

The Growth of the Atlantic Baseball League

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Abstract

Detailing the emergence of the Atlantic League, an independent Minor League Baseball organization. Research and interviews present the player development taking place in the Atlantic League, the emergence of experimental rule changes in the Atlantic League, and a partnership between the Atlantic League and Major League Baseball. Includes first person perspectives from Atlantic League President Rick White and Atlantic League Umpire Buzz Albert.

The Atlantic Baseball League is an independent professional baseball organization that, since founded in 1998, has evolved into a premiere professional baseball organization. From player development to Big League partnerships, the stock of the Atlantic League is trending upwards. With this positive trajectory, the Atlantic League continues to expand, as the League has now been independently contracted by Major League Baseball to implement experimental rule changes which may one day make their way to the highest level of professional baseball. From the independent nature of the league which is structured to help even the most obscure players make a name for themselves, to the rule changes which are shifting the tides of the game entirely, this is the story of the Atlantic League of Professional Baseball.

Redemption Through Development

The landscape of professional Minor League baseball is extremely saturated, and in turn overly competitive. With so many players striving for their opportunity to be promoted to the Major League level, it is easy for players to fall through the cracks. The Atlantic League offers a newfound opportunity for players that were not successful in Major League affiliated Minor League clubs. Meaning, whereas each Major League team has Minor League clubs, known as a farm system, the Atlantic League is an organization completely independent from Major League Baseball. Atlantic League President Rick White helped to explain the dynamic between the League and its players. White explains how there has never been a single player that has began their professional career in the Atlantic League. Every single player in the League has at some point been involved with a Major League organization, or another independent league. White also

discusses the scope of the Atlantic League's success, noting that roughly 950 players have gone onto receive Minor League contracts after playing in the Atlantic League, with 150 of those players reaching the Major League level. Notable players such as Tike Redman, Mark Hendrickson, and Rich Hill, have all used the Atlantic League to rehabilitate their professional careers, each having gone on to see significant playing time in the Major Leagues.

No Longer Playing By The Rules

Beyond player development and promotion, the Atlantic League has become a testing ground for a completely different aspect of the game of baseball. It was announced in March 2019 that the Atlantic League and Major League Baseball had come to a three-year agreement, with the Atlantic League promising to test a series of rule changes that MLB would then analyze to see if they would be adaptable to the Major League game. The proposed rule changes and subsequent usage of them in in-game scenarios included bigger bases, a three-batter minimum for pitchers, the elimination of defensive shifts, and most notably, an automatic strike zone which uses computer technology to determine whether a pitch is a ball or strike. Though these experiments were just that, their implementation caused great pushback from traditional baseball fans. Atlantic League Umpire Buzz Albert allowed for a first-person perspective regarding the ABS (Automatic Balls and Strikes) experiments. Albert has been an Atlantic League umpire for 13 seasons and has called tens of thousands of balls and strikes. He explains how, though not eliminating the need for an umpire, the implementation of ABS has resulted in significantly less responsibility for umpires. Whereas balls and strikes are typically decided upon the judgment of the umpire, ABS does it automatically, simply relaying the correct

call into an earpiece worn by the home plate umpire. Although widely objected, Albert was not critical of the ABS experiments, stating that he understands that baseball is only trying to provide the best fan experience possible. That said, Albert does not believe that ABS will actually ever be implemented by Major League Baseball.

Atlantic League's Partnership with Major League Baseball

When researching the Atlantic League and their recent partnership with Major League Baseball, the question of why they, of all Minor League organizations, had been chosen. As Rick White explains, his experience with this partnership began when he came on board as President. Initially, White says, the Atlantic League teamed with Major League Baseball to create a "transfer agreement." This agreement required the Atlantic League to "Move three to four dozen players every year from the Atlantic League to Major League Baseball organizations." This was an attempt to build certainty, pricing, and growth for the Atlantic League, while also building a relationship with Major League Baseball. After half a decade of constant contact between Major League Baseball and the Atlantic League, a major development took place. During the 2018 League meetings, it was in fact Major League Baseball that solicited the help of the Atlantic League in the implementation and experimentation of these rule changes. This recognition from Major League Baseball is an opportunity that White describes as "Not just a formal recognition of the Atlantic League, but a pragmatic recognition of the skill set of Atlantic League players."

Conclusion

Though the Atlantic League did not play baseball in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their continued growth in years to come is to be expected. With a great

emphasis placed on player development and career revitalization, coupled with an exclusive partnership with Major League

Baseball which ensures the popularity of the league for future generations, there is only room to grow.

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