

Perfect★Game★USA

and the Future of Baseball

*How the Remaking of Youth Scouting
Affects the National Pastime*

LES★EDGERTON



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Foreword by Wally Lubanski



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To my kids, Britney, Sienna and Mike,
who are each my favorite.

To my wife, Mary, who is,
to use a baseball term,
a five-tool wife and scores an 80 on the 20–80 scale.

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Acknowledgments

First and above all others, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the founder, chief architect, and guiding light of Perfect Game USA, Jerry Ford himself. Without his generosity of spirit, this book would never have been able to come into existence. The same applies to his wife, Betty, and to all the members of the Perfect Game organization, many of whom I should have written about here, but simply didn't have enough space.

I owe much to the students who helped me conduct dozens of interviews. Special thanks to Mike Leyland and Chris Wells, my students when I taught at the University of Toledo, who volunteered their services in conducting interviews for the book. And, yes; Mike is related to Detroit Tigers' manager Jim Leyland — Jim is his uncle. There's a funny story about how he and I connected for this project.

I was given very gracious permission by the university to use students who could earn independent study credit to assist me in my research. After I announced the opportunity in my classes, a young man approached to inquire if I'd consider him for the project. This was the second class Mike Leyland had taken from me, but I'd never figured out that he was related to the Detroit Tigers' skipper. That was because I thought Mike's name was pronounced "Lay-land" and he'd never corrected me when I'd called on him and used that pronunciation. There were two other reasons I didn't make the connection. One, I didn't realize that the Leyland clan was from the nearby town of Perrysburg. The second reason I didn't know who Mike was related to was that I didn't follow the American League much because for years I've refused to acknowledge they even still played baseball in the Junior Circuit. Why? Because of that designated hitter monstrosity. I've been a bitter enemy of the rule ever since it came into existence. All I'll say is that most of the AL hitting records should be marked with an asterisk, in my opinion.

Well, since Mike and I began to work together, I've since learned that not only does he look, talk, and walk like his famous uncle, he's got the same

work ethic. His help has been immense, and I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

When I moved to teach at Tri-State University in Angola, Indiana, I asked for student volunteers who might be interested in helping me conduct research. I hit the mother lode! My wonderful “crew” of very able research assistants and interviewers includes the following downright terrific people: Omar A. Hosani, Mitch Harshbarger, Cliff Meyer, Joe Clark, Derek Brenne- man, Sam Clinton, Kara L. Benschneider, Stephen Kahl, Jake Colson, Mario Ramon, Brenton Barteck, and Dan Higginbotham. I can’t thank you folks enough — you’re the greatest!

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Foreword

by Wally Lubanski

Opportunity.

Webster defines the word, in part, as “a good chance or occasion, as to advance oneself.” In the amateur baseball world, few organizations promote the spirit of opportunity as well as Perfect Game USA. For literally thousands of young players striving to realize their potential on the baseball diamond, Perfect Game USA has provided the unique opportunity — the vehicle — for these players to demonstrate their tools and talent to baseball decision-makers from coast to coast. By developing a very broad, expanding stage for up-and-coming prospects to “show their stuff,” Perfect Game USA has played an enormous role in helping to fulfill the dreams of many players.

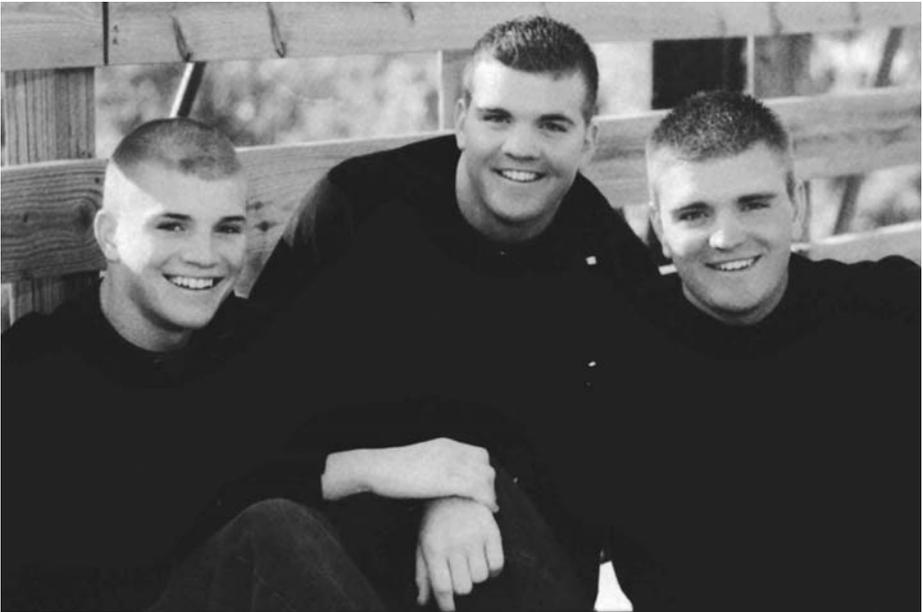
My family’s relationship with Perfect Game USA began in January 2001, when my oldest son, Chris, attended his first Perfect Game event, the World Showcase, in Fort Myers, Florida. Just a sophomore in high school at the time, Chris competed at the national event with players from across the country, many of them older and with much more impressive baseball resumes than he had. Hailing from Schewenksville, Pennsylvania — not exactly a traditional baseball hotbed — Chris took a huge leap from the comfortable confines of the local baseball surroundings at home.

Although a dose of Florida weather certainly beats a bleak, frigid Pennsylvania winter any day of the week, Chris’ first baseball experience in the Sunshine State began with uncertainty and, frankly, a little apprehension, too. After all, Chris was now playing with and against some of the finest baseball talent in the country ... the cream of the crop! How would a skinny kid from a cold weather state stack up against the best that amateur baseball had to offer? Would Chris’ first encounter with Perfect Game be his last? Was this Perfect Game opportunity worth the time and expense — or should Chris simply depend on that baseball adage, “If you are good enough, they will find

you,” essentially limiting his baseball pursuits to his own backyard, thus rolling the dice in the hope of maybe being discovered by a college recruiter or pro scout?

Chris learned a ton at that first Perfect Game showcase — the feedback he obtained from Perfect Game was invaluable in helping him understand the areas of the game he needed to improve upon, a key to his future development. Chris further benefited by gaining big-time showcase experience at a relatively young age, experience that would only help him later as his journey progressed. He was now on the baseball radar as well, as Perfect Game began to develop a player profile on Chris, data that could be relied upon later by college programs and major league clubs. Moreover, Chris took full advantage of his moment in the sun, competing successfully with a caliber of talent that he would not routinely come across on his home turf.

The feedback, the exposure, the competition ... all of it helped to motivate Chris to continue developing his passion and talent. He faced the challenge — the opportunity — that Perfect Game provided, and he rose to the occasion. As they say, the rest is history. Chris went on to compete in numerous Perfect Game showcases and tournaments, locally, regionally, and nation-



The Lubanski brothers — from left, Joe, Mike and Chris — have all participated in Perfect Game events. In June 2003, Chris became the first-round draft pick of the Kansas City Royals, the No. 5 pick in the nation, and signed with the Royals for a \$2.1 million bonus (courtesy Wally Lubanski).

ally. The skinny kid from Pennsylvania would play for two summers with the USA Baseball National Teams' program, earning gold and bronze medals, and later be offered baseball scholarships from Georgia Tech, Louisiana State, North Carolina, and Duke before signing a national letter of intent with national powerhouse Florida State University. He would be named a First-Team High School All-American, and he capped his amateur career by being selected the Gatorade National High School Baseball Player of the Year. In June 2003, Chris became the first-round draft pick of the Kansas City Royals, the No. 5 pick in the nation, and signed with the Royals for a \$2.1 million bonus.

Chris was promoted by the Royals to Triple A in the summer of 2007, just one step short of the big leagues ... and yet another opportunity. In many ways, the first really big step in Chris' career was at Fort Myers with Perfect Game, and the folks at Perfect Game continued to provide opportunities throughout Chris' high school years, opportunities which served as a springboard for him as he pursued his baseball goals. To a great extent, Chris (and many other players) is where he is in his career because of Jerry Ford and the entire staff at Perfect Game.

Today, families can become overwhelmed by the deluge of showcase and other exposure opportunities available. Consequently, players and parents should be proactive in carefully pursuing opportunities through those organizations recognized for their integrity, support, accessibility, results, and innovation. With competition sprouting up at all levels of the industry, Perfect Game USA remains at the forefront, spearheading even more opportunities to help young players achieve their dreams.

Of course, every youngster will realize varying degrees of success as they look to continue their baseball playing experience beyond high school. But when it comes to providing exposure opportunities to many players throughout our nation, Perfect Game USA is second to none.

Wally Lubanski helps parents and players learn about the college baseball recruiting process through his T.E.A.M. Student-Athlete Recruiting Guidance Program, a tutoring service for players and travel teams.

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Preface

I became aware of the Perfect Game USA company several years ago while conducting research for a book rating all the youth baseball showcases. That book never came about simply because it quickly became apparent that no other showcase company approached Perfect Game in the quality of events or came close to matching its impact on the pros or college programs. The Cedar Rapids, Iowa–based outfit was decidedly the dominant player, for reasons that will become clear in this book.

Some 2008 statistics provide solid evidence, when Perfect Game set a new record for the seventh consecutive year. Of the 1,504 players drafted into the major leagues, 1,164 were players who had attended Perfect Game events—a total of 77.4 percent. On the college front, 221 players out of the total 277 on the eight rosters of the College World Series were players who had attended Perfect Game events, accounting for nearly 80 percent. The influence is clearly substantial.

The scope of this book is to paint an accurate picture of youth baseball — from the perspective of how the current landscape affects high school players who want to rise to the next level, be that college ball or the pros— along with the history of Perfect Game’s impact as the primary agent of change. It’s a complex picture, including, but not limited to, the place high school baseball occupies, the impact of select or travel teams and other organizations such as Little League, the rise of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs, and the role of foreign-born players. The audience for this comprehensive source is historians, researchers and the young player and his family, who need to have an accurate picture and an aid to navigate the sometimes treacherous shoals of youth baseball.

Since baseball showcases in general and Perfect Game in particular are relatively new in a historical sense, my research depended chiefly upon dozens of interviews and personal observation while attending a number of events. The subject is not addressed in another book, and very little in print is

dedicated to discussing the relatively recent major changes occasioned by showcases. I also gained valuable insights from the many folks who gather on the High School Baseball Web (www.hsbaseballweb.com), easily the most prominent website for just about anybody involved with youth baseball.

I need to provide a disclaimer. Not only have I been involved in researching Perfect Game for the past four years and counting, I've also been involved with the organization as my son Mike has participated in four Perfect Game showcases as an individual and one tournament with his summer select team. He was also invited to a number of other events sponsored by such companies as Team One, Area Code, Top Guns, TPX, all of which were declined. I felt our experience as participants with the same hopes, dreams and baggage that most parents and players have provided a valuable insight. I've included the positives and the negatives in our family's odyssey through not only the Perfect Game events, but high school ball, select team experiences, and the recruiting milieu.

There is one hole. An NCAA rule handcuffs college coaches from delivering comments on the book's topic: "Institutional athletics department staff members may not endorse, serve as consultants or participate on advisory



Jerry Ford, facing camera, the founder and president of Perfect Game USA, talks with ESPN officials at the 2007 PG WWBA World Championships in Jupiter, Florida.

panels for any recruiting or scouting service involving prospective student-athletes.” Half the folks attending showcases to find prospects are college coaches! While I won’t report names and colleges and put any coach at risk of noncompliance with Bylaw Article 11.3.2.5, I will pass on my observations as well as many of their comments anonymously.

* * *

One of the motivations for writing this book was delivered by a Fort Wayne, Indiana, high school coach. When I asked his take on showcases, it became evident he was unfamiliar with showcases in general — at least those with national scope — when he answered with a snort: “Showcases! Those are just a guy who owns a stopwatch who wants to make a quick buck!” I was amazed by his attitude and lack of knowledge concerning the biggest force in baseball. What was more amazing was that I discovered he wasn’t the only high school coach with this attitude. It is my hope that this book will help inform the many coaches who are simply unaware of the enormous value Perfect Game showcases can be to their young charges in the pursuit of their dreams, as well as to be cognizant of the problems showcases pose.

“You never hear anyone saying their daddies took them to their first basketball game. But you hear it all the time with baseball.”

—*Hall-of-Famer Buck O'Neil*

It's Not Your Father's Game Any More: The Rapidly Changing Landscape of Youth Baseball

The beanpole southpaw leaned over and peered in at the catcher to get his sign. Fastball. Low and inside.

The pitcher went into his stretch, checked the runner at first, then lifted his leg and delivered the ball exactly where his battery-mate had called for it and the batter gave a mighty swing at the ninety-three mile an hour heat...

And missed.

"Stee-riiiiike three!" screamed Blue in a raspy voice. He added, "This game's over!" — even though no one was listening — the winners were already rushing the mound and their victorious pitcher and the last batter was trudging back to his dugout, head down.

The southpaw's teammates poured to the mound, like ants after sugar, pummeling the flushed lad, burying him under a pile of sweaty, elated bodies, and dimly, at the bottom of the celebrating mass, the pitcher could hear the roar of the home crowd voicing its approval.

Senior year. Last game against their biggest rival. Conference championship on the line. A two-hit, complete-game shutout. Only two baserunners allowed for the entire game. Seventeen strikeouts. He'd even hit a home run and a double and walked once! The only out he'd made at the plate was a towering fly their center fielder had made at the fence.

Dream game in a dream season.

Later, in the locker room, noisy with jubilant players in various stages of undress, taking showers, replaying the game to each other, the highlights, Coach Kirk Begosee walked over to him. Behind the coach stood two adults, one a