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Low pay, bus trips worth it for Ems

By Chris Metz
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

"This is what I've wanted to do my whole life," said Ems pitcher Jason Ritter with a boyish seriousness. "I'm going to bust my butt for two or three years and see where it takes me. If it looks like I'm not going anywhere, then I'm going to have to get out into the real world."

It's hard to imagine that the real world would take a back seat to a fast food diet, 10-hour bus rides, and barely enough money to buy a 1978 Pinto, but while this, the life of a minor league baseball player, falls a bit short of the Utopian dream, it all seems worth it for the chance to one day button up a major league uniform.

For Class A ballplayers, playing the game they love brings with it a fair amount of pressure to succeed. Each player is undoubtedly aware that the odds of making it to the big leagues rests somewhere between slim and none.

"It hasn't really hit me yet," Scott Pinoni, the Ems' power-hitting first baseman, said. "Next spring when there's 160 guys fighting for 100 spots, that's when I'll realize it."

Watching the Ems take batting practice on a cool Oregon afternoon with the fresh sound of the bat cracking line drives out to center, interrupted occasionally by a random hoot from first base coach Rafael Santana, patrolling the field with his infamous swagger, it becomes clear that, at this level, this is still a game. Talk of salary arbitration and revenue sharing are far removed from this playing field.

Most of these young men have been playing baseball for most of their lives and the Class A Emeralds is a logical step toward their dream of one day walking between the lines of a major league park. Even so, Eugene is the first professional experience for most of the Ems, and sometimes it's easy for them to forget that they are pros now, as to them, it's still just a game that they love.

"Sometimes I'm out there and really enjoying the crowd, the atmosphere and the opportunity that I've been given to play," starting third baseman Sean McNally said politely, weighing out the pressures and pleasures of playing professional baseball.

"And other times, I'm upset about my last at-bat. I could be at home playing Babe Ruth when I was 14."

The Northwest league also provides some reality checks to remind the players that they are now professionals.

"When I see the ninth hitter hit it out," said Malcolm Cepeda, "that's when I know 'hey, I'm a professional.'"

One problem that comes with the first year of pro ball is the adjustment that has to be made both on and off the field. Every year the Ems meet a few days before actual games begin, which proves to be interesting as

"When you first come out here, you don't know the guys," Pinoni added. "It was a lot easier to make the adjustment, being real good friends. If you've got a problem, you can always go to him, or he can come to me."

To a man, this year's Ems agree that the experience they have gained in Eugene and minor league baseball has been not only worth it in the long run, but it has been an exciting experience overall.

"I wouldn't want to spend the rest of my life at this level, but it's one of those steps you've got to take," Jed Hansen, the Ems' second baseman, said. "It's a lot



GARY GRASS/for the Emerald
Signing autographs is just one of the many experiences that minor-league players have to get used to on their path to the major leagues.

the players get to know each other, both on a personal level and a talent level as well.

"You have five days, and everybody's trying to show off and show that they belong," McNally said. "It takes a few weeks to just settle in and relax."

For McNally, the adjustment was made a bit easier by the fact that Pinoni, his college teammate at Duke, wound up with him in Eugene as well.

While both Pinoni and McNally say that everybody on the team "gets along great," they admit that coming to Eugene together has been an extra cushion in their adjustment to the life as a minor leaguer.

"It's a little bit traumatic for anybody — going away from home and playing, even though that's what all of us want to do," McNally said. "I was really excited just to know somebody. For the first couple of weeks it helped a lot."

of fun though."

Anybody who has even seen Bull Durham knows that the minor leagues come with their share of pitfalls like long bus rides and low pay. But while these subjects bring grimaces and smirks to the faces of the 1994 Ems, it's all just a labor of love.

Just ask pitcher Mike Kurnick, who measures in at 6'9", 225 pounds.

"I don't like buses, but I'm a big guy," Kurnick said, with a grin. "You've got to deal with it though. If you want to play, it's just what you've got to go through."

"I don't like the bus rides at all," McNally said grudgingly. "You've got to learn how to play after a 10-hour bus ride and you're exhausted. Somehow you've got to get yourself going, and I'm just now getting used to it."

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