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‘You Have to Be Delusional’: A Minor Leaguer’s Hard Road to the Bigs



Credit...Jesse Rieser for The New York Times

While big leaguers fight with owners about labor issues, minor leaguers like Jack Kruger are getting ready for another season of long bus rides and longer odds.



By **Kurt Streeter**

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Jack Kruger was about to start a season with yet another minor league baseball team, the Salt Lake Bees, a Class AAA team in Utah, when his cellphone rang.

Get on the first plane to Los Angeles, his manager said.

The Angels, Salt Lake's parent club, were promoting Kruger to the majors to replace a catcher with a concussion. The Angels were playing the Tampa Bay Rays that evening, May 6, 2021, and he was expected to be there.

Kruger, a 20th-round draft pick in 2016 who had toiled in the minors for five seasons, jumped on a plane and got to the Angels' locker room an hour before the first pitch.

In the dugout, everything felt surreal. He looked around and spotted Shohei Ohtani, and beside him Mike Trout. Not too shabby for a new pair of teammates.

He watched from the bench as the game spun by quickly. Fifth inning. Sixth. Seventh. Finally, in the ninth inning, Kruger got the nod. He jogged to the plate, eyes focused, shin guards, chest protector and catcher's mask on.

There had been no time to warm up properly. He had taken only six practice throws instead of his usual 40. What if he had to make a quick throw to second base? Would the ball sail into the outfield? Would it hit the pitcher?

But everything unfolded perfectly. The Angels got three quick outs. Final score: Tampa Bay 8, Los Angeles 3. Kruger's team lost, and he never got to bat, but at least he tasted the big time.

Here's the thing about professional baseball: It does not take long for harsh reality to crash down.

The next day, as Kruger readied for his second game with the Angels, a team executive pulled him aside. Kruger thought he was about to get a hearty congratulations. Instead, the executive informed him that he was being designated for assignment — a

kind of baseball purgatory. If no other team wanted him, the Angels could send him back to the minors or cut him completely.

One day after Kruger achieved his baseball dream, he had no idea what would come next. He was 26.

The coming season could be yet another baseball year scarred by a labor war between major league players and team owners. Spring training? Delayed. The regular season? Threatened.

But as billionaires argue with millionaires, minor league baseball marches on. Unmoored from the big-league talks, its teams are holding spring training. The season is set to begin April 5.

Has there been a better time to celebrate the underdogs, overachievers and untested talents that make the minors hum?



Kruger waiting his turn at batting practice at the Texas Rangers' facility in Surprise, Ariz. Credit...Jesse Rieser for The New York Times

I reached out to Kruger after he [wrote on social media](#) about his slog through the minors. Hearing his story in a series of conversations, I came to see that he embodies a kind of gritty perseverance that is often overlooked, with so much focus going to the big-league stars.

Uncertainty laced the days after he was cut. Would the Angels bring him back? Would some other team pick him up? Baseball moves are often dictated by timing, and if the timing was off, would this be the end of his quest?

Kruger has always been an underdog. As a child he developed Perthes disease, a hip bone disorder that forced him to use crutches for nearly two years in grade school.

When he was done with the crutches and the pain subsided, he homed in on baseball. The sound of a ball hitting his bat, the thrill of making a deadeye throw — every part of the game made him feel it was exactly where he belonged. Because the disorder slowed his growth, he was often the smallest player on the field until midway through high school.

“The only way I could keep up was by being really skilled,” he told me. “Also, by working harder than everyone else and never listening to people who tried to place limits on me.”

He would lean on that resolve after struggling as a player in his freshman year at the University of Oregon. He transferred schools and played for a junior college team, rounding into form.

Few could imagine his upside then. But John Cohen, who was the coach at powerful Mississippi State, saw Kruger’s desire. His ability to lead. His smarts. Outside of schoolwork, Kruger tried to read a book a week. He taught himself to play the ukulele. He loved to talk about science, history, religion — anything and everything.

“Jack has what I call a ‘figure-it-out component,’” said Cohen, now Mississippi State’s athletic director. “He’s the guy who can figure out how to get off the island. He could be on Wall Street right now, he could be in business right now, he could be a lawyer now. But he loves baseball too much.”



“The only way I could keep up was by being really skilled,” Kruger said. Credit...Jesse Rieser for The New York Times

Kruger, by then broad shouldered, powerful and an inch over six feet, played a single year at Mississippi State, flashing prodigious potential. He earned all-conference honors, ending with a batting average of .345 and eight home runs. But surgery on his throwing shoulder dimmed the interest of pro scouts. The Angels, who declined to comment for this column, saw what he could be. They lured him from his senior year with an unusually large sum for a 20th-round draftee: a signing bonus that neared \$400,000.

So began Kruger's minor league journey.

2016: Rookie ball in Utah with the Orem Owlz.

2017: Class A, split between Iowa's Burlington Bees and California's Inland Empire 66ers.

2018 and 2019: Class AA in Alabama with the Mobile BayBears, who moved and are now [the Rocket City Trash Pandas](#).

2020: The truncated early pandemic season, when he bounced between minor league games in Southern California.

He remembers each stop as if he were still living it. The loneliness of being away from home and family for six, seven, eight months a year. The impossibly long seasons of games that ended near midnight, the peanut butter and jelly sandwich meals, the 10- and 12-hour bus rides to play games in small towns he had never heard of.



Kruger was lured away from college early with a generous signing bonus from the Angels. Credit...Jesse Rieser for The New York Times

After paying his agent and his taxes, Kruger put his signing bonus in savings and used it to boost a minor league salary that ranged from \$1,000 to \$2,500 a month. He drove a beaten 2002 Lexus and rented a two-bedroom apartment in San Bernardino, Calif., which he shared with six teammates. Sometimes a player would sleep on an air mattress in the kitchen.

Through it all, perhaps the hardest part was the precariousness.

Minor leaguers sometimes lapse into a mode of thinking that Kruger calls “playing G.M.” It’s the temptation to read the general manager’s mind and fixate on what each move made by the front office means for each player’s future.

You worry and you worry, and then, he said: “You start feeling like you have to perform better and better. You have to produce. Now there is so much pressure on you. And you are away from friends and family, you are not making a lot of money, so that is a worry. You are not eating right and getting proper nutrition. You’re not getting enough sleep. A domino effect begins, and it can cause you to take your eyes off the prize from the ultimate goal.”

He needed focus and determination more than ever when the Angels designated him for assignment.

And this time, things worked out. One afternoon a few days later, as he walked with his wife on a Ventura County beach in California near his childhood home, his cellphone rang once again. This time it was his agent.

“Congratulations,” his agent said. “You’re a Texas Ranger. Texas just claimed you.”

Here we go again, Kruger thought. Another new adventure.

Kruger vows to keep grinding. It helps that playing for half an inning in the majors automatically boosted his farm system salary: He said he now earned about \$60,000 a season.



This season, Kruger will earn about \$60,000. Credit...Jesse Rieser for The New York Times

He will most likely play this year in Texas for the Round Rock Express, the Class AAA team of the Rangers, where he finished last season on a tear.

“I see myself on the Rangers, behind the dish, helping lead the team to a win in the World Series,” he said. “You have to be delusional in a way. Confident where you 110 percent believe that you are the right man for the job. And if other people don’t see it, then they’re wrong, and you have to show them that.”

“I’ve been doing that my whole career,” he added.

Last week, he drove an hour west from his small apartment in Mesa, Ariz., to the Rangers’ spring training stadium in Surprise, Ariz.

At the stadium, he reveled in his wide new locker, affixed with his name etched on a red plaque, next to the “T” symbol representing the Texas Rangers.

He put on his uniform and walked on the grassy field, all business, focused on the task.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/sports/minor-league-baseball-jack-kruger.html>

Baseball players, I will venture to say, are different, certainly at this level. Almost all take lengthy journeys through the minors; most never make it to The Show.

Catchers certainly are different. Most can master the defensive side of the game, which usually determines whether they remain at the position. If they can’t, they get shifted to other positions, usually one where a strong throwing arm is required. The competition as hitters ratchets up with outfielders and corner infielders.

If a catcher calls a good game—no small art—and blocks pitches in the dirt, throwing out a third of the runners who try to steal on him (and the pitcher, who is often the guilty party) he can make it to the majors, and stick there, if he can hit his weight and pop an occasional home run, though he will likely get shuffled around from team to team. Every team wants a slugger at catcher too. Trouble is, all good minor leaguers can hit a fastball, but at the major league level, breaking balls determine your survival. Opposing teams also are constantly messing with your head, adjusting the way you are pitched. Catchers are always banged up, playing hurt, and this crimps their flexibility and range at the plate. Thus, though your catcher is typically the smartest guy on the field, with the most knowledge of pitching, he just might not be able to hit that slider they keep throwing to get him out. So he moves on to the next team desperate for someone who can call a big league game, not lose the game with a passed ball or errant throw, and maybe get a timely hit as a bonus.