



**UNDER ARMOUR PRE-SEASON ALL-AMERICA TOURNAMENT
ARTICLE REPRINT FROM MLB.COM AND MiLB.COM WEB SITES**

High schools' best start on their quest

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By Jim Street / MLB.com

TUCSON, Ariz. -- The lanky teenage right-hander from Gahanna, Ohio stood on the same mound used by a pair of Cy Young Award winners, went into his windup and threw a fastball that bore in on the batter.

A radar gun located on a screen-protected table behind home plate registered the speed of the pitch and several feet behind the table, behind the backstop, a hand-held digital camera captured the moment.

"When your kid is on the mound, you are a little more nervous than if it was somebody else's kid out there," Steve Curl said. "But when you think about how large this country is, and how many kids there are from one tip to the other, it's exciting to have your son selected to participate in an event like this." With a wild imagination, Ryan Curl, a senior at St. Francis Desales, could have put himself in the shoes of Diamondbacks pitchers Randy Johnson or Brandon Webb, both of whom have thrown pitches off the Field 2 mound at the Kino Sports Complex, the Spring Training home of the D-backs and White Sox.

But on this crisp mid-January Sunday morning, the 6-foot-2, 190-pound Curl, who primarily plays center field for his high school team, was focused on throwing strikes and having fun with some of his peers who, someday, just might be playing in the Major Leagues.

That is the bottom-line goal of all 254 high school players who were invited to participate in the Under Armour Pre-Season All-America Tournament, powered by Baseball Factory/Team One.

Each of the eight teams played two six-inning games Sunday, ending a three-day event that showcased some of the best young talent in the continental United States, and also unofficially kicked off the 2008 baseball season.

The teams consisted of 14 to 16 players representing specific regions of the country. Pitchers were limited to six batters and hitters who walked received another at-bat, a rule instituted two years ago after one player walked in all seven of his tournament at-bats.

The participants returned to their respective homes Sunday night, no doubt dreaming of their weekend in the desert, where they could measure their skills against other top-caliber competition.

More than 30 scouts from 17 Major League organizations attended the tournament, along with several college coaches who came from near and far to check out talent from 38 states. Every player invited to the showcase event has the ability to play Division I college baseball or professional baseball.

"I wish I had eyes in the back of my head because I know when I'm watching something on one field, I'm missing something on another field," said Tim Thiessen, three months into his position as head baseball coach at Fresno Pacific University, an NAIA college in central California.

"This is the first time I have been to this event and it's unbelievable," he added. "There are more than 250 kids here and they all can play. I feel like I'm in heaven on earth right now."

The cloverleaf of fields enabled four games to be played simultaneously.



David Wright is one of the Major Leaguers who once displayed his wares at the tournament (Ed Betz/AP)



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Players, scouts, coaches, parents and baseball fans braved near-freezing weather early Sunday morning to attend the final day of the nine-year-old event. Frost delayed the 8 a.m. start about 30 minutes, but it turned out to be another sun-splashed day with non-stop action.

Tracking and dodging the foul balls hit behind the four backstops was an adventure, but when the final pitch was thrown mid-afternoon, clearly the mission had been accomplished.

"The main goals of this event are to identify some of the top high school players in the country and reward them by selecting them as Preseason All-Americans, get them as much exposure as possible to (professional) scouts, give them some experience against a high level of competition and help get them ready to roll for their seasons," said Jason Budden, the vice president and marketing director for Baseball Factory, a 14-year organization that provides high school players with "the very best instruction, tournament competition and college planning and guidance."

Each of the players at this event will receive his own page on the Team One Internet site, which can be e-mailed to college coaches and/or professional organizations. A two- to three-minute video, along with the text, will be gathered from a Saturday morning workout, Saturday afternoon game and the Sunday doubleheader.

Among the participants:

Andy Burns: The shortstop/third baseman is rated as the top player in Colorado and 38th overall by *Baseball America*.

Jaff Decker: Outfielder/left-handed pitcher has topped 90 mph with his fastball and is considered a legitimate two-way player, demonstrating gap power on offense.

Niko Vasquez: The shortstop out of Las Vegas is regarded as one of the top infield prospects in the country.

Matt Ramsey: The Farragut High (Knoxville, Tenn.) senior has committed to the University of Tennessee. The scouting report says "Interesting pitcher/catcher combination and does both well."

"Projection is always a tough thing," said Steve Bernhardt, the executive vice president of baseball operations for Baseball Factory. "If you are not used to this kind of environment, it can be intimidating."

"For a lot of these guys, it's their first taste of something of this magnitude and they want to be at their best. That (pressure) can make it difficult to perform at their best in the short window of a weekend, but it's a great experience for them."

Ramsey was all smiles as he approached the end of the tournament.

"It has been a lot of fun, a great experience," he said. "My goals coming in were to play hard, give it everything I have and have a good time. I couldn't wait to get out here and start playing again."

Every baseball career is a series of stepping stones, and this is just one of them along the way. Some of the players in this tournament will be selected in June's First-Year Player Draft. Others might get drafted, but decide to attend college.

And some figure to join the Team One Showcase graduates who have reached the Major Leagues.

The list of 175 includes Mets All-Star third baseman David Wright, Athletics third baseman Eric Chavez, 2003 American League Cy Young Award winner Roy Halladay of the Blue Jays, along with up-and-coming stars Delmon Young, recently traded to the Twins from the Rays, and Lastings Milledge, now of the Nationals.

It's impossible to know right now whether Ryan Curl will eventually join that exclusive club.

But for a part of Sunday morning, he was on top of the world.

This story was not subject to the approval of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues or its clubs.