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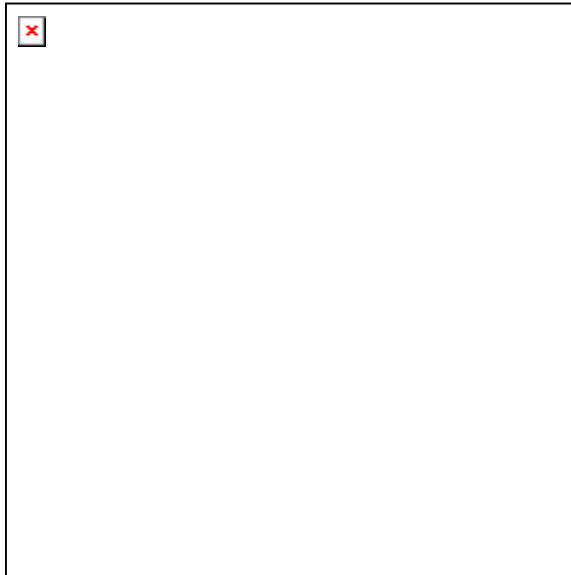


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Baseball in Italy; Sarnian Justin Farina played with Anzio in the top league

Sahker, Harry
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Sarnia native Justin Farina played professional baseball in Italy this summer.

The 24-year old St. Christopher Secondary School alumnus pitched for Anzio in Serie A/1, the country's top league.



A product of the Sarnia Braves and the Sarnia Minor Athletic Association, Farina played for the London Majors of the semi-pro Ontario Senior Intercounty League in 2005. It was through the Majors that he was able to link up with Anzio.

"We got a new manager, Roop Chanderdat, in the off-season," explained Farina. "He knew that if I was eligible for Italian citizenship that I might be able to play professionally there. He put the word out and two clubs were interested. One of them was Anzio."

With Italian grandparents, Farina had sufficient ancestry to become naturalized. He did so, and joined Anzio in April.

Serie A/1 consists of nine clubs, each playing a balanced 48-game regular season that started in mid-April. Clubs are allowed only three imports each, but they can carry an unlimited number of "oriundos". An oriundo is someone like Farina: a foreigner with sufficient Italian ancestry to qualify for citizenship and the right to live and work in the country. Most of the league's

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oriundos are Italian-Americans.

Like the Intercounty, Serie A/1 boasts several ex-pros and is occasionally graced by a former major leaguer or two.

"Both leagues have good players and mediocre players. There are a lot of Latin players in Italy. In terms of the overall talent level, I'd have to say that it's a little higher in Italy, but it's pretty similar."

Better known as an Allied landing site in World War II, the town of Anzio is on the Mediterranean coast about 50 kilometres south of Rome. Anzio completed its regular season on Saturday. They finished last in Serie A/1 and have been relegated to Serie A/2 for the 2007 campaign. With the team struggling, crowds were small. "We didn't get big turnouts. Maybe 100 or 200 at best."

Just five kilometres down the coast from Anzio is Nettuno, home to Italy's most successful club. "They draw 1,000 to 2,000 on a slow night. The fans there really get into it. They have that soccer mentality. They get emotional."

Farina heard the verbal jibes that Nettuno fans threw at some of the players, but he didn't know what their shouts meant. "When I arrived in Italy, I didn't speak the language at all. I understood a little, but I picked it up and I was able to get by."

The Serie A/1 regular season schedule consists mostly of Friday evening games and day-night doubleheaders on Saturdays. "We practiced a few hours each day from Monday to Thursday. We had Sundays off. During my free time I made trips to Rome, and I went to the beach."

A substantial meal is usually consumed by the players between Saturday games. "Sometimes both teams eat together. It's a very laid back environment. We got a taste of the local food wherever we played. I loved it."

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Farina made his Anzio debut on April 29, on the road in Grosseto. He went five innings, struck out ten, gave up three runs and was the losing pitcher. Two and a half months later, he was still winless. He finally got his first Serie A/1 victory on July 15, at home, also against Grosseto.

Two weeks later, on July 29, Farina threw a no-hitter as Anzio beat Modena 7-0. "I felt good right from the get go, and the defence made some really big plays in the first few innings. We were putting things together offensively for the first time in a while, too."

Farina had 15 strikeouts and two walks in the game. "Both of the walks were on full counts. The fact that I was throwing a no-hitter didn't really hit me until the sixth or seventh inning. That's when the guys stopped talking to me and started to sit at the other end of the bench while we were batting."

He finished the game strongly. "The last few innings were surreal. Everything was automatic. I ended up striking out six of the last seven batters. I was all over the zone. Everyone gave me a big hug after the last out, and they gave me the game ball."

Farina had thrown another no-hitter, back home in Sarnia a long time ago. "That was back in mosquito ball. I think that I was 10 years old. It was a five-inning 'mercy rule' game. I still have the ball from that one, too."

Soon after his gem against Modena, Farina was selected to play for Italy at the World University Baseball Championships in Havana, Cuba. He pitched against Japan and Chinese Taipei.

Italy's games against Japan and the host nation were played at the Estadio Latinoamericano, a cavernous baseball shrine that was home to the AAA International League's Havana Sugar Kings in the 1950s. "It's beautiful. The field is great. The crowds at our games


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were small, and I'd have loved to see it with fifty thousand people inside."

Italy finished fifth in the 11-team competition.

After returning from Cuba, Farina made one last start for Anzio before coming back to Canada so that he could prepare for teacher's college at the University of Windsor. In 11 games for Anzio, he had a 2-5 won-loss record with a solid 3.88 earned run average and 65 strikeouts in 58 innings.

Farina said that he would love to return to Italy in the spring. "Everyone loves being there. It's a great league to play in. Everyone has fun. And having played for the national team, the prospect of playing for Italy at the 2008 Olympics is a really big draw for me."

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