

Article

Developing or Just Playing? Team Effects on Individual Performance in a Collegiate Summer Baseball League

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Abstract: Collegiate Summer Baseball Leagues offer development opportunities to college players. Overall, a significant number of Major League Baseball players once played in a summer league, suggesting at least some positive effect from the experience. However, teams within each league are individually owned and likely approach both business and baseball operations in different manners, leading to different opportunities for players based on their team affiliation. This investigative and exploratory study examines differences in player performance and from their collegiate season to their following collegiate summer league season. Results suggest that some summer league teams, such as the Savannah Bananas, have significant effects on individual player performance compared to their collegiate teams. Qualitative interviews with Bananas' players are then conducted to add context and explanations for the quantitative results. Interviews suggest that the team environment in which they play improve their performance. Benefits to mindset, self-confidence, and goals to improve on and off the field are cited as beneficial.

Keywords: Baseball; Development; NCAA; Collegiate Summer Leagues; Savannah Bananas

Collegiate summer leagues play an important role in the development of baseball players. These leagues have arguably become more important due to the restructuring of Major League Baseball's (MLB) minor league system. This restructuring has caused the elimination of numerous teams and the reorganization of leagues to be directly affiliated with MLB (MLB.com, 2020). Opportunities to play in competitive environments with wooden bats make such leagues similar to the minor leagues, which allows for more attention from MLB scouts. Individual players may benefit, as demonstrated by the thousands of collegiate summer league players who are playing and have played MLB ("Summer Collegiate Baseball", 2021). These additional development opportunities are subsequently beneficial to college teams, as returning players may make greater contributions to the team (Spink, Wilson, & Odnokon, 2010).

While these leagues provide critical opportunities that can be advantageous to players as well as their current and future teams, little is known about the benefits of such leagues and how those benefits may vary. The purpose of this study is to examine differences in individual player performance that can be attributed to team affiliation. Using a study of the Coastal Plain League (CPL), results suggest that some teams have positive effects on player performance while others have negative effects. These results are an initial step in understanding how collegiate summer play affects individual outcomes. Industry professionals may utilize the results and the recommendations to improve the collegiate summer league experience for individual players and other stakeholders.

Purpose and Research Questions

Collegiate summer baseball leagues exist throughout the United States and typically play during June and July. Teams are composed of players from various colleges and universities. These wooden bat leagues provide college baseball players the opportunity to play in a minor league-like environment and Major League Baseball (MLB) scouts utilize the early opportunity to evaluate players. Such leagues have been very successful in producing MLB players. For example, the Cape Cod League has produced over 1400 MLB players (Cape Cod Baseball, n.d.), while the CPL (coastalplain.com) and New England Collegiate Baseball League have produced over 100 players in shorter periods of time (New England Collegiate Baseball League, n.d.). Further, some leagues have the explicit goal of offering player development (Coastal Plain League, n.d.), even though such development is in the hands of the team and the player.

As such, each team may approach the combined goals of players and owners in a unique method. Some teams may completely ignore player development as a means to minimize the risk of harm to the player, while others may take a hands-on approach in an attempt to improve that player's performance and the team's performance. Others may be focused purely on profits, paying little attention to baseball operations.

Thus, it reasons that teams may have varying effects on player performance and player performance improvement. The purpose of this manuscript is to examine differences in individual player performance attributed to team-level effects. By examining player performance within a collegiate summer league as well as performance improvement when returning to the player's college team after playing in the summer league, this study finds significant differences across teams. These results suggest that team-level factors may be leading to player improvement. This article can support the decision making of players themselves who are seeking to improve as well as teams in summer leagues who may be able to improve performance both on and off the field.

Literature Review

A team is an organizational group made up of members who rely on each other, work towards shared objectives, and coordinate their efforts to achieve those objectives (Kogler Hill, 2022). Teams also “require both individual and mutual accountability” (Moore, 1993, p. 104). Extant research indicates that sports teams' outcomes vary due to effects other than the general skill level of players (e.g., Prinz & Wicker, 2012, Thomas et al., 2019). Team cohesion is one example, with both task and social cohesion being elements of this construct. Task cohesion exists when team members share commitment to achieve a goal (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). Teams with a clear goal and a results-driven structure are more likely to be highly effective, especially when linked with strong social cohesion (Kogler Hill, 2022).

Social cohesion represents the quality of interpersonal relationships among team players, which can build trust, friendship, and a sense of belonging within the team (Carron et al, 2002). The social aspect of cohesiveness can be critical for team success. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) find that the critical difference between a team and just a group of people is a shared commitment where people, not just supervisors, hold each other accountable.

Team cohesion is associated with multiple positive outcomes. High levels of cohesion have been associated with increased trust, cooperation, and collective efficacy in sports teams (Carron et al., 2002). For example, Tao, Chuang, and Lin (2016) find that team cohesiveness leads to improved performance in Major League Baseball. Cohesiveness may be especially relevant in collegiate summer leagues, as players come from many different college teams and spend only about two months together.

Leadership is also critical for team cohesion. Effective leaders influence team cohesion by establishing a shared vision, fostering a positive team culture, and facilitating open communication among team members (Northouse, 2019). One of the primary ways leaders enhance team cohesion is by articulating a clear and compelling vision that unites team members toward common goals (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). In sports teams, coaches who set clear objectives and align individual roles with team strategies help members understand their contribution to the collective effort (Yukelson, 1997). Effective leaders also cultivate a positive team culture by modeling appropriate behaviors and establishing norms that promote mutual respect and collaboration (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Communication is another vital mechanism through which leadership influences team cohesion. Leaders who

encourage open dialogue and active listening create an environment where team members feel valued and understood (Sullivan & Gee, 2007). Clear and consistent communication from leaders helps to prevent misunderstandings and ensures that all team members are aligned with the team's objectives (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). This openness not only builds trust but also facilitates conflict resolution, which is essential for maintaining cohesion. Lastly, leadership can help build confidence (Stevens, Rees & Cruwys, 2021), which athletes consider an important part of their performance (Smith, Zakrajsek, Hardin, & Graham, 2020).

Methods

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the research problem. In Study 1, archival data was utilized to conduct an exploratory analysis to ascertain whether team effects on individual performances are present in the sample data. Next, in Study 2, a qualitative case study approach was taken. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the findings from the exploratory analysis. These interviews were designed to offer explanatory insights and to contextualize the results of the archival data analysis.

Study 1

Participants and Procedure

The CPL is a growing collegiate summer league with the goals of "... returning players to their respective schools as better, well-rounded individuals who can instantly help their program succeed on and off the field; as well as be successful at the next level of baseball" (coastalplain.com). Historically, the CPL has produced over 1,650 players who were selected in the MLB draft as well as 131 Major League players (coastalplain.com). With stated goals to improve players, the CPL is an appropriate sample for evaluating player performance and improvement. The sample consists of all position players who played in the CPL from 2016-2019 and were also Division I NCAA players. These years coincide with an expansion of the CPL in 2016 and stop before the severe disruptions that began in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Archival data of player statistics were collected from baseballcube.com. Data were collected from the 2016-2019 seasons, covering the most recent league expansion up to the cancellations and delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.^[1] As pitching, hitting, and fielding performance are measured quite differently, and pitching and fielding performance can be heavily dependent upon factors outside a player's control (Marr and Thau, 2014), only hitters were considered in the analysis. Collegiate statistics for position players from NCAA Division I schools were then collected, allowing for comparison between college and CPL performance. Data was collected from The Baseball Cube (thebaseballcube.com, n.d.) and the Coastal Plain League (coastalplain.com) websites. Multi-level and OLS regression were used to analyze the data.

Measures

The first dependent variable is WRC+ (weighted runs created plus) from each player's CPL performance for the year. WRC+ is a rate statistic that considers the value of each outcome, (e.g., single, double, triple) rather than treating all hits equally (Slowinski, n.d.). WRC+ also adjusts for park factors, allowing for better comparisons between players who may be playing in different hitting environments. For example, ballparks often have different outfield dimensions, which can affect the number of home runs hit in that stadium.

The second dependent variable compares CPL performance to NCAA performance. First, each player's OPS was calculated by adding his on-base percentage plus his slugging percentage. Each player's OPS in the CPL was then divided by his OPS in college to create the ratio. Team affiliation was measured with a dummy variable for each team. Control variables for each year and a player's number of at-bats in the CPL, and a player's number of at-bats in college were also included. Variables were analyzed using OLS regression. As WRC+ measures performance as a rate, at-bats is only included as a control when analyzing OPS ratio.

Results and Discussion

In light of the purpose of the manuscript to examine differences in individual player performance attributed to team-level effects, Table 1 contains descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analysis. Testing for team effects on WRC+ finds that four teams (Forest City, Morehead, Peninsula, and Savannah) show a positive and significant effect ($p < .05$) on individual performance, and one team shows a negative and significant effect. Despite finding these differences, these team-level effects could simply be due to differences in the distribution of talent. The next test compares a player's performance in college with that of the CPL. Team effects on OPS ratio find much different results, as only Savannah produces a positive effect ($p < .05$). Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Descriptives and Correlations

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3
1. OPS Ratio	1.06	0.58			
2. WRC+	92.51	41.15	0.17***		
3. CPL AB	105.37	42.8	0.11***	0.39***	
4. College AB	124.18	72.46	-0.32***	0.21***	0.27***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Effects of Team Affiliation on Performance

Variables (n = 544; 596)	OPS Ratio Coefficient	wRC+ Coefficient
Edenton	0.08	-20.76***
Florence	0.05	5.71
Forest City	0.04	26.4***
Gastonia	-0.06	11.68
High Point	0.09	-1.8
Holly Springs	0.08	2.84
Lexington	0.09	-10.79
Macon	0.02	11.69
Martinsville	-0.04	8.47
Morehead	0.19	15.1
Peninsula	0.17	35.51***
Wilmington	0	1.94
Wilson	0.04	5.79
Savannah	0.24*	27.41***
Year		
2017	0.05	-2.97***
2018	-0.11	-0.5***
2019	0.1	-4.09***
CPL AB	0.003***	
College AB	-0.003***	0.12***
Intercept	1.11***	74.94***
(df)	19	18
F	6.14***	6.54***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In each of these analyses the control variable representing the number of at-bats a player had in college is a significant predictor of both summer-league and collegiate outcomes (wRC+ and the CPL/NCAA ratio). Given that experience contributes to performance across numerous settings (Macnamara, Hambrick, & Oswald, 2014), additional analysis was performed on a sub-sample of players with less experience. This sub-sample contains players who accumulated less than 72 at-bats. This cut-off was used because it represents a number of at-bats that is more than one standard deviation below the median [2] player. Results are shown in Table 3. When examining this subset of players with limited

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collegiate playing experience results show that only Savannah ($B = 1.26$, $p < .01$) and Morehead ($B = 1.44$, $p < .01$) produce positive and significant results on OPS ratio. Only Savannah ($B = 35.74$, $p < .05$) produces positive and significant results for wRC+.

Table 3. Effects of Team Affiliation on Performance of Inexperienced Players

Variables (n = 138; 121)	OPS Ratio	wRC+
	Coefficient	Coefficient
Edenton	0.56	-29.87
Florence	-0.01	-9.15
Forest City	0.07	25.27
Gastonia	0.09	20.01
High Point	0.67	-6.04
Holly Springs	0.52	10.93
Lexington	0.33	-18.92
Macon	0.27	25.24
Martinsville	-0.15	-1.07
Morehead	1.39***	13.61
Peninsula	0.48	34.16
Wilmington	0.16	12.26
Wilson	-0.07	-15.53
Savannah	1.09**	35.74*
Year		
2017	0.05	-0.19
2018	-0.2	-6.31
2019	0.35	-7.23
CPL AB	0.01***	
College AB	-0.02***	-0.01
Intercept	0.69	78.63
(df)	19	18
F	2.96***	1.73*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the wRC+ analysis show the potential for meaningful benefits to teams. The teams causing a statistically significant effect on performance are shown to have a rather large effect, with wRC+ effects ranging from a 35.51% increase to a 20.76% decrease. For perspective and all else equal, the Pythagorean Winning Percentage formula (Baseball-Reference, n.d.) predicts an entire team of league average players improving by

35.51% would win at a 63.5% rate. The same team of average players declining in performance by 20.76% would win at a 38.5% rate¹.

In the context of the purpose of the manuscript to examine differences in individual player performance attributed to team-level effects, results clearly demonstrate significant differences across some teams in the CPL, with both positive and negative effects being found. While this empirical work alone cannot determine the cause of these effects, the consistent positive effect shown by the Savannah Bananas, other positive effects from Morehead, Forest City, and Peninsula, as well as the negative effect shown by Edenton suggest that some teams have created environments that are making a difference. As previously mentioned, it is important to note that all teams exist within an environment regardless of the intentionality behind that environment. As this empirical work alone cannot determine the cause of this performance increase, qualitative interviews were conducted to further understand these results.

Study 2

While the quantitative results are interesting and provide some evidence of team-level characteristics affecting individual player performance, no specific cause can be identified. A post-hoc qualitative study was conducted to identify the reasons for changes in performance. Team cohesiveness is considered an antecedent to team and individual excellence. Study 2 focuses on uncovering whether team cohesion was present in the Savannah Bananas.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 15 Savannah Bananas players and the head coach, representing a majority of the roster. While examination of other teams would have been beneficial (especially teams producing negative individual results), the Savannah Bananas allowed for this research to be conducted. This aspect of the study was approved by the first author's institutional review board (IRB). Players were given anonymity in the study.

Procedures

Selected players and the Bananas head coach were invited to a semi-structured interview. The questions were open-ended to encourage the development of themes until saturation was achieved. Each player was asked: (1) what they enjoyed about playing baseball, (2) what they knew about the Bananas organization prior to joining the team, (3) how they thought the team may be different from others, and (4) how they would describe the coaches and culture of the organization.

¹ Pythagorean Winning Percentage = $(\text{Runs Scored})^{1.83} / [(\text{Runs Scored})^{1.83} + (\text{Runs Allowed})^{1.83}]$
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Results and Discussion

Bananas Head Coach Tyler Gillum and the players provided explanations for the quantitative evidence of player improvement. The Bananas are significantly different from most collegiate summer league teams. Players are encouraged to have fun during the game and regularly engage with the fans in entertaining ways. Table 5 contains relevant quotes from interviews. The Bananas are well-known for their innovative approach to baseball, but during the time of this study they were also confined to traditional baseball rules. Players described the benefits of playing for the Bananas and how they believe it helped their on-field performance. Themes included leadership expectations, person/environment fit, mindset, building people, and improving confidence. These results reflect the overall culture of the team, which emphasizes a customer-first mentality, hard work, and personal growth.

Coach Gillum admits that the Bananas approach is not for everyone, but that players willing to give it a try will often see benefits. Bananas players point to being more relaxed and only focusing on the moment when they are playing. The ‘fans first’ aspect of the environment requires players to stop thinking about the game itself and focus instead on the moment. Gillum tells players to “flip the switch” when doing this as a way to emphasize a shifting of focus from one thing to another. The fun environment helps them do this more easily and then allows them to put poor at-bats or other negative experiences behind them and move forward (Petelczyc, et al, 2018).

They also point out that while they are there to have fun, they are also there to play quality baseball and improve through a focus on process. Players must be willing to engage in both activities to be successful in Savannah. One player specifically tied his performance improvement in college to the confidence he gained when playing in Savannah.

Conclusion

The results of Study 1 and Study 2, when taken together, demonstrate the positive effect of environment on individual player performance. First, Savannah players are found to improve their OPS by 24% from college to the CPL, while no other teams are found to produce a significant change. Inexperienced players have especially thrived in Savannah, with dramatically improved OPS. Improvements are also found when examining wRC+. While these differences could theoretically be explained by differences in talent levels across teams, qualitative interviews with Savannah Bananas players suggest that other factors may be at work.

Team cohesion has played a role in the Savannah Bananas’ performance. Players suggest that a fun environment, with a focus on process, backed by strong and caring leadership has created a great summer experience and team cohesion, which many credit for their improved performance. This begins with leadership expectations from ownership and management about fitting into the culture and environment of the team. Players are told that they will be outside of their comfort zone, but that they are also there to have fun and entertain fans. The Bananas head coach, Tyler Gillum, clearly understands his role. He is

largely a steward of baseball players, but a leader of the people on his team. This is highlighted by one player who said “He (Gillum) said, ‘We’re not here to build great baseball players, but we’re here to build better men’.” This suggests that while the Bananas do not emphasize on-field performance, they do emphasize performance in terms of personal growth. One player added that the Bananas do a good job turning players into the best people they can be and having them take that back home.

Players who fit well in the environment tend to have a great deal of buy-in. This is best exemplified by one player who experienced regret because of one instance where he did not do what he could have done for a fan (see Table 4). In this regard it, and to revisit the original research question, it appears that the most consistent teams balance both developing and playing to maximize individual performance in the collegiate summer baseball league.

These results are potentially very useful to industry practitioners. If teams can deliberately create environments that allow players to improve, numerous benefits can accrue to team owners and employees. Collegiate summer leagues clearly place emphasis on the number of players drafted by and playing for MLB teams, and improved player performance may increase those numbers. Individual teams may also earn recognition when former players succeed at higher levels. Improved individual performance will likely aggregate to improved team performance as well, which can possibly lead to increased revenue via ticket sales and merchandise.

Several limitations and future research opportunities are present. First, because Savannah is the only team sampled for qualitative interviews, results of performance in other teams from the archival data analysis should be taken lightly. Reasons for improvement in Savannah are likely different than reasons for performance changes on other teams. This is especially true of negative changes, as theoretical reasons for such performance are not considered in this study. Next, while player skill is controlled for via previous performance (OPS), there are differences across college teams and leagues that are too numerous to control for. The overall effect of coaching is also likely part of the explanation, as Bananas players repeatedly mentioned their head coach. Coaching and coachability of individuals (Anderson, & Birrer, 2011) can certainly lead to performance improvements and likely does factor into these results. However, the CPL’s goals to return players to schools as “better, well-rounded individuals” (Coastal Plain League, 2020) suggests that on-field improvements will not be the focus of CPL coaches, regardless of their ability. Overall, while a full explanation for these results cannot be given, the large performance increases and player statements regarding coaching and the environment make a strong case for the broad causes. These limitations also provide opportunities for future research. Scholars or industry practitioners can examine differences in culture, coaching ability, and likely many other factors possibly leading to individual player performance improvements. Circumstances unique to collegiate summer leagues, such as host families, could also be considered. Lastly, this study focused only on hitters. The development of pitchers represents another possible future research opportunity.

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Table 5. Quotes

Category	Synopsis	Quote
Leadership expectations	While the culture is about having fun, it is for the fans, and players are expected to participate.	"...from the first day we got here (team owner Jesse Cole) told us 'guys this it's a fans first environment, you're going to be outside of your comfort zone'. And I've seen him yell at dudes before, not because they pitch bad, not because they made an error. But because they wouldn't go in the dugout in the fourth inning and dance with somebody "
Leadership Expectations	A strong effort is required.	The work ethic is incredible.... they do everything 100%.
Person/Environment Fit	Players must fit with the environment. Not every player is willing to engage.	"(Head Coach Tyler) Gillum does a great job of recruiting guys to come here that he believes can handle all the pressures of, you know, putting on us, you know, putting a smile on people's faces for the fans and for being good baseball player. So Gillum does a really good job of recruiting coaches and players that can handle all that pressure and all that that situation."
Person/Environment Fit	Players express benefits from being around others that fit in the environment. Distraction is considered positive, because players are distracted from other parts of their lives or a recent bad outcome on the field.	I can just go into the baseball field and... enjoy the company around me and just live in the present. I don't really think about other things. I'm distracted, which I really love.
Person/Environment Fit	Players enjoy being around others with the same goals.	I look forward to being around a bunch of guys who are passionate about getting better every day and come to the field. They bring some good energy and I like being around them. I like being around other people (with) the same interests that I have, to get better at baseball, to put a smile on fans faces, and to just have a good time.
Person/Environment Fit	Players buy-in to the mission	"I gave all I had on the field...but there was still a certain time...I didn't give all I could have there in that dance or to make that fan's experience better. Coming back, I didn't want to have that feeling where I left a fan out one time or a fan came up to me and I couldn't talk to them. So, I did everything that I could to know that when I'm looking back at the season, to not have that feeling of remorse"
Mindset	Players regularly suggest that having fun helps them play	"...my first few years of college, I was extremely hard on myself. And I realized if I'm not having fun when I'm playing,

	better. They compare it to their collegiate experience, which is usually more rigid.	and I'm no good, I'm just, that's just the way it is that if I'm not relaxed and I find out they're tense and not having a good time and mad, I'm not playing well, if I'm out there having a good time and loose. That's when I start performing the way I should.
Mindset	Entertaining the fans is important. Players must be able to shift their mindset to it when they are asked to do so.	"...our head coach always says flip the switch. ... if we're filming a video or we're on the field dancing... you [have] to be able to really lock in.
Mindset	Shifting mindset has benefits. Players are able to forget a bad outcome and move on.	"When you're playing at school, you strike out your first at bat, you go out in the outfield and that whole at bat is going to go through your head for the rest of that half inning. And a lot of guys can flush it and you can say that you can flush it, but its still going to be in the back of your mind. But there's so many other things going on here that it truly does leave your mind and you're not even thinking about it a few hours later."
Mindset	The change of pace and doing something different helps players improve.	"We spend so many hours on the baseball field. It just really feels good to like, do something else and have fun with it. So I think it's an advantage and makes us better."
Building People	The Bananas work to help players improve on and off the field.	"I think that the front office does a good job of trying to not only have us playing our best here, but also turning us into the best people we can be for the community and then having you take that back home"
Building People	Coaches realize the effect they can have on people as baseball players is limited, but the effect on people can be significant.	"He (Gillum) said, we're not here to build great baseball players, but we're here to build better men. And I think that's always been one of his big mottos is, he's going to try his best to make you a great baseball player, but at the end of the day, it's going to do everything he can to make you a great man and put you in this society and be successful."
Improving Confidence	One benefit to players both on and off the field is confidence. One player in particular expressed how much performing for fans helped his confidence on the field.	"...my confidence just skyrockets. ... the first two jumps [in improvement] I made were more physical jumps. But the second, when I came down here [to Savannah], it was more of a mental thing for me. I finally started to believe in myself more. I always had this mental block, that I spoke to Jesse actually about just like always believing at the moment was too big for me. ...you just got to go out there and pitch the ball. ... that guy has got a number on the back, just like you do and he's going to show it again, just like you do. Coming down here and learning that was something that really helped me going forward.

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