

Stepping Up To The Big Leagues

By Paul Zwaska, WMLL Board Member

Like most kids who play organized youth sports all across America, the kids in the WMLL program dream of one day growing up and playing baseball or softball at the professional level. They dream of playing in a stadium in front of thousands of fans and making that big play. The reality is the chance of that happening to any one child from WMLL or any other youth baseball program is practically nil. Only one WMLL player has ever made it all of the way to the major leagues. Mike Gosling, a Madison native, played a year or two at WMLL in the early nineties before his family relocated out west. Mike's 5-year MLB career was spent pitching in the big leagues for Arizona, Cincinnati and Cleveland between 2004 and 2009 appearing in 58 games and compiling an era of 4.85. So out of the thousands and thousands of kids that have played at West Madison Little League over the last 55+ years, only one has made it. Those are daunting odds.



Mike Gosling pitching on June 28, 2007 in a game between the Reds and the Phillies.

The truth is, if your child is interested in making it to the major leagues, he or she has a better opportunity of getting there via the WMLL ground crew. This past summer, two West Madison ground crew members, one current and one past, spent the season working in Major League baseball parks on the east coast. Evan Mascitti worked at Citi Field for the Mets this summer and Eric Zwaska worked at Oriole Park at Camden Yards. Eric recently returned to Oriole Park to work during the Orioles post season games in their quest for a World Series win. These two young men have a long history with West Madison Little League.

Evan Mascitti played his entire youth career at West Madison and also umped games. It was a family affair as his father coached many teams during that time and Evan's younger brother Marco also went through the baseball program from beginning to end. Evan inquired about joining the ground crew back in 2009 and worked on the crew for 4 years. His brother Marco decided to join him on the crew and they worked side-by-side for a couple years. Not only did Evan love playing the game but you could also see that he enjoyed maintaining the field that it was played on as well. His attention to detail, his pride in his workmanship and his eagerness to learn caused me to take notice of the potential in this young man. While he was attending Beloit College, I began to put a bug in his ear about getting into a "turf" program to further learn the profession. Evan played baseball for the college and even performed groundskeeping tasks on their field based on what he learned at WMLL. After graduating from Beloit College with a Bachelor's degree in Geology, Evan eventually enrolled in the turf program at Penn State. This past spring he collected his Master's Degree in Turf Management. With school

over, Evan immediately jumped on board with the Mets working under the watchful eye of Mets Head Groundskeeper Bill Deacon to acquire experience at the Major League level.

Evan says he learned a lot of the skills he needed for the job with the Mets at West Madison. Much of what they do at the major league level is the same, but the difference is that at the major league level he was able to spend a lot more time on each job with a higher attention to detail. Whether Evan remains in major league baseball remains to be seen. It is a job that requires an individual to spend long hours during the growing season tending to their crop of turf and soil to perfection on a daily basis. The life of a groundskeeper means long hours, hard physical labor and dedication during the growing/sports season. You can bet Evan will make good use of his knowledge and techniques he learned while working at West Madison.



Evan Mascitti tended to the infield at Citi Field this summer, home of the New York Mets

Eric Zwaska kind of fell into the “family business”. When Eric was old enough to work he joined the WMLL ground crew (somewhat reluctantly) at my urging. He has spent over 5 years working on-and-off at West Madison, but only in the last couple years has he decided that it is a career path he is interested in pursuing. Eric, like Evan, has a long history with WMLL playing his full youth baseball career here at West Madison and playing on every all-star team he was eligible for. In one way or another, Eric has been involved with WMLL since 2001.

Eric is enrolled in the Penn State online Turf Program. This online program offered by Penn State allows students to obtain a 2 year certificate, Bachelor or Master’s degree or their PhD in turfgrass management from anywhere in the world. Penn State is one of the premier turf programs in the country. This gives kids the opportunity to be able to continue to work full time yet still get their school work done. Another great advantage of this online program is that the tuition rate is equivalent of in-state university tuition for similar Penn State programs. The downside is the student must be disciplined enough to get their weekly school work done on their own.



Eric Zwaska mows the infield at Oriole Park at Camden Yards in preparation for a night game.

This summer, Eric was able to secure an internship working on the Orioles ground crew in Baltimore under the watchful eye of Head Groundskeeper Nicole McFadyen. I spent my entire 15+ years of my Major League career with the Orioles maintaining the field for the likes of Cal Ripken and the rest of the Oriole greats that played during the 1985 to 2000 era. Eric spent this spring working to get the WMLL facility up and running before heading off to Baltimore in May. He returned to work at WMLL for the month of September until the Orioles clinched a playoff spot. This triggered Eric's return to Baltimore to assist the

Orioles ground crew in maintaining the field for the playoffs. How fortunate for someone to get the opportunity of working the playoffs in their first season of working in the big leagues. You can't get much luckier than that! It will be an experience for Eric to savor for the rest of his life.

Both of these young men have used their experiences on the West Madison Little League ground crew to spring board into careers in the game of baseball. I couldn't be more proud of them and look forward to watching their progress in this profession. For teenagers who are looking for an opportunity to get into professional sports, working on the West Madison Little League ground crew offers the rare advantage of being mentored by a former MLB Head Groundskeeper who is well connected in the sports field management industry. Just be aware of the long hours and hard work that is involved in a job/career in sports field management. But it may be their best chance at making it into the Big Leagues!!



Two generations of Orioles groundskeepers, WMLL's Eric Zwaska (left) and Paul Zwaska.