



## For Gearrin, Burke, tests not a worry

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By:  
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A note appears on a locker. Go see the trainer.

Steroid test.

“Some guys are nervous,” Kyler Burke said, taking a break from his workout at the D1 sports training facility in Chattanooga. “Some guys are wiggling out.”

Burke, a former Ooltewah High School standout, said he takes about three or four such tests per season. Danville Braves pitcher Cory Gearrin took two during a two-month short season.

“Some guys are like, ‘Oh, God,’” said Gearrin, a former Rhea County High star. “They’re panicking.”

Burke and Gearrin are not those guys. But to understand why some players would still take the chance, still take the risk, even after witnessing the recent public humiliation of several baseball stars such as Roger Clemens, you must understand the pressure.

Start with Burke. The 35th player taken in the 2006 draft hit .209 in his first year of pro ball, not uncommon for a high school player adjusting to a wooden bat, and the rumblings began. He was traded the next year to the Chicago Cubs in a deal involving All-Star catcher Michael Barrett, adding more pressure, more attention, more questions.

Did the Padres not want him? He started miserably in Class A short-season Boise.

“I was coming out of little Ooltewah, Tennessee, and playing against the best guys in the country and the world, really,” said Burke, who realizes now that the trade will help his career. “It was tough. I’ve never really failed before, and now I’m out there struggling. I started playing a little better and then I got traded.”

The blogs and the message boards started buzzing. The Cubs traded for this guy?

“I try not to look at that stuff,” Burke said. “I guess some people say, ‘Aw, he’s from Tennessee. He was good in Tennessee, but now he gets out in the real world and he’s not that good.’ You’ve got to put that behind you. You’ve got to believe in yourself.”

The real world is finding out that the kid from Tennessee is pretty good. An awful start in Boise didn’t prevent Burke from batting .254 with 10 home runs in 63 games. He played winter ball in Hawaii — living in an apartment just one block from the beach — and hit .333. Finally, some success.

And yet one baseball report stated: “A common thread among players who were fairly lucky, Burke’s BABIP (batting average on balls in play) was very high at .483.”

He can’t win. And he’s still just 19 years old.

So there’s one example of the pressure. And Gearrin is another. The fourth-round pick of the Atlanta Braves spent the first part of his short season tinkering with his mechanics, making adjustments so he could get batters out at the higher levels. And he got pounded.

"It was as bad as I could have asked for," he said.

Gerrin spent three years in college, at Young Harris and Mercer, so he's no teenager. And the shelf life of a minor league baseball player can be short. But Gerrin said his coaches never pressured him, and he finished the season with 14 2/3 scoreless innings. In his last 10 games, the sidearm reliever struck out 28 batters.

And he, like Burke, will leave for spring training in a couple of weeks, one more step toward the Big Show.

But the Big Show is the scene of some big controversy right now as Clemens and former trainer Brian McNamee engage in a battle of he said/he said concerning the seven-time Cy Young Award winner's alleged use of performance-enhancing drugs. Gerrin and Burke, who pitched in high school, both said they're keeping up with the ongoing feud and will believe Clemens until proven otherwise.

"It's a hard deal," Burke said. "There's a lot more guys involved in it than, I think, the public knows about. I don't know if it's good or bad, really. It seems like they're pulling out the big-name guys. I think it's kind of over and done with. You've got to kind of move on.

"It's a tough situation for everybody. These guys have good careers, and now it's coming back to haunt them. Whether they did it or not, their names are out there."

Added Gerrin: "I guess it stinks when you hear Clemens was the hardest-working guy in baseball. But he may be telling the truth. Obviously, you work hard and you don't want to think there's that much more ground you have to make up if guys are using steroids or HGH."

But most guys, the players feel, are not on those drugs. All the fuss concerning steroids does have one benefit — most players are terrified to use them now.

"I don't think it's a big deal anymore," Burke said. "They've cracked down so much that most guys think, 'It's not worth it.'"

And with that, Burke and Gerrin returned to training, trying to get a competitive edge the old-fashioned way.

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