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Palmer starts on road back to fast lane

INTERCOUNTY BASEBALL: The London Majors kept their pitcher's injury a secret last season

By RYAN PYETTE, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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Josh Palmer knows what everyone was thinking.

How could a pitcher so automatic on the mound two years ago struggle so much in his followup season?

In 2008, the 24-year-old from Bewdley, Ont., was great for the London Majors. He and Adam Echlin led the club to the Intercounty Baseball League pennant and within a game of its first playoff title in 33 years.

Last season, the pitching pair became the biggest head-scratcher in a disappointing campaign that ended with a first-round defeat at the hand of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

They were hurt and tried to pitch through pain.

"To go from an 8-0 record and pitcher of the year to two wins and five losses and losing 10 miles per hour on your fastball, that's not what you want," Palmer said Friday ahead of the Majors' 2010 home opener against Hamilton Sunday at 1 p.m. at Labatt Park. "There was a lot of stuff that was hidden from the public. We didn't want it to get around the league we were hurt. I pitched the season with a torn labrum and Adam had a messed-up elbow."

Palmer went to London surgeon Bob Litchfield for repairs last fall. He postponed his senior season at Oklahoma Baptist University.

"Normally for this kind of injury, it's seven months before you can start throwing the ball again," he said, "but I healed fast. I stayed in London and did the rehab (at the Fowler-Kennedy clinic) and it took four months to recover."

He is throwing for the Majors this summer.

So of course, this one question looms largest for a reshaped team looking for a bounce back: can post-surgery Palmer become the mound Superman of his past?

London co-owner and manager Roop Chanderdat will take his time finding out.

Palmer is on a pitch count. He was capped at 30 in the season opener at Kitchener and will be boosted to 40 if things continue to progress.

"Of course, when you feel good, you want to do more," he said, "but I know it's a process. I want to be out there in July and August. I feel like I thrive in those (important) situations."

Plus, he has something to prove. He will, for the time being, operate in a closing type of relief role, a job that eventually could go to hard-throwing Mike DeLong.

"With Josh, we're looking at using him this year in situations where he will get wins," Chanderdat said. "He might only be asked to go two innings or so during a game instead of being that starter asked to go five or more like he did in '08. Right now, we're going to bring him along slowly and be very careful with him. That's the most important thing."

Echlin won't pitch for the Majors this year.

But the potential return of large lefty Craig Bate, should he get his release from the Frontier League's Southern Illinois Miners, and the emergence of Aaron Boag's schoolmate Chris Cox, who went from a No. 5 starter to top two this year at Canisius College in Buffalo, would put the Majors in good arm shape.

They already have Mike Mitro, Andy St. Gelais and Pierre Deschenes prepared to contribute big innings.

The pitching staff has new -- but not unfamiliar -- receivers. Palmer's former college mate Mason Reilly has opted to stay in California this summer.

"We have Mike Welbourne (from Oshawa) and I played with him for five or six years when we were younger," Palmer said, "and Tyler Plumpton (from Peterborough) is from around where we grew up and he'll help when he shows up (from the University of Rio Grande)."

Strong pitching could bridge the gap until the roster -- one that won't feature all-star third baseman and German hockey pro Kyle Piwowarczyk -- settles and Chanderdat can decide on a regular starting nine to make a run at league powers Brantford, Toronto and Guelph.

"I told these guys we have, on paper, a team that can compete," he said, "but I'm interested to see how this group comes together. You have players used to being top starters and hitting third or fourth on their teams and they come to the Majors and maybe they're the fourth outfielder here."

"It's a different situation."

Provided they get some timely bonding and a recharged Palmer on the hill, they could be looking at shades of '08.

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Majors home opener

London vs. Hamilton

When: Sunday 1 p.m. at Labatt Park.

Saturday: LDBA Park will be renamed Dan Pulham Memorial Field in honour of the late London ball volunteer whose son Casey is currently a coach with the Majors.

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