

M.L.B. DRAFT

Baseball's Efforts in China May Show Up at the Draft

Players from China have signed as international free agents, but a new wave of recruits is trying a different path: attending a U.S. college to become eligible for the draft.

By Brad Lefton

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — None of the hundred or so fans at a recent Ban Johnson summer collegiate league game here felt compelled to leap from their lawn chairs to applaud when a batter, known just by the nickname DJ, stopped at second base on a ball he had ripped down the first-base line. It was a routine play that required DJ, the team's fastest runner, to suppress his desire to leg out a triple in favor of doing what the situation dictated rather than risking an inning-ending out at third.

But when that story was relayed to Ray Chang, DJ's high school coach 7,000 miles away in Nanjing, China, Chang was bursting with pride.

"That's awesome. I love hearing that," Chang, who was born and raised in the United States, said by phone. "Our main focus is talking about the ins and outs and the strategies of the game because when these kids come to us, they are so far behind where a U.S. kid would be in terms of experience playing and watching the game."

Chang is the manager of baseball operations for Major League Baseball's player development initiative in China, a program offering academic and baseball schooling to students from seventh grade through high school. The first development center was established in Wuxi in 2009. Additional centers have opened in Changzhou (2011) and Nanjing (2014). Chang, also the head coach at the Nanjing center, has been working in China full-time since 2017, when he retired from a 12-season minor league career that began in the San Diego Padres organization.



DJ's first name on visa documents is Fnu, a State Department term that means First Name Unknown. Amy Kontras for The New York Times

DJ, his former student, is a 24-year-old native of Qinghai, a province in the autonomous region of Tibet, who is identified on his visa documents as Fnu Suonandajie. Fnu is not a name, however, as it stands for First Name Unknown, a term used by the State Department for foreigners with an unknown given name. And Suonandajie is not a family name: It was given to him by a monk when he was a child. He rectified that cultural difference by asking Americans to call him DJ.

At 5 feet 8 inches and 184 pounds, DJ plays center field and bats leadoff. He did not play baseball until he was nearly 10, but was discovered in 2011 by M.L.B. recruiters who scour China for promising athletes to send to their middle school program in Changzhou.

The recruiters were initially impressed by DJ's foot speed and throwing accuracy, a skill he attributes to hurling rocks at domestic yaks to encourage them to stop grazing. He says it is a common task of Tibetan children, with a goal of having the rock land close enough to the yaks to startle them into moving along without actually hitting them.

M.L.B.'s recruiters are working to open the world's biggest market to a sport it knows little about. The goal is to find players who can help build enthusiasm there, the way the Chinese basketball player Yao Ming ignited interest in the N.B.A. in China after he signed with the Houston Rockets in 2002.

A friend of DJ's gave him a bracelet that reads "Drink Hot Water" to celebrate his Asian heritage. Amy Kontras for The New York Times

Unsurprisingly, DJ says basketball, soccer, tennis and table tennis would have been his likely playing choices had baseball not come calling. Instead, he graduated from the development center's high school program in Nanjing, where he was coached by Chang. He came to the United States, earned a roster spot as a walk-on at Los Angeles Harbor College, and graduated from the community college last year with an associate degree in communications. Shortly before Thanksgiving, he was awarded a full scholarship to play baseball for Rockhurst University, a Division II school in Kansas City.

"I like the idea of pitcher versus batter, just me against him," DJ said of his passion for baseball before a recent Ban Johnson league game. "My first game in the summer league this year, I strike out first three at-bats, but when I get another chance, I was like, 'You got me the first three, but I got this one,' and I squared that ball and hit it in the gap. I flipped my bat and I said to myself, 'I got you.' That kind of idea that you just don't give up until the last out, I really like that."

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By attending college in the United States, DJ and a few other players represent a new pathway in the development process that could ultimately lead to a watershed moment in M.L.B.'s foray into China: the first-year player draft.

Previously, the path for development center players was to sign as international free agents. That landmark was first achieved in 2015 when the Baltimore Orioles signed the first development center graduate, Gui Yuan Xu, a position player who goes by Itchy because of his affection for Ichiro Suzuki. Xu played 73 games over three seasons in rookie and Class A ball before being released.

Gui Yuan Xu, who goes by the nickname Itchy, played 73 minor league games over three seasons after signing as an international free agent. Like DJ, he came up through China's development centers. Cliff Welch/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images

Since then, six other development center graduates have been signed, by Boston, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee and Philadelphia. Five of them suffered the same fate as Xu, unable to rise above the lowest levels of the minor leagues before their eventual release. Only Jolon Zhao, a right-handed pitcher in Milwaukee's system, remains.

DJ will be one of at least nine graduates who are trying a different path by being on a baseball scholarship at a U.S. college this fall. Two more graduates are mulling scholarship offers.

Once enrolled in college, they become eligible for M.L.B.'s annual draft, which will begin Sunday and run for three days. While M.L.B. is in negotiations with the players' union over the creation of an international draft — a deadline looms July 25 for that decision — the current system is limited to amateurs playing in the United States and Canada.

Besides making development center graduates much easier to be seen and tracked by M.L.B. scouts, Chang says there are other merits to choosing the college option rather than signing as a free agent.

"Honestly, for me, this is a blessing," Chang said. "Facing the shock of a new culture and the rigors of 144-game minor league seasons, which is so many more games than they've played in a season here, at 17 years old, is incredibly challenging. The college route allows more time to ease into the new culture and prepare you better to handle the grind of minor league baseball, if you're lucky enough to get that opportunity."

He added, “These guys can compete, no doubt, but they need to transition into the new culture and the longer season.”

While M.L.B.’s draft does not currently include international players, DJ and other development center graduates who play college ball in the U.S. would be eligible. Amy Kontras for The New York Times

The goal, which is to have a development center graduate drafted, could happen soon, according to Bryan Minniti, who was an assistant general manager for the Philadelphia Phillies, overseeing the organization’s scouting and player development, when he signed a development center graduate as an international free agent in 2018. Minniti was recently named a board member of baseball’s international governing body, the World Baseball Softball Confederation.

“Any player development project, especially one started from scratch, takes time, but I think we’re getting closer by the day to seeing a Chinese player in Major League Baseball,” Minniti said. “From a scouting perspective, every team is hungry for players with tools, and it doesn’t matter where they come from. If there’s a 6-foot-2 left-hander with a really good arm, he’s going to get noticed.”

In fact, there is. Roger Rang, another Tibet native and development center graduate, is a 6-2, 185-pound lefty who will be a sophomore at Arizona Western College this fall. Through July 8, he had struck out 50 batters in 48⅓ innings while walking only nine for the Casper Horseheads, a summer collegiate league team in Wyoming.

With the 20-round draft on deck in the coming days, scouts are paying attention.

Brad Lefton is a bilingual journalist based in St. Louis. He specializes in baseball in Japan and Asia.