

BASEBALL

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Page 9
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Field of Dreams

For most, the quest to play big-league ball begins in the minors



Being in the minor leagues exposes many players to the media for the first time, and it gives them their first taste of the big-league life.

The batter steps into the cage and taps the far side of home plate with the Louisville Slugger grasped in his right hand. He holds the bat there for a moment before lifting it up and clasping the handle with both hands. The bat is held, cocked and ready, at ear level, waiting for the pitch.

It comes, and he swings, leading the bat with his body, cutting up at the ball. The batter grunts after the miss. He tried too hard.

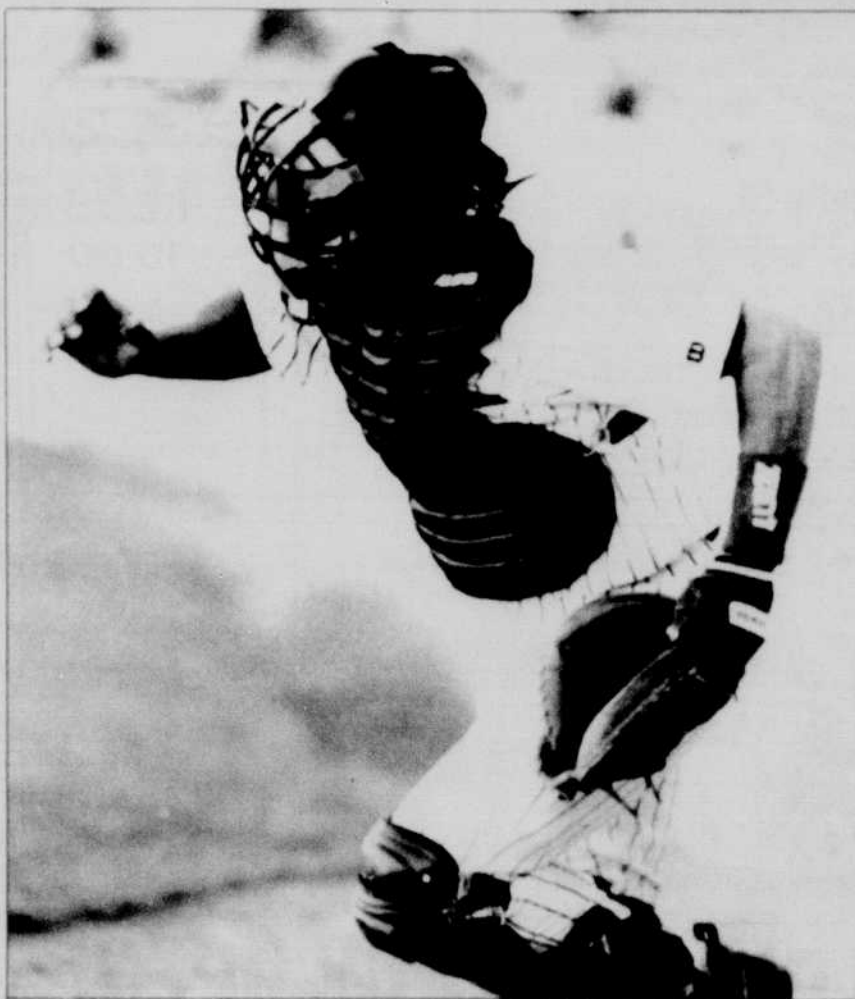
"You picked your head up again," yells the manager. "If you don't look at the ball, how are you supposed to hit it?"

The batter tries again, digging in the box with his back foot, and cocks the bat with a slight scowl on his face. This time he connects with the ball on the bat's sweet spot, sending it to deep right field and off the top of the thin plywood wall with a loud thunk.

"Nice shot," a teammate comments. The manager says nothing. He was hitting ground balls across the infield with a fungo bat as his fielders ran through the motions of a double play for probably the 20th time in the last five minutes.

For a minor league baseball player, practice before the game is not used as a warm-up for the evening's contest, or to entertain the handful of fans who came out to the park early. It is work — hard work — and nothing less.

The Eugene Emeralds are a Class A affiliate of the Atlanta Braves in the 40-year-old Northwest League. Players sent here by the Braves are young and undisciplined. Some have never played above the high school level, and others are foreign players who don't speak any English. Most have never used anything but aluminum



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The daily routine of running out of the dugout after the national anthem has been played is something that each player has dreamed about all of his life and would never trade for anything.

bats before. But every player is here for the same reason — to learn how to accomplish the dream of playing in the major leagues.

Joe Trippy is the team's center fielder, in the middle of his first professional season. Trippy played ball on an athletic scholarship at the University of Washington — where he still needs eight credits to graduate — as a pitcher and outfielder. He signed with the Atlanta Braves as a free agent outfielder two days after the 1995 draft had ended, and reported to Eugene two weeks later to begin workouts.

"I've always wanted to play baseball," Trippy said. "Me and my two brothers used to play whiffleball in the yard all the time when I was growing up. My dad always used to take us to watch the Seattle Mariners. The game's always been a

huge part of my life."

Trippy has been making the most of his opportunity this season with the Ems. His batting average has consistently remained above .300 and he is among the top 10 hitters in the Northwest League.

But he is aware that baseball is a funny game — you can be on top of the world today and gone tomorrow.

"It's not like it was in college when the coaches are always harpin' on you to do your best," Trippy said. "Everybody has to push themselves. The coaches here tell you what to do, and it's up to you to do it."

The minor leagues can be a tough environ-

Turn to **DREAMS**, Page 10