

Attention Grabbers

Locals showcase skills for scouts at combine

by James Peters

Staff Writer

Lou Holcomb, a part-time scout for the Baltimore Orioles, decided three years ago to “kill three birds with one stone” by starting the Mid-Atlantic High School Baseball Classic. The event, which is dubbed the “Battle on the Ship” because it is played at the University of Maryland’s Shipley Field, includes a day-long skills combine and an all-star game, allowing soon-to-be sophomores, juniors and seniors to showcase their skills in front of both college coaches and professional scouts, who in turn get to evaluate the young players in a competitive setting.

As an added bonus, Holcomb’s job is made somewhat easier as he, too, gets to watch some of the players he’ll be keeping tabs on during the next several years.

“I get to see a lot of kids,” Holcomb said Sunday. “We had about 220 kids participate and tryout for the North-South ‘Battle of Ship.’ There are a lot of college recruiters and pro scouts here today, so it’s really a baseball bonanza, so to speak.

“We had about 30 colleges out on Friday. We had them pressed up against the [bullpen] fence over here with the radar guns and stopwatches, and then [the players] hit. So it was a good chance to evaluate them and let them showcase their abilities a little bit. We had a couple of kids get offers [for] college scholarships [Friday].”

Among the competitors were several locals from Montgomery County high schools: Magruder’s Matt Sweeney, Gaithersburg’s Rick Phillips and Springbrook’s Harold Brantley and Keith Hessler. They all made the most of their time in front of the scouts during Sunday’s all-star contest despite their South Senators squad falling, 9-7, to the North Orioles in a 10-inning affair.

Sweeney made perhaps the best impression. The slugging corner infielder blasted a three-run homer to right field in the first inning to give the Senators a 3-0 lead. The shot came against Kenwood

(Baltimore) pitcher Bruce Pugh, who registered 89 miles per hour during the combine workouts.

Sweeney also played both third base and first base flawlessly despite not having seen any recent time at third.

“He threw me a fastball right down the middle [of the plate] on a 1-0 pitch, so I just hit it as hard as I could,” Sweeney said. “I thought he’d go with something else. I just readjusted and hit it out. It was great. I didn’t expect it because there are a lot of great players out here.”

Sweeney, a 2005 All-Gazette first-team selection as a junior, said he has already drawn interest from Maryland, Towson and West Virginia, among others. The left-hander, who earned the South’s Top Hitter Award (for power) during Friday’s workout, belted a combined 20 home runs this spring and summer between playing for Magruder (six homers) and Gaithersburg Post 104 (14).

“Matt Sweeney’s a power hitter,” Holcomb said. “He’s a strong guy. He’s got a lot of potential. He’s a really good-looking ball player.”

Brantley was on base during Sweeney’s home run. He reached on an error and then stole both second and third base. The Springbrook rising senior had three stolen bases and singled once in three at-bats as the South’s leadoff hitter.

Brantley, who is back to full strength following a serious traffic accident earlier this summer, was named to the All-Gazette second team this spring after hitting .423 with eight triples, three home runs, 20 runs batted in and 14 stolen bases.

“It was a great experience,” Brantley said of the combine. “I came out here trying to perform at a high level. I think I did pretty well. I came out here and hit the ball hard, and that’s what I wanted to do. Maybe I turned a couple of heads. Maybe somebody would want to give me a scholarship.”

Brantley’s teammate, Hessler, a rising junior, worked the second inning on the mound, taking over for Montgomery County resident and St. John’s (D.C.) pitcher Wade Newman. In his one inning of

work, Hessler, a southpaw, allowed one run on three hits and left the bases loaded with a flyout to left field.

“It was a little nerve-racking, but after throwing in the bullpen for a while, I just settled down,” said Hessler, an All-Gazette first-team selection who was 5-1 with a save and 96 strikeouts this spring. “I just tried to throw strikes, and you try to get your speed up to get the coaches to look at you. I think it was a pretty good weekend overall.”

So did Phillips, who saved many potential wild pitches from hitting the backstop during his few innings behind the plate. He walked in his only at-bat of the game.

“It was really fun,” said Phillips, an All-Gazette honorable-mention selection who hit .444 with four home runs and 28 RBI for Gaithersburg as a junior last season. “I got to play on a college field. I’ve never played on a college field before. It was a new experience. There’s a lot of good players here. It will definitely help me develop. I got to catch different pitchers, so that helps a lot. It gets you used to different pitchers.”