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New law benefits foreign minor leaguers

By FREDERIC J. FROMMER
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON -- Whether or not they're potential superstars like Miguel Tejada or Sammy Sosa, all foreigners signed to play in America's minor leagues will soon be treated as internationally recognized athletes by U.S. immigration law.

Just before it adjourned for the year, Congress passed legislation reclassifying minor leaguers' visa status from temporary seasonal workers to internationally recognized athletes - like major leaguers.

The law will allow major league baseball and other sports to bring in an unlimited number of foreign ballplayers without running afoul of a legal limit. President Bush is expected to sign the bill.

"This legislation levels the playing field for minor league sports teams that depend on getting the best athletic talent from around the world," said the bill's sponsor, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, who pushed the legislation in part to help her home-state Lewiston Maineiacs, a minor league hockey team.

Although the bill will help professional basketball, hockey, and ice skating, its main beneficiary is baseball because of the sport's vast minor league system and reliance on players from Latin America and other parts of the world.

The U.S. currently allows minor league athletes into the country with the same kind of visas as other seasonal temporary workers. The agency caps these at 66,000 a year, and since 2004 the cap has been reached each year.

Ed Burns, major league baseball's vice president for baseball operations and administration, said the cap prevented teams from bringing in an estimated 350 players in 2004 and 2005.

Some players were put on the inactive list, with the hope of getting them visas the next year. Others were placed in the lowest-level rookie leagues in Venezuela or the Dominican Republic.

Players in the latter category were faced with the prospect of seeing their careers stalled, Burns said.

"Players who were jammed with the H-2B visa cap might have had to have spent an extra year at one of those Latin American minor leagues, when their skill level and development ought to have dictated that they played in a higher classification," he said.

Burns said that could have happened to someone like Sosa, a late bloomer who became one of the game's most prolific home run hitters, had the cap been in place when he signed with the Texas Rangers in 1985.

The Rangers might have been reluctant to use a visa spot to promote the Dominican-born Sosa early in his career had such visas been in short supply back then, he said. But Burns said Sosa's talent eventually would have landed him in the major leagues.

Some teams, like the Milwaukee Brewers, don't have teams in Latin America. So the Brewers, when faced with the cap, have had to rent out roster space from other teams there, said Gord Ash, Milwaukee's assistant general manager.

Lucy Calautti, a lobbyist for major league baseball who pushed for the legislative change, said that the uncertainty over the visas "put a damper" on some teams signing minor league players from outside the country.

The legislation will entitle minor leaguers to get P-1 visas, reserved for internationally recognized athletes or members of internationally recognized entertainment groups.

The Federation for American Immigration Reform, an organization that pushes for tougher immigration limits,

opposed the bill. The group's president, Dan Stein, said he had no problem with giving unlimited visas to foreign athletes who are ready to play in the majors.

"But minor league is minor league, and if you're not ready to come right into the big leagues, you shouldn't be getting a numerically unlimited visa availability," Stein said. "If they need the seasoning, they can get the seasoning in their own country."

Stan Brand, a vice president and lobbyist for minor league baseball, said minor leaguers are elite athletes.

"By definition, they're all among the best in the world, or else the major leagues wouldn't spend money to recruit and train them," he said.