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Local high school baseball players hurt by the low number of Arizona college programs



May 14, 2013 - Scottsdale Notre Dame Prep's Nick Affronti in their win over Sunnyslope in their Division II Baseball championship game.

David Kadlubowski/azcentral sports

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By Zach Buchanan

azcentral sports

Thu May 16, 2013 10:35 PM

Scottsdale Notre Dame first baseman Nick Affronti has accepted the fact that his college recruitment isn't going as well as he'd like. Fresh off winning a Division II state title and batting .462 for the season, the 6-foot-2, 217-pound senior knows he's good enough to be playing major college baseball.

He just doesn't know why no one else seems to agree. Coaches give him positive reviews, but don't follow up with offers.

"It's more just that I want to know why," Affronti said. "If coaches contacting me weren't interested and said, 'You just don't have the skill level that we're looking for,' then I would understand. But I haven't heard anything."

Affronti's dilemma is hardly unique. In fact, it's surprisingly common among Arizona high school baseball players, despite the area being such a hotbed for talent.

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Chandler Seton Catholic coach Marty Maier, who also coached at the junior-college level for nine years at Phoenix College, thinks Arizona ballplayers are at a unique disadvantage when it comes to college opportunities — namely, there aren't enough of them in-state.

Arizona has just four four-year colleges that have baseball programs, the sixth-fewest in the nation despite being 15th in population. Arizona's baseball quartet of the University of Arizona, Arizona State, Grand Canyon University and Arizona Christian is the same amount of baseball schools in Delaware, and trails other, smaller states like New Mexico (six), Vermont (seven), Rhode Island (seven) and North and South Dakota (eight each).

"When you start playing high school baseball in Arizona, if you want to continue playing at a four-year school, at some point you're going to leave the state," Maier said. "The odds just say that 90 percent of guys are going to leave the state because there's nowhere to play."

Compounding the problem, somewhat paradoxically, is the fact that two of those four in-state programs — ASU and UA — are two of the better in the nation. The Sun Devils and Wildcats recruit nationally for the cream of the baseball crop, narrowing the opportunities for in-state players.

Of the 33 players on the UA baseball roster, only 13 are from Arizona. For ASU, just 14 of 34 Sun Devils are homegrown products.

"It's not very helpful having ASU and U of A be the top baseball teams in the country," Affronti said. "It's really, really competitive."

Players of Affronti's caliber — able to play Division I baseball somewhere, but maybe not at the top-tier programs — are caught in a limbo thanks to out-of-state tuition costs and scholarship restrictions on collegiate baseball programs.

NCAA baseball programs are allowed 11.7 athletic scholarships to dole out among a roster of more than 30 players. The key positions — pitcher, shortstop, catcher and centerfielder — are most likely to get scholarship money, while corner infielders and outfielders get less, if any.

That means a first baseman like Affronti must earn academic scholarships and, if playing out-of-state, pay a higher tuition. College coaches can just as easily find a first baseman or a left fielder in the nearest metropolis rather than do some financial gymnastics to get a similar player with an Arizona driver's license.

"Let's say it's Kansas State or Missouri State," Maier said. "Whoever it may be, they're in a city or in a community with suburbs and all that, somebody's got somebody who is a slugger that you're going to park at first base. Why am I going to pay money to go get a guy and bring him in?"

The options left for many players are to go out of state to a lower-division college and play without a scholarship, stay in Arizona and play at the junior-college level, or stop playing altogether.

Affronti has had several Division III teams interested in him, including Trinity in San Antonio, Texas, but the tuition demands are just too much. He has a spot waiting for him at Arizona Western College in Yuma, but is holding off on making that decision while he hopes for a late-breaking Division I offer.

Other players Affronti played with growing up have taken other routes. Michael Salazar, designated hitter on Division I champion Scottsdale Desert Mountain, used a recruiting service to land a spot at the University of Dubuque in Iowa. Many aren't willing to move that far away.

"I don't want to go all the way out to Ohio," Affronti said. "It's just not a place for me to go. I want to stay around my family, where my dad can come watch me play."

Maier has a solution, but admits it will never come to pass, and certainly not for the purpose of improving the college prospects of local baseball players. But in a perfect world, he'd see some of the more populous local community colleges — such as the 25,000-student Mesa Community College and the 16,000-student Gateway Community College — expanded to four-year schools.

That way, you'd prevent a large chunk of the state's students — baseball players included — from leaving the state to find a college education.

"You're sending all these kids and their pocketbooks out of state to go to college," Maier said. "Dumb."

That's just wishful thinking to Maier, and he knows the situation for Arizona baseball players won't improve much soon. He'll continue working the phones to try to place his kids in college programs, and Affronti will keep waiting for the phone to ring.

He won't be alone. His teammate Ryan Scott, whom Affronti thinks is the best catcher in the state, will be waiting too.

"A lot of kids just get looked over, these amazing players," Affronti said. "I've played with a ton of them. I've played with so many kids growing up where I go, 'Wow that kid, he's better than I am. He's going D-I.' And I see them going to Gateway and I see them going to Scottsdale Community College. And it's like, wow, my future doesn't look too bright."



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