



Randy Frazier
(Wareham, Mass.)



Photos courtesy: The Cannonball Foundation

New England nonprofit helps even the playing field by opening more routes to college scholarships and other benefits for middle- to lower-income players

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

By Dan Guttenplan

RONALD FRAZIER IS YOUR typical baseball father. The Wareham, Mass., resident raised three sons around the game of baseball, coached at the AAU and high school levels, and wanted nothing more than to provide his sons with an opportunity to play as long as they wanted.

Fairly early in the career of youngest son Randy's career, the father started to get the sense that his son had the skill level to play in college. This came as welcome news for the Frazier parents, who planned to pay for three college educations on two teacher salaries.

"Both my wife and I are teachers," Ronald Frazier said. "As you know, teacher salaries aren't the greatest. Even if one of my sons was offered a big scholarship, we knew it was going to be tough."

What the Fraziers didn't anticipate was how tough it would be long before college. As Randy, now 18, progressed through Little League and AAU, the cost of his participation spiked dramatically. Parents of players with equal or lesser skill than Randy footed the bills for Perfect Game events and invitational tournaments while Randy continued to play for local teams in Wareham. Soon, Randy felt he was at a disadvantage because he wasn't receiving the same resources as other local players due to his family's financial means.

"I thought it was unfair a little bit," Randy Frazier said. "I couldn't go to all of the major events that well-to-do kids could go to."

Around the same time Randy began missing out on the big-money events, St. Sebastian's School (Needham, Mass.) baseball coach Mike Schell started a nonprofit organization to provide baseball players of middle- and lower-class families the same opportunities players of wealthy families receive. Schell created The Cannonball Foundation as a way to provide student-athletes from underrepresented communities opportunities for academic support, college coun-

seling, competitive play and mentoring services.

As a former Division 1 baseball player at Holy Cross, Schell had the baseball chops to call on former mentors and teammates for volunteer services, such as hitting instruction from former professional baseball player and Team USA hitting instructor Kevin Wilson, and recruiting advice from Holy Cross baseball coach Greg DiCenzo. As a teacher and college counselor at St. Sebastian's, Schell could provide an outline for student-athletes to write an essay for a college application, participate in a college interview, find a college match and seek financial aid.

As the son of a mother who was born in Italy and a father who was raised in Dorchester, Mass., before attending Harvard University, Schell has a genuine desire to help families in working-class communities carve out better lives for themselves.

"I've learned my greatest life lessons through baseball," Schell said. "We want to revitalize baseball in America. I'm especially talking about blue-



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Zack Bernier
(North Dartmouth, Mass.),
who now pitches
at Wentworth College

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— Mike Schell, executive director, The Cannonball Foundation

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In 2010, Schell started the Cannonball Prospects, an independent team made up of high school players. In addition to entering the team in high-profile tournaments across New England, Schell scheduled team meetings with college recruiters, executives from successful businesses and college admissions officers. The Prospects receive skill and leadership training from Minuteman Baseball as well as college and career counseling from Play In School. Over the past three years, more than 50 players have passed through The Cannonball Foundation, and by Schell's count, more than half now have plans to play baseball in college. Last year, every rising senior achieved their goal of gaining acceptance into a four-year college.

THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS for Cannonball Prospects has become rigorous. Schell weighs an applicant's academic résumé, extracurricular activities, SAT scores and, most importantly, character when deciding whether to admit a player. He turns no one away from the academic and professional mentoring, although he selects his Prospects team based on talent in hopes that those players will take advantage of the bigger stage at which his team plays to earn future baseball opportunities.



Schell

"This provided a platform my sons normally wouldn't have had," Frazier said. "A lot of these players weren't being outplayed, they were being outpaid. What sets us apart is what we provide outside of baseball. These players have opportunities to listen to college coaches talk about recruiting. They go to colleges and hear what it takes to round out their academic portfolios."

Schell doesn't like to highlight individual success stories, but Randy Frazier is a nice example of the way in which a player can parlay his experience with The Cannonball Foundation into a baseball future. Frazier earned a tryout for the Northeast team for the Area Code Games last summer in Dudley, Mass. He plans to play baseball at UMass-Dartmouth next spring.

"I think the reason I have an opportunity to play in college is 100 percent due to The Cannonball Foundation and being connected to Mike Schell and the people in the foundation," Frazier said.

According to Schell, 80 percent of the foundation's operational expenses are funded by private donors and grants.



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— Ronald Frazier (left), who also serves as a coach for the Cannonball Prospects

A fraction of the student-athletes pay for the services, but no player is turned away due to financial constraints.

"This is a very expensive program, and we're at the mercy of our donors," Schell said. "We charge the bare minimum with a goal of 80 percent or more scholarship players. We work with families so that money is not an issue."

Many of the foundation's clinics and instructional sessions are led by volunteers, such as Wilson, who has his own business as a hitting instructor. In turn, Prospects are expected to donate their time to charities and community programs.

"Mike is trying to get the best people in one place so New England kids don't have to move to Florida or be on an elite team to get the most elite instruction," Wilson said. "That's the recent trend, and the unique part about this is the quality instruction with hitting, baserunning and classroom preparation."

As a Division 1 baseball coach, DiCenzo has seen the way in which recruiting has changed over the years.

Many of his colleagues handpick players from a select number of invitational tournaments each year. He acknowledges these tournaments are often outside the financial comfort zone of middle-class families.

"What Mike does in terms of providing clinics for skill development is special, but what he does outside of baseball is more important," DiCenzo said. "The players leave there knowing how to act in a college interview, how to dress when he gets to college, how to apply for a job — whatever life skill they'll need after baseball."

ON A RANDOM WEEKDAY IN early August, Schell traveled from Union College to RPI to Skidmore College to meet with representatives from each college to learn about changes and trends in college admissions. His goal is to form a collaborative effort nationwide so that admissions officers and coaches at private colleges, larger state schools and prep schools will call on The Cannonball Foundation to fortify their respective recruiting pipelines with strong baseball

players, but more importantly, high-character individuals. In exchange, the academic institutions will take part in a Vision U bus tour, in which Cannonball Foundation student-athletes will hear from admissions officers and recruiters in regards to how to better prepare themselves for their respective futures.

"We need more socio-economic diversity in the college player base," Schell said. "What we see happening is we'll establish The Cannonball Foundation at campuses all over the country with on-site foundations. We bring in our resources, which are world-class facilities and mentoring programs for college admission — and this year, we'll add softball. The schools will provide us with an infrastructure platform."

Over the past two summers, The Cannonball Foundation has hosted a competitive tournament on Cape Cod for elite teams around the Northeast. This summer, the foundation made its debut in the Greater Trenton, N.J., area — at Schell's alma mater, Lawrenceville Academy — with a Baseball College Recruiting Seminar. Like many ambitious philanthropists, Schell has a five-year plan for the foundation to grow almost exponentially. As a baseball player at heart, he understands that falling short of this goal does not signify failure.

"Baseball has a beautiful way of making us great failures," Schell said. "As a player, I'd look at a 3-for-10 performance and feel like a failure. I wanted 10 hits. As the executive director of a nonprofit, I believe everyone has a right to an education. My dad ended up at Harvard as a total shot in the dark, and that afforded me the opportunity to go to Holy Cross. I'm devoted to giving back to the student-athletes in the middle- and lower-classes that need a break."

@Dan_Guttenplan

dguttenplan@baseballjournal.com



WHY 'CANNONBALL'?

The Cannonball Foundation, created in 2009, was named after William "Cannonball" Jackman — a legendary pitcher who was one of New England's biggest baseball stars in the 1930s and '40s.

Once voted as one of the greatest African-American pitchers of all-time — and sometimes compared to Satchel Paige — Jackman played sparingly in the Negro leagues, instead preferring to play in and around his adopted hometown of Boston, often with all-white teams.

Jackman, a towering figure who led the Portsmouth Merchants to several local championships, thrilled fans with his dominant and distinct underhand pitching motion, and his entertaining antics, including his famed trash-talking.

Jackman remained in Boston until his death in 1972.

For more on "Cannonball" Jackman, read our 2011 profile by baseball historian Scott Simkus: bit.ly/NEBJcannonball

For more on The Cannonball Foundation, visit thecannonballfoundation.org

Photos courtesy The Cannonball Foundation