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# PROGRAMS & EVENTS

## Rookie Career Development

### Learning about life in the big leagues

The Players Association and Major League Baseball each January bring together several of the clubs' top prospects to take part in the Rookie Career Development Program, a private, four-day gathering in which the players get to know each other and learn about life in the big leagues.

Through lively skits, lectures, question-and-answer sessions and discussion group breakouts, the players are schooled on a variety of the issues they will likely face as they begin building their careers in Major League Baseball.

"Because I spent some time in the Majors, the situations that were put in front of me at the Rookie Career Development Program weren't as abstract," said Ryan Zimmerman, who was the fourth overall draft pick in '05 and made his Major League debut with the Nationals in September. "I had already seen some of the things presented to us during my month with the Nationals. I had the opportunity to watch some of the veteran players on my team handle some of the situations that were discussed, so I had a basis for comparison. I thought the program was very good."

Andre Ethier, a top Dodgers prospect who was the Double-A Texas League's Player of the Year, was reluctant to attend at first because he was training hard and the program was scheduled just before his wedding. But he came away convinced.

"The Rookie Development Program was great," Ethier said. "Not only did I meet some of my fellow prospects with the Dodgers, but I got to spend some time with some of the rising young stars on all of the Major League clubs. The program gives us a bit of an advantage because it provides a lot of information about what our futures might entail as Major Leaguers. It was a lot to take in, but it was a great opportunity for all of us."

Josh Barfield, a second baseman with the Padres and son of former Major Leaguer Jesse Barfield, benefited from the program a year earlier.



Josh Barfield answers questions during a 2005 Q&A session. (MLBPA)

"I came into the program thinking it would be a little boring, but I was pleasantly surprised," Barfield said. "Everything is first-class. They give us a lot of information in a short time, but they also do it in a way that's not boring. They get everyone involved, which makes it better."

Barfield, who was the Padres' fourth-round draft pick in 2001, was also impressed with the program's level of depth and candor when it comes to difficult issues facing players.

"They discussed topics that are out there but aren't talked about very much," he said. "I came out with several pages of notes. I learned a lot of things I didn't know about in the media sessions. The money management session gave me a lot to think about, too."

The Class of '06, as usual, included a "who's who" of upcoming prospects. In addition to Zimmerman and Ethier, there were rising stars like Stephen Drew

### Rookie Career Development Program



#### Freshman diaries: MLB rookies speak

Several promising rookies, as well as others involved in the 2006 Major League Baseball Rookie Career Development Program were interviewed.

- [Watch all the interviews >](#)
- [2006 Rookie Career Development Recap Show >](#)

(Diamondbacks), Jeff Francoeur (Braves), Craig Hansen (Red Sox), Jeremy Hermida (Marlins), Jered Weaver (Angels), Francisco Liriano (Twins), Lastings Milledge (Mets), Tim Stauffer (Padres) and Yuniesky Betancourt (Mariners).

Among the many notable prospects attending the Class of 2005 along with Barfield were Scott Kazmir (Devil Rays), Russ Adams (Blue Jays), Mike Hinckley (Nationals), Hanley Ramirez (Red Sox), Huston Street (A's), J.D. Durbin (Twins) and Curtis Granderson (Tigers).

The Class of '04 included such bright young prospects as Bobby Crosby (A's), Gavin Floyd (Phillies), Zack Greinke (Royals), Jeremy Guthrie (Indians), Scott Hairston (Diamondbacks), Edwin Jackson (Devil Rays), and B.J. Upton (Devil Rays).

"It's a great thing for all of the rookies," said Delmon Young, the first overall pick in the June 2003 draft and the younger brother of Dmitri Young. "It gives us an understanding of the types of issues we're going to encounter in our careers."

"There are 90 prospects in here and we're all trying to learn how to get around in the big leagues -- if we get there one day," said Rickie Weeks, the second overall pick (Brewers) in the 2003 draft. "This experience at the Rookie Development program -- all the speakers and the seminars -- will help us get there and stay there."

General managers select the players each fall based on club projections that each player will experience his first significant amount of service time in the Majors the following season. The agenda includes sessions on working with the media, financial planning, financial responsibility, alcohol, tobacco and drugs and umpires. There's also an extended program for Latino players, which introduces additional issues such as immigration law and adapting to a new culture.

The program, which has been growing and developing since 1991, is a successful forerunner for a number of programs now jointly operated by the Players Association and MLB. Rookie Development is coordinated by Gene Orza, the MLBPA's Chief Operating Officer, and Kevin Hallinan, MLB's Senior Vice President of Security.

"Our experience suggests that players are better served if they have advance notice and a fuller understanding of the changes that occur when players reach this level of play," Orza said. "We respect the players' rights as adults to make their own decisions and we don't tell them how to live their lives. We simply present them with the issues, some in the form of lectures, others in the form of theater and others in the form of small discussion groups."

It takes dozens of staff members, consultants and other specialists to put together the information-packed gathering in Northern Virginia each January.

Perhaps the lecturers who have the most impact on the young players are the current players who address them on the first morning. Veteran catcher Mike DiFelice shared some of his experiences with the Class of '06. A session featuring a candid discussion about the use of drugs and alcohol is conducted with medical consultants from the MLBPA and MLB. Jon Birger of *MONEY Magazine* provided guidance on financial planning.

The sessions that players often enjoy most are the skits that are used to start discussion on some of the issues and obstacles players are likely to encounter during their careers. The past three years those skits have been performed by Second City Creative, the consulting and training division of the renowned, Chicago-based improvisational comedy troupe.

The resource players in the '05 program included Bobby Bonilla, Dave Gallagher, Vance Law, Jim Poole, Jeff Reboulet, Steve Rogers, Bob Tewksbury and Dave Valle.

Players are asked to actively take part in some of the skits, which are stopped for impromptu Q&A sessions at appropriate junctures.

"Watching and participating in the skits with Second City was very helpful," said Hinckley, who demonstrated some acting skills to go along with his pitching ability. "They put a lot of different scenarios in front of us which made us consider how we'd react in similar situations. I had figured it would be more of a seminar where people would lecture us and didn't realize we'd be passing around the microphone and role-playing on stage."

A key to the Rookie Development Program has been



the resource players -- former Major Leaguers who return each year to provide some personal insight. The rookies are placed in smaller groups, led by a resource player, for private breakout sessions on some of the most important and sensitive topics.

Mike Hinckley acts in a 2005 skit with resource player Jeff Reboulet. (MLBPA)

The Rookie Development Program is entirely bilingual with U.N.-style headphones available so that Spanish-speaking players can listen to real-time translations of each seminar.

As if the program's agenda isn't full enough, the players and support staff all pack into buses for a trip to Washington, D.C., on the first night.

The tour sometimes includes the White House. In 1999, President Clinton spent 30 minutes talking with the players. Following the Capitol tour in '06 dinner was served across the street at the Cannon Caucus Room, the site of the Watergate hearings. The featured after-dinner speaker was U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-III.).

In the decade-plus since its inception, the Rookie Career Development Program has become a solid foundation from which the Major League careers of many of today's players have been launched. Its list of previous attendees reads like a "who's who" of today's young stars.

"Bottom line, new players are being targeted in a positive way by people who want to see them grow and prosper," said Hallinan. "Players are better prepared than ever before to deal with the challenges of being a professional athlete."

While the Rookie Career Development Program can't take full credit for the exceptional talent and character that is typical of so many of today's Major Leaguers, it can certainly claim that it's played a significant role in trying to get them off to a good start.



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