

● PISTONS MAKING A LIST? As NBA free agency nears, 8 veterans Detroit could target. 9C



Nathan Wood, 17, of Dearborn Heights dances with Eastside Diamond Hoppers infielder Johnny Medina (15) at Jimmy John's Field on June 13. FINN GOMEZ/DETROIT FREE PRESS

# PARTY IN THE PARK

## How Utica's USPBL is breaking down baseball's unwritten rules

**Matthew Auchincloss**  
Detroit Free Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Ray Ortega leans on a counter, watching intently. In front of him is rain-soaked Jimmy John's Field in Utica. To his left, an enthusiastic older man in a Detroit Tigers jacket tells a third-base coach he's a coward for not sending a player home as one of the stadium workers offers him more popcorn. To the right is more seating — cushioned chairs in small tiers, with the doors to indoor suites right behind them. Ortega's face is serious and focused, his attitude emphasized by his all-black attire. The only thing that doesn't match is the black cowboy hat with silver sparkles bedazzling it — an odd look for a hitting coach. As Ortega watches the field, a player walks up the tunnel to his right. No. 22 for the Eastside Diamond Hoppers —centerfielder Sam Schnier — is in the hole, bat in hand, prepared for his turn at

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### Six to The Show

More than 50 USPBL players have been signed by MLB organizations, with six making the majors. The list:

**RHP Randy Dobnak:** The first USPBL player to hit the majors, this former Unicorn has a 4.86 ERA in 140 2/3 big-league innings over five seasons, including 5 1/3 innings this season with the Twins.

**RHP Logan Gillaspie:** Undrafted out of college, Gillaspie went from the Diamond Hoppers to the majors with the Orioles in 2022. This season, he has a 2.57 ERA in three games with the Padres.

**RHP Jared Koenig:** An ex-Unicorn, he made the big leagues with the Athletics in 2022 and has 89 appearances over the past two seasons with the Brewers and a career 3.67 ERA.

**OF Joey Wiemer:** The ex-Temperance Bedford star was a Diamond Hopper before making the majors in 2023 with the Brewers. After an offseason trade, he's now a Royals farmhand.

**RHP Randy Wynne:** A Beaver in 2016 and 2017, Wynne made his MLB debut in 2023 for the Reds, and has an appearance with the Reds this season, with a career 3.86 ERA.

**RHP Luis Contreras:** The Venezuela native went from the Diamond Hoppers to the Astros in 2024 and has a 9.00 ERA over nine innings (in seven appearances) this season.

## McGonigle has off-the-charts intangibles



**Jeff Seidel**  
Columnist  
Detroit Free Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK

### Tigers prospect is model for competitive drive

Detroit Tigers prospect Kevin McGonigle is putting up remarkable statistics at High-A West Michigan. It's impressive to say the least. But let me tell you a story that tells you something else about him.

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### Next up: Rays

**Matchup:** Tigers (48-27 entering Thursday's late Game 2) at Tampa Bay (41-33), series opener.

**First pitch:** 7:10 p.m. June 20; George M. Steinbrenner Field, Tampa, Florida.

**TV/radio:** FanDuel Sports Network Detroit; WXYT-FM (97.1).

**Probable pitchers:** **Tigers** – RHP Jack Flaherty (5-7, 4.03 ERA); **Rays** – RHP Shane Baz (6-3, 4.54).

## Greater things still to come for Skubal



**Shawn Windsor**  
Columnist  
Detroit Free Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK

### Tigers' standout: 'I'm not a finished product'

The Detroit Tigers hadn't had a must-see performer in nearly a decade — not since Miguel Cabrera was in his prime. They have one now. More proof was in the stands Thursday, June 19, at Comerica Park, where more

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# COVER STORY BASEBALL

## USPBL

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the plate. A child runs out of a suite and up to the low gate cordoning off the tunnel from the suites. He asks Schner for his autograph on a league-branded baseball, eagerly holding out a pen. Schner complies with a smile.

It's an unusual scene. Players don't typically sign autographs while waiting for their turn to bat. Fans rarely have access to do so, either. Just like Ortega's cowboy hat, it seems more *fun* than baseball normally is.

But it's all in line with the words on the back of Ortega's shirt.

In white lettering, standing out on the black long-sleeved "dri-fit" material, there's a hashtag: *#REALBASEBALLREALFUN*.

### A Bananas-flavored experience

Anyone who attended a United Shores Professional Baseball League game before this year likely remembers a summer-league atmosphere: A small ballpark with music between batters, serious focus from the players, limited interactions between fans and players, and even that coming generally in a controlled setting.

It's not like that now.

As the USPBL approached its 10th season this summer, founder Andy Appleby felt it needed a new spin on the game. The summer wood-bat league has found plenty of success, sending 52 players to higher levels of professional baseball, but Appleby wanted something new. Something different. Something that appealed to the fans and brought them closer to the game.

One place he looked was in Savannah, Georgia — home of the Savannah Bananas. Calling the Bananas a baseball team isn't quite accurate — they play Banana Ball, their sped-up, reimagined version of baseball that's more about fan entertainment and being silly on the field than it is about the game itself.

In just a few years, the Bananas — and their three spinoff squads — have gone from selling out their home park to travelling the country, packing minor-league, major-league and NFL stadiums everywhere they've gone (including last weekend's stop in Grand Rapids). The Bananas have designed a league around entertaining fans for reasonable cost —appealing to families and uniting a community.

For Appleby, the Bananas model was an appealing example of how to excite fans. But he didn't want to play Banana Ball. The USPBL is a league in independent ball that sends pros on to the higher minors. Scouts from MLB organizations attend games looking for future big-leaguers. (They've found six so far — most recently with the Houston Astros featuring 2019 Diamond Hopper Luis Contreras getting seven April MLB appearances this season.) Appleby didn't want to lose that.

"We have to kind of keep the purity of the baseball but, but we are allowing the players to have a little more of their own expressionism," Appleby said. "There's more celebrations and fun things that the Bananas coined a long time ago."

So, the USPBL would continue regular baseball. That didn't mean they couldn't take other aspects of the Bananas' success and integrate it into the USPBL. League president Dana Schmitt got to work.

It just so happened that at the same time, Ortega looking for a new opportunity after working with the Savannah Bananas. Ortega also happened to be a former player and coach in the USPBL and someone who understood the vision. Schmitt brought him in as the assistant director of baseball operations, as well as the league's hitting coach.

Ortega was known around the league as a serious man who didn't tolerate nonsense. The former catcher was driven and focused and liked baseball the way it was. But he'd also seen the Bananas' success firsthand and knew how beneficial it could be for his players to express themselves on the field more.

"One of the things that was awesome about Ray being the person that brought this idea to come back and make this happen is, when he was a player, he was super-serious," Schmitt said. "He was a hardcore player. He was all about baseball. So if he went to the Bananas and saw and it opened his eyes. ..."

Ortega added: "I was thrown into the fire, and I subjected myself to it, but I wanted to take the risk, and I'm glad I did. I was able to see past all those reasons not to see it and it comes back to the experience that you're having for the people coming to watch you, and the role model that you get to become using the platform.

"What really attracted me was when you merge the two things together, you give all your players a platform to speak, and that's powerful, and that's something that they don't really have in the minor-league system until you make it."

Thus, "Real Baseball, Real Fun" was born.

The team immediately began changing the in-game experience for fans and players alike. Music during gameplay, not just between plays. A two-and-a-half-hour time limit for most games (though Friday-night games often run over, giving fans a chance to see more gameplay). Players wearing glowstick necklaces. And, crucially, run celebrations.

### A cup above

Both teams showed off their first-run celebrations on Friday. As Ortega was explaining the celebrations, one of the Beavers drove in their first



Young fans attempt to get a high-five from players at Jimmy John's Field in Utica on June 13. PHOTOS BY FINN GOMEZ/DETROIT FREE PRESS



Ray Ortega, USPBL assistant director of baseball operations and hitting coach, watches a game at Jimmy John's Field in Utica on June 13.

run. Ortega sprang into action.

"Get ready for Red Solo Cup," he said.

As the crowd watched, the team brought out an oversized red Solo-style cup, while every Beaver grabbed a regular one filled with water. Standing as a group on the first base line, they faced the fans and swayed along to the first chorus of Toby Keith's hit song while toasting the fans.

Across the diamond, the Hoppers would soon teach fans how celebrations are designed to build. Their first-run celebration — a team swag surf — came out in the first inning. The Hoppers then escalated it after a home run, as a cowboy hat-shaped piñata became a victim of shortstop Giuseppe Ferarro's bat after he whacked a solo shot in the bottom of the fifth.

The home run celebrations are part of an overall plan to build brand identities for the teams. There are four USPBL teams: the Diamond Hoppers and their opponent for the night, the Birmingham Bloomfield Beavers; the Utica Unicorns and the Westside Woolly Mammoths.

The music varies with the franchises: The Unicorns are space cowboys, the Hoppers play house music, the Beavers match their flannel-themed home jerseys with some country and the Mammoths go old-school, of course, with classic rock. Likewise, each team has home and away uniforms, with the home kits being more colorful.

"Every team has their own playlist, their own genre of music, their own style of celebrations that's 'on-brand,'" Ortega said. "As we continue the consistency and showing our brands to the fans, they'll be able to see the differences between all of them and will root for their own team. ..."

"We're gonna storytell, and we're gonna create a world where each brand has their own vibes and their own culture and their own fanbase."

As only two teams play at once, the two teams that aren't participating send their players to the ballpark to work the crowd, becoming part of the "Really Fun Guys" crew, as Ortega put it. On this Friday night, the whiffle ball area was staffed by Unicorns right-handers Bruce Yamamoto and Damian Espinoza. Mammoths players roamed the park, interacting with kids at balloon animal stations and on the playground.

The players playing that night interacted with the fans as well. Schner's experience happens more often than not in the tunnel with eager kids coming over to request an autograph. The players throw T-shirts and soft balls during breaks. After the game, kids run the bases and swarm players for autographs. Standing in the rain with far fewer Sharpies than there are fans, the players sign balled-up shirts, baseballs and much more. The kids are overjoyed by each one.

"The real juice of all of this is connecting on a personal level with your fan base," Ortega said. "They want to feel included in the dugout, included in the celebrations. So when we do that stuff outside for them to see, it makes them feel like you're part of this as well as build that fanbase."

A lot of the kids didn't know the players' names, referring to them by number (the jerseys don't have names on the back). But they knew who the stars were. As kids line up in the tunnel in during the ninth inning ahead of the postgame running of the bases, , chatter grew among the 8-12-year-olds that the Hoppers' No. 21 — third baseman Jorge Gonzalez — was the best player on the field.

Another player popped up in the argument: The Hoppers' No. 2, second baseman Marcus Judd, by far the most popular player for autographs once the kids are released onto the diamond. Judd was the last player to leave the field, taking photos and signing autographs. One child precariously balanced himself against a fence to give Judd his shark-themed slide to sign. Judd took it and wiped it carefully, rain still coming down. On it, he wrote: "Never stop dreaming."

### 'They're playing like kids again'

Judd is another of the people most responsible for bringing the new USPBL dream to fruition. He played for the USPBL's Beavers in 2023 and has spent time in various minor leagues since, including a tryout last year with the Savannah Bananas. He didn't make the cut, though — a surprise to Ortega. The coach saw the opportunity, though, and reached out to him shortly after rejoining the USPBL, explaining the new mission and asking him to come be a part of it.

Judd agreed. He has become something of a baseball internet celebrity from his social media and had even recently signed a deal with Baseball Lifestyle 101, one of baseball's biggest brands.

Ortega wasn't looking for a guy with just brand deals, though. He was looking at Judd because he knew Judd could see his vision for the league: A league where guys play baseball and get to be themselves. Where there are celebrations on the field and players show off their personalities. Judd had personality in spades, a fierce love of the game and tons of ideas for Ortega. It was perfect.

"I've always been an outgoing ball player," Judd said. "There was a time for me when it was, 'OK, am I doing too much? Is it being looked down upon?'"

"Because no one communicates with you if you're doing everything the right way, but you still have that pressure inside of you. I need to perform, I need to perform, I need to perform. You don't need to perform, you just need to play! The performance will happen by itself."

Judd has brought personality to the team and his boldness has emboldened others to express themselves. Friday's closer, Riley Bost, began growing out a handlebar mustache. Others have noticed Judd's sparkly necklace — from his brother's company, Subrosa Artistry — and have purchased their own, bringing more pizzazz to the diamond. Judd feels it's emblematic of that shift in baseball culture and is only preparing them for the next step.

"Look how much fun big-league players are having," Judd said. "They're playing like kids again. The fans are loving it. They're a little older, they get paid millions, so maybe they don't have to dance or nothing like that."

"But you can see the divide and the gap starting to close a little bit. So I feel like if and when a lot of these guys get the opportunity to go up to the next level, they're going to be not only ready for the game, they'll be ready for the show."

For Judd, being himself makes him feel like he's a little kid again, the one that loved playing the game. Note his Instagram handle: @juddythekid. And the kids are why he loves the USPBL, too. Interacting with them is his favorite part of the game and why he keeps playing and being himself.

"I've had a kid today, from 2023, remember my first, last name, when I batted, position I played, (saying) 'Do you remember me?'" Judd said. "Only because I signed something after a game and told him, 'Hey man, you can do it.'"

On this Fireworks Night at Jimmy John's Field — like every Friday — there's a spectacular show that runs through the entirety of both "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" and "Espresso," and only ends after the first chorus of "On Top of the World" despite a rainy evening. Despite many fans having already escaped the dreary weather, more stay to watch. The Hoppers celebrate an 8-4 win, and the Beavers gamely sign autographs before heading home.

They'll rematch on Sunday for another day of real baseball. It'll be real fun, too. That's what the league is all about.

Contact Matthew Auchincloss at [machincloss@freepress.com](mailto:machincloss@freepress.com).