

Minor leaguers with major dreams make game speci

MINOR LEAGUE baseball has a unique way of teaching humility. Eight-hour bus rides, cheap motels, competing for little more than a love of the game and a lot of boyhood dreams. A ballplayer is forced to come to terms with himself. Not just how far his abilities will take him, but what kind of person he is going to be in life.

A few weeks ago I visited Lackawanna County Stadium to interview the Phillies' two most highly touted prospects, first baseman Ryan Howard and pitcher Gavin Floyd. I was curious to see how they were handling the emotional roller coaster of shuttling between the Phillies and the Triple-A Red Barons.

Floyd, who started the season on the Phillies' roster, pitched an impressive 10-4 victory over the Cardinals in his first game. An 11-4 rout by the Braves and two unimpressive relief appearances followed and he was back with Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. Howard was promoted after Phillies' superstar Jim Thome landed on the disabled list in May. He put too much pressure on himself and ended up hitting .200 in his two weeks in Philadelphia.

Both are young players. Howard is 26, and Floyd just 22. The sky is the limit for them. I've seen them play at three different levels and they both have remarkable talent. When I interviewed them I also discovered that they are intelligent, courte-

COMMENTARY

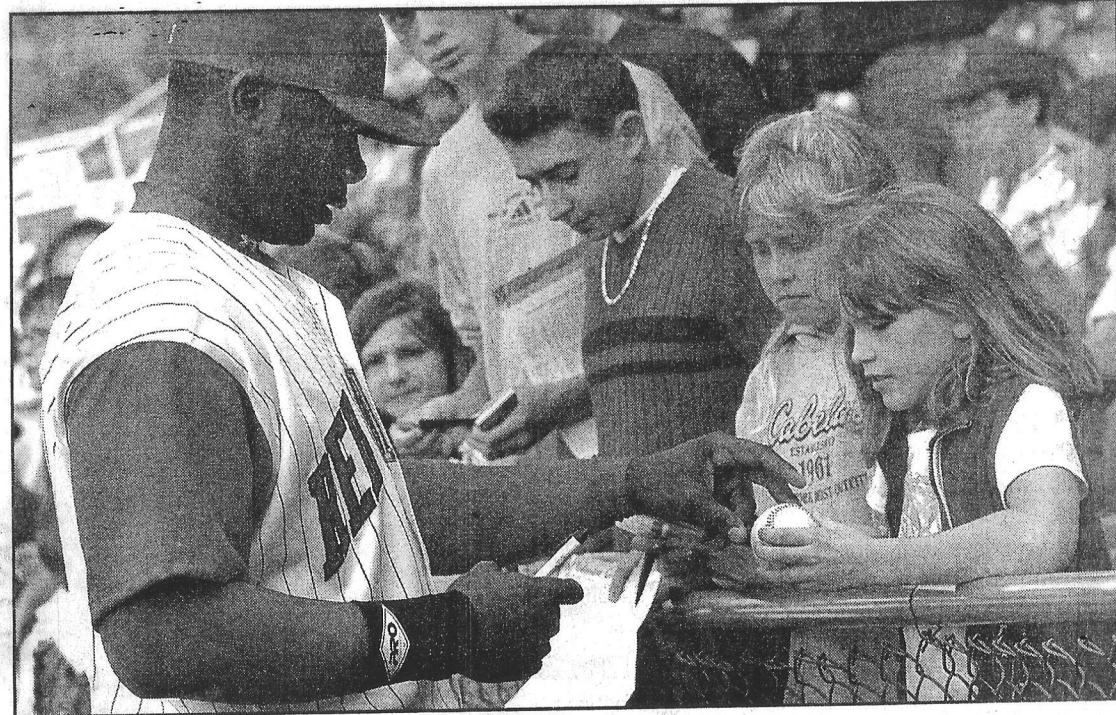
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ous young men with great confidence in their playing abilities. Just as important, they genuinely seem to respect the game and the obligations that come with being a professional athlete.

But only time will tell.

I also met another player who earned even more of my respect. Robert Ellis is a 34-year-old pitcher who's bounced around the minor leagues for 14 years. He arrived in the Scranton area last summer and posted a 5-8 record, including a no-hitter against Louisville. This season has been rougher. A three-week stint on the disabled list reduced his role to part-time scout, chattering pitches in the stands behind home plate.

In 2000 he considered retiring, but when the opportunity arose to pitch in the Mexican League he took it. That summer he lived out of a motel room with his wife and three young children... and loved it. The following year the Arizona Diamondbacks signed him. Ellis found himself on the same pitching staff as Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling en route to a world championship. He also contributed six victories to that effort.



Ryan Howard is among the players on the Red Barons roster who embody the spirit of the game. The first baseman hit .200 in a brief stint with the Phillies, but still holds plenty of big league promise.

Some might think that life hasn't been fair to the easygoing, 6-foot-4 Texan. The thought certainly crossed my mind during our conversation. But he's of a different opinion. "Baseball is a funny game," Ellis said with a smile. "You just can't predict where it's going to take you. If I had quit earlier, I wouldn't have had the experience of playing on a world championship team."

So what keeps Ellis going? It's plain and simple - "I love the game and I love to compete," he

told me. "They're going to have to tear the uniform off my back before I leave it."

Ellis has paid his dues. He's given his all to baseball. Maybe the game will give him something more to remember before his playing days are over. Maybe it won't. Either way, he'll have no regrets.

For every Chase Utley, Jimmy Rollins, and Brett Myers that have worn the Red Barons' pinstripes, there are probably four or five Robert Ellises who have also passed through the organi-

zation. They remind us that life itself is a journey, which is often more rewarding than the ultimate goal.

William Kashatus is a frequent contributor to the Times Leader. He is also the author of several books about baseball, including "September Swoon," the story of Richie Allen and racial integration of the Philadelphia Phillies.

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