Field of dreams

By KRATIE KOSS

The Cardinals’ predraft workouts give prospects an intimate opportunity to make one final impression on scouts, crosscheckers and player development officials.

For draft-eligible high school and college players, receiving an offer to attend a major league club’s predraft workout is a golden invitation, another indication that their goal of playing professional baseball is oh-so-close to becoming a reality.

When the audition takes place at a big league ballpark, the future comes into even sharper focus, even if just for a day.

Such was the case for the 22 amateurs who arrived at Busch Stadium on May 28 to participate in one of six predraft workouts the Cardinals had scheduled around the country as part of their final preparation for the 2009 First-Year Player Draft.

That Busch played host to the event was something of a rarity. Since the organization resumed predraft workouts in 2005, its Midwest-region workout had been conducted at AutoZone Park, home of the Triple-A Memphis Redbirds. But with the Cardinals on the road at the end of May, the club seized the chance to evaluate draft prospects on its home turf. And for players who grew up as disciples of Cardinal Nation, the setting made an already exciting opportunity almost make-believe.

“To work out for your favorite team since you were little—that’s what you dream of,” said University of Illinois shortstop Brandon Wikoff, raised in Peoria, Ill.

Personal touch

In some parts of the professional sports landscape, predraft workouts have become high-profile events that make beauty pageants seem parochial. The quintessential example is the NFL, where coaches and front-office personnel from all 32 teams descend upon Indianapolis for the league’s annual scouting combine, a weeklong, televised extravaganza featuring more than 300 of the top prospects in college football. (Prospects also work out on campus and for individual teams.)

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Baseball, in contrast, has no such centralized proceedings; clubs organize their own workouts, often in unceremonious fashion. The Cardinals’ tryout in St. Louis, for instance, had a decidedly private, almost homespun feel to it. There was no media swarm on hand, no agents flanking their charges. Aside from members of the club’s scouting and baseball operations departments, the only observers were the players’ families and friends, who joined them on a stadium tour and watched parts of the workout from the stands.

Felix Rutledge and his family made the six-hour drive from Tupelo, Miss., to watch their son Lex, a 17-year-old left-handed pitcher, make his bid to turn pro. “It’s an exciting opportunity for a young high school kid to come be at Busch Stadium,” the elder Rutledge said. “We’re just going to enjoy the moment.”

Just five years ago, prospects didn’t have the chance to impress the Cardinals in such a setting—a variety of factors led the club to suspend the workouts early this decade. But not long after Jeff Luhnow, now the Cardinals’ vice president of scouting and player development, joined the organization in the fall of 2003, he explored the issue with the club’s scouts and concluded the predraft workouts deserved a reprise.

“Pretty much all of (the scouts) thought there was a lot of value to having an opportunity to see the players in a more controlled environment before the draft,” Luhnow said.

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in 2005, it decided to hold several sessions across the country – previously, a single workout took place in St. Louis – to ensure players outside the Midwest got a fair look. (Prospects pay their own way to workouts, deterring some from traveling cross-country.) In addition to the St. Louis workout, the Cardinals held auditions this year at their training complex in Jupiter, Fla., as well as in Los Angeles, Charlotte (N.C.), Phoenix and Houston.

Area scouts guide the invitation process, recommending players they’ve evaluated but want other members of the organization to see in person. About 40 players are invited to each workout, with the assumption that only 20 to 30 will accept – some players are still playing for their high school or college teams, while others may decline because they’re attending other organizations’ workouts. (Three high-profile prospects – college stars Josh Phegley and A.J. Pollock and high-schooler Randal Grichuk – also were brought in for personal workouts at Busch.)

All told, the organization evaluated about 170 draft prospects at its six group workouts in 2009. Considering the club’s draft board is about 1,000 players deep, that 17 percent of the pool gained a significant advantage. After Luhnow broke down the numbers for the 2005 and ’06 drafts, he discovered about 50 percent of the Cardinals’ selections had attended one of the workouts, a pattern he suspects has continued.

While elite prospects sometimes come to the sessions – first-round picks Colby Rasmus and Adam Ottavino both participated – the workouts are more pivotal for lower-profile players who have caught a single scout’s eye. Luhnow pointed to Double-A Springfield teammates Steven Hill (13th round/2007) and Tony Cruz (26th round/2007) as examples of prospects who enhanced their predraft stature by attending club-sponsored workouts.

“With both of those guys, the scout liked them, and they came to the workouts and got everybody excited about them,” Luhnow said. “There’s a good chance we would not have drafted them had they not come to our workout, because someone else would’ve been there to get excited about.”

**Short and sweet**

The focus of the predraft workout isn’t to write the book on a draft prospect; that’s already been done by scouts on the ground level, through careful and consistent evaluation of players over many games.

Instead, the half-day audition serves as an outlet for a broader group of the organization’s talent evaluators to meet with players and watch them in person, to confirm what scouts already have observed. To that end, players are given a fairly small window for showcasing their talents: Pitchers throw a total of 15 to 20 pitches, hitters get three rounds of six to eight swings, and position players field nine or 10 balls and make six to 10 throws.

That’s all it takes, though, for personnel men to glean the information they need. Luhnow and assistant scouting director Jaron Madison attend every predraft workout. In St. Louis, they were joined by several area scouts, crosscheckers, associate scouts and members of the scouting and baseball operations staff, including John Vuch, director of minor league operations.

After Luhnow addressed the prospects, they took a guided tour of the stadium before getting down to the business of showcasing their skills.

The 60-yard dash, which Luhnow said provides a “much cleaner read” on players’ pure speed than evaluators can get in games, was supposed to lead off the workout, but an early morning rain scrubbed the drill – no point in risking injury, or liability. Instead, pitchers and catchers sprang into action, after warming up in Busch’s bullpens.

At each predraft pitching workout, the Cardinals have a former pitcher oversee...