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Baseball - off-field at least - nearly a year-round sport

By SEAN MEYER, The Londoner

It may be winter but Roop Chanderdatt, co-owner, general manager and field manager of the London Majors, is still busy signing players and coaches for the upcoming Major Intercounty League season.

SEAN MEYER PHOTO



Considering the warm temperatures we've had so far this winter - until the weekend, anyway - Londoners could be forgiven for thinking spring has already arrived.

Roop Chanderdatt knows differently. After all, Roop knows full well nothing means spring has arrived like the sound of a baseball being smacked over the outfield wall at Labatt Park.

Still, Roop, co-owner, general manager and field manager of the London Majors, is currently busy preparing for spring training - and even the dog days of summer - by busily signing players and coaches for the upcoming Major Intercounty League season.

In addition to recently announcing the return of himself as field manager, Harry Muir as pitching coach, James Sinfield as third base coach and Scott Price as first base coach, Roop has been working the phones heavily recruiting players to the 2007 edition of the team.

"It's a busy time for a GM. Our season came to an end at the end of August and I was able to take time and reflect. We had a great team and a good season. When we had all our regulars in the lineup, there wasn't a more talented team," Roop says. "We have a strong foundation here, but I want us to be a perennial contender and that work starts early. I probably got back to work in October, recruiting guys from last year. Guys who want to come back, guys we want to come back."

Recently, Roop announced several key signings and the return of his entire 2006 coaching staff, all part of the process of preparing for the arrival of spring training in April.

"Kyle Piwowarczyk, a two-time, first-team all star is coming back. He's a great local kid; this is a great place for Kyle to play. Rudy Vallejos, the rookie of the year and Josh Palmer, he'll be someone I really rely on, number three pitcher, bullpen guy. This kid is going to get drafted, he will play in the pros one day," Roop says. "Chuck Roberts is coming back, another London kid, and so is Simon Galarraga (infielder and the team's international scouting director). Simon (a native of Venezuela) lives here year-round now, so he's no longer considered an import player, which will really help us. Simon had a real good season last year so it will be great having him back."

Other returning players Roop was excited to have lined up for 2007 are Greg Schillingotn, a former OBA player of the year, Ted Kalnins, a six-foot-seven pitcher who returned to baseball just last year after five years away from the game and Kevin Virtue, a second-team all-star who is recovering from arm surgery and will pursue a job in the independent Northern League before looking at officially returning to London.

Mike Mitro, Matt Emery, Tyler Tilbury and Jason Kolibhofer are other players Roop has under contract for the upcoming season. However, the team has suffered some significant losses as well, especially league batting champ Brad McElroy who will be playing in the Carolinas this season and pitcher Hiarali Garcia who will be playing in the Alaskan league.

"We still have some guys who look to be coming back, but I don't want to say anything until we get something in writing," Roop says. "I would say I am a little bit worried because of the unknowns. We are looking for a shortstop, another infielder, whether a starter or not I don't know, an outfielder, a catcher. We have three months to put the puzzle together. That will include scouting trips to Venezuela, Arizona, and it will include a lot of phone calls. We have a lot of holes to fill, but we have time."

Establishing a solid core of local players is something Roop - along with fellow owner Scott Dart - have prided themselves on since first acquiring the Majors.

With the signings already announced for this season, the team is well on its way to maintaining - if not growing - that tradition.

"It's good to have guys like Piwowarczyk, Roberts, Virtue, Galarraga, who can be considered a local guy now. It's good to have that local core to build around, that's very important to us," Roop says. "If local guys have enough talent to play in this league, they should be playing for us."

Those local faces, Roop says, can not only improve the team's fortunes on the field, but off it as well.



"I'm really excited about the upcoming season, off and on the field. We lost in the finals, but we showed this community we're competitive, that it is a great brand of baseball. People responded and we want to add to that base. Our attendance was up and I think you are really going to see growth in that area," Roop says. "Financially we had a good season because we really tightened up expenses. We had a good year, attendance increased and that means concessions were up. Scott and I are also hoping to build on our sponsorships this season. All the sponsors we've talked to are excited about what we are doing, so we want to build on that momentum too."

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