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Majors behind eight ball

MORRIS DALLA COSTA The London Free Press



The London Majors got lucky.

Three days before their Intercounty Baseball League opener Sunday in Kitchener against the Panthers, the Majors finally got a chance to practise at Labatt Park.

Thursday was their first full outdoor session and it's put them well behind in their preparation for the season.

"The weather has not cooperated," said Majors manager Roop Chanderdat. "We are two to three weeks behind where we should be. In this part of the country, we're used to having to practise in the cold but at least we could get on the field. With the rain, we can't get on the field."

The Majors have spent a lot of time working out at Adam Stern's Centrefield Sports indoor facility and hitting in the cage at Labatt Park.

"But it isn't the same," Chanderdat said. "For a team used to going between four and five times a week, full outdoor and hitting in the tunnel, we're really behind."

It's especially difficult for teams that have a number of new players. Chemistry is always an issue in a short season and losing several weeks is difficult to overcome.

The Majors have had some holes to fill from the team that went 18-18 and lost in the second round of the playoffs to Barrie.

Chanderdat believes he's done that. He picked up a couple of players from the Guelph Royals franchise that's taken a year off following a dispute over stadium use with the city. The Majors added starting pitcher Ryan Hart and filled a hole in centre field with Chris Stewart.

Stewart will take over from Ryan LaPensee, who signed with the Arizona Diamondbacks organization.

Chanderdat believes he's closed one of the large holes from last year.

"One of the big problems we had was catching, not because we didn't recruit well but the guy we recruited tore up his knee in the college World Series," he said.

Chanderdat has signed former Stratford catcher Tyler Graham, a second-team IBL all-star. He will be paired with Mackenzie Harrison, a Londoner who played with the London Badgers and is playing college ball in Florida.

"He's the real deal," Chanderdat said of Harrison.

The Majors have also signed what they hope is a long-term solution at shortstop. Windsor native Kevin Mailloux, 25, was a Seattle Mariners prospect and while he played well, he couldn't make the jump. He's now settled in London.

"He was a first-team all-star everywhere he's been including the last two years in the minor leagues," Chanderdat said. "He wasn't released. He retired because he wanted to start a life. He and I go back to 2006. He was supposed to come play with me but he hurt his knee that year."

Mailloux will pair up with second baseman Alan Cattrysse, an IBL all-star.

Some of the other pieces of the puzzle returning from last year are big-hitting outfielder Cleveland Brownlee, first baseman Chris Chambers and third-sacker Paul Lytwynec.

There is one intriguing individual who might earn a starting job this year. Outfielder Julio Estrada is a Cuban who's been living in London the last few years.

"But he hasn't played in a couple of years," Chanderdat said. "He's a big strong hitter but it's going to take some time for him to get back into shape."

The bottom line in baseball is pitching. If a team can't get good pitching, the chances of winning are slim.

Chanderdat has some returning pitchers - including Mike Mitro - but he has done a pretty good overhaul of his staff.

Beside Hart, he's brought in Rory Young, a Houston Astros draft that didn't sign, and Jordi Amargos, a pitcher from the Dominican Republic.

"He's had four years in the Tampa Bay Rays organization and we look at anyone who's been with any minor league team for four years," Chanderdat said.

"No matter what kind of stats, we view him as being a decent ball player."

He believes he's put together a good team.

"It's just a matter of do we have enough in our season to let the guys gel, especially since you have some guys who aren't used to playing a short season," he said.

"If we dissect (last) season, we were 18 and 18, three games out of third place. That's on the positive side.

"On the negative side, we don't want to be 18 and 18. We want to be better."

Majors' home schedule

Sunday, May 15: Burlington at London, 1 p.m.

Friday, May 20: Hamilton at London, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, May 27: Kitchener at London, 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, May 29: Burlington at London, 1 p.m.

Friday, June 3: Toronto at London, 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, June 5: Hamilton at London, 1 p.m.

Friday, June 10: Kitchener at London, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday June 11: Ottawa at London, 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, June 12: Ottawa at London, 1 p.m.

Tuesday, June 14: Burlington at London, 11 a.m.

Sunday, June 19: Barrie at London, 1 p.m. (DH) Tuesday, June 28: Brantford at London, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, July 1: Toronto at London, 5:30 p.m.

Saturday, July 9: Ottawa at London, 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, July 17: Brantford at London, 1 p.m.

Friday July 22: Hamilton at London, 7:30 p.m.

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