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Majors eye another run at elusive title

INTERCOUNTY BASEBALL

By **STEVE GREEN, THE LONDON FREE PRESS**

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Some of the faces may have changed, but the London Majors are looking to stay the same in other, more important ways.

Another winning Intercounty Baseball League season and another run at the first championship since 1975, for starters.

Last year, the Majors started slowly, but caught fire over the second half, finishing at 21-15 in fifth place. However, their playoff run lasted only six games as they were beaten in the first round by the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"I'm excited by this season," said manager and co-owner Roop Chanderdat. "We've got a good group of returning players and a great recruiting class."

He has about 10 players returning. Back for their second seasons are first baseman-outfielder Chris Chambers of California, outfielder Ryan Cattrysse of Chatham and his older brother Allan, an infielder-outfielder.

Chambers hit .308 with four homers in an injury-plagued first season; Allan Cattrysse was the all-star game MVP and led the Majors with a .336 average; while Ryan Cattrysse was third on the team in 2009 with a .318 average, earning a starting outfield spot midway through the season.

On the mound, Josh Palmer, Pierre Miville-Deschenes, Mike Mitro and Mike DeLong all return. Palmer went 8-0 in 2008, but was hampered by arm problems last year. Coming off surgery, he'll probably start in the bullpen before joining the rotation later on, Chanderdat said.

Veteran third baseman Kyle Piwowarczyk, one of the best at the hot corner, looks like he won't be back for his 10th season as he's taking time to rest after playing pro hockey in Germany and baseball every summer. In 2009, he hit .310 with 10 RBIs.

And two of the Majors' top players from last year have signed pro contracts with independent league teams. Pitcher Craig Bate (7-1, 1.43 ERA, 76 strikeouts in 66 innings) has joined the Southern Illinois Miners of the Frontier League, while first baseman-catcher Will Richards (.295, seven homers, 33 RBIs in the regular season, three homers and 10 RBIs in the Toronto series) is now with the Sioux Falls (Iowa) Canaries of the American Association of Independent Baseball.

"Those are huge holes and to try to replace them so late is tough, but I think we've added some big pieces," Chanderdat said. "And I still have a few more irons in the fire."

Among the newcomers are shortstop Chuncey Ward of Macon, Ga.; first basemen-outfielders Cleveland Brownlee of Atlanta and Mitch Delaney of LaSalle; pitchers Andy St. Gelais of Quebec City and Zack Breault of Amherstburg; outfielder Ryan LaPensee of LaSalle, and catcher Tyler Plumpton of Peterborough. Ward looks to be the everyday shortstop, with Plumpton the likely No. 1 catcher once he returns from the University of Rio Grande in Ohio. Until then, Ryan Welbourne will shoulder the catching load.

Brownlee came personally recommended by former major league star Cecil Fielder.

"Cleveland had been bouncing around the independent leagues for a couple of seasons and he just needs to put up some numbers to get another shot," Chanderdat said. "We've shown we're pretty good at moving players on to other levels."

The Majors have three exhibition games with Michigan JetBox April 23 and 24 (a doubleheader) at Labatt Park. They open the season May 2 at Hamilton.

It's remains a nine-team league with the Ottawa Fatcats replacing Oshawa. Sarnia native Bill Mackenzie is the Fatcats manager.

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