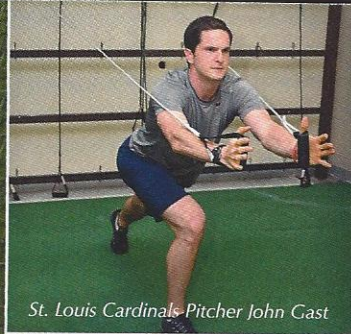
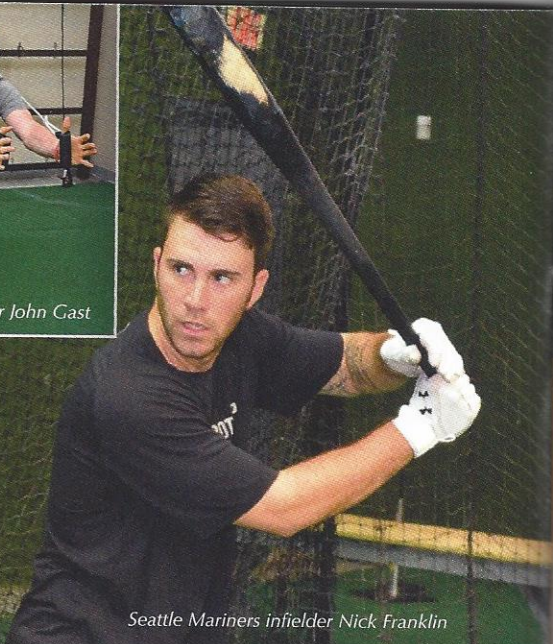


At Home, On Deck

by Terry Matthews-Lombardo



St. Louis Cardinals Pitcher John Gast



Seattle Mariners infielder Nick Franklin

**Where do Major League ballplayers go to stay fit in the off-season?
A surprising number of them train right here in Altamonte Springs**

Walk anywhere near a local baseball field this time of year, and you'll hear the crack of a bat and the slam of a baseball hitting the soft spot of another young player's glove. Major Leaguers, too, are already well into their spring training regimens in stadiums across Florida and Arizona. But for the professional ballplayer, training is a year-round affair, and several Major League Baseball stars return home to Seminole County every winter to visit family and hit the gym. Altamonte, as it turns out, is something of an epicenter for offseason baseball activity, and *Altamonte-Wekiva Springs Life* caught up with three local players who call our community home.

Named the *Orlando Sentinel* 2009 Athlete of the Year, infielder Nick Franklin was immediately drafted straight out of Lake Brantley High School by

the Seattle Mariners. Now, five years later, Nick still returns to his home base of Altamonte Springs to train at The Next Level Baseball facility off State Road 434. Exactly how much time does Nick spend honing his skills during the winter? Let's just say Nick and The Next Level staff have become quite close.

"They're like my second family," Nick says with a chuckle as he settles in for one of his six-day-a-week workouts as spring training approaches. In fairness, Nick has been training with his Next Level "family" for more than eight years, beginning when he was still at Lake Brantley.

This offseason, following his MLB debut in May 2013, Nick often began his training days at the Competitor Gym, owned by another famous area athlete, Kawika Mitchell, a former NFL linebacker and graduate of Lake Howell High School. After the morning workout, Nick, who focused on strength and power development this offseason, typically paused for a protein-packed meal before beginning the baseball-specific portion of his training program.

Another player who's proud to call Seminole County home is catcher Drew Butera, a former Lake Mary Little Leaguer and an off-season resident of Timacuan. First drafted by the New York Mets in 2005, Drew made his Major League debut with the Minnesota Twins and was traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers last season. Like Nick, Drew trains almost daily during the offseason and considers Next Level Baseball "my second baseball home."

Much of Drew's training is done under the watchful eye of his father, Sal, himself a former MLB catcher and 1987 World Series player for the Twins. As a catcher, Drew's offseason workout focused on leg strength and agility. He begins each offseason "standing up" to give his tormented legs and knees a rest. This year, Drew didn't get down into his catcher's squat again until after the holidays.

What happens to a player who ends his season early due to injury? St. Louis Cardinals pitcher John Gast, a former Seminole County Player of the Year and a 2007 graduate of Lake Brantley, made his Major League debut last season and quickly piled up two wins in three starts, but a shoulder injury and subsequent season-ending surgery sent him back to Altamonte more quickly than he planned.

His recovery included daily visits to physical therapy, as prescribed by the Cardinals, followed by his own personal regimen of conditioning and strength training. Limited to the amount of throwing he can do, John still worked out to stay sharp as he planned his comeback.

In a winter full of training, is there any time left for downtime? A bit, but not much, according to these Major Leaguers. Drew did sneak away for a weeklong vacation to Europe in late winter, though. For Nick, a few sporadic rounds of mini-golf on State Road 436 represented the bulk of his leisure time this offseason.

Such is the glamorous life of a big-league superstar, but these Altamonte-area MLB players prove, at least, you can always go home again.

Alicia's addict parents neglected her.
She was placed in a group home.
No one detected depression.
She attempted suicide.

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