

WITH ALMOST 20 YEARS OF PRO EXPERIENCE, LAPOINT IS TAKING THE LUMBERJACKS ON HIS OWN PERSONAL ODYSSEY

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By Randy Howard

If you're trying to get the man on the phone, hang up and forget it — he's probably not in.

Yesterday, it was a meeting with the General Manager. The day before, he talked with the Mayor about paving the parking lot at East Field. Last week, he played in an NCAA charity

Usually, LaPoint can be reached at the field just before practice. Today, he is downstairs fiddling with the keys of the ticket computer. He has a wad of chewing tobacco tucked behind his lower lip and holds a paper cup in the same hand

was. He took up the whole batter's box." LaPoint got the win.

Although he was a veritable journeyman in pro ball, his finest moments can be found in the record books. He was a starting pitcher for St. Louis in the 1982

World Series when they played — who else — the Milwaukee Brewers. In 1990, after he had played for some nine teams in both leagues, Manager Bucky

Dent gave LaPoint the nod to pitch on opening day at Yankee Stadium. LaPoint says climbing the hill that day for the Bronx Bombers was the highlight of his career.

But like that old Blood Sweat and Tears number, what goes up eventually ends up floating in the can. And anybody who knows boo about the industry knows how the league hierarchy

works: million dollar deals are made and owners and managers cop a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately attitude with players that don't produce. The Yankees — infamous for axing marquee prospects and signing stars in the twilight of their careers — cut LaPoint the following spring.

"I'd put in a lot of work in the off-season and my shoulder was sore. I was working hard but the relievers were the ones getting rewarded."

It was then that LaPoint says he lost his "mental edge," and one month later, after a short stint with the Phillies, he was finished with Major League Baseball.

After LaPoint was released by the Phillies he struggled with a few minor league teams hoping to get another crack at the show. In 1992 he found himself back in his home town, yearning to be back under the lights of more glorious ballparks. That summer, he suited up with the Glens Falls Colonels, a semi-pro team comprised of local college players.

One would think that such a fall from grace would be too much for a major league ego to endure. Indeed, there was

Special Delivery

golf tournament in Saratoga and was the guest speaker for a local civic group. For a guy who's been out of Major League Baseball five years, Dave LaPoint is keeping busy.

Busy too, these days, is the Adirondack Lumberjack's front office, which is not much bigger than the bedroom you used to share with your little brother. Surprisingly, there is no desk in sight for LaPoint (although there is one in the clubhouse) who, incidentally, is the president, manager, pitching coach, and fourth man in the starting rotation, magically rolled into one.

He comes and goes unannounced.

He says he's happy about the Jaceys being the new owners.

that shows the World Series ring. When he speaks you realize after all those years in the pros, he is still just Dave.

"I like Jimmy Leyritz's opinion on chewing tobacco. I'd quit, but just for a couple days."

The telephone rings. Like a true professional, he lets the juice fly before answering.

When LaPoint graduated from Glens Falls High School in the spring of '77 he inked his first contract to play pro ball with the Newark Co-Pilots, a farm team for the Milwaukee Brewers. LaPoint, 36-six-years-old now, recalls his first big-league start on Fan Appreciation Day against the Seattle Mariners.

"The main thing I remember was that I couldn't believe how big Willie Horton

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something clearly askew about LaPoint. He looked overweight. His attitude was intact, yet it seemed almost as if the fire had been doused. Occasionally, the locals came out to see him pitch — they wanted to see how silly a major league changeup could make a hitter look. There were those who began to wonder if LaPoint would turn into a has-been with a menial nine-to-five job and grace the taverns with his presence every day after work. Maybe he'd open his own saloon and, like Billy Cox, fade away as a boy of summer with a foul taste in his mouth.

"I still run into people that think I never knew Ozzie Smith, or that I didn't play with Don Mattingly," LaPoint says with a smile on his face. "The only thing they'll talk about is the ball I dropped in the World Series."

The following year LaPoint tried his luck for the last time. He briefly pitched for the Minnesota Twins' AAA affiliate but decided to retire for good on July 1, 1993.

Fast forward the TV8 video camera

18 years from when he was signed — LaPoint is no spring chicken anymore. He jogs around in the outfield with his chalky legs, shagging flies and chatting with the players. As skipper of the Lumberjacks, LaPoint's sense of humor is not dulled by the weight of responsibility. Maybe that explains why he's doing that impression of Mario Lemieux, skating across the ice while in obvious discomfort of having to relieve himself.

"That's just been the way I've played baseball and gone about my business. I have ways of keeping them (the players) loose and happy."

Enjoying the game may be a crucial element for LaPoint's mix, but we know from his track record that he takes his managing seriously. Take last season's 12-game skid for example, when the Lumberjacks infield looked like it was playing hot potato on routine plays. It was around the 25th game of the season that LaPoint knew he had to make some personnel changes: he was starting to get quiet.

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"When I get quiet it's not a good time to be around me because I have ideas in my head that I'm not going to discuss with anybody."

LaPoint's silence was brief. It led to a drastic managerial move that saw 3/4 of the infielders get released. Players like Durcak, Fogg, Phillips, and Mueller were signed in an effort to turn the 'Jacks around. Another local hurler by the name of Matt Stevens was, in LaPoint's mind, a key acquisition, primarily because of his extensive minor league experience.

"I needed Matt in there to make sure there was no B.S. going on behind my back," LaPoint said. "My biggest criteria is to have good guys."

He must have done something right. After battling for the cellar spot with Yonkers early last year, the Lumberjacks finished at 42-27, second only to the Albany-Colonie Diamond Dogs in the Northeast League Standings.

Welcome to the present, where there is a rivalry budding along I-87 between the Albany-Colonie Diamond Dogs and the Adirondack Lumberjacks. You all remember the conclusion last year — the collision at home, the bench-clearing

brawl, the umpire getting tossed on his ass. In the end, Adirondack walked away with the Northeast League Championship title.

"I'm sure there's still bad blood flowing," LaPoint says, exalting the Dogs sound fundamental defense of a year ago. "I did not respect Al Sontag for knocking down that umpire. Raphael Mercado hitting our catcher from behind...that's not good."

There is a new twist to the saga this year. John Cerutti, former Toronto Blue Jay and Albany's headline hurler last year, is not returning. That's too bad because Dave LaPoint is limbering up his rifle for the 'Jacks '96 campaign.

"I've been throwing quite a bit. I'm not sure how I'll do," says LaPoint, who threw batting practice nearly every day last summer.

He lived a dream that, at one time or another, every kid in America would die for. Now, he's living it again.

"The best part about it is being able to come back. This team here is the greatest thing that ever happened. I can do what I do best and share the knowledge that took me 18, 19 years to gain."

Sounds like the hometown hero is on a mission.



In 1982, LaPoint brought a live arm and a whole lot of enthusiasm to St. Louis.