

This is a tale of two players. Two different college players from different areas of the country, one from the north and one from the south. Two players that found themselves playing in the SANDLOTT Wood Bat League in Nashville, TN. Both of the players shared the same dream, the dream of many high school and college players, the dream to play professional baseball. This is a true story. A story filled with ironies, twists and turns and a moral that proves that persistence and hard work are the keys to making it to the pro baseball ranks.

Luke Lambeau was a pitcher from Iona College in New Rochelle, NY. Luke originally from Connecticut pitched in 2003 for the Stingers in the SANDLOTT Wood Bat League. Luke had a great year in 2003 and Stinger Coach Cliff Terracuso quickly realized that Luke was potentially a professional pitcher. Coach Cliff Terracuso had moved to Nashville to accept an assistant coaching job at Lipscomb University and also coach in the SANDLOTT Wood Bat League. Cliff himself a solid player from south Florida had played his summer baseball for Fred Ferrara the head of International Scouting for the Florida Marlins. Cliff called his old coach Mr. Ferrara and told him about the great summer that Luke was having. Fred invited Luke down to Florida to work with his assistant scout Randy Kearce during spring training. In addition to scouting Randy Kearce was coaching a team in the semi-pro Florida Federal League that plays a winter schedule. After watching Luke pitch in his first Federal League game Randy shared Cliff's opinion that Luke was indeed potentially a professional pitcher. Luke continued to work out with Randy Kearce during Marlins spring training camp that had just started up for the 2004 season. Randy told Luke that he and Mr. Ferrara could possibly find a place for him in the Marlins organization but in the meantime coaches from the Northeast League an independent professional league were in southern Florida for tryouts and spring training for the Northeast League. The Northeast League is an equivalent to double A organizational ball and teams feature players from rookies to ex-major leaguers. Randy arranged a workout for Luke in the Northeast League spring training camp. Immediately Luke impressed the New Jersey Jackels and was offered a Northeast League contract with the Jackels. Randy Kearce advised Luke to sign the contract since nothing seemed to be opening up within the Marlins organization. Luke signed and then stayed in Florida to play with Randy's Federal League team so that he'd be in shape to report to the Jackels the first week of May.

Nick Hiter was a catcher in the SANDLOTT Wood Bat League for the Twitty Birds. Nick from Nashville had played at Trevecca University in Nashville. Cliff Terracuso had watched Nick all summer as he played against his Stingers team. Once again Cliff gave Fred Ferrara a call and told him that Nick Hiter like Luke Lambeau could play at the

professional level. Fred decided to invite Nick down to Florida for spring training and see first hand if he shared Cliff's opinion concerning Nick's ability to play as a pro. Fred asked Randy Kearce to add Nick to his Federal League team roster so they could watch him play at game speed. Nick's first appearance was in a game Luke was scheduled to pitch. Luke and Nick recorded a win for Randy's team and Nick smacked two hits including a double and threw out the only runner that attempted to steal. Randy invited Nick to stay in Florida for the rest of spring training to see if something would open up within the Marlins organization. Nick's luck wasn't as good as good as Luke's. The Marlin's spring training camp wrapped up and Nick still had no contract and nowhere to go. Randy continued to encourage Nick and told him that he would try to get him into extended spring training. He also told Nick that he'd make some calls on his behalf to some of the independent league teams that he knew. Nick told Randy that he'd stay one more week and see if something opened up. With only a few days left before he palned to come home former Twins major leaguer Jarvis Brown returned Randy's call. Jarvis had taken the job as manager for a new expansion team in the Northeast League the New Haven County Cutters. He told Randy that he could make no promises of a roster spot but invited Nick to Connecticut to spring camp with the Cutters. There would be four catchers reporting and the club would only keep two but it was a shot. Two of the players had significant organizational minor league experience and the other rookie had been drafted by one of the major league teams so his chances were slim but he had little to lose and would get a fair shot to make the roster. Nick played well in the pre-season New Haven Camp, especially defensively. The last day of preseason Nick went to the locker room to see the results of the final cut. Two New Haven County Cutter uniforms were hanging in his locker and two of the other three catchers were headed home.

Meanwhile, Luke was set to report to the New Jersey Jackels training camp. Unexpectedly, Luke got a call from the manager of the Aces of the Northeast League to tell him that he'd been traded to the Aces by New Jersey and he should report to them instead. The Aces were a last minute replacement for the Allentown Northeast league team that had ceased operations. The Aces would be a road team playing all their games on the road and they needed pitching. Their roster was being hastily filled and the best way to do that was thru trades and aquisitions from other Northeast League teams. As the season began Luke made his way from the bullpen to a starting role for the Aces. Poor defense and a weak offense for the first year team sent them into the season with a losing record. The Aces answer to the problem was to bring in additional players and release most of the players that were signed for the 2004 season. Despite good stats, Luke was one of the players the Aces decided to release. Disillusioned Luke moved back to

his parents home in Connecticut.

As Luke made his way home, the New Haven Cutters were leading the Northeast league in their division and had posted a impressive winning record, including nine straight wins beginning opening day. Nick's playing time was sparse during the first half as manager Jarvis Brown elected to catch Adam Shorsher, a very competent catcher with two year's organizational minor league experience. Plus, Shorsher was on fire at the plate. He was second on the team in batting average and second in home runs. The Cutters lead the league from opening day until the last day of the of the first half when they lost and the New Jersey Jackels won tying the win-loss record of the two teams. There would be a one game playoff for the first half championship. The Cutters lost the playoff game and proceeded to go on a losing skid that put them behind in league standings to begin the second half of the season. Jarvis Brown needed to make some changes. Three pitchers had already visited Jarvis in the clubhouse to request that Nick Hiter catch them when they pitched. Jarvis agreed and Nick began catching about half the time. Nick's numbers got better as he played on a more regular basis. The Cutters win loss record was better when Nick was behind the plate and the team ERA was a full run lower when Nick caught. Several other trades beefed up the Cutters staff but Jarvis Brown needed one more relief pitcher to get back on a winning track. Jarvis Brown's confidence had grown with Nick's experience and Nick's comfortability with Jarvis had grown to the point that he felt comfortable to ask Jarvis to give Luke Lambeau a tryout. Luke was in Connecticut at his parents home and jumped at the chance to throw a bullpen for Jarvis. Nick's recommendation of Lambeau was validated by what Jarvis saw and Luke was signed to finish the season with the Cutters.

As the last game of the season approached Luke had established himself as the best pitcher out of the pen and the Nick played in situations that required solid defense but also was called on as a DH sometimes when he was not catching. Luke was being utilized in late innings when the game was on the line. Nick was throwing out runners at an outstanding rate of 48% and his batting average continued to climb with his playing time. Nick got the start on the final day of the season as the DH and Luke was slated to close. The game was a see saw battle with the lead swapping back and forth as each inning unfolded. Cutter's first baseman Hector Lebron was ejected arguing a call in the seventh and Nick was brought in from the DH role to play first base. Luke came in to pitch in the eighth with the game tied. Luke pitched a scoreless eighth and repeated with a scoreless ninth. Nick lead off the bottom ninth with a one out single. Nick moved to second after a hit by second baseman PJ Johnston. The next Cutter batter was walked intentionally when the Elmira Pioneers coach realized that Luke was slated to bat

since the Cutter's had killed their DH position when Nick had come in to play first base. Two outs, the bases loaded and the score tied pitcher Luke Lambeau stepped to the plate. After a swing and a foul ball the count was 0-2. On the next pitch Luke ripped a fast ball to center as Nick scampered home with the winning run. Nick Hiter had gone 4 for 5 with a double, two rbi's and two runs scored. Luke Lambeau had pitched two scoreless innings and had smacked in the winning run. Luke Lambeau and Nick Hiter were announced as co-MVPs of the final game of the season.

But this does not end the tale of two players. Luke Lambeau and Nick Hiter had beaten the odds. Neither of them had been drafted and neither of them were expected to play pro baseball despite good college numbers. The one common thread between Nick and Luke was the SANDLOTT Wood Bat League and Cliff Terracuso's belief in their abilities. But the biggest factor was their belief in themselves and the persistence it took to do whatever was necessary to get that one opportunity to play pro baseball. Weeks of training in Florida with no promise of even a shot at pro ball. Keeping their eyes focused on their goal when no scouts saw the talent in them. Players are evaluated on five skills. foot speed, arm strength, hitting, hitting for power and overall makeup as a player. The one attribute that cannot be measured is the heart of the player.

Nick Hiter was the first player signed for the 2005 season for the New Haven County Cutters. Luke Lambeau has recently signed also with the Cutters for 2005. Two different roads lead two different players to the same place. The place of their dreams as a professional baseball player.

Good luck and God bless,

Mickey Hiter

SANDLOTT Baseball