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Majors seek tighter defence

Thu, June 1, 2006

By **ERIC BENDER**, FREE PRESS SPORTS REPORTER

To hear field general Roop Chanderdat talk, the game the London Majors lost this season was a losing streak.

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"It was good to come right back with a win. It gives the guys confidence," he said when the Majors took an 8-6 decision from the Hamilton Thunderbirds on the weekend after dropping a game Thursday in Oshawa in the 12th inning. "You don't want to get on a long losing streak."

The Majors stand atop the Intercounty Baseball League, and have since Day 1 this season, with a 6-1 record.

Three of the wins have been at the expense of the Oshawa Dodgers. But the Majors have not yet seen the Kitchener Panthers, the Barrie Baycats or the Toronto Maple Leafs. Or even struggling Stratford, which is 0-6.

"We've got some big games coming up," Chanderdat said. "We have Kitchener and they are not doing too well right now. We want to get in there and get out before their bats start waking up."

The Majors travel to Kitchener to meet the 2-7 Panthers tonight and motor farther up to Barrie on Saturday for a doubleheader against the defending champion Baycats (5-1). Then they are home Sunday in Labatt Park to play the Stratford Nationals, who are under the direction of Shawn Gillespie, last year with the Majors as a general manager. Gillespie had to step in as a

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field manager on the illness of Harry Muir.

Gillespie and his father bought the Nationals in the offseason and are attempting to rebuild a club that has had difficulties ever since the Ross family moved the franchise from St. Thomas.

"We'll see where we stand in this league after these games," Chanderdat said. "Barrie will be a good barometer."

Barrie is just a half game off London's pace.

Chanderdat is relieved that third baseman Pete Babcock is healthy again with his "big stick." Babcock had a triple, double and single in the Hamilton win.

Venezuelan import Ozzie Troconis has been moved to shortstop, switching with Kyle Piwowarczyk, who goes to second. The plan is to have Phil Carey, when he returns from college where he's involved in the college world series, play second base and have Piwowarczyk used in the infield, outfield, or at DH to keep his bat in the game. He's hitting at a .350 pace now.

"We're still making a lot of errors," Chanderdat said. "Our defence is our weakness right now."

On offence, the Majors are at the top of the league with 20 stolen bases and designated slugger Chuck Roberts is third in the league in percentage.

Catcher Brian Blackburn will be back from college and ready to play by Monday, not soon enough for the weekend action. With catcher Chad McKellar away, Andrew Mercier is going to spend a lot of time behind the plate.

Aylmer's Tom Van Kasteren will get the start against the Panthers. On Saturday, the Majors will start import Erick Perez (4-0) in the first game against the Baycats and have right-hander Hiarali Garcia of Windsor ready for Game 2.

Minor increase indicated

There are indications minor baseball registrations are up sharply this year. Minor association officials are pleasantly surprised.

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North London numbers jumped to 400 from 240 last year and Oakridge is up several dozen.

Final numbers and the percentage rise are still being tabulated.

Canada in the World Baseball Classic and quick starts by the Blue Jays and Tigers may have contributed to the interest. Adam Stern of London and Chris Robinson of Dorchester were members of the Canadian team.

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SPORTS NEWS

Oilers leaving for N.Y.

Where is the best place to prepare for a Stanley Cup Final? If you're the Edmonton Oilers, it's in upstate New York in a place called Tarrytown. This morning, the Oilers will board their charter bound for New York to continue preparations for their first final in 16 years.

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