

2012 Major League Baseball draft strategy is wide open

June 6 2012, By Chris Gorski

Major League Baseball's draft began last night. Drafting is not always a matter of taking the best player available, which is where strategy comes in. This year, add mystery as well.

Today, teams will complete rounds 2-15, out of a total of 40. In past years, these rounds are when some teams could pick a player with high [bonus](#) demands and pay him as if he was worthy of a much earlier pick. The MLB changed the rules this year to reduce the ability of the teams to spend freely, especially in these middle rounds.

Although the bonus figures generally drop with each pick, there have typically been many [anomalies](#), such as last year's 61st overall pick, Josh Bell of the Pirates, who received a \$5 million bonus. He was one of six players to receive that much. Deciding if and when to spend a draft pick on someone who is considered difficult to sign and then actually signing him are two different and significant strategic problems. Teams will probably use different strategies to make the system work for them. Will teams be willing to pay up to meet high bonus demands, but accept the MLB's new penalties, which can include fines and lost draft picks?

We likely won't know until the signing deadline, which is in July and is when most players usually sign.

Drafts in general are interesting economic and [operations research](#) problems, something I've written about before. If teams want to put themselves in the best positions, they need to do many things well:

- 1 - Accurately evaluate players
- 2 - Predict how other teams will draft
- 3 - Know how much they are willing to spend and how they will allocate that [money](#) among their draft picks.

The first point is obvious, though incredibly difficult in practice. Teams will often choose 17- and 18-year-olds in a sport where performance usually peaks at around the age of 27. Figuring out how those players will mature can't be easy.

The second point is important because, as any fantasy sports veteran will know, you shouldn't always pick the best player available. The pitcher you choose now might be so much better than the one you could choose in the next round that it's worth waiting until your next pick to choose an outfielder.

And the third point is the huge wild card in this draft. Or is it? MLB has made public the amount of money in each team's bonus pool. But will teams obey these guidelines and risk the penalties? Here's one clue -- one of the consensus top talents, who many evaluators thought was likely to be chosen first overall, Stanford pitcher Mark Appel, was the eighth choice in the first round (by the Pittsburgh [Pirates](#)). Perhaps the first seven teams didn't think he was the top available player. But maybe rumors of high bonus demands factored into this. We'll see.

Baseball has this issue more than other sports because players have more choices. Every high school senior can be drafted, regardless of his plans to play college baseball. Every college junior (and some other underclassmen) can be drafted. But in those situations, the player can refuse to sign, and be picked in a subsequent draft.

I expect that [teams](#) will try to do what's best for them -- but it will be fun to see how many different strategies take root.

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