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Majors eager to start new season

By SEAN MEYER, The Londoner

Chris Dennis of London Majors works on his bunting skills as spring training for the baseball team kicked off at City Wide baseball fields on Commissioners Rd.

MIKE LAST PHOTO

London Majors enjoyed plenty of success in 2006, not only reaching the Intercounty Baseball League championship series, but also seeing an increase in the average attendance at historic Labatt Park.

However, 2007 is a new season - one that begins Sunday, May 6 at Labatt Park against the Stratford Nationals. And while the Majors will be eager to build on last season's success, they will have to do so while dealing with a couple of key injuries and the loss of some veteran players.

Still, Roop Chanderdat - the Majors' co-owner, general manager and field manager - says London baseball fans shouldn't assume any less success this year.

"We're a younger team this year for sure. We had a successful season last year (the Majors lost the championship series in five games to the Brantford Red Sox) and that led to us losing some quality players. Some left for what they thought were better leagues, for better scouted leagues, for what they saw as better opportunities. So we had to make some changes," says Roop, who owns the Majors along with Scott Dart.

"We have added some great young players this year. We have three players from the Canadian junior national team. We are still going to be competitive, but the development of these players is going to be important."

Those three junior national team players are catcher Chris Dennis (who was drafted by the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, however didn't sign with the team and will go back into the Major League Baseball amateur draft), outfielder Matt McCarney (also drafted by Tampa Bay) and outfielder Mitch Delaney.

"I'm excited by these three guys. It's just a matter of how they adjust to our game. These guys all have the talent to be in this league," Roop says. "We need these three guys to step up. We probably need three pitchers to step up too. If that happens, we will be in good shape. That's also assuming our veterans step up too."

When it comes to his veterans, Roop says he expects strong seasons from returning players such as infielder Chuck Roberts, who hit .333 last season - after a two-year break from playing - and was a second-team all-star; pitcher Josh Palmer, who went 5-4 with three saves in 2006; and Rudy Vallejos, who was named the IBL Rookie of the Year.

"Chuck is going to be a big player for us. Josh was one of the most valuable players we had; he could close, start, he was there wherever I needed him," Roop says. "Rudy Vallejos put up great numbers;



he was rookie of the year. We need him to step up his game in his second year. I think he is capable of that."

For his part, Chuck is looking forward to continued success this season.

"I think anything less than what we accomplished last year would be disappointing. With the guys we have coming back, with the new guys we have. I think we can be a good team," Chuck says. "I think if we can get the pitching, which is the big story in the league, you need three top pitchers to be successful, than we will win our share of games."

On a personal note, Chuck says he is hoping to continue building on what he accomplished last season. However, he is quick to add personal goals are not his priority.

"I believe in leading by example. I took two years off and came back. Of course you want to be successful, but as long as the team does well, I couldn't care less about my numbers," Chuck says. "I want to contribute of course, still hit the .300 mark, have the power numbers come up a bit. But I just want to do what I can to help this team succeed."

Two other key returning players are going to have to overcome injuries.

Outfielder Kevin Virtue had arm surgery while also dealing with the effects of a broken foot while infielder Kyle Piwowarczyk broke his wrist playing hockey and is still dealing with complications.

"We are banged up going in. Kyle is dealing with complications from his broken wrist. In hockey you can just put a cast on it and get back out, but you can't play ball that way," Roop says. "Kevin is coming back from some significant injuries. Kevin is the biggest gamer we have. If it was anyone else I wouldn't think they would be ready for the season, but Kevin, I think he should be ready."

On the business side of things, Roop says there are many positives as well.

"Our attendance increased last year, probably in the 425-450 range. We are getting close to an average of 500 which we have always seen as significant. I think we really captured the hearts and mind of London ball fans. We started 6-0, 8-1, and I think we really caught some people's interest," Roop says. "The hardcore ball fans will come, but I think we are starting to reach that casual fan. The media that covers us has really helped with that. We have a lot of youth baseball teams coming out, schools. We are getting our players more involved in the community."

Chuck says the growing community connection to the Majors is something he cares quite a bit about.

"I know we are always looking to do what we can to put people in the seats. It's always fun to play in front of big crowds. I know London has had some bad history with the Werewolves leaving, the Tigers leaving, but I like what Scott and Roop are doing," Chuck says. "The next three or four years I think you will see coming to watch the Majors become like going to a Knights game. A smaller version of that yes. But people coming out, filling the stands, kids coming out too and having fun. I think you will see that happen."

Community involvement is something Roop says is very important to the Majors organization. With that in mind the team offers organizations a 50-50 split in selling game tickets (the team keeps 50 per cent of the money) while also offering free tickets to any school who wants to come out to a game - one ticket per student.

While drawing fans is definitely important, Roop adds the team's bank account is something that always has to be watched closely. However, it too seems to be heading in the right direction.

"Last year was the best season we had in a business sense. That's not to say we are making money, but it was our best year. We don't count the purchase price, we are just talking covering the expenses, paying the bills," Roop says. "The business community is out there and I think we can show them this is a good place to invest their money. A lot of businesses have been with us from the start and that's fantastic. I think we have got a lot of opportunities. We have a solid foundation in place, now we just have to start adding some pieces."

WANT MORE INFO?

- To learn more about the London Majors, visit <http://www.londonmajors.com> or send

an email to intercountybaseball@londoner.com

- To learn more about the Intercounty Baseball League, visit <http://www.intercountybaseball.com>.

MAJORS HOME SCHEDULE

- Sunday, May 6, Stratford at London, 1 p.m.
- Sunday, May 13, Brantford at London, 1 p.m.
- Monday, May 21, Toronto at London, 1 p.m. (doubleheader)
- Sunday, May 27, Brantford at London, 1 p.m.
- Sunday, June 3, Guelph at London, 1 p.m.
- Friday, June 8, Kitchener at London, 7:30 p.m.
- Friday, June 15, Kitchener at London, 7:30 p.m.
- Sunday, June 17, Barrie at London, 1 p.m. (doubleheader)
- Friday, June 29, Stratford at London, 7:30 p.m.
- Sunday, July 1, Oshawa at London, 5 p.m. (doubleheader)
- Friday, July 6, Kitchener at London, 7:30 p.m.
- Sunday, July 8, Hamilton at London, 1 p.m.
- Friday, July 13, Hamilton at London, 7:30 p.m.
- Sunday, July 15, Guelph at London, 1 p.m.
- Sunday, July 22, Stratford at London, 1 p.m.

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