

THE ARCHITECT OF THE DETROIT TIGERS

The blueprint that built Dave Dombrowski into one of baseball's most respected executives.

By Ben Chiswick



On a sunny Wednesday afternoon in West Michigan, Dave Dombrowski sat behind home plate at Fifth Third Ballpark. The President, CEO and General Manager of the Detroit Tigers blended in among the scouts and radar guns on a day in which the rest of the ballpark was overtaken by 6,000 screaming kids enjoying a field trip.

But Dombrowski was not there to complement a bag of salty peanuts with a cold beer, or egg on a buddy to take part in the dizzy bat race.

The baseball veteran was there to work, evaluating the talent on the Tigers' Class-A affiliate, the West Michigan Whitecaps. In his 33rd year in the industry of professional baseball, Dombrowski has learned a thing or two about player development. Though his current role requires his primary focus to be on the big league club in Detroit, he sets aside time every year to visit each of the Tigers' full-season affiliates.

"Coming in here and watching is for my own firsthand experience and to get a feel for it," explained Dombrowski. "I've heard reports on all of these guys but I like to get a feel myself. It's amazing when you've seen a lot of guys play over the years, people stand out very quickly."

Dombrowski is kept well informed on all the happenings in the minor league system throughout the year. This primarily comes in the form of conversations with Director of Player Development Glenn Ezell and the many reports left by coaches, scouts and roving instructors that spend the season visiting the various minor league affiliates in the Detroit Tigers farm system.

"We talk all the time," said Dombrowski. "I get every game report. It's a situation where they keep me abreast of what's taking place every day. I don't think there is anything that I'm not really aware of that's taking place. But it's more informational rather than me being hands-on because my responsibility is the big league club. When you have people that are running your system that you have trust in, you know things are being handled the way you want them to be done."

For some Major League general managers, that is enough. Dombrowski, on the other hand, likes to supplement all of the secondhand information he receives with his own personal experience.

"I'd be surprised if you talk about any player that reaches A-ball in our system that I don't really have some feel of myself," he said. "That's why I travel throughout the system to look at them. But I would also say that if we were making a deal, I would pick up the phone and call Glenn Ezell and perhaps talk to our managers. You want to be as thorough as you possibly can. I have some feel of [our farm system] and I think probably a pretty good grasp of it, but other people have a better grasp than me."

Perhaps Dombrowski's desire to be so involved in his farm system stems from his own knowledge and experience related to player development.

After all, one's present is shaped by his past. And like the players Dombrowski has helped develop into major leaguers over the years, his career was also shaped by a climb that started on the ground floor of professional baseball.

Dombrowski, a native of suburban Chicago, was a senior at Western Michigan University when he saved up his money to attend the 1977 baseball winter meetings in Honolulu, Hawaii. That led to a job with the Chicago White Sox upon graduation in 1978.

While his position as Administrative Assistant in the minor league and scouting department may not have been glamorous, it gave him a foot in the door that ultimately led to bigger and better things. His responsibilities included answering tryout letters, filing, and coordinating spring training transportation.

"My responsibilities sound so mundane, but for me I was excited," reflected Dombrowski. "I tackled all of it. I was thrilled to do it. So many people are worried about where they are going and what they are doing, rather than necessarily focusing on the task at hand. To me, that's very important. Worry about the task at hand. Worry about what you need to take care of. If you do those things, it's amazing how things will work out for you."

Dombrowski focused on the task at hand and was rewarded for his hard work.



Dombrowski talked to the West Michigan media before the game on May 20.

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When his immediate supervisor left following the 1978 season, he was promoted to Assistant Director of Player Development. After a couple of years he became the Director of Player Development before the 1981 season, and by the end of that year he was named the White Sox Assistant General Manager. By 1985, just seven years into his career, Dombrowski had earned the title of Vice President of Baseball Operations.

In addition to giving him that all-important foot in the door, Dombrowski's time with the Chicago White Sox provided other invaluable experiences. In addition to his front office responsibilities, General Manager Roland Hemond made sure Dombrowski was exposed to all aspects of player development and scouting. From tagging along with scouts at high school and college games to spending weeks at a time in Latin America, the young Dombrowski was given a crash course in the business of baseball.

But for Dombrowski, nothing was more important than the people. Working with Hemond and Paul Richards, who was in charge of the farm system, still resonate as career-building experiences in Dombrowski's mind. Bill Veeck was the owner at the time. Tony LaRussa managed the big league club. Dombrowski did not make much money and even lived in his parents' house on the south side of Chicago during the early part of his tenure with the White Sox, but he soaked up as much as he could from the baseball legends he was thrilled to be working around.

"One of the advantages for me was that I spent so much time with them," Dombrowski reminisced. "They used to spend hours in the ballpark upstairs in the press room after the game. Just talking baseball, talking about the game. I got a chance to listen to them. I wasn't at the head table, per se, but you could overhear them. You would spend time with scouts that would be there from all organizations. It was a great, great experience and I was very fortunate."

Dombrowski was hired by the Detroit Tigers as the team president in November of 2001 and had the role of general manager added to his title in April of 2002. Now one of the most revered executives in professional baseball, the 53-year-old veteran of the game is quick to point out that his ascent through the world of player development has gone a long way to shaping his successful career.

"I think it helped my career a great deal being exposed to player development, scouting, Latin America operations, and to have a feel for what people do," said Dombrowski. "I've held all the jobs at various times that you can possibly hold [in player development]. I think any time you personally do something it's very helpful to you."

Dombrowski emphasizes that nothing has helped him more along the way than the people he learned from.

"You learn from them and then you put into motion what you believe, but you follow the philosophies that they helped implant in you."

Those philosophies have fared well over the years. Dombrowski's resume includes Executive of the Year awards from various organizations in 1990, 1998 and 2006. He presided over teams earning Organization of the Year honors in 1988, 1990 and 1998. In addition to his World Series title with Florida in 1997, Dombrowski's 2006 Tigers won the American League pennant.

The secret to success? You won't get that from Dombrowski. In the hyper-competitive world of professional sports, it comes as no surprise that he keeps his cards close to the vest.

One thing that Dombrowski will volunteer is that when it comes to drafting talent, the Tigers are not afraid to go after high-risk, high-reward prospects.

"We've been an organization that's believed in trying to get a lot of high-end talent," he explained. "We believe in trying to get the best player available in the draft. We don't draft by positions up high, we draft the best players that we think are available regardless of high school, college, pitcher or positional player. We try to get people that project to be All-Stars high in the draft."

Dombrowski and the rest of his staff also like hard-throwing power pitchers, and Tigers fans have seen that philosophy in action in recent years. Detroit has spent their last four – and six of their last seven – top draft selections on power arms. The list is highlighted by current Tigers' ace Justin Verlander, the second overall pick in 2004, who won the 2006 American League Rookie of the Year award and led the league in both wins and strikeouts in 2009. His rotation-mate, Rick Porcello, reached the big leagues less than two years after being drafted 27th overall out of high school in 2007, and finished third in the Rookie of the Year voting in 2009.

One of the players Dombrowski watched while visiting with the West Michigan Whitecaps this summer is arguably the brightest prospect of them all. Whitecaps right-hander Jacob Turner opened the 2010 season rated the No. 1 prospect in the entire Tigers farm system by Baseball America despite having yet to make his professional debut. The ninth overall selection out of a St. Louis-area high school in 2009, Turner was signed away from a scholarship offer to the University of North Carolina with a \$5.5 million major league contract that included a coveted spot on the Tigers' 40-man roster. Tigers fans are hopeful that the young star will soon be joining Verlander and Porcello in Detroit.

If that happens, Turner's name will be another addition to the impressive list of players that Dombrowski has helped develop into difference-makers in the big leagues.

After getting his start in Chicago, Dombrowski was hired by the Montreal Expos as



Dombrowski keeps a close eye on all of the Tigers minor league affiliates.

their Director of Minor League Clubs for the 1987 season. In 1988 he became a General Manager for the first time at the tender young age of just 31. In 1992, he took over the expansion Florida Marlins and led the club to a World Series championship in 1997, making them the fastest expansion club ever to win a title in just their fifth season. Shortly thereafter he was charged with overseeing the highly-publicized, owner-mandated fire sale of the Marlins championship squad. Though he would leave the Marlins for Detroit soon after, Florida went on to win another World Series in 2003 with a team primarily made up of Dombrowski's trade acquisitions.

The cast of characters Dombrowski remembers working with over the years include Harold Baines and Ozzie Guillen with the White Sox. After going to Montreal, he helped foster a particularly well-stocked farm system that included the likes of Larry Walker, Randy Johnson, Moises Alou and Marquis Walker. Dombrowski's Marlins farmhands included Edgar Renteria, Josh Beckett, A.J. Burnett and Brad Penny.

"You see those types of guys and that's one of the most fun parts of the game," said Dombrowski with a smile. "It's fun to watch those guys play. And now we're getting to the point where we're getting pretty good flow within our system [with the Tigers] so it's a lot of fun to watch."

But not all prospects are such obvious talents. One player that sticks out to Dombrowski is catcher Mike Redmond. Currently in his 13th major league season, the Cleveland Indians' catcher was not exactly a can't-miss superstar.

"He was a guy in the Florida system that we didn't think was going to be a big league player," admits Dombrowski. "We talked about even making him a coach and he went on to a big league career as one of the best defensive catchers in the game handling a [pitching] staff. There's a guy that was really a surprise for me and for us at that point."

Clearly, "prospecting" is far from an exact science. Often times, evaluating talent boils down to nothing more than a gut feeling, which is why Dombrowski puts so much stock into getting a firsthand look at all of his players.

Of course, there is also something to be said for the minor league experience, which offers a brief escape from the pressure cooker of the major league grind.

"When you're here you get a chance to watch what's taking place, watch a little BP," said a relaxed Dombrowski. "You're looking at a different aspect of it. You always want to win. You want every one of your clubs to win. But it's also a situation where not every pitch seems like it's live or die."

On the field, minor league baseball tends to focus more on player development than wins and losses. Around the ballpark, the relaxed atmosphere and emphasis on creating an enjoyable ballpark experience creates a more laid-back day at the office.

For Dombrowski, it also offers an opportunity to get back to his player development roots and watch ballplayers hustling, diving and putting everything on the line for the chance to make it to the majors someday.

"It's a joyful experience," said Dombrowski, breaking into a wide smile. "It's a whole different feeling. I absolutely love coming here and seeing our young players, spending time with the player development staffs, and visiting with the people at our affiliates. It's a lot of fun. I enjoy doing it. No question, it's a good atmosphere."

Just like the players that make up his big league roster in Detroit, Dombrowski's present is shaped by his minor league past. •



BALLPARK EVENTS

A lot more than Whitecaps Baseball takes place at Fifth Third Ballpark. Check out the exciting events coming up soon!
For more info, check out

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Saturday, June 12 – The Free Beer and Hot Wings Show Presents Wingstock 2010
Featuring Snoop Dogg, Jackyl, Pop Evil, Drowning Pool and Richy Nix
presented by WingStreet at Pizza Hut



Saturday, July 3
LZ Michigan
Welcome home our
Vietnam Veterans

Saturday, August 7
Great Lakes Irish
Music Festival



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