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## 15. PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL-SCOUTS DIG DEEP

by Sean McAdam  
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The stakes are higher, the cost is greater, and the secrets are fewer. But for those that make their living as scouts, beating baseball's bushes for amateur talent, the charge is still the same; find and sign as many good players as possible. "Really, what a scout gets paid for is to recognize and categorize talent in his area," offers Tom Mooney, who has scouted for the Seattle Mariners and Houston Astros. "You're looking at everyone from the most talented player in the area to a player who's going to be a college senior who could fill out a minor league pitching staff. It's all about identifying and evaluating talent." That hasn't changed, but most everything associated with scouting has. The tools have gone "high-tech", from radar guns to computers. And it's no longer enough to see how well a prospect throws, hits and runs. Now, it's vital that a scout knows how a potential draftee thinks, reacts under pressure and responds to failure. This is the information age, and scouts want to be as well-informed about a high school senior or college junior as they can be. "The kid with a lot of talent is going to have success," says J.P. Ricciardi, a former scout who now serves as a special assistant to Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane. "But it's the intangibles that can make the difference. You almost have to be a little bit of a detective these days. You have to dig and find out." Mooney agrees. "Scouts are spending more time in the home with Mom and Dad," he says. "A lot of teams are giving different tests, trying to figure out what kind of kid they're dealing with. More and more, mental makeup is very important.

Because baseball finds so many of its future players at the high school level, the margin for error is enormous. Unlike basketball or football scouts who evaluate mostly college players, baseball scouts are often trying to project the career upside for a 17-year-old, who hasn't yet attended his senior prom. That can be a risky venture to begin with, but with other variables such as maturity, self confidence and upbringing factored in, the task becomes all the more complicated. "When you are watching a 17 year old kid who's dominating at the high school level," explains Mooney, "as a scout you have to take him off that high school field and think about him in the Florida State league, competing against the best kids from Florida, California, and Texas. What happens when he has his first long slump? Does he give up? Does he work harder?" A thorough knowledge of a player's personality and work habits helps a scout determine how he might handle both adversity and fortune down the road.

Gone are the days when a scout might stumble upon a terrific talent, then keep him hidden away until draft day. "There are few secrets anymore." Ricciardi says. "Everybody knows who the best players are. But the scout who does his homework can walk away with from a potential problem. That's what separates the really good scout from all the others" The recruiting process can be long and arduous, and thanks to competition from other sports, at times fruitless. Baseball may be offering bigger signing

bonuses than ever before, but in all but a handful of cases, becoming a professional baseball player means spending at least a couple of years in the sports trenches, riding the buses from one small minor league town to another. For a generation that has grown up watching Sports Center and defining success by the amount of national TV exposure one gets, baseball doesn't have a lot to offer -- initially. "The money might look good from our standpoint, up front," says Ricciardi. "But if they play baseball (out of high school), they've passed on four years in college, playing in front of 70,000, being on ESPN. We lose a lot of athletes because we don't have that immediate glamour. We're a grind-it-out kind of sport, and some kids don't have that patience."

Naturally, money has made an impact on scouting, changing the process just as surely as it has changed every other aspect of the game. "You're talking about \$1-to-\$2 million now for a first round pick," says Ricciardi. "The pressure to be right was always there, but with that money, it's that much more." Ricciardi, who has served as an area scout and national cross checker with the A's, signed seven players who made it to the Major Leagues. None cost more than \$50,000. Now, that kind of money is routinely offered to 15th round picks. As is the case on the major-league level, the revenue disparity between teams creates an uneven playing field in the draft. Small market teams get eaten up by their large market brethren when it comes to competing for "multi-sport" stars who have bargaining leverage. "The rich clubs can squash other teams," Ricciardi says. "They can overpay the kids."

Conversely small market teams can't afford to be as patient as those with deeper pockets and a slower time table. As a result, they're more likely to go with college players, who are by definition, older and more experienced, and in theory, closer to making the jump to the big leagues and cheaper to sign. But beyond the obligatory hurdles and complications, a scout's primary function is to find talent. Increasingly, pitching dominates the search, since it's so difficult to develop and so expensive to acquire. Teams are far more willing to take a gamble on drafting a tough-to-sign pitcher than a third baseman. "Personally," says Ricciardi, "I like athletes -- middle-of-the-diamond guys -- center fielders, shortstops, and catchers. They're playing positions where they can really make an impact on your club, and they are few and far between." Mooney concurs; stressing that athletic ability is paramount. Both are less interested in how good a player is now than they are in how good he's going to be. "I look for a guy who has room to get better," says Ricciardi. "You're always torn between performance and projection," another scout says. Many scouts have noticed a deterioration of skills in high school and college players. That's partially a function of baseball having lost ground to basketball and football, for the nation's best athletes, and also a reflection of the competition for leisure time. Only the most dedicated players ignore the temptations offered by home computers, MTV and video games. But the quality players are still out there. More expensive perhaps, and maybe less refined. But still there. "The challenge," says Mooney, "is to get the right player in the right round. What makes a successful scout and organization is maximizing every pick in every round."