



Minor League Baseball: Investing In The Future

By thunderbaseball

Baseball players know what you think of them.

They're overpaid. They're spoiled. Everything's been handed to them.

If you've lived the life, however, you already know perception does not match reality. At least not in the minor leagues. Not even close.

If you've been around minor league baseball long enough, you know that the glamour of "The Show" feels much further away than a phone call or a few rungs on the baseball ladder. The long, uncomfortable bus rides, the picked-over food spreads, the cramped locker rooms, the tiny hotels. None of it screams big leagues.

But the biggest difference may very well be the money. The minimum annual salary in Major League Baseball currently sits at \$400,000. Meanwhile, most players at the minor league level who haven't reached minor league free agency are lucky to make \$10,000 over the course of a season; a survey of players revealed that those in rookie ball make \$1,250-1,300 a month while players in Triple-A, the highest level of the minors, can make roughly \$1,000 more per month while under the contracted amount.

"I think the way things are today, most people look at professional athletes and assume they're rolling in money," said New York Yankees Senior Vice President of Baseball Operations, Mark Newman.

"And these guys are not."

Most players in the minor leagues — some estimates have the number as high as 90 percent — will not play in the big leagues. For most, dreams of a career at the highest level are nothing more than that, just dreams.

And for most players, their first taste of making baseball their career comes with the Major League Baseball draft.

THE DRAFT

For players who ultimately never reach the big leagues, their biggest paycheck will most likely come before they ever a play game for the team that drafted them. Players are given signing bonuses after being drafted, based on where they're picked and what leverage they have. If you have college eligibility left, the odds are good that you'll do well financially, regardless of where you were drafted.

Thunder catcher Austin Romine was the recipient of a reported \$500,000 signing bonus, earned after being drafted 94th overall (second round) in 2007 out of El Toro High School in California. Often referred to as "bonus babies," high round picks are given more of a financial cushion at the start of their careers than those less fortunate. But with the money not only comes pressure, but some grief from fans, media and even teammates.

"There's definitely ball busting," Romine says.

"Guys are like, 'Oooh, bonus,' and stuff like that. But there's never any tension between guys because of that. We're all out here doing the same thing. Once you get out on the field, it doesn't matter how much money you make."

Romine feels no sense of entitlement because of his lofty draft status. In fact, it may come as a surprise to learn that he doesn't believe in the very system that helped net him half a million dollars before seeing a single professional pitch.

"Seeing the draft and what's happened over the past few years, I've lost a lot of faith in it. Outside of the first couple picks, a lot of it's hype," he said.

"It's what showcase did you go to, who likes you. At no point in time do I think, barring some situations, money dictates the player. There's guys that made crap that went on to be great big leaguers. That's how I look at it. The money doesn't mean anything. You've still got to go out and play."

For Scranton Yankees reliever Eric Wordekemper, taken with the 1391st pick of the 2005 draft by New York, the round he was picked (46th) certainly didn't dictate the money he received.

"I was a junior, so I did have some leverage," said Wordekemper, who had a year remaining at Creighton University.

"We worked a deal out where I got about 20th round money, right around there. I could have went back to school, so I had that on my side as well. Ultimately, I wanted to go and play pro ball. So we were able to work out a deal."

If you're a senior, however...well, there's probably not a whole lot of money coming your way.

"I got the minimum, thousand dollar senior sign bonus," said Kevin Smith, picked by New York in the 39th round out of Oklahoma in 2006.

"That comes out to like \$660 after taxes. They pay for the plane ticket, but basically, that was my food for spring training. That's about it."

Many players in Smith's situation are just happy to be able to start their pro careers. Chris Malec, also given a thousand dollars as a senior sign, had some special circumstances. Selected in the 16th round of the 2005 draft out of The University of California State-Santa Barbara, the former Yankees farmhand was diagnosed with testicular cancer while in college. More so than money, the corner infielder was just looking for an opportunity.

"When I signed, it was for nothing, basically. A thousand bucks, here you go. It was a senior sign, no room to negotiate," he said.

"I got cancer in the middle of it, so I was just happy enough to get an opportunity. For me, it was just like, 'Give me a chance.'"

IN-SEASON PAY

Make no mistake about it, playing baseball is seasonal work. And with seasonal work comes a seasonal paycheck. Players are only paid during the season, meaning they're paid roughly five months out of the year, not twelve. Even during spring training, players are unpaid.

Depending on who you talk to, players at the rookie ball level in the Yankees system make anywhere from \$1,250-1,300 a month. Players receive a \$100-200 raise when climbing the next rung on the baseball ladder, as well as an additional \$100 for repeating a level, with most players at Double-A starting out at \$1,700 per month, and most Triple-A players sitting around \$2,000-2,500. And that's before taxes get taken out, not after.

According to one former member of the Yankees 40-man roster, minor league players on the 40-man receive \$30,000 in their first year on the 40-man and \$60,000 for their second, as well as royalty checks from the organization. In addition, they receive the protection of the Major League Baseball Players Association, with the latest perk coming in the form of being excluded from being tested for HGH with the rest of their teammates.

40-man roster or not, paychecks come once every two weeks, and often can't come soon enough. For players who have only played at the lower levels, simply surviving can be a struggle.

"I had a couple of times where I had to dig for quarters, literally, in High-A, just to buy some food to cook at home because I really just didn't have any money," said Edwar Gonzalez, who signed with the Yankees as an undrafted free agent in 2002.

"Especially for the guys that don't sign for that much money, with no signing bonus, they don't have anything to fall back to. I'm lucky, a couple of times my family helped me out. Besides that, you're on your own. If you don't have any food, you've got to borrow from somebody or something like that."

Gonzalez's tale is not an uncommon one. For many players, having a bite to eat before or after games can entail swallowing a little pride as well.

"It's bad to say, but you rely a lot on your parents in minor league baseball unless you're a high round guy, said Smith, who was recently released by the Yankees.

"Especially the low round guys, not getting a bonus, you're calling your parents every first of the month after you pay your rent, 'Hey, I need some food money.' It's rough, and personally,

I feel bad for my parents because I'm 26 and they're still shooting me money every now and then. It's not a very glorious life in the minor leagues. You're losing money, basically, during the season.””

Even for those who have spent some time at the highest level of the minors, things can be difficult. The pay scale is such that for many players, the incentive to get to the next level is based more on career goals and prestige than any sort of monetary reward.

“For me, personally, financial steps up aren't significant enough when you're under the contracted amount,” said Thunder relief pitcher Grant Duff, who enjoyed his first call-up to Triple-A this season.

“It's more or less the going up, it's a huge thing. If you're in Triple-A, you're one step closer to being where everyone's ultimate goal is. I think that's the main motivation. Financial motivation, I don't think there really is any.”

If there's any financial motivation at all, it's to reach the big leagues. Nobody gets rich at the minor league level, even most minor league free agents. So, in real world terms, just how little do players who haven't reached minor league free agency make? They'd make more flipping burgers or working at a gas station than playing baseball. Some players might make just as much if they weren't playing at all.

In all five states — Florida, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and South Carolina — where the Yankees top minor league affiliates are housed, the average weekly unemployment check is \$425.80, which translates to a monthly take of \$1703.20.

From May to August, where games are scheduled nearly every day, players on the Trenton Thunder were asked to be at the ballpark an average of 28 days per month. For an average night game played at 7 PM, many players report at 12 PM to lift weights and do various early work (drills, early hitting, etc.). With the average game lasting nearly three hours, players are on the clock ten hours a day, which translates to 280 hours over the course of an average month.

In those same five states, the hourly minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour. For a player making the Double-A minimum of \$1,700 a month, he'll earn \$6.07 an hour while on the job.

Spoiled? Don't so much as mention the word to Romine.

“Anybody who says that we're spoiled obviously does not know anything about baseball,” he said.

“I'm not trying to compare (baseball) to someone who's worked a hard job their whole life, I've got so much respect for them. But I don't think at any point in time we're spoiled. This is a tough job. Every day, there's somebody behind you ready to take your job. There's no job security at all. It's tough. The late nights, the bus rides. We get in at four in the morning and we have to play the next day. It takes a toll on the body and the mind. People don't see that, they just see when we go out and play. They don't see what goes on before, they don't see all that. They see us put on a nice, white uniform and going out there and strapping it on and giving whatever we have left that day to try and do good.”

However, while it's hardly spoiling them, players do have limited ways of making additional money during the season. While some teams are able to provide players with perks — the Thunder, for example, have a connection with a local golf course where players and coaches can play for free — there are some financial rewards to be had.

In exchange for participating in pre-game clinics with kids and making personal appearances for team sponsors, players can receive cash and gift cards to local restaurants, most often "On The Border." While not a large amount, it's never a surprise to see the sign-up sheet for these events filled just minutes after it's posted on the clubhouse door.

Players also receive per diem of \$25 on the road, up from \$20 in seasons past. It's not uncommon for players to save a few dollars here and there from their daily road stipend, because saving as much as you possibly can during the season can help in the winter months.

"People don't realize that we don't get paid in the off-season at all," Wordekemper said.

"I know people back in my small town of Iowa think I make more than what I do. It's different than most minor league sports. In minor league hockey, they get paid pretty well. Minor league basketball gets paid pretty decent, too. But there's so many baseball players and there's so many levels, that it's hard to negotiate it. If you don't like it, they'll find somebody else because there's tons of players out there."

IN-SEASON EXPENSES

So where does the money that players receive go? Probably the same place most of your money goes: Bills.

"You've got your normal bills; rent, power, cable, you've got to buy gas, food, clubhouse dues. Pretty much the normal stuff, same everyone else has," said Thunder reliever Josh Schmidt.

But for most players, rent is their biggest expense. While the Yankees provide players with a free hotel room for the first three days at home with a new affiliate, players do eventually have to find a place to live. While housing can be a player's biggest expense, it can also be where they save the most.

"For a two-bedroom apartment, you're probably going about three guys, maybe more," Malec said.

"Four to five, you kind of start that later in the season when a couple guys come up for like an August call-up or something like that, then maybe you add another guy. But at the start of the season, one guy will plop an air mattress down and you're good to go. You have your own space, you can mark your own territory. It's not as bad as you think, but sometimes the TV will be on a little loud or somebody will come in with the door and all that."

Losing a little space and privacy to save a buck is a necessary part of minor league life, with some players sharing stories of splitting tiny apartment buildings with five teammates. While minor league teams provide assistance in finding housing for players — the Thunder have an agreement with an apartment complex just across the state border in Pennsylvania to distribute information packets to incoming players — there is no financial assistance given.

“I’m on a budget, and it’s a tight budget, but it’s something I kind of learn to live with,” Malec said.

Part of that budget for the 27-year-old includes having a car, which is considered a luxury for most players, who generally rely on the team bus for transportation. However, that luxury can become more of an expense than it’s worth, something Malec can attest to.

“I drive across the country, and that’s always been an interesting experience, I’ve got a bunch of stories from that,” he said.

“My car broke down in Texas on the way home, I blew out a transmission. I got it towed about 200 miles one year, and the car was too expensive to get fixed, so I just bought a cheap Trailblazer on the way home and kept on truckin’. But it’s nice to have the car so you can get to the field at your time and get your workouts in and be on your timeframe. Otherwise, eating becomes difficult. You’re at the liberty of other people, and you feel bad asking for rides.”

Some position players can incur an additional expense: Bats. While the organization does provide gear that ranges anywhere from batting gloves to cleats, when it comes to bats, many players are particular about their lumber and insist on a certain model...which is great, but it also comes out of pocket if not a pro stock model provided by the team.

“My bats, I use ash Louisville Sluggers, and my bats are \$52 a bat, and that’s on the cheaper side. You get maple or something like that, and they charge \$84 a bat. You break one, and it hurts,” said Richie Robnett, who signed with the Yankees as a minor league free agent for the 2009 season.

“You try to get bats from wherever you can, because when you’re down in the minor leagues and you don’t really have a good contract, you just try to get what you can. If you know guys in the big leagues, it works out well, because they get all their bats for free, the team just pays for them.”

Walk into a minor league clubhouse, and you’ll see an impressive lineup of lumber.

Bat from an established big leaguer that a player happens to be friends with? Check.

Leftover lumber from a player that’s been called up or sent down with the name scribbled out? Bingo.

Taped up batting practice bats that have been used for years before games so that their gamers don’t see any unnecessary damage? You betcha.

But, among the various things you’ll wish you could unsee when visiting the cramped confines of a minor league locker room, you’ll also see what’s known as the spread. Players are provided with a table full of food after batting practice and games to help get them through the day. Spend enough time in a clubhouse, and you’ll also see attendants running around cleaning cleats, laundering clothes and carrying out various tasks for players. In exchange, players have to pay what are known as “clubhouse dues,” which can add up during the course of a season. The amount owed also increases as players move up a level and is just another expense that can add up over the course of a season.

The individual leagues are in charge of dictating the minimum amount that players owe, but according to Smith, dues can run anywhere from \$350-375 a month depending on how much he tips.

“The minimum is \$10 a day (at home),” says Thunder home clubhouse manager Tom “Tonto” Kackley.

“But what they get is all their baseball laundry cleaned, they get their spikes cleaned each night, they get a nice, light spread after batting practice — a lot of sandwich meat, fruit, snacks. And then a regular meal after the game. Those are the basics that you get, but there’s a lot involved in terms of running errands and things like that.”

With errands comes tipping, which is commonplace by players at every level of the minors. Clubhouse attendants — who aren’t paid well, either, especially the assistants — work hard to earn them.

“I like to tip because I think they do a great job, especially with cleaning cleats and things like that that are extras and stuff like that, I think they deserve more. Everyone takes care of people and helps them out,” Duff said.

“It’s going to the store for you and getting you a sandwich, getting you an energy drink when you know you need them. If they have to leave and drive somewhere to go get you something, and you want it before the game, you give them two, three, four bucks or something like that. Just little things. Certain guys are different, they’ll need this sandwich on this day or whatever, it’s just how it is. You’ve got weird little niches for everybody, they’ll need this drink at this time and the guys in there make sure they have it on hand for you to have, stuff like that.”

Players on the 40-man roster or with prior big league time generally offer larger tips, but there is no set amount for what’s expected, if a player tips at all.

“Most of the guys, they’re generally going to tip a little bit, but that varies a lot,” Kackley said.

“They’ll pay dues at the end of a homestand, be it three or seven games, and they’ll tip me at that point. Hopefully, they think I’ve done a good job and think I’ve given them a lot to eat and it’s a nicely run clubhouse. For errands, I try to pass that off to (assistant clubhouse attendant) K.C., who helps me out in the clubhouse a lot. It enables me to stay here at the facility, which is where I need to be, and it gives him the opportunity to pick up a couple bucks on tips if he has to run out or they want something special from McDonald’s or what have you.”

While some expenses are obvious, others are not. Getting shuttled between levels — especially for players traveling long distances between levels, like going from Tampa to Trenton — going from place to place can not only be expensive, it can also be a hassle.

“As it is, you move to spring training for a month, and then you move to your affiliate for five months, and then you move home. So you’re moving three, four, five times a year, no matter what,” said Schmidt, who was sent between Trenton and Scranton twice in ten days this May.

“When I got sent down (from Trenton to Tampa) in ’08, we were on the road for one day, and I had to be there for an 11 AM game in Tampa. So I’ve got seven days worth of clothes with me until we get an off day and I can come back and pack up all my stuff and drive it. To me, I hate packing all my stuff and moving, but it’s part of what we do. Last year, I think I moved six or seven times, if you count going to Venezuela. That’s a big pain. And you’re trying to do it in a short period of time. You’ve got to unpack, and you don’t always know if you’re staying, you might be there for a couple of days.”

YANKEES HELPING OUT

It might be more interesting to learn where expenses don’t go. As there is no union for minor league players — a sensitive subject in its own right — each organization can be as generous or as stingy as they wish when it comes to some aspects of minor league life. The Yankees pay for the medical procedures performed on contracted players, covered under insurance as part of the players benefit package. In addition, rehab costs are covered by the organization under Workman’s Compensation, but those are commonplace in minor league baseball.

However, Yankee extras such as providing financial assistance to their affiliates for batting practice spreads, bonuses for making an All-Star team and providing hotel rooms for incoming players are considered to be going above and beyond by many. But where players feel the organization stands above the rest is in providing apparel and equipment.

“The Yankees are definitely better about gear than a lot of other organizations from what I hear,” Schmidt said. “We get enough stuff to survive the season, and not every team does that. Some teams are like, ‘Here’s your shorts and t-shirt.’”

Robnett, who had played in the Athletics and Cubs organizations prior to joining the Yankees last season, couldn’t believe his eyes and ears when he arrived in Trenton.

“When I got there, it was pretty much like, ‘What do you need,’” Robnett said.

“What was cool about the Yankees is that they would pay for pretty much 50 percent of my bats, and I’ve never seen that. Never heard of it, never seen it. Then, you go up to Triple-A, they buy the first 12 of your bats that you want. After that, they’ll pay half. That’s just awesome, that’s stuff you just don’t hear about from other teams.”

“And stuff like gear and shoes, I didn’t have any stuff that was the Yankee colors, so they sent me a Nike bag that was filled with all their apparel and stuff that you would need, stuff that any baseball player needs; sliders, workout shirts, running shoes, stuff like that. That’s just necessity stuff, and what I liked about the Yankees, they made sure you had that kind of stuff so that you can perform. They don’t want you worrying about all the little stuff, they want you to worry about what goes on on the field, which I think is the way that it should be.”

According to Robnett, the generosity and care from the Yankees provides a better atmosphere to work in and can potentially create a better on-field product in the long run.

“I think overall, the Yankees just make everything so much better for you,” he said.

“Other teams, like the Cubs, if you’re in Double-A, you’re a Tennessee Smokie, that’s what you are. If you’re in Double-A with the A’s, you’re a Midland Rockhound, that’s what you are. When you’re in Double-A with the Yankees, you’re a Yankee. You’re not a Trenton Thunder, you’re a Yankee. If you’re in Triple-A, you’re a Yankee. If you’re in A-Ball, you’re a Yankee. That’s what I like. You’re a part of the organization, and they always want to make it known to you that you represent us.”

That feeling, according to Newman, comes straight from the Steinbrenner family, including “The Boss” himself.

“It’s our ownership that allows us and wants us to treat these players well,” he said.

“But behind that treatment is a message, and that’s do things in a first class way, take care of details, be respectful of your teammates and the Yankee logo. That’s all part of who we are. It’s values. George Steinbrenner, if he saw Trenton play on TV, and he has, and saw a player with a torn pair of pants, and he may have torn it sliding in the fifth inning, he would call me and want to know why we didn’t have an extra pair of baseball pants for that player. He drove that.”

As he makes or oversees literally every decision that’s made at the minor league level in the Yankees organization, Newman understands more than most what the life is like for his players. To that end, he feels the Yankees go above and beyond to make their day easier. But in return, he says, the Yankees expect a first class effort.

“We try to make the facilities, equipment, coaches and medical training staffs first class; We try to treat our players in a first class way,” he said.

“Their part of the bargain is that we expect them to respond in a first class way and represent the logo and the franchise in a first class way. Play to win, support your teammates. It’s important to us when kids play here, when young men play here, when they look back if they play for the Major League Yankees in New York, great. But if they don’t, and this is as high as they get, we want them to look back and say, ‘I got something from my experience with the Yankees.’ And by that, we don’t just mean more T-shirts or warmup jackets.”

Now that Robnett finds himself playing for the Camden Riversharks of the independent Atlantic League...well, those T-shirts and warmup jackets are nowhere to be found. Neither is an abundance of cash.

“Where I see the difference, now that I’m in independent ball, pretty much I’m paying to play baseball right now,” he said.

“They don’t have a lot of money as far as paying players here goes. You’ve got to pay for living, I have a mortgage at home, and you’ve got to pay for all those things. So pretty much, you’re paying to play. Equipment, anything you need, agents don’t help you out anymore. You’re kind of like a ghost from the game, it gets tough. I was fortunate enough to get a good signing bonus and put that to where I can still afford to do this, but I can’t see myself doing it for too much longer, just because I can’t afford it.”

NUTRITION

The pitfalls for minor league baseball can be numerous. Combine not having a lot of money and limited options on the road, and when it comes to nutrition, you've got a recipe for disaster.

"It's hard to eat healthy when you have less money, way harder," Smith said.

"The only part that's bad is the road trips, where the only place we can stop on the highway is McDonald's with the hours and it's just the easiest spot to stop so we don't waste time. The dollar menu looks real nice."

For players who are into nutrition, and that certainly isn't everyone on any given roster, a lot of thought goes into both what they can eat and when they'll be able to eat it.

"You have to plan your meals, bring things, have snacks and that sort of thing," Malec said.

"As much as the money thing, it's the time constraints and the travel. You're in a hotel, and you're at the liberty of there being two or three options there; a McDonald's, maybe an Applebee's, something like that. You don't have many options. At the lower levels, one thing that really hurts is when your game ends at 10:30, 11 o'clock, there's nothing open at that hour. So that's kind of a drag, too. But to eat healthy, it is difficult. You really have to make a conscious decision. If you don't budget your money wisely, it's going to be difficult to get your fruits and veggies in there."

If you've ever been in a McDonald's, you've probably noticed there's no fruits and vegetables menu, however. But if you've been in the minors long enough, you're limited to what feels like the same handful of places, healthy or not.

"Usually, it always seems to be an Applebee's or a Subway," Smith said. "You try to eat Subway, but if it's the end of the month and you have to pay rent, you'll just pack up on the spread and you won't go out to eat."

With limited healthy options available on the road, a good clubhouse spread at the field is critical. A veteran clubbie like Kackley is well aware of the importance of nutrition to his players, and visits grocery stores and a local warehouse club in-between homestands stocking up on food.

"It is important, but the great thing is, I've noticed over the years that players nowadays are a lot more conscious of that themselves. It used to be you could put anything healthy out there, and they wouldn't eat it," he said.

"But now, it's stressed by the Yankee organization from the time they're drafted. I'm sure the other big league teams are doing that too. So the guys are a lot more conscious of what they eat. But we tend to keep the healthy options there, with a salad or a good vegetable every night, or a lot of fruit. We at least keep the options there. The younger guys, the smarter guys, they'll take advantage of that."

According to George Kontos, recently spotted in the Thunder clubhouse comparing the grams of sugar in two different sports drinks, the comforts of home extend to more than just a few comfortable couches.

“When we’re here or wherever home is, most of us have our cars and it’s a lot more convenient to leave 15 minutes earlier on the way to the field to go somewhere healthier that’s out of the way,” he said.

“Whereas on the road, you’re kind of restricted to whatever’s in walking distance of the hotel. Once you’re at the field, it’s a little bit easier, but if you’re getting up at 9:30 or 10 o’clock looking for something decent for breakfast, you might have a little bit of a struggle.”

FAMILY LIFE

For many players, especially at the lower levels of the minors where salaries are lower, starting a family can be difficult. Supporting yourself on less than minimum wage can be hard enough, but taking care of a wife and children can prove to be near impossible.

Noah Hall, who played with the Yankees organization in 2007 and 2009 as a member of the Trenton Thunder, is a 33-year old veteran with parts of three seasons at the Triple-A level under his belt. Having been a minor league free agent since 2001, the friendly outfielder has been able to command a higher salary than a player under the contracted amount for ten seasons now. Noah and his wife, Kelly, have a young son, Isaiah, and both travel with Hall wherever his career takes him.

“This game, and most sports, are really bad for families,” he said.

“I’m very blessed that my wife, Kelly, will come on the road with me. We’re sacrificing a little more money, financial stability, I guess, for our own well being as a couple and as a family, so I get to see Isaiah grow. I don’t get to miss out on him growing up, I don’t miss out on my relationship with my wife. A lot of guys don’t get to do that, and it’s a shame. Some guys, they make it work. But for us, we wouldn’t want to do that, it’s not that important, it’s just baseball. I love to play this game. But when you have a family...God’s the first thing, and then your family and whatever else; work, yourself, whatever. That’s the way you’ve got to look at it.”

Now in the independent Atlantic League with the Somerset Patriots, Hall’s salary is limited to a league-imposed \$3,000 a month cap, which is likely less than he could be making with an affiliated team given his years in the game. When planning out the possibility of starting a family with his wife, Hall knew that it would be tough to do while he was still playing.

“We didn’t really talk about it before Isaiah came, but when he came, we knew that was going to be an issue,” he said.

“At the time, I was still making a decent amount, so I could survive. But now, it’s to the point where if I have to stay in this league the whole year — which I’m fine with...if I get picked up great, but I love it here — it’s going to be really hard to try to do it next year. We’ll see. She’s the one who’s kind of in control of our money, because she’s a lot more responsible and knows what we’ve really got to pay for and all that, so I let her take care of it. She let me know that is probably going to have to be your last year if you don’t get picked up. It kind of sucks. As an athlete, you want to play as long as you can, especially at the highest level you can. And I’d love to do that, I’d love to play in this league for five more years if I could. But the way it’s set up, for guys like me, you just can’t do it. And it’s unfortunate.”

The financial structure of minor league baseball is such that older players who want to settle down and focus on family are forced to retire years earlier than they might like to. Still productive at 33 years old, Hall is facing that situation himself, and has talked about it with some of his older teammates.

“A lot of guys I’ve played with or against, they’re in the same boat,” Hall said.

“They’re like 30 years old, and they’re saying this is probably their last year. And that’s a shame, because physically, a lot of us could play until our mid to late 30’s, you know. If you’ve got a crazy physique, maybe 40 years old, I don’t know. But it’s a little bit sad that that’s what going to make it to where I’ve got to retire. I wish somebody would take into account that kind of stuff, and maybe they will, eventually. I’d love it to be this year, because then I could do it. I just wish they could do something different.”

FREE AGENCY

For veteran players, especially those who haven’t enjoyed a Major League paycheck yet, minor league free agency can be a welcomed boon to their wallets. The most likely scenarios in which a player can become eligible for minor league free agency are two-fold; once he has completed seven seasons in the minors with the organization which originally signed him or if he’s released before those seven seasons are up. In the latter scenario, the player automatically becomes a free agent and is eligible to sign with any team.

Scott Patterson, however, found himself in a unique situation. The towering hurler hadn’t thrown a single pitch in affiliated baseball before signing with the Yankees in 2006 out of the Atlantic League.

“That year I signed out of (Lancaster) with New York, I signed for \$3,000 a month, and it was freaking nice,” he said.

“\$3,000, that’s not much, but I was a single guy then and to me, I was like a millionaire. I was running around spending money everywhere. It was good.”

Gonzalez has re-signed with the Yankees twice now as a minor league free agent, despite getting better offers from other teams like he did in 2009. He says the small increase in pay helped, but not as much as you might think.

“It did a little bit, but it’s not much,” he said.

“You get paid as the season goes on. Once the season’s over, you’re on your own again. So even if you get paid well for that five months that you’re playing, you still have seven other months that you have to make everything up. So it’s really not much. But those five months, that you’re playing, it’s a lot better because you don’t have to worry about bills or your apartment or anything like that. It helps out a lot, but it’s not really that big of a difference in the long run, because we don’t get paid all year round.”

Hall knows the world of minor league free agency like the back of his hand. Twice, he’s signed with the Yankees after starting a season with the Atlantic League’s Somerset Patriots, which is where he’s currently playing.

According to Hall, every minor league free agent contract is different. Some are structured so that pay changes based on the level the player is being used at, while others pay a flat amount regardless. While minor league free agency does generate more money for those fortunate enough to enjoy it, it still doesn't solve the problem of providing a full year's pay.

"For us, as free agents, it's good money, but you've got to look at as it's half the year," Hall said.

"It's not like it's the full year that you're getting paid. I mean it's good, it's a job where you're getting paid \$5,000 a month, with my education. But it's good for the time being to save a little bit of money. I did that a couple times, I made a little bit and was able to save some to buy a house and things like that. But right now, I'm pretty much broke. That's the way it is. If you've got a family, it's hard to survive, especially in this league. They do what they can to help you out financially, but there's a cap or whatever it is, and you're stuck. For guys like me, who have families and don't have family money, it's hard."

ON-FIELD IMPACT OF MONEY

Richie Robnett knows both sides of how money can affect things between the lines. Selected with the 26th overall pick of the 2004 draft by the Oakland Athletics, the outfielder commanded a reported \$1.325 million bonus.

There were times with Oakland, he says, where his performance didn't warrant the playing time he received.

"There's times where I went through really bad streaks with hitting, and I got frustrated," Robnett said. "And when I get frustrated, I just make it worse for myself instead of trying to fix the problem. But they'd keep throwing me out there, keep throwing me out there."

Part of that frustration was not being able to live up to the gaudy contract he signed. With that frustration came pressure. With that pressure came poor performance. All of it regrettable for the 26-year-old, who topped out at Triple-A.

"I felt like I probably put a little bit more pressure on myself, because I felt like I had to live up to (the contract)," he said.

"But at the same time, now that I think back to it, there really wasn't pressure, because they show a whole bunch of interest in you and they're telling you that they want you in the big leagues with them. That's when it was time for me to relax, instead of putting added pressure on myself, like I've got to do more now because you've got to live up to the first round draft pick and stuff like that. But really, that's when I should have stepped back and just focused on trying to get better."

When Robnett started falling out of favor in the A's organization, and even when he was traded from Oakland to the Cubs prior to the start of the 2009 season, he got an even better understanding of the impact that both the draft and the bonuses that players receive have on the game.

"The draft comes every year, so you've got guys with high draft status and they might have received big signing bonuses. Well, when teams do that, that's their investment and they've got to protect their investment," he said.

“A lot of times, regardless of how badly one of their big prospects is doing, he’s got to play because that’s who they put their money into. Even if somebody’s on the bench and does well, well he can’t play today because we don’t have anything invested in him. That’s where the whole business side of it comes into it. I’ve seen in my career where guys would even get released or sent down from a team because they’re outplaying the prospects and they don’t want that embarrassment and stuff like that, they don’t like that at all. I’ve seen situations like that before. But I think it’s really huge. Baseball is a business, and I understand from the business aspect, you’ve got to protect your investment.”

OFF-FIELD IMPACT OF MONEY

Scott Patterson’s first professional contract with the Gateway Grizzlies earned him a whopping \$550 a month. It was nearly impossible to be financially irresponsible with his money, because there wasn’t any of it to spare. Not completely impossible, however.

“There were some things where I look back and when you come up through independent ball, you make \$550, I could manage money with the best of them,” he said.

“But even I made a few stupid decisions, maybe I went out a little too much, bought maybe too much hunting stuff that I didn’t need; too many guns and bows and stuff. So I could imagine somebody who just walked straight into that money.”

Someone like, say, Austin Romine. Signed as an 18-year-old out of high school, the affable backstop says he was fortunate to have responsible people around him to help him make sound decisions with his newfound haul.

“Some guys get it at a young age, so some guys are a little careless with it,” he said.

“I was lucky enough to have parents who cared and some help from my agent and stuff like that to really invest it well and put it away. It’s a big thing, giving an 18-year-old a lot of money. It’s tough for some guys to handle that and play baseball, too. I did go out and I bought some things I always wanted. No big purchases, I didn’t buy like \$30,000 jewelry or anything like that. But I did buy some stuff. You worked hard 18 years of your life to get there. I think it’s nice to reward yourself a little bit.

“You’ve got to be smart with it. You hear some cases of guys who aren’t smart with it. I always thought you’ve got a good cushion now, now all you have to worry about is playing baseball. Some of those guys don’t have that luxury. Some of those guys go paycheck to paycheck and they have to play and bust their butt because they don’t have that cushion.”

For other players, that cushion can be removed by having to take care of friends and family. Edwar Gonzalez, the Thunder’s Venezuela-born veteran outfielder, knows all too well about the latter.

“Once you get money, you want to help your family out a little,” he said.

“You can do with it whatever you want, but I’m a family guy and they helped me out every time I needed it, so I didn’t have any problem with that. When I got that money, I paid for a lot of traveling to see them; either me going to Venezuela or them coming over here, so a lot of it went to that as well. A lot of guys, especially Latin guys, they have families back home

and have kids and wives who they have to send money. So you have rent, you have your family back home, your kids, your mom and all that. You're tied."

As for friends, it's rare to see baseball players with an entourage of any sort. In large part, the culture of the game doesn't allow for it, but most players are careful with whom they associate themselves with anyway.

"I had a pretty tight knit group of friends growing up," Romine said.

"They knew me when I played Little League baseball, before I was anything. I try not to surround myself with people like that. I surround myself with people who are driven to do something with their life. But you're going to run into that every now and then, some friends saying, 'Hey, you've got a lot of money, go buy this.' Well, if I keep doing that, I'm not going to have any money, either."

However, for people who don't understand that players are making thousands, not hundreds of thousands of dollars, there can be some disappointment to learn that they'll be paying for their own frosty beverages.

"You go back home, and friends you haven't seen from like high school in four or five, six years...word kind of gets around that you're playing and they'll say hey," Schmidt said. "They'll be like, 'Hey, you're buying beers,'" and I'm like, "Ehhh, I'm not rich, dude."

And those are just the friends you knew you had. According to Patterson, there can be plenty of new ones waiting in the wings once you reach the highest rung of the baseball ladder.

"The best story I have, there was a kid that called me that was my neighbor when I was in middle school and like my first year in high school, Mark, he was down in Tampa," Patterson started.

"That was my first big league spring training, and he called me on my phone and he said, 'Hey, this is Mark, I just wanted to call...' He's like, 'I was your neighbor.' And I'm like, '(Shoot,) 20 years ago. But hey, how are ya?' This was before I knew you had to pay for tickets in spring training, and he came and brought about eight dudes three times, and it cost me about \$200. After that, I learned real quick to not answer your phone if it's a number you don't know."

And how did "Mark" get Patterson's number?

"The biggest problem I had was my dad, people would call him and be like, 'Hey, do you think I could go to the Yankees game? Could your son get me tickets?' And my dad was giving out my number," said Patterson with a laugh.

"So I'd call my dad and be like, 'Who is this guy calling me, Dad?' I didn't say anything like the first two times, but then his high school buddy called me, and I was like, 'Dad, we can't do this anymore.'"

Patterson, who has since gotten married and is now in Triple-A with the Mariners organization, has since invested his a large portion of his money, but concedes there can still be pitfalls that come with a big paycheck.

“There definitely is (a risk of irresponsibility),” he said.

“I wasn’t, because I invested and bought hunting land. That’s what I put all my money into. I always wanted to run a hunting outfitting business. But you know what, I tell my wife now, when I was here coming up through independent ball, you get used to not having money, and I was comfortable with it. Now, I was with New York and the Padres in the big leagues, you’re used to making all that money, you come back (to Lancaster) and it’s like, ‘I did it before with no problem.’ Now, I can’t do it. I don’t have a house or anything, I live with her. But I bought hunting land, I have an outfitting business, so that’s all I really have to pay, but it’s a struggle trying to pay that.”

OFF-SEASON JOBS

If you’re looking at Kevin Smith’s 2009 statistics, it’s unlikely that his off-season employment doing data entry for a law firm will show up.

Stayed in Nebraska recently? Say hello to Eric Wordekemper, who’s had to work as a valet at a hotel in the Cornhusker state.

And Chris Malec’s internship at a mortgage company is unlikely to show up in any profiles written about his career.

Did you get a big bonus? Then that’s where you likely get to enjoy it, falling back on your big windfall during the off-season without having to work.

Sign for peanuts? Well...

“Before I played in winter ball in Venezuela, I was a waiter at Red Lobster,” Gonzalez said.

“I’ve worked as a construction worker, putting up privacy fences. I worked in Charleston — I lived there in my off-season a couple off-seasons ago — I worked on the grounds crew at the stadium. I had all those three jobs at once. The worst was putting up privacy fences as a construction worker, because I was the one carrying all the lumber and concrete and all that stuff in 90 degree heat. Once I got back to spring training, I was pretty happy to be back. I was hustling more than anybody else, because I was so happy to have my job and do what I wanted to do. But that was something I needed to do to pay for my bills.”

Off-season jobs are commonplace for players in the minor leagues. While many players essentially sell themselves by providing baseball lessons to kids — it is, after all, what they know — others aren’t so lucky. Hall, for example, has worked as a technician for a relative’s purified water machine business for the past two seasons.

“It’s a crappy job, but it’s fine though. I’m not against doing stuff like that,” he said.

“I’m a father and a husband, and I’ve got to provide for my family however I can. Whatever the job is, it doesn’t matter, as long as you get paid to do it. I understand that’s real life, most people have jobs they really don’t enjoy. I’m very blessed to have had a job for 15 years now that I’ve loved, and I’ve been able to survive and not get into a deep hole financially.”

Since the age of six, Duff has helped out his father, who sells custom-built homes, on construction sites. However, that isn't the only way the Texas native occupies his time in the off-season, as just doing that won't pay the bills.

"I have other jobs as well, just because I have to make money to come out here," he said.

"I've worked as a towel delivery boy for my wife's business, I deliver towels to condos. I shovel decks, snow shovel. Then I also drive my dad's plow for plowing snow, stuff like that. Then, I pick up any jobs I can just to make money, because I only make any actual income for what, three and a half, four months a year. It also enables me to not work for a month and a half, two months and get in shape to come out here for spring training."

Ultimately, most players work in the off-season to be able to afford to play during the year. For as much as they may not like the jobs they get, many are lucky to have them. Malec, who also has helped coach a traveling team of 11-year-olds back home in California, can attest to that.

"It's tough to find a way to supplement your income in the off-season," he said.

"I live with my parents every off-season. I just can't afford to live out. You find anything you can do to nickel and dime and find a couple bucks."

AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

The best way to end up with a small fortune in the minor leagues is to start with a large one. Nobody gets rich playing away from the bright lights of the big leagues, and nobody knows it better than the players who live the life of the long, uncomfortable bus rides, the picked-over food spreads, the cramped locker rooms and the tiny hotels.

"The minor leagues, it's a grind," Wordekemper said.

"But ultimately, it's an investment for us. Yeah, we don't get paid a lot right now, but if you do make it, it's well worth it."