

Draft Recap: 2020 Iowa Owls

There was a certain half-empty/half-full quality to the Iowa Owls' 2019 season. Viewed one way, the team made a remarkable upward climb, winning 24 more games than it did the year before. But the club once again finished dead last in the Prairie League's Northern Division, 15 games behind McAllen's world champs. And while the good news mostly out-weighed the bad, early in the year two key players were felled by career-threatening injuries: Jameson Taillon (our #1 starter) and Mitch Haniger (arguably our best outfielder). These things happen to every club and are a painful reminder of the importance of roster depth.

With 2019 in the rear-view mirror, let's recap the 2020 Draft while it is still fresh. For this draft I had three main goals: get young catchers & centerfielders, and fix the bullpen. While going 3-deep at every position is always a theoretical goal of mine, it requires a 24:16 ratio of hitters to pitchers so is rarely achieved — especially in a year like this one, where my Owls began the draft with two uncarded pitchers (and soon took a 3rd); it is hard to get through a season with fewer than 15 carded pitchers. Fortunately, the versatile Scott Kingery was already rostered... so the eventual 21:19 split may not be ideal, but we'll be ok.

#7, BRYAN REYNOLDS (LF). I went into the draft hoping to grab with this pick Will Smith, seemingly the pool's only carded catcher in the pool with star-potential. After the early selections were made, I found myself presented with a hard choice between Smith and a hitter that I assumed would be one of the lottery picks. Ultimately, I talked myself into Reynolds as the safer choice of the two (since catchers always seem risky). He is a fine replacement for Haniger (who might never be good again), but truth be told I did suffer from some buyer's remorse. Opportunity costs are always high in the early rounds.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Dak took Will Smith right after me, which of course increased my self-doubt. I had also considered fixing my closer problem here (Liam Hendriks), but always figure the bullpen is the last area on a rebuilding club to fix, so didn't sweat that one too much.*

#18, NATE PEARSON (RHP). This extra pick was obtained as part of a trade for my best starting pitcher (Ryu), so I definitely wanted to draft an arm here. With Dinelson Lamet and Zac Gallen plucked from my grasp at #15 and #17, I decided to go with the best "future" hurler on my list. Pearson joins two other hard-throwing potential aces, Michael Kopech and Forrest Whitley, on a roster that desperately needs one of them to come through.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Michael took Jose Urquidy right after this, and I really think the Astros' cheating scandal might have affected my choice here. No serious regrets, but I do go back-and-forth over the wisdom of making early uncarded picks.*

#27, NICK ANDERSON (RHP). This was a really hard decision, since Anderson is not yet a closer (but is favored for that role in Tampa this year). So the biggest item on my bullpen shopping list remained unfilled and this guy is also pushing 30. But I just couldn't resist the 110 K's in 65 innings.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Dak once again seemed to have hacked my draft list, taking Adrian Houser at #28, and he was followed in order by Aaron Bummer & Tony Consolin. I liked the first two for their high inning totals, and the other for his prospect status, but am content to have taken a pitcher who (fingers crossed) will give me a good closer a year from now.*

#55, VIDAL BRUJAN (2B). In the old days, a lot of uncarded slots are filled in Round 3. In retrospect, I jumped in on this guy way too early; times have changed. Furthermore, Brujan doesn't have a clear path

to the majors and is barely a Top 50 prospect. But I mentally filled my other two open uncarded slots after taking Pearson earlier in the draft and didn't want to risk letting my "second-baseman of the future" be the fish that gets away.

I almost always fill my uncarded slots with an eye toward future needs. So as my lineup has improved over the last few seasons I find myself taking more pitchers. Going into the draft I was thinking there were three soft spots on my roster: CF (Ender Inciarte seems to be in decline), 2B (Kolten Wong & Ryan McMahon are fine, but both hit left-handed), and CA (where Roberto Perez could easily revert to his sub-Mendoza ways). I wasn't thrilled with the OF choices after the Pache-Carlson-Rodriguez picks in Round 1, so quickly switched my focus to 2B, where Brujan was pretty much the only one I deemed pick-worthy. Hence my decision to take him early.

An interesting contrast in uncarded strategizing is provided by Houston's GM, Greg, who has stockpiled a trio of minor-league shortstops, along with one of the game's best young ones in Dansby Swanson. He finished seven up on me in the standings, so I cannot help but question the wisdom of my reaching down the prospect lists to take a 2B here (or CA later) instead of just best-available. But as Popeye would say, I yam what I yam & dats all what I yam.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** During the long wait between #27 and #55, I had decided that Spencer Turnbull was my favorite remaining starting pitcher and Luke Jackson was my favorite closer. With a fairly tight cluster of picks (55, 64, and 67), I had to decide which guy to take when, and ultimately missed out on Turnbull by making Brujan the priority. Ob-la-di, ob-la-da.*

#64, LUKE JACKSON (RHP). Well, we finally got our closer. The draft pool only had a few worth considering, but fortunately (for me) they were mediocre enough that even my fave of the sorry bunch was still available here. The Atlanta pen looks stacked this year, but hopefully Jackson still pitches well enough, and often enough, to be a valued member of my bullpen for the next five years. As the infallible Alexander Pope put it, hope springs eternal in the human breast.

#67, VICTOR REYES (CF). Essentially, not getting Spencer Turnbull meant this slot was open for me to draft some depth in center. The best choice would have been Oscar Mercado, who I might have taken at #18 had he still been on the board (but it would have been hard for me to take outfielders with my two early picks). Suffice to say that I don't have any special love for Reyes, but at the very least he pairs well with Inciarte during the season ahead.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** After passing on Will Smith early in the draft, I spent the next few nights tossing and turning over whether to take Reese McGuire, a lefty-hitting catcher with defensive chops who, alas, was caught by police with his pants down in a parking lot. While this is hardly the crime of the century, it calls to question his "intangibles." There were a couple of other catchers to possibly mate with Perez on my roster, but maybe I waited too long. Another player on my radar who was selected before my next pick was Daniel Norris, who as with Turnbull would have been a nice addition to my rotation. (Note that I traded for Norris in my other league a few days later, a funny example of how draft prep can exaggerate one's estimation of a relative mediocrity taken at #77 in our CBA.)*

#87, SERGIO ROMO (RHP). I went into the draft with just a 30-inning closer, Jose Alvarado, whose card is really awful. My pick of Luke Jackson at #64 was a nice upgrade, but following that up with 37-yo Sergio Romo is my way of announcing that every pick doesn't need to be of the "let's contend in a few years" variety. His is the third decent card added to my bullpen during this draft (and won't be the last).

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** The closer rating is what nudged me toward Romo over a younger arm more likely to stay good for the next few seasons. While they are also on the wrong side of 30, Oliver Drake or Chris Martin would've been smarter down the road... but in the long run we're all dead anyway.*

#106, LUIS CAMPUSANO (CA). As with Brujan, I may have reached a bit for my young catcher here, but better safe than sorry. (Notably, the other young catcher on my prospect list, Daulton Varsho, was not taken until Round 8). Campusano violates my usual policy of waiting until a player is in AA to draft him, but the catching market being what it is I decided to test the rule with this exception. If he continues to slug like he did in the California League, this genius pick should hit the majors around the time my Medicare benefits kick in (assuming I can avoid COVID-19).

#107, DREW POMERANZ (LHP). I went into the draft wanting another starting pitcher. Nate Pearson sort of fills the role, but he's useless right now so for the last few rounds we've come close on pick-ups like Turnbull and Norris. By the 6th Round, of course, there are never any decent bulk starters left to draft, so I opted for this 31-yo swing-man instead. His 104 IP boost the quality of my rotation for about half a season, and the Padres liked what they saw in him enough to give him a 4-year deal this off-season.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** The draft is going well from my perspective, in that I am checking off most of the boxes — both current and future needs are being addressed fairly methodically. But every pick represents a trade-off as my draft winds down. Taking Pomeranz means I don't get Tyler Chatwood or Randy Dobnak (arguably better starter choices). Would it have been wiser to take two pitchers with this pair of picks, and delay taking Campusano? I did still have an alternative to Campusano on my list, Daulton Varsho, but decided it was better to choose the one I wanted and do so right away. There is no telling whether I might have been able to draft the same guy in a later round... I do know that I had mapped out my last four picks right after taking Sergio Romo, and it mostly worked out fine.*

#120, STEPHEN VOGT (CA). My need for a 3rd catcher was self-inflicted, since I traded James McCann to Ray right before the draft, but in doing so I was thinking that what my team really needed was a catcher who hit righties well. Smith would work (1R balance rating), and behind him was a left-handed hitting trio: Reece McGuire (4R), Jason Castro (7R), and Vogt (3R). The depth of the carded catching pool this year is the main reason why I felt I could take Reynolds over Smith in Round 1, and my vague thought was to jump in after the first of them was selected. Bryant had nabbed Castro in the 3rd, as part of a mini-run on the position that also saw Tom Murphy go, meaning I would strongly consider taking a carded catcher in the 4th and 5th. Ultimately, it proved correct that I could wait on this and first take care of my closer and centerfielder needs. I also had sort of an ace-in-the-hole in mind, Austin Allen of the A's (who I think will be another Victor Caratini (with both bat and glove). Anyway, with the first of my last two picks I decided to take Vogt, whose .804 OPS will make this year's games a bit more fun.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** My last two picks were just seven slots apart. I thought I could take Vogt here and it would still be tough to choose between all the good relievers still in the pool, but couldn't have been more wrong... Michael Feliz, Ty Buttrey, and Chris Martin fell like dominoes, forcing me to scramble for a new name. This triggered a fond memory of the old days, when the locals would gather for the long draft day and would both heckle one another and sometimes lend a helping hand. Anyway, I guess the good news this year was that I didn't need to dig deep until the very end.*

#128, BUCK FARMER (RHP). It came down to three names: Nathan Eovaldi (who was on my starter list), Michel Baez, and Farmer. Once again, I took the guy whose card makes my staff a little better in the season ahead. I also think my existing crop of starting pitchers will still look good next year. (More foolish words have been spoken, and these will be chiseled on my rotation's gravestone should we suffer a TJ, a PED, and/or who knows what else in the twelve months ahead!)

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Austin Allen. He is the left-handed catcher from which dreams are made.*

This was my fourth draft since rejoining the CBA. In general, I got the guys I wanted and am happy with how it turned out. But as I watch the last few rounds unfold (my team was done fairly early), it strikes me that perhaps my overall strategy was a bit flawed and that I should tweak my draft-swing between now and next year. A few open questions:

- 1) Was much to be gained by taking my 4th uncarded, Brujan at #55, in the mid-draft period versus with my last pick (when I took Farmer at #128)? The picture is murky due to the fact that I selected a guy who was somewhat down my merged prospect list — a better “best available” would have been pitcher Spencer Howard, for instance, who Bryant selected shortly after my final pick. So it’s safe to say that my emotional desire to take Brujan led to my assembling a weaker overall roster. It would be certainly better interesting to consider the butterfly effect of my taking Spencer Turnbull at #55.
- 2) As far as Turnbull is concerned, I am as always fascinated by the way some guys on my short lists just seem to hang around forever. For example, I was itching to pull the trigger on Austin Allen, who was finally taken by South Mountain at #161, as early my #87 pick. I refrained because Stephen Vogt was similarly attractive to me as a third catcher, and the risk of delayed action was thereby reduced.
- 3) Uncarded selections are much less stressful than the carded ones. For the former, I mostly just create a merged list of Top 100’s that are on the net and take “best available” at the positions that interest me. It’s a tad more subjective, in that I favor the prospects who are close to the majors, but there is no agonizing over details that cloud decisions over whether to take a reliever or catcher next, and it’s equally hard to pick just one from the stack of availables.

Looking back, the 2017 class was a good one, with Amed Rosario (#7) and Nick Senzel (#27), Mitch Haniger (#56), Matt Boyd (#87), Amir Garrett (#127), and Kyle Tucker (#187) still featuring prominently on the club. My notable whiff that year was on Zach Collins (#83), the young catcher in the ChiSox system who finally got a card this year (a few years after I gave up on him). His memory haunted my selection of Luis Campusano at #106... let’s hope my uncarded catcher demon is exorcised once and for all.

Still rostered from the 2018 class are Matt Olson (#5), Forrest Whitley (#25), Scott Kingery (#45), Victor Caratini (#121), and Adam Engel (#125). I also drafted Hyun-Jin-Ryu (#85) that year, who was flipped this past winter. Significantly, four of my last five selections that year were pitchers who flamed out within a year or two: Clayton Richard, Kenan Middleton, Brian Duensing, and Sal Romano. Note at first I thought it was 5/5, but then I remembered that Jose Adalberto (#265) is now known as Jose Alvarado (and is still a marginal keeper). I can only pray this bleak record isn’t a harbinger of the fate of my newly-reconstructed bullpen!

Finally, a year ago the headline is the Hindenburg-like sequence that led to my 1st-pick-overall turning into an injury-bust a few months later. I was almost afraid to look at the rest, but scrolling down the page there is some good news, with Joey Lucchesi (#21), Peter Alonso (#41), Ryan McMahon (#63), Domingo German (#81), Dylan Cease (#105), Trevor May (#121), and Roberto Perez (#161).

This year’s draft class consists of eleven players in all, which means 29 of my current players have come via the draft. Another nine were netted in trades, and I believe just two of my players, outfielders Ender Inciarte and Michael Conforto, were on the inherited roster. It’s definitely my team now.

In closing, here follows a condensed look at my roster. The 14 new faces (drafted or acquired in the last 12 months) are in **Red**. Hitters have balance, ABs, and OPS listed; pitchers have IP and ERA. The hitting remains a relative strength, but the pitching is still suspect. I think we’re roughly a .500 club — it would be nice to win more than we lose for a change — but the CBA has a lot of really good teams and unfortunately this isn’t one of them.

CATCHERS. Roberto Perez (2L, 389, .768) and Victor Caratini# (1R, 244, .795) form a tolerable platoon with enough ABs to get through a season. I did want to draft a third catcher (preferably LH) to round

things out, and found a pretty good one in **Stephen Vogt*** (3R, 255, .804). And in the event they want to trade their tools of ignorance for a game of bridge, I also took a fourth, the uncarded **Luis Campusano**, who is coming off a great year of high-A ball. Rostering a catcher quartet reveals my hope that quantity does indeed have a quality all its own.

FIRSTBASE. The incumbent is Matt Olson* (483, .896), who has good power and a '1' glove. Bursting onto the scene is another slugger, the right-handed Pete Alonso (1R, 597, .941), who will be our primary DH this year. The pair slugged 89 HRs last year, causing ownership to move the fences in a tad to help their quest to break the club's season record.

SECONDBASE. Playing most days will be the left-handed Kolton Wong (E, 478, .780), a '1' in the field. My chief utility guy will be Scott Kingery (2L, 458, .788), who is a versatile '3' at 2B/3B/CF, and waiting in the wings is little **Vidal Brujan** (still at least a year away from the bigs).

THIRDBASE. Eugenio Suarez (E, 575, .930), another power hitter aiming to set a new homer mark for the club. Depth is provided by the aforementioned Kingery and Ryan McMahon (1L, 480, .778) — something of a blunderer afield (a '4' here and at 1B/2B), but thankfully packing some thunder at the plate.

SHORTSTOP. My first player drafted (after my return to the CBA) was Amed Rosario (3L, 616, .754), who has been a minor disappointment thus far. As such, my Owls showed wisdom in the acquisition of Paul DeJong (2R, 583, .762), a year ago — especially so given he's now a 2e7 in the field. The pair forms a strong platoon this year, and we (hopefully) remain set for years to come.

LEFTFIELD. **Bryan Reynolds#** (3R, 491, .880) is rock-solid, and will hopefully be my lead-off hitter for the next five years. He was the best player on the board when I drafted, at least in terms of fit for my current roster. Waiting in the wings is Kyle Tucker* (E, 67, .856), who had a bit of a lost season but still has a chance at stardom.

CENTERFIELD. Ender Inciarte (1L, 199, .740) is still a '1' but lost much of the year to injury. We have another great fielder in Adam Engel (4L, 227, .685), but the alarm bells are ringing for an upgrade at this position. I failed to take an uncarded player to prepare for Ender's possible further demise, but did pick up **Victor Reyes#** (2R, 276, .767) to add some depth along with Nick Senzel (3L, 375, .742), who did not look great out there last year but remains a highly-regarded prospect. This is another position where quantity masks over some quality concerns.

RIGHTFIELD. Mitch Haniger (2L, 246, .777) took one to the 'nads and might never be the same. I considered cutting him, but wanted to give him another year. For now we are just fine, with Michael Conforto* (3R, 549, .857), last year's LF, sliding over.

ROTATION. Matt Boyd* (1L, 185, 4.56), Reynaldo Lopez (1R, 184, 5.38), Joey Lucchesi* (2L, 164, 4.18), Homer Bailey (5L, 163, 4.57), **Chris Archer** (1L, 120, 5.19), and Dylan Cease (4R, 73, 5.79) give me a barely-adequate rotation — the bulk is there, but the quality is generic. Further down the road, but hopefully coming fast, are a trio of potential aces: Forrest Whitley (RHP), Michael Kopech (RHP), and **Nate Pearson** (RHP).

BULLPEN. My vague plan is to rely heavily on a very deep bullpen, fronted by a trio of swing-men who I plan to ride pretty hard: Domingo German (4R, 143, 4.03), **Matt Strahm*** (E, 115, 4.71), and **Drew Pomeranz*** (4L, 104, 4.85). As for the short men, there are just three holdovers: the erstwhile closer, Jose Alvarado* (5L, 30, 4.80), and the left/right setup duo of Amir Garrett* (3L, 56, 3.21) and Trevor May (1R, 64, 2.94). New hands are set to throw the remaining end-game innings. Setting up are **Nick Anderson** (7R, 65, 3.32) and **Buck Farmer** (2R, 68, 3.72); closing are **Sergio Romo** (E, 60, 3.43) and **Luke Jackson** (6L,

73, 3.84). This isn't the kind of quality you find on a playoff-bound club, but (I think) it represents a nice upgrade over what we had a year ago.