

The stuff dreams are made of

Pair of Bay Staters refuse to give up in relentless pursuit of playing pro ball

Most amateur baseball players are no longer living the dream that they may actually play professional ball some day. Yet, every once in a while, a weekend warrior continues to dream and turns his dream into a reality.

Jeff Bercume (Leicester, Mass.) and Jon Shepard (Belmont, Mass.) are two Bay State kids who did just that.

Jeff Bercume

Bercume paid his dues to go pro — literally. The opportunity cost him thousands of dollars.

After graduating from Merrimack College in 2009, Bercume played summer ball in the outfield for the Andre Chiefs in the Intercity League, hitting .301 and leading the league with 22 RBI and 14 stolen bases. Yet the turning point in his quest to play pro came in the middle of the season, when he was not selected in the MLB draft.

"I decided that day that I'd give myself one year to get signed professionally, whether by a major-league organization, (independent) team, in Europe or wherever. I just wanted to give myself the experience of playing pro ball."

During the season, Bercume attended as many open tryouts as he

could, about nine of them. Some, he was invited to; others, he'd just showed up. At none of them did he receive a contract offer. He also sent a letter and corresponding email to every independent league team in the United States and Canada. Come winter, he remained unsigned.

"My college assistant coach suggested I call the California Winter League," Bercume said. "It cost \$3,000 to play 20 games in Palm Springs, but it was run by independent-league coaches. I got jobs caddying, bus-boying, catering, doing everything I could to make the money to get there and pay the fee on my own dime. Going to Cali was a leap of faith. I had confidence in myself, and hopefully somebody would agree with me."

During a game in this showcase league, a scout from the Oakland Athletics happened to be driving by on his way back from a funeral and stopped at the game — and saw Bercume play. This led to the scout coming back for a second game. As luck would have it, Bercume pulled a hamstring that day and had to miss the rest of the season. The scout asked Bercume to call him when he was healthy.

Berthume called the scout at the end of the winter and was invited to attend an extended three-day April tryout in Arizona, again, on his own dime. He was given a 50 percent chance of making the club.

"I bought a plane ticket to Arizona, one way, and found a hotel room. Then, every morning at 5:30 a.m., I walked a mile to the field for my tryout.

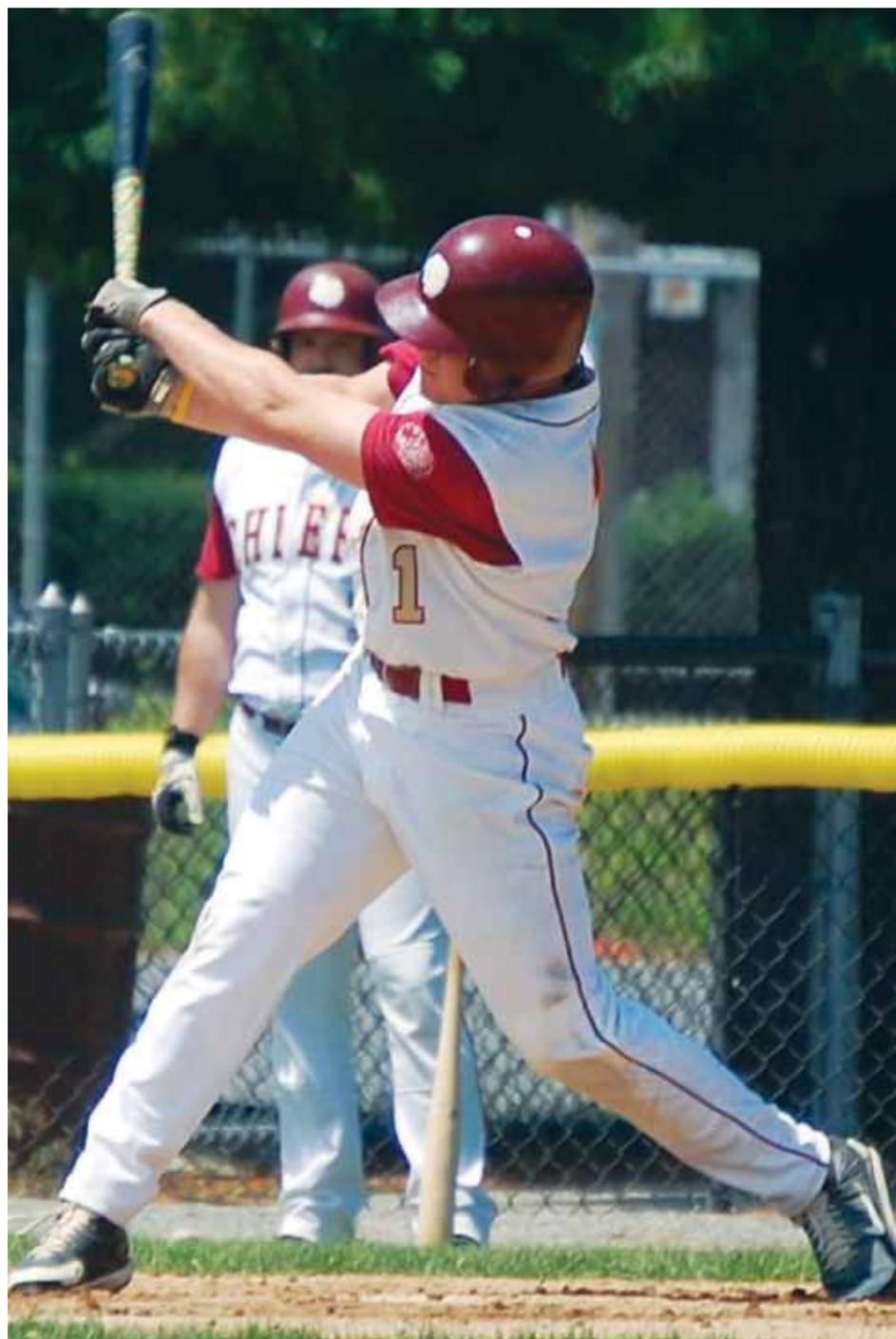
I did OK. What was to be a three-day tryout turned into three weeks. Then I was finally offered a deal."



Brett Rudy



Jeff Bercume



▲ Jeff Bercume played for the Andre Chiefs in 2009, leading the Intercity League with 22 RBI and 14 steals.

In May, Bercume was signed as an undrafted free agent by the Oakland A's and joined their Single-A affiliate Vancouver Canadians. Now,

he's in his second professional season, playing A-ball again, this time with the Vermont Lake Monsters in the New York-Penn League.

"Here, every day, pitchers are tossing 90 miles an hour, and the hitters are hitting with considerable power," Bercume said of playing

Photos/Chuck Andre (Bercume); courtesy of Jon Shepard (Shepard)



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pro ball. "But there is not as much polish as in the Intercity League, where the guys know what they are doing. The cool thing about the Intercity League was that it prepared me so I didn't show up pro and feel over my head. I had faced guys who played pro before, or threw 90 before. It built my confidence. Pro guys don't have jetpacks. They make mistakes just like everybody else."

Bercume recognizes that his destiny as a professional baseball player is not fully up to him.

"You can only control what you can control," he said. "I can control when I get to field and control that I am playing as hard as I can. Every ounce of me wants to play baseball for my entire life. In reality, most minor leaguers never play one game in the major leagues. When my professional career is done, the opportunity to be able to play for the Chiefs again is a real possibility. You can't just quit baseball."

Jon Shepard

Not being drafted can feel like you're on a sinking ship, but Shepard is a submariner that stayed afloat.

Shepard finished his career at Wheaton College last year with a 1.04 ERA and nine saves, limiting opponents to a .168 batting average, and earning himself All-American honors. Yet, he didn't get drafted as he had hoped.

"After I got All-American, I thought I'd get drafted," Shepard said, "but I didn't hear anything from the June draft and that was disappointing, and a little sad."

So Shepard went to work for Game7 Sports Training, where his boss, Kevin McGovern, also was owner of the Malden Bulldogs in the Boston Yawkey League. McGovern recruited Shepard to join the Bull-



dogs for the summer. Shepard put up strong numbers. In 21⅓ innings pitched, he allowed just 13 hits with 24 strikeouts, and led the league with eight saves.

"While I was playing for Malden, I was hoping scouts would call," he said.

"I wanted to get into independent baseball. I would go to lots of local tryouts. There were also some in the Midwest, and some in California, but it was too expensive to get out there. I ended up at a tryout in Brockton, 20 minutes away, that I didn't expect would go so well. Nothing happened in other tryouts because people would throw harder than me because I'm a submariner. It was pretty much luck and being better on that day to beat out the others."

Shepard was signed by the New

York Federals in the independent Can-Am League for the 2011 season. The Federals are a traveling team without a home field. The team is primarily viewed as a developmental team that feeds other teams in

the league. If you perform well on a traveling team, another Can-Am team will pick you up. The Rockland Boulders — based in Pomona, N.Y. — did exactly that by acquiring Shepard after he earned the win in two victories against them while pitching for the Federals in June. He remains with the Boulders today.

"It wasn't an easy road," Shepard said. "There were lots of obstacles. Instead of feeling down when I wasn't drafted, or giving up, I kept trying to play baseball as long as I could. I knew opportunities would



Jon Shepard

◀ Submarine pitcher Jon Shepard joined the Malden Bulldogs after wrapping his career at Wheaton College last year.

be slim, but they ultimately got me to where I am right now."

When asked about how the Bulldogs prepared him for professional baseball, Shepard gave his amateur experience props.

"The Yawkey League taught me to throw strikes and gave me confidence," he said. "Whether it's amateur or pro, it's the same exact thing. The game doesn't change. You can't try to do too much."

On adapting to the higher level of talent, Shepard added: "While pro ball may have better batters as a whole, they are still human. You have to trust your stuff, trust your catcher, and just throw the ball. Every guy in the league was a No. 3 or No. 4 batter wherever they played amateur, but I'm here, too. So I just pitch the ball. If you get it, I tip my cap. But I'm not gonna change anything. The strike zone is the same here as it is everywhere."

Focus is also important to Shepard: "Baseball is a mental game. I go one pitch at a time. Even one batter at a time is too much. I focus on the pitch at hand. I take care of the 'right now.' I want to focus on what I can control."

Shepard recognizes that professional baseball won't last forever.

"I would love to go back to the Bulldogs someday because I have an absolute love for the game," he said. "I plan to play for the rest of my life, whether it's a 50-plus league, or on the beach playing Wiffle ball. Baseball is not a game you can just put down." **B**

Brett Rudy is the founder of the Boston Amateur Baseball Network. He can be reached at bostonbb@bostonbaseball.com

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