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Diamond Dukes

'Lo' Bundy ('81) and Jeff Garber ('88) call the shots from the dugout.

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The temperature is well above 90 degrees, with stifling humidity. It's around 3 p.m. on a July day, and members of the Wilmington (Del.) Blue Rocks file off the team bus at Harry Grove Stadium in Frederick, Md., some four hours before game time. Most of the players on the minor league baseball team wear T-shirts and shorts. Some have Walkmans on their heads as they come in the backdoor of the stadium - only to find the clubhouse door locked. Player rebellion?irate visitors steamed by the weather? No way. The Blue Rocks, with the sun bearing down on them, patiently wait for a Frederick employee to unlock the clubhouse door.

The team then files into the clubhouse behind their T-shirt- and shorts-clad manager Jeff Garber, who appears as young as some of his players.

"We are very strict about being on time," Garber says a few minutes later. Garber, 33, a former JMU baseball standout, recently finished his third year as a minor league manager in the Kansas City Royals' farm system.

After eight years as a player in the minors with the Royals, Garber is quickly making a name for himself as a manager. Last season his peers named him the top managerial prospect in the Carolina League. He guided the Carolina League all-stars against the top players from the California League. And his club, Wilmington, was declared co-champion along with Myrtle Beach when Hurricane Floyd wiped out the fifth and deciding game of their Carolina League playoff championship series last September.

Garber, who majored in physical education, is not the only former Duke to find success in the dugout after his playing days were over.

Lorenzo Bundy, 40, who like Garber reached as high as Class AAA as a minor league player, spent last season as a coach for the Colorado Rockies of the National League. The year before that he was a coach with the Florida Marlins. This season Bundy is a roving minor league instructor in the Colorado farm system.

Garber has been in the minors as a player, coach and manager since 1988. Bundy, who graduated from JMU with a degree in communications in 1981, spent 16 years in the bushes as a player, coach and manager before joining the big league staff of Jim Leyland in Florida. The low minor leagues are known

for second-rate hotels, enough meal money to eat at fast-food restaurants nearly every day and long road trips on crowded buses.

What is the worst about the minors as player?

"The day-to-day grind," Garber says. "You don't know if you have what it takes to get up there [to the majors]. I think that is the hardest part. Where do you fit in?"

Garber is the only former Duke who is active as a minor league manager. Bundy is the only JMU product to make the majors as a coach.

"No one pulled any strings for them. They did everything on their own," says their former Dukes coach, Brad Babcock. "I'm proud of both of them. They just worked so hard to get better. I just tried to provide an environment for them to get better."

Here is a closer look at both men who may one day - who knows - be managing in the majors.

A major leaguer on move

Like all successful major leaguers, Bundy has spent his career constantly on the move since leaving JMU, where the 36-career homers of this left-handed hitting first baseman still stand as a school record.

Drafted in the 22nd round by the Orioles as a shortstop out of high school in 1977, Lo instead accepted Babcock's sight-unseen offer of a scholarship to JMU.

"I always remember picking up the paper and reading about the Dukes," says Bundy, who recalls following future big leaguer Billy Sample when he played for JMU in the 1970s. "I always wanted to go there.

Bypassed by the draft after his junior and senior seasons with the Dukes, he played for the Shenandoah Valley League and Rockingham County Baseball League, eventually being signed as a free agent by Joe Branzell, a long-time scout for the Texas Rangers who would later ink other Dukes to contracts.

Bundy eventually signed with the Pittsburgh Pirates and reached the highest level of the minor leagues at Class AAA with Hawaii, the top farm club of the Pirates. Bundy then signed with the Montreal Expos as a six-year minor league free agent after the 1988 season. The next year he was a player/coach for Indianapolis, Montreal's top farm club.

Bundy finished his eight-year pro career with a lifetime average of .318 with 135 home runs and 534 RBIs. In 1990 he got his first managerial job, and led Montreal's Gulf Coast League team to the title. He managed in the Expos' system through the 1994 season, then became a roving minor league base-running and outfield instructor with the Marlins in 1995. He was in the minors with Florida before joining the big league team for the 1998 season.

In between all of these moves, he played winter ball in Mexico as often as possible. It was in Mexico, where Bundy first met his future wife, that he learned of his move to the majors. On Dec. 4, 1997, Bundy saw on television that Jerry Manuel, a bench coach for Leyland and the Marlins that year, had been named the manager of the Chicago White Sox.

"I wonder who is going to get Jerry's spot?" with the Marlins, Bundy remembers asking himself. A few days later Bundy got a call from John Boles, who then worked in the front office for Florida and is now the team's manager.

"Lo [short for Lorenzo], you are up to replace Jerry Manuel as the bench coach," Boles said, according to Bundy. "Your name comes up. I'll be [upset] if you don't get the job."

Added Bundy: "Of course, I didn't get any sleep that night." Sure enough, Bundy was offered the outfield/base-running coach job for the Marlins. "Of course, I said yes," Bundy says. Sixteen years after leaving JMU to play pro ball he had made it to the major leagues.

"It's even tougher [to get there] as a manager or coach," says Bundy. But the fit is a natural one. "I found myself being the coach on the field [at JMU]. I always consider myself a student of the game, even before I got into coaching. You just keep your mouth shut and listen."

Bundy admits that one day he would like to manage at the major league level.

"Long range, yes, it would truly be a dream come true," he says.

Tops in the minors

Fans were in for a surprise when they saw Wilmington play last year.

The two coaches working under Wilmington manager Garber were Steve Balboni and Steve Crawford. The burly Balboni was part of the world champion Kansas City Royals in 1985, when he hit a career-high 36 of his lifetime 181 homers. He played in the majors 11 years. Crawford pitched in the World Series for the Boston Red Sox in 1986. He spent 10 years in the majors, including time with Kansas City from 1989-91.

"People expect them to be the manager. I have to earn every ounce of respect," says Garber, drafted in the 10th round by Kansas City out of JMU.

"I like managing against the best managers here," adds Garber, prior to a Class A Carolina League game last summer in Frederick. "I take notes all the time. That is another thing college prepared me for."

Garber has also merged education and baseball, while studying the biomechanics of hitting while working on his master's degree at Valdosta (Ga.) State University.

He also needs to be part psychologist as well. Most minor league teams have their share of high-priced prospects who received million-dollar signing bonuses and fringe players who were chosen late in the amateur free agent draft.

Last season Garber had Dermal Brown, the No. 1 pick by Kansas City in the 1996 draft, to start the year in Wilmington before he moved quickly to Class AA and eventually his big-league debut with the Royals.

Garber had plenty of chances to watch in the minors. During one five-year stretch as a player in the Kansas City farm system he was a regular just one of those seasons. "He understands guys' problems because he went through it," Babcock says. "He is also a great role model."

"Baseball is ultimately a game of failure. You have to be able to relate to players. I feel like I can motivate players," Garber says.

Garber, like Bundy, wasn't pursued by big-time college programs while in high school, but he had an older brother at JMU so he felt comfortable going there. He says that Babcock told him he had a chance to start as a freshman.

"It was my job to earn or lose," says Garber, who did indeed start at short and was named a freshman All-American.

By the time Garber left JMU he held career marks in at bats (797), hits (279) and runs (208). He credits Casey Carter and her staff in academic support for aiding him as a student-athlete at JMU. Garber was drafted in 1988 by the Royals and reported to Eugene in the rookie Northwest League. He was signed by the late Kansas City scout Bob Carter and has been with the organization ever since.

"I consider myself a Royal," he says.

After minor league spring training in 1994 with Kansas City he was named the Dick Howser Award winner, in memory of the late Royals' manager. "That is one thing I am most proud of."

Garber reached Class AAA Omaha in four different seasons: 1990, 1991, 1994 and 1995, but he never got the call from Kansas City.

"It took me two years to accept [the fact] I didn't make it," he says. "My ultimate goal was to get to the major leagues. Maybe I wasn't meant to be a major leaguer" as a player.

He began his coaching career in 1996 with Spokane in the same Northwest League, and was the team's manager the next season.

Last year he was promoted to Wilmington, which plays in one of the top high Class A leagues in the country.

Garber, who runs a youth baseball school during the off-season for youth, has not ruled out coaching at the college level one day.

"I just want to learn as much as I can about the game, the total game," he says.

And while he hasn't made it to the majors as a player, Garber may have what it takes to reach the big leagues - like Bundy - in the dugout one day.

by David Driver