos League due to the low pay, costs involved, and distance from home.

Like Lewis, Stewart Ijames’ journey to the Frontier League started because of the MLB Draft. The standout from the University of Louisville was drafted two times (once after high school and once after his junior year) but ultimately decided to finish college first. However after his senior year, he was not selected in the draft. He landed in Washington in the summer of 2013 as a rookie with no professional experience.

Ijames became a breakout star in Washington, playing in 90 of 96 games and earning a spot on the mid-season All-Star team. He found his place as a rookie in the Frontier League and enjoyed his team, his host family, and the fans in Washington. He gladly returned to the Wild Things for the 2014 season where he was once again named to the All-Star team and participated in the Home Run Derby.

Halfway through the season, he was signed by the Arizona Diamondbacks. Just then, he realized how much his time in Washington and in the Frontier League meant to him. “It didn’t hit home until I was

standing for the national anthem in my uniform [for the last time.] I can't express what this baseball team means to me. I'm walking away from family."

He went on to play for the Arizona Diamondbacks rookie affiliate in Arizona and in Missoula, as well as helping the Class A Hillsboro Hops win the championship. He is currently playing for the Leones in the Colombian Professional Baseball League for winter ball and was named to their mid-season All-Star team as well as the Home Run Derby.

### **Best (and Worst) of Both Worlds**

I did interview one player who used his time in the Pecos League to propel him to a spot in the Frontier League. After college, he landed a spot with the Santa Fe Fuego and does credit the Pecos League for helping him get signed to the Frontier.

"The numbers I put up in Santa Fe made it really easy to talk to teams just because I can show them 'this is what I did in 67 games.'"

Being a rookie didn't bother him in either league. However, it was easier in the Pecos since the majority of the team are rookies. In the Frontier League, rookies are way more expendable than veterans, so it becomes a bit nerve racking if you aren't performing well.

"The hardest part of sticking with the Frontier League was being transplanted into a group of guys that had been playing together for an extended period of time and expecting replicated numbers of what I did in Santa Fe... It just goes to show you that if it's a battle between me with a Pecos background or a guy with an affiliated background, the Pecos guy is going home."

It was easy for him to compare the Pecos with the Frontier League. There are glaring differences between the two, but both did have their bright spots.

The Frontier League is way ahead in professionalism (better conditions, transportation, food, pay, stadiums and crowds), but fan interaction and the bond between players was stronger in the Pecos League.

"In the Pecos League, there are no clubhouses, you wash your own uniforms, drive yourself on road trips, and there's a very wide strike zone... The only reason I was able to feed myself in Santa Fe was because we had a little boy take a hat around the bleachers and people put money in it when we hit home runs. We were very close with our fan base in Santa Fe. The best thing about the Pecos was that everyone was there because of their love of baseball, which made it a brotherhood. The city of Santa Fe adopted us as their own, and I'm grateful for that part. The Frontier League obviously had more talent as a whole, but there was a barrier between us and the fans."

After batting .194 in only nine games, he was released from his team in the Frontier League and did not return to the Pecos League.

Playing the in the Pecos League or attempting to play in the Frontier League is big decision for a rookie. The Pecos League isn't for everyone, and as with everything, a promotion and a better life isn't promised.

Stay tuned for my next article that shows what life is REALLY like in the Pecos League with stories straight from the players who experienced it.