



*(Via capecodchamber.com)*

## **The Evolution of the Cape Cod Baseball League**

By: Tommy Mumau and Max Tanzer

Since it originated in 1885, the Cape Cod Baseball League (CCBL) has gained the reputation of being the most prestigious summer collegiate league in the United States. Some of the most talented players to step on an MLB diamond spent a summer on the Cape during their journey to the big leagues. When you attend a CCBL game you may be watching the next face of MLB, as the league has produced generational stars, from Hall of Famer Frank Thomas to four-time All-Star Aaron Judge.

Watching a game feels almost as if you are taking a step back in time, pulling up a lawn chair along one of the baselines without being charged for admission. Fans are joined each night by MLB scouts, who are in attendance to get a glimpse of their club's future talent. The league's high-quality competition paired with its picturesque setting on Cape Cod has made it one of the top sources of entertainment in the nation.

Despite the league's throwback atmosphere, the CCBL has undergone many changes during its 137-year history. There have been several changes to the league both on the field and in the press box. It has gained a heightened media presence, through both its broadcasts and social media accounts. The introduction of the internet has also played an integral role in recruiting players to CCBL clubs.

A catalyst for this increase in attention was the league's decision to mandate the use of wood bats instead of aluminum bats in 1985. According to [MLB Pipeline's Jim Callis](#), "it wasn't always possible for scouts to get a clear sense of just how a hitter would perform when making the switch to the pros. After all, aluminum bats don't break and there's a larger sweet spot."

After the change, the league saw a massive decline in offense, further strengthening the sample of play scouts could garner when attending games. According to [Chris Thoms' CCBL database](#), in 1984, qualified players (hitters with 2.7 plate appearances per respective team's game) hit .280 in over 9,000 collective at-bats launching 289 home runs. Moreover, 21 players slugged over the .470 mark and five reached the .600 threshold. Falmouth's Jim Mccollum pieced together an astounding season that year, slugging .787, the best single-season mark in that category ever during a Cape Cod League campaign.

Meanwhile, when the wood bat rule was implemented a season later, the pendulum began to sway in favor of pitching as the league's overall batting average dropped about 16 points. Power numbers followed this trend as only 137 home runs were hit and just five hitters slugged over .470.

This reputation was on further display when the league was depicted in the 2001 romantic comedy *Summer Catch*, following a fictional player and his summer on the Cape with the Chatham Angeles. Moreover, the league has been recognized in several publications and television shows such as *60 Minutes*. This can be attested to its dominant presence in MLB as 26 percent of players to appear in a major league game in 2022 were Cape Cod League alumni (CCBL Stats). This is pertinent at the minor league level as well, where CCBL alumni made up 21 percent of the 5,530 players to play a game last season for any pro-ball affiliate (CCBL Stats).

The league's high level of talent has been a strength throughout its history. Mike Trombley spent the summer of 1988 in Falmouth before beginning his 11-year MLB career. The former hurler said he still occasionally attends CCBL games, and he is impressed by how today's players are more advanced at the college level than when he competed in the league.

"The kids are much more polished nowadays," Trombley said. "When I was there, and I can only speak for myself, but I was learning as I went. ... The quality, I would say is better on a whole because these kids are getting better and better at a younger age."

For decades, the league has consistently showcased the best collegiate players in the country. The managers of the CCBL clubs often constructed their rosters by talking to college coaches they had prior relationships with from various schools across the country. This allowed them to recruit the best players to their team.

Since the internet has become prevalent, organizations have used this tool as a way to recruit players from several other universities. Falmouth Commodores manager Jeff

Trundy has been at the helm of the club for 24 years and said that the change in recruiting methods has been one of the biggest adjustments in his tenure.

“When I first started in the league ... a lot of your recruiting was done by phone calls and by knowing people and talking to them and going on their recommendations,” Trundy said. “That still happens. But now with the internet, there's a lot more awareness of the players who are out there.”

The prevalence of the internet also presented many new media opportunities for the league and its clubs. In 2003, current Vegas Golden Knights broadcaster Dan D’Uva and American columnist Guy Benson helped launch the league’s first team broadcasts, by calling Chatham Anglers games. The Cotuit Kettleers and Hyannis Mets (now the Hyannis Harbor Hawks) also started their broadcast programs during the season, marking a new era in the league’s media coverage.

“The mantra for the [Cape Cod Baseball League] was the best baseball players at the college level come to Cape Cod,” D’Uva said. “So, [we thought] why not the best college broadcasters too?”



*Dan D’Uva (Left) broadcasting for Chatham. (Via @Dan\_D’Uva)*

D’Uva spent six seasons broadcasting for Chatham and he later began supervising the club’s broadcasting interns each summer, a role he still has today. The voice of the Golden Knights helped create the league’s strong broadcasting program, as all 10 CCBL teams now have their own broadcasts for both home and away games. All but two of the league’s organizations stream audio and video of their games on *YouTube*, while the Anglers broadcast on *Teamline* and the Brewster Whitecaps stream on *Live Coverage*. Each of the teams have video broadcasts for their home games and audio-only broadcasts for away games.

The broadcast crews for each team are composed of college students from across the nation, allowing these aspiring sportscasters to cover the top talent in the country.

The equipment and software used to stream games have improved drastically over the past decade as well. Current FOX Sports and Seattle Mariners broadcaster Aaron Goldsmith spent the summer of 2008 broadcasting for the Bourne Braves and mentioned it was very difficult to get their broadcasts on air. At that time, the organization used Skype to dial into a streaming service and the crew had to navigate firewalls and slow Wi-Fi just to get on the air.

“It was the most jerry-rigged thing ever,” Goldsmith said. “The next closest thing would have been two soup cans, that was how low-budget this whole thing was, but ultimately it got us on air.”

He also mentioned there was hesitancy about broadcasting during his time. There was concern that calling games would detract from attendance because people would be listening to the game as opposed to attending them.

“It was not necessarily seen as great of an asset to the league or individual teams, and [home] teams generally did not welcome road broadcasters like they do today,” Goldsmith said. “I’m very happy with how much it’s changed because I wouldn’t say there was pushback necessarily, but it wasn’t as accepted as freely as it is today.”

While Cape League broadcasts generally hover around 1,000 to 3,000 viewers per game on YouTube and other platforms, attendance has not been impacted as the medium provides opportunities for families out of state to watch their kids play or fans to listen while at the park.

In fact, according to [CBS Boston](#), in 2021 the league saw 10,808 fans attend Opening Day games, a jump of 6,000 compared to the previous season (2019). Moreover, the CCBL averaged 1,493 fans per game, the largest margin of any summer league in America that season per [Ballpark Digest](#). In 2022, this number catapulted to [1,568](#). This has allowed for the accessibility and capabilities of Cape League media to grow immensely.

The franchise’s media teams were initially limited to just broadcasters, but D’Uva said that during the 2010 season Chatham expanded its media presence by adding a beat writer and photographer.

This trend has percolated to the other nine teams in the league, as each club now employs interns to provide broadcast, print and social media coverage, among other content. All ten teams also have social media accounts, promoting the clubs on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. D’Uva said he believes it is important for the league to have each of its franchises covered through multiple mediums.

“It’s expected now to have immediate access to information, [like] broadcasts articles, video [and] photographs,” D’Uva said. “Fans expect that now because that comes from everywhere else. So, why not the Cape Cod League? Especially if it thinks of itself as the preeminent college baseball summer league.”

Eric Zmuda, the CCBL commissioner, said he believes that the league’s media platforms can be beneficial both to those covering the games and the athletes on the diamond.

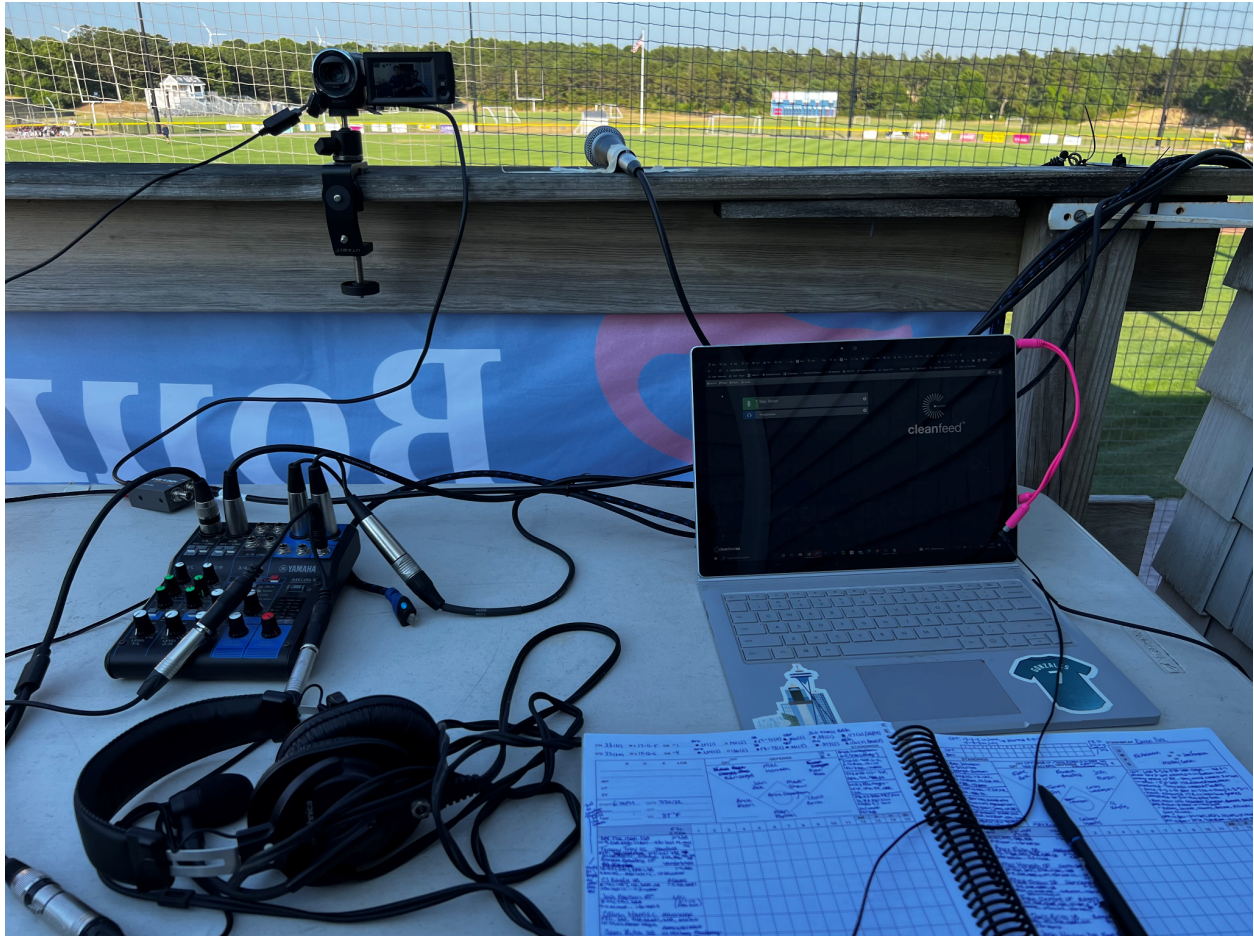
“We want to highlight the broadcast and media interns and the jobs they do for each team, as it pertains most importantly to the players and what they do on the field,” Zmuda said. “We want to make sure everything is the best of the best on both sides of the lines, on and off the field.”

Throughout the years, each of the organizations have evolved its media teams at different paces. Before the start of the 2021 season, the Commodores renovated their press box to allow their interns to work in a professional environment. Falmouth’s facility has a control room and five cameras that enhance the broadcasts.



*The control room at Arnie Allen Diamond at Guv Fuller Field. (Via Falmouth Commodores)*

Additionally, other teams have implemented equipment and various software that allow for multiple cameras, field reporters, graphics and other capabilities that enhance their respective products.



*Bourne Braves broadcast setup at Doran Park during the 2022 season. (via Max Tanzer)*

Along with the league's team broadcasts, the CCBL has gained recognition on larger platforms in recent years by having games broadcasted on the New England Sports Network (NESN) and the radio with WEEI (Garner). Zmuda said he believes showcasing the league's product on regional television can help it gain publicity.

"We want to continue to build [our regional footprint]," Zmuda said. "NESN is a fantastic regional footprint that goes on to cable and some satellite systems. ... [We] have that opportunity to have a continued relationship with them, which just gains our exposure higher and more frequently on that stage and hopefully up to the national stage too."

In recent years, other collegiate summer leagues have taken these steps to be consistently covered by regional and national media. For instance, on May 26 the Northwoods League announced a deal with ESPN+ in which the network carried certain games on each day of the season (NorthwoodsLeague.com). Chuck Sturtevant, president of the CCBL, said he believes that the league has a significant opportunity to make similar agreements with networks once its broadcast quality improves.

“We have some major players that are looking to broadcast or stream all our games, like ESPN 2 [and] NESN Plus,” Sturtevant said. “They're willing to pay for that, but they need the quality of the video streaming ... to be very good.”

Bourne Braves general manager Darin Weeks has been with the CCBL since 2000, spending time with both Falmouth and Bourne. He also noted that the growth of social media was crucial for the continued evolution of the league last summer.

“This year the precedent was really good from a team and league level,” Weeks said. “15 years ago, the league was just starting to broadcast games. We didn't even have the ability to go online and see how other teams were doing. We just had walkie-talkies, we would have to call other ballparks to see out-of-town game scores.”

Weeks noted that the increase in social media presence and focus on personality is unorthodox for some league representatives and decision-makers, but it is important nonetheless.

“The social media presence is going to continue,” Weeks said. “It's an entertainment venue. Some people in the league are being dragged by their ankles into the 21st century. They still see it as the old American Pastime, but they will come around on that.”

This season, the Braves specifically saw massive growth in their social media department. According to social media manager Joey Kurtz, between June 1 and September 1, they averaged 44,500 impressions per day (3.7 million in total) and tallied 18,900 likes. They have gained roughly 1,000 followers over the past year as well.

“Most organizations, like the Bourne Braves, find a healthy mix between [traditional and non-traditional content],” Kurtz said. “At the end of the day, our Twitter is reporting information to the public so we stay mainly traditional. We put about two to three untraditional joking tweets out a week during the season which do quite successful in terms of interactions ... it doesn't hurt to show personality.”

Additionally, the league has gained a significant following on its different social media platforms, as it currently has 30.8K followers on Twitter and 16.8K followers on Instagram. Each of the teams have strong followings as well, as all 10 clubs have at least 6,000 Twitter followers. Chatham is the leader in this category, currently being followed by approximately 9,400 fans on Twitter.

These social media platforms allow fans to get to know the players and generate excitement for the clubs, as teams frequently post interviews and highlight videos. This content also allows fans to experience important moments, like 2021 Bourne Brave Colton Bender being selected in the MLB Draft by the San Diego Padres, amassing 205,000 views and 32,000 likes on [TikTok](#).

It is content like this that makes the game of baseball more exciting for fans. The Savannah Bananas, an exhibition team and former summer collegiate club, have employed several different marketing strategies and promotions to entertain fans.

The Bananas competed in the Coastal Plain League (CPL) from 2016–2022, before deciding to solely focus on entertainment by playing “Banana Ball.” The game is rather unconventional when compared with the traditional sport, as players wear costumes and batters can be called out if a fan catches a foul ball, among other rules.

A key factor in the Banana’s success is its marketing strategies on social media, helping them gain national recognition. Savannah currently has 838K followers on Instagram, 130.4K followers on Twitter and 3.8 million followers on TikTok. These social media platforms have provided the team with a nationwide fanbase that may not have known about the team otherwise.

Trey Redfield was a play-by-play broadcaster for the Falmouth Commodores in 2022, and he was a broadcaster and media relations assistant for the Morehead City Marlins in the CPL in 2021. Redfield had the opportunity to call games against the Bananas and experience what makes the club so successful. He said that while the team’s marketing was effective for the success of the league, while the CCBL’s strength is the prominence of all 10 teams.

“[The Savannah Bananas] show a lot of class, they show a lot of professionalism [and] they care about what they do,” Redfield said. “The Savannah Bananas were really that, and they’re a reason why they made the Coastal Plain League look so good. There’s no such thing as one team making the Cape League [look] good because they all do.”



Whether the league eventually decides to follow this route or not, representatives and former players all spoke to the power of its reputation nationwide.

Former Sacramento State University player Steven Moretto has traveled all over the country to play summer baseball, including stops in the Cape Cod League, Northwoods League, and Expedition League. Moretto appeared in 34 games for the Commodores as a 20-year-old in 2019 and spoke highly of his experience.

“I went there not knowing what I was getting myself into,” Moretto said. “Out of the three summer ball teams that I played on, that team was the closest. I still talk to a lot of guys on the team, it was one of the best summers of my life for sure.”

While the family-like dynamic of the team and the success of the Commodores that season played a large role in Moretto’s experience, the league provided another layer of depth that he hadn’t experienced in other summers.

“If somebody likes baseball, especially college baseball, there is no better place to be than the Cape for the Summer; it is the most pure form of baseball,” Moretto said. “There was just an hora with it. The area is beautiful, the people there are unbelievably nice. There’s something different about that place, it’s almost indescribable.”

Moretto is still in touch with several of his teammates and his host family from that summer.



*Steven Moretto fielding a groundball versus the Kettleers in 2019. (Via Rich Maclone/Enterprise)*

These factors have contributed to the league being able to maintain many of its traditions, including free admission for fans. Since Trombley's retirement from MLB, he has become a financial advisor and said he believes that the league's reputation of excellence is what has allowed it to remain at the top.

"I'm still scratching my head on how well they make it work," Trombley said. "I would say the history of the [Cape Cod Baseball League] lends itself [to] being such a strong league that people want to support it. I've always said that going to Cape Cod is like a throwback in time a little bit, which is such a wonderful thing."

Chris Fitzgerald, general manager of the Falmouth Commodores, said the league has been able to maintain the tradition of not charging ticket prices because it is a non-profit. The CCBL is supported by several local and national sponsors, including MLB and T-Mobile ([capecodbaseball.org](http://capecodbaseball.org)).

Weeks echoed similar sentiments when asked about how the Cape League has remained at the top of the chain.

"The reputation is that the Cape League is still the best league, but that is going on complete perception," Weeks said. "The toughest thing is staying on the top of the mountain, and we've been on top for a while, so the league is going to have to continue to find ways to keep that top-shelf level."

He added that its ability to consistently roster the country's best college players is one of the main factors that has helped it maintain this level of success. Among these players is Anthony DeFabbia, a junior at Stetson University who has spent parts of the last two summers with the Commodores. DeFabbia tied for the CCBL lead in wins in 2021 and said playing against the top talent in the country has helped elevate his game.

"The Cape Cod league is right at the top of the list of the best leagues in the country," DeFabbia said. "So, when I got asked to be a part of Falmouth my freshman year, it was a no-brainer. Just with the legacy of the league and the competition, I thought it would be an unbelievable experience."

Recruiting this high level of talent begins with how each organization and coaching staff treats these athletes. For example, this past year the Braves hired Scott Landers as their new field manager. Weeks explained that because Landers has a close relationship with Vanderbilt head coach Tim Corbin, the team was able to roster more players from that program than before.

This has provided the Braves with an opportunity to sign additional players from the school in future summers as they treated their players very well.

“It’s all about building trust with programs and the Cape League franchise,” Weeks said. “That’s the same with every team. At the end of the day, we are caretakers of these kids, and for these coaches, their livelihoods and futures depend on how we take care of their kids.”

One of the main factors that contributed to the Braves’ championship run in 2022 was the commitment from its players to stay the entire summer. This is a feat many organizations across the country struggle to achieve as these athletes suffer injuries, are often required to return to their schools, struggle with fatigue, or simply miss home during these long seasons.

Evan Sleight, an all-star outfielder for Bourne that summer, was with the Braves for the entire campaign. He supported Weeks’ notions mentioning that Landers had a great relationship with his players, which was important to his experience.

“I’d heard a lot of great things about him [from Rutgers head coach Steven Owens], and he blew my expectations out of the water,” Sleight said. “Our whole team really just stayed the whole time, and we were all really close, and the coaches helped us with that. They wanted us to win, but they let us be ourselves. It made a really great atmosphere the whole summer.”



*Evan Sleight celebrates with teammates after scoring a run. (Via Bourne Braves)*

This sentiment was also described in the book *The Last Best League: One Summer, One Season, One Dream* by Jim Collins. The author describes legendary Chatham Anglers manager John Schiffner meeting his team before the start of the 2002 season.

“Schiffner knew at least one more thing that would come clear later: They would never have a season again like the one they’d experience with him. They would never again be twenty years old, playing baseball on Cape Cod, with their entire lives and all the sky in front of them” (Collins 4).

Moretto agreed with this, adding that the way coaches communicated with players was monumental in comparison to other leagues. He appreciated that coaches focused more on approach than swing mechanics in the Cape League and he used his Commodore-teammate Zach DeLoach as an example of a beneficiary.

After hitting .200 with eight extra-base hits for Texas A&M the previous spring, DeLoach had a slow start during the first two weeks of that summer as well. However, after hitting coach Brett Becker suggested a toe-tap adjustment in his stride, DeLoach would go on to win the league-batting title that season hitting .353 against Cape League pitching. Moreover, he hit .421 against SEC arms the following spring, leading to a 1.7 million-dollar signing bonus after being drafted in the second round by the Seattle Mariners in 2020.

DeLoach told Shannon Drayer of [Seattle Sports](#) that the summer on the Cape was career-altering.

“That was probably the make or break of my career, to be completely honest,” DeLoach said. “I take myself back to the Falmouth Field and take myself back to that cage, and for whatever reason, that just calms me down and takes me back into my routine and my confidence.”

It’s this relaxing environment that provides the league with a charm that cannot be emulated anywhere else.

As rival leagues continue to grow and implement more contemporary marketing and business tactics, the CCBL will likely adjust its strategy. However, it will still stick to its roots. The league’s rich history paired with pedigree and simplicity highlights baseball in its purest form, making it difficult for any league to compete with.

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