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## SPORTS SOCCER

### Majors gear up for playoff push

Thu, July 12, 2007

By RYAN PYETTE, FREE PRESS SPORTS REPORTER

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The London Majors figure they have a shot at returning to the Intercounty Baseball League final if Rudy Vallejos does a lot at the plate and succeeds at squatting behind it.

Last year's rookie of the year and all-star left fielder has been converted to catcher for the stretch run as the playoff-bound Majors try to secure sixth place in the standings and perhaps climb a little bit higher.

"I was a little rusty the first few games -- I hadn't caught much since high school (in Ottawa)," the 23-year-old said. "But I know as I get used to it again and play more back there, it's going to be OK. I have confidence I can call a good game and work well with our pitchers."

London (13-17) has five games left in its regular season. But the Majors are on a three-game win streak and have a recent history of shocking playoff wins.

"We went to the final last year (losing to Brantford) and we want to make it back again this year and, this time, get the ring," Vallejos said. "We're a young team, but we feel we have enough veterans in our lineup -- Chuck Roberts, (Kyle) Piwowarczyk, (Kevin) Virtue and I consider myself one because I was here last year.

"It's definitely not a rebuilding season. If we pitch the way we're capable of and our hitters protect our pitchers by scoring some runs, we're going to be a team that nobody wants to face."

That's certainly the case if the starting pitching hums along like it has been. Josh Palmer hasn't given up more than three runs in his last three starts and Mike Mitro has won two in a row.

Steady Tom Van Kasteren will start tonight in Kitchener while recently signed lefty Kirk Martin, now a four-time Major, will start tomorrow night against Hamilton at Labatt Park.

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"He'll be on a pitch count so hopefully we can get him three innings his first time out," London manager Roop Chanderdar said. "We have to get him qualified for the playoffs in these last few games (three appearances or at least six innings pitched)."

Last weekend in Brantford, Chanderdar managed the IBL team to a 3-2 win over the defending champion Red Sox in the all-star game. Vallejos and Piwowarczyk played and Van Kasteren was the starting pitcher.

One interesting element to London's playoff push is that no matter where they finish, the Majors have a good chance of facing the Barrie Baycats in the first round. The teams had a nasty brawl last month that resulted in multiple suspensions, including an eight-gamer to Majors shortstop Alex Arango.

"We always seem to run into them in the playoffs and it will be a phenomenal series to play them again," Vallejos said.

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Proprietor and Publisher - The London Free Press,  
P.O. Box 2280, 369 York Street, London Ontario Canada N6A 4G1