

“Y’ALL-STAR WEEK” IS CHEEKY GOOD FUN. IT’S ALSO EVERYTHING THAT REALLY MATTERS ABOUT SPORTS.

We tell ourselves that sports teaches valuable lessons. But what does that actually mean? As the Florence Freedom prepare to host the Frontier League’s Y’All-Star game, author Brad King explores those questions with the independent league baseball players.

By **Brad King** - July 8, 2015

I arrived at the UC Health Stadium on June 5 at 1:30 in the afternoon, four-and-a-half hours before the Florence Freedom would go on to beat the Traverse City Beach Bums in a Frontier League baseball game.



UC Health Stadium is quite five hours before the game, but the Florence Freedom still run through drills at a leisurely pace.

PHOTO BY REBECCA KING

There wasn’t much activity when I arrived at the park. Not yet. I walked down the stairs of the one-tiered stadium and stood behind the third base dugout so that I could watch the catchers warm up. None of the four looked up. They were engrossed in their own game, one they’d devised to pass the tedium of preparation. One at a time, each catcher crouched down behind a milk crate. Another player would toss a ball. The goal: knock down as many balls as possible into the crate, simulating the movement a catcher needs to make during a game.



Competition is at the root of so many of these relationships. Even in warmups, the catchers were competing to see who could knock down the most balls into the milk crate.

PHOTO BY REBECCA KING

One of the catchers duffed a ball. The three others howled in delight. "That was bad," yells Isaac Wenrich, a 26-year old catcher and the largest of the bunch.

Small pods of other players were scattered across the field. Two batters hitting off the tee behind home plate. Another trio in the batting cage. A handful of players taking ground balls in the infield. A group of outfielders taking fly balls. Everywhere you looked, there were small groups. Working.

That's what brought me here. These small groups. Long ago I stood on a field just like this, just like millions of boys and girls. But I've never really been able to explain what made it so special and why I still care about those memories today. And I know it's special because we speak about the importance of sports. We tell ourselves that it teaches valuable lessons. We are *sure* that it matters.

Yet we rarely talk about why.

I have long been fascinated by that question, and baseball has always felt like the perfect sport in which to find the answer. The game is filled with down time punctuated by lightning-fast action. To be great, players must find a way both to engage their minds during those long, slow moments and to prepare their bodies for that singular moment of action. And so the game is filled with a mix of conversation, concentration, and camaraderie.



If you spend time around baseball, you'll see side conversations happening everywhere. All the time.

PHOTO BY REBECCA KING

But there's something more to why the game matters, and it comes from the relationships that have grown out of those small groups I see scattered across the field.

That is why I am here.

GARRETT VAIL

Garrett Vail is a 25-year old catcher who grew up just outside of Temple, Texas. He learned the game from his father, who himself grew up hard. His father left home at sixteen. When he had his own family, he was determined to make sure his three boys would have it easier than he had. So he built a baseball complex in the family's front yard, became a coach, and used the game to teach his three sons about the game, and about life.

"I was just understanding the reasons why [my dad] pushed me like he did. He was trying to be the best dad he could be, provide the best family life that he could, and make sure I push towards my goals. He had to figure that out on his own. He was just making sure he knew that I was there. Whether it was tough love, or any of that, he was always there.

"Baseball's like the perfect sport because you have to deal with failure. You can't get big-headed when things are going great. It will shoot you right back down. You've got to learn. It's probably the closest game to life that you could ever play."

Before you can understand where the *here* is that I came, you need to understand the Frontier League. It's professional baseball, but it's not associated with any major league organization.

The league was formed in 1993 with a singular mission: bring professional baseball to places that would never have major league teams. Since its formation, the Frontier League has grown from a eight teams in West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky into a two-division, 12-team league with organizations in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Missouri.

A few of the original teams faded out of existence, replaced by those with larger markets or more financial security. Its schedule expanded from 66 games per year to 96, including a four-team playoff.

The season begins each May and runs through September. Most games are crammed into the three months in between. In July the Freedom will have only three days off. When the team does have a game, players begin arriving around 11 in the morning, eight hours before the first pitch.

The reward for that work is underwhelming.

On a good night, the stadium holds 5,000 fans. Those are rare nights. This year the Freedom's average attendance is just a smidge more than 1,800 people, down nearly 400 from last year and 500 off the Frontier League's average.



Baseball is a game that requires constant cooperation. You can find ways to play alone, but it's just so much easier when you have someone to tee up your ball.

PHOTO BY REBECCA KING

On top of that, the players barely scratch out a living. The league minimum is \$600 per month, with top players maxed out at \$1,600. To help make ends meet, most players live with host families, and each of them receives a meal per diem.

So the *here* where I have come is one of the last stops in professional baseball. These players aren't here because they want to be. They're here because they *need* to be. There are some deep-seated reasons that compel them to stay when everything around them is telling them to leave.

but he'll return to the Division III Lakeland University baseball team for his sophomore season. His father had been a football player most of his life, but Jared took to baseball. After his parents split and his mother dropped out of his life, his dad decided to learn the game and become his coach.

"I don't think he'd outright say [he was teaching me about life]. If I bugged him about it, I could probably get it out of him. But I don't think he'd outright say it. I think he was trying to prepare me for the future. That's one thing he always taught me: Don't sweat the small stuff. Don't worry about the little things in your life. Think about big picture. Think about down the road. Live now, but prepare for the future."

From the moment players arrive in the Frontier League, they are locked in a battle not only against some of the best players in the country who, for whatever reason, never latched on with a major league club, but also Father Time. Major League Baseball carries no arbitrary age limit, but the Frontier League is geared towards youth.

Teams can carry no more than 24 players, and 11 of those must either be first or second year players. The remaining 11-to-13 players can have unlimited experience, but there's a hook: only one can be older than 27, and none can be older than 30.

TAYLOR OLDHAM

Taylor Oldham is a 26-year old third basemen with the Freedom. He grew up near Orlando where he was homeschooled. His father taught him the game, and catch in the backyard became his physical education credit. His father never pushed him to play even when it became clear that he was better than many of the kids around him. Taylor has four sisters, but they had a different relationship with sports. "They got to do whatever they wanted as long as they were happy," he laughed. He's starting his fifth year in independent baseball.

"I would love to [stay in baseball]. I think maybe, but at the same time, part of me wants to get as far away from it as I can. [laughs] But I think it would be too hard for me not to want to keep playing if I just [laughs] stayed in it somehow."

"It's just my identity. It's part of me. It's just literally what you do every day. Every day that we come out here and take batting practice, take ground balls, it's kind of nice. 'Oh, I got paid to do that today.'

"It's just such a passionate love, an identity. It's just what I am."

Getting noticed in the independent leagues is hard. The kind of hard that forces you to take a deep breath, and ask if you can keep moving forward. There are no big crowds pushing you. There's no logic that says keep going. Whatever drives you has to come someplace inside.

Even the league's marketing faces that reality. The Freedom are hosting this year's All-Star game, which the team dubbed "Y'All-Star Week" playing off the phrase made popular by the town's water tower, itself the cheapest solution to the original "Florence Mall" phrase that ran afoul of advertising laws.

The Y'All-Star Week will showcase the best players the league has to offer, and then connect them with the greater Cincinnati community. Festivities open on Monday, July 11 when the Freedom take on

northern Kentucky business leaders, and finally the Frontier League derby. The Y'All-Star game happens on Wednesday, July 13.

It's a week packed with activities that should be enough to entice big crowds. But it might not be, and "Y'All-Star" was born. Everyone who has said the phrase to me has done so with an eye roll and a shrug. But not one of them has apologized for it.

DENNIS PELFREY

Dennis Pelfrey is the 39-year old manager for the Freedom. Like so many people who find themselves in the independent leagues, his path here was hardly straight. He'd kicked around baseball after his playing days were over. He'd worked as a hitting instructor for the Gary Southshore RailCats, a team in the now-defunct Northern League. He eventually settled into a high school coaching position at South Grand Prairie in Texas, where he taught for nine years. He took over as the manager in 2015.

"It never really clicked for me until probably my third or fourth year of playing pro ball that what [my dad] did for me was fantastic and great. Just throwing the ball hard at me, making me catch them. If I get hit, I get hit. When I'm hitting, he's bringing it in there. I've got to be able to hit that if I want to play in the big leagues. I remember being very frustrated as a kid. I wouldn't want to go play with my dad because he would always dominate me. Now that I look back upon it, that helped me become a good player.

"I'm not very emotional. The game is not emotional, but we make it emotional. That's what causes that roller coaster of production. Just progress every day whether you have a good day or bad day. My dad was exactly the same. (There were) no heart-to-hearts. (There were) no birds and the bees. It is what it is, and you either succeed or fail. One of the two."

There's something alluring about watching a team that is made of "near-misses" and "almosts" who are working for one more day in the sun. That fits so well into the mythology we carry about sports: We played for the love of the game.

What's so interesting is that the love doesn't come *because* of the game. It comes *through* the game. The love comes from the people who used the game to teach more than just catching ground balls and slapping singles. And so our love for the game becomes so deeply intertwined with our love for the people who taught us that we can't help but lose sight of those connections even as we cling to the notion that *sports matter*.



Florence Freedom manager Dennis Pelfrey: "You can go to any baseball field and understand, and be a part of something with some people who have the same mentality towards that game. That's what makes [baseball] the most special."

PHOTO BY REBECCA KING

Life in the independent league is about as close as we might get to that truth. It has to be. These players know they are long shots to reach the affiliated minor leagues, and even longer shots to reach the majors. Only 26 Frontier League players have made the leap to Major League Baseball. And there are currently only 51 former Frontier League players in the minor leagues.

Yet they play, and love the game, passionately in the twilight of their baseball lives, facing down an unbeatable opponent. Like the players they pushed aside before, they too will be pushed aside by a younger group who grew up playing baseball in their backyards, and who believe they will be the ones who defy the odds.



Florence Freedom catcher Taylor Oldham: "To be successful in this game, you realize that you can't hold on to things. You can't hold on to that strikeout. You can't hold on to that. In life people are going to hurt you and sometimes you're going to hurt people. Just be able to, and this sounds cheesy, but forgive and move on."

PHOTO BY REBECCA KING

They are at the end of their childhoods. On the precipice of new, uncharted lives. Each searching for meaning, wanting to pass along the lessons they learned about the game, about life, in the way the best know how: through sports.

This is why sports matter. This is the cycle. This is baseball. This is life.

Brad King is a writer who lives in Indianapolis. He's currently working on a book, [Catch: An Oral History of Life and Baseball](#) that explores how the game has shaped our personal relationships. You can read about the book [on his blog](#), sign up for his [email list](#), and follow along on the [the Facebook page](#).

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