



B O R N F O R

B A S E B A

From the Little League World Series to the big show and back down again, Brian Esposito was made for this.

by MIKE LOPRESTI



CHANGING OF THE GUARD
As new club manager, Brian Esposito takes over a squad with playoff appearances in four of the past six years. That's a lot to live up to, but Esposito is ready to show he belongs.

THE NEW MANAGER of the Indianapolis Indians was 12-years-old when he had one of the biggest baseball days of his life.

Four hits, three RBI, a home run. For a golden moment, Brian Esposito was the toast of Williamsport. This was the 1991 Little League World Series, and his Staten Island team from New York was on the way to a third-place finish, with a 16-0 throttling of Canada's Glace Bay.

"That experience at 12 shaped my entire year," he would say 27 years later. "We fell a game short of the LLWS the year before in the Eastern Regional. It taught me how to work hard for what you want, taught me how you bounce back after failure, taught me what it meant to be a teammate."

About those teammates. Jason Marquis threw a no-hitter that day. Later, he would pitch for nine different big league teams and win 124 games. He and Esposito played a lot of baseball together, went through a lot of workouts together.

And there was Michael Cammarata. "We hung out a lot off the field as we grew up," Esposito said. "He played more hockey in high school and college, but we remained close off the field."

Esposito's road would lead to life in baseball as a catcher, Cammarata's to New York City as a fireman. He died on 9/11, trying to save people stuck in a nearby hotel when one of the towers came down. "Tough one to swallow, losing him," Esposito said.

Esposito still has his home run ball. Good story about that. "The fan who caught it found my home address, and mailed it to me a few years later," he said. The memories of that 1991 summer have always lingered, over a baseball journey that began with . . . well, just when did little Brian Esposito fall in love with the game?

“The womb, I would have to say. I was one of those guys who sat in school all the time and basically told everybody, this is what I was going to do.

“You look at every picture my mother has, and I have a bat or a ball or glove in my hand.”

He quickly became a Yankee fan, of course. Kids in his neighborhood did that, as surely as they liked ice cream.

“When you were growing up in Staten Island, the rite of passage was to get a Yankee hat. And that’s the way it still is. I have a nephew, I just had to get him out of that stage and get him a Pirate hat to start his life.”

The memory of Esposito’s first visit to Yankee Stadium – his Little League team was being honored -- has stayed with him, through every ballpark he ever walked into.

“The first thing that hit me was the smell when you walked in there. We were in the tunnel underneath, and at the time you don’t know what it was. You just remember this funky smell. Looking back, it was a combination of beer and grass and different things.

“Every time I walked into a stadium and they had those underground tunnels, that kind of takes me back to where it all started. They’ve cleaned that up a little bit. All these newer stadiums, they don’t really have that smell anymore similar to what Yankee Stadium had.”

With baseball in his heart and the whiff of Yankee Stadium in his head, Esposito set out on his life’s passion. Oh, how he loved it. Which is why, after his last high school game, he stood on the field crying.

“I was a realist. I didn’t want to leave because I didn’t know where I was going to go to school, or if I was going to go anywhere. I didn’t know if that was going to be the last game I was going to play or not.”

Then came June 5. The morning of the baseball draft. Pro baseball didn’t much want him, but the University of Connecticut did. The Huskies coaches had watched him play two innings in a Babe Ruth league and liked what they saw. He signed his letter of intent on draft day.



Eventually, he would be named UConn MVP. He also had become an ardent basketball fan, with both the men and women’s teams winning national championships. He sat outside one night in line to get his student season ticket.

He had also started to think about professional baseball. The Red Sox brought him to Fenway Park for a workout. Then another. He was on his way home to Staten Island when they called to ask him back a third time.

“The funny thing about it was, the two players I was with for that one were Manny Delcarmen, who the Sox winded up taking that year in the second round -- he just threw off the mound and I caught him -- and a kid named Miguel Negrón, who Toronto winded up selecting in the first round.

“During that workout, he didn’t have any bats so he was using mine. He broke both of them. The



NO STRANGER
Esposito arrives as the 61st manager in Indians history, but isn't new to the managerial role. He's compiled a 233-195 (.544) record as an MiLB skipper.

Anaheim, Texas, St. Louis, Colorado, Houston and Chicago Cubs organizations. A minor league tour of a dozen cities, from Ran-

cho Cucamonga to Round Rock.

And three wonderful games played in the big leagues.

The first was as a defensive replacement for the Cardinals in 2007, the other two with Houston in 2010, when he had three at-bats. Alas, no hits. But he was in the Baseball Encyclopedia to stay.

"It was just a call you expect to always get at some point," he said of that first summons to the majors. "You feel like you worked your butt off to get it. And then when it happened, I really didn't get hung up on the nostalgia of it. I just said, 'OK it's time to go.' I got my stuff ready and I went up there and all I could think about was how I was going to stay there.

"Which didn't work out. I didn't stay up there a long time. But that was the plan."

He waited three years for his next shot and

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irony was, they went into the clubhouse and they got bats from (Red Sox infielder) John Valentin's locker, and they had me use his bat. There was a humongous difference between my little crappy store-bought wood bats and the bats John Valentin had in his locker. I had my best workout ever right there."

Boston called Esposito's name in the fifth round in the 2000 draft. He had one thought. "Just do everything I could to become a big leaguer. I had got my foot in the door."

The road ahead would not be easy, nor completely fulfilling. A 13-year trek with the Boston,

tried to make the most of it when it came with the Astros.

"I was doing everything I could to help make an impact, whether it was helping with the young pitchers, helping with the scouting reports. It was one of those things I didn't get much of an opportunity to show that I belonged. But it is what it is."

All those seasons, all those minor league stops, all that waiting. But he never stopped the quest.

"That's just the way I learned that life was all about. My old man taught me that a lot. He showed up and went to work (as a building contractor) every day and did what he had to do. He got in that



work van and went to work every day and busted his butt, so it was something I wasn't going to stop doing, just because it didn't work out in one spot. It was just an opportunity to go someplace else and see what I could do there."

Indeed, there were two voices in his head. Phil and Colleen Esposito.

"My mother's probably my biggest fan. My mother knows more about baseball than some people I could sit around in the clubhouse with. She would drive my dad crazy with the game; she printed up every box score. That had a lot to do with what kept driving me as well, was the fact that I knew I had two of my biggest fans at home, and the sacrifices they had made. They were never, ever going to be ready for me to end my career as both a player, and now as a coach."

Already, back during that brief fling with the Astros in 2010, his path was starting to lead toward coaching. Maybe he didn't understand it at the time, but others did. Marc Bombard, his Triple-A manager at Round Rock, for instance.

"He would always tell me 'You're going to be a great manager one day.' Here I am going to the big leagues, or going up and down from Triple-A, and I had this guy tell me I'm going to be a good manager. So it kind of planted the seed a little bit. I didn't quite understand why. I've got an opportunity to go play in the big leagues and they're talking about managing. I said, 'Can I go play for a little bit first?'"

"I think it had to do with the passion that I had to help lead pitching staffs, to help lead my team. I guess those qualities came out as the catcher in me, so there were always a lot of people pushing me in that direction."

By 2013, he had played in more than 750 minor league games, thrown out 204 would-be base stealers and hit 38 home runs – probably none of them as loud as that one in Williamsport. It was time to move on with the next phase of his life.

And that first coaching stop would be . . . Indianapolis.

"I remember the place is beautiful. It's a great city. The management took care of the players,

they took care of the staff. And they like their baseball. They take things seriously over there, it's not just for the entertainment. They want to see guys go out there and play the game the way it should be played."

I had when they first came into pro ball are now at that level. It's kind of neat to be able to impact them at the very beginning and now try to help finish them off so they can get to the big leagues. It means a lot to me.



He managed Jamestown in the Short-Season New York-Penn League in 2014, and we're talking getting back to the basics.

"We lived in a dorm behind the stadium. There wasn't much in the town. The guys showed up every day and it was all about playing baseball. For me, it was exactly what some of these young guys needed. I enjoyed it. It brought me back to my roots. It made me get back to realizing what it's all about."

Esposito moved to Single-A West Virginia the next two seasons, with a glowing .626 winning percentage in 2015. Last season he was with Short-Season A West Virginia.

And now, the Indians will be led by an ex-Little Leaguer who spent a lifetime, it seems, chasing his dream.

"Our experiences are what shape us to be what we are. So now the only thing I can do from my end is understand what experiences I had and how I could build these relationships with these players to deliver the messages to the guys to get them better. I had the opportunity to manage for the last couple of years and now a lot of the guys

"The thing I enjoy most is the chance to touch all these different players . . . if there's 25 guys on your roster, there's 25 different ways you're going to be able to reach these guys. Are my experiences important? Yes. Do these kids really care about my experiences? No. They want to know how you can help them, how you can get them better."

Want an example of Esposito's deep feeling for baseball? Ask him about his golf game. In 2013, just as he was coming to Indianapolis for the first time, he decided he was going to really get into the sport.

"I went out and bought the entire wardrobe to play golf. I've got a whole ensemble of golf stuff. But I never quite played because I was always just buried into doing my work and getting things done."

Now he gets to the course occasionally. "I would say at the moment it's fair," he said of his game. But baseball comes first. It always has, it always will. He need only think back to that late summer day in Williamsport, rounding the bases, and his teammates waiting at home plate to greet him. Michael Cammarata among them. ▼