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Majors well matched against rival Panthers

Thu, July 27, 2006

London and Kitchener open their Intercounty quarter-final tomorrow at Labatt Park.

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

On the stats sheet, the London Majors look better, but in the win-loss column, the Kitchener Panthers were the season series winner 3-2.

The Majors and Panthers open a best-of-seven Intercounty Baseball League quarter-final series tomorrow at Labatt Park at 7:30 p.m.

"It should be a good series," Majors field boss Roop Chanderdat said. "It's been close. We have a few guys banged up. They'll be ready."

A loss to the Hamilton Thunderbirds on Sunday closed out the Majors' regular season with a 21-15 record. Kitchener was four games behind at 16-18, but had two games to play, not enough to catch London.

Majors' ace and workhorse Erick Perez, a southpaw from Venezuela, is to start for the Majors. He pitched 61 2/3 innings, chalking up a 7-2 win-loss record and an earned-run average of 3.21.

"We want him to get back in early," Chanderdat said of Perez,

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who threw five innings in the loss to Hamilton on Sunday after being off for three weeks attending his father's funeral in Venezuela.

Hiarali Garcia, 4-2 with one save, is expected to start Game 2 on Sunday in Kitchener at 7 p.m. Garcia worked 63 2/3 innings with a 4.66 ERA.

London stands sixth in the nine-team league's team pitching average with an ERA of 5.06, compared to Kitchener's 5.16 and seventh-place ranking.

The series will feature the league's top offence -- the Majors swinging the bat at a collective .305 average -- against Kitchener, the weakest at .242. Leading the way for London is centre-fielder Brad McElroy, who finished with a .403 average and should claim the league batting title.

The Majors have six batters in the .300-plus club: Pete Babcock and McElroy (both over .400), Kevin Virtue, Kyle Piwowarczyk, Chuck Roberts and Rudy Vallejos. Four -- McElroy, Virtue, Piwowarczyk and Roberts -- are among the league's top 10 hitters.

Kitchener has no one in the top 10, but three batters perform at more than .300 in Byron Bell, Luke Baker and Pete Molloy.

London first baseman Simon Galarraga is third in the league in runs batted in with 35. He is the team leader in home runs with seven, but has struck out 32 times in 32 games.

McElroy, Piwowarczyk and Vallejos represent the potency of the Majors' attack on the bases. Each has stolen 19 bags on the season, representing the lion's share of the team's 75 steals. Kitchener had stolen 25 bases with two games to go.

Team fielding has been a soft spot for the Majors, with 81 errors against 62 for Kitchener. The Majors stood seventh in fielding, the Panthers fourth.

Two years ago, the Majors eliminated the Panthers in the quarter-finals, beat out the Toronto Maple Leafs in the semis and lost the final series to the Guelph Royals. Last year, the Majors were ousted by the Barrie Baycats, who went on to win the league championship.

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