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SPORTS OTHER SPORTS

One chance remains
 Thu, August 28, 2008
A final game tomorrow night could end the London Majors' 33-year championship drought
 By RYAN PYETTE

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BRANTFORD -- It's Game 7 heaven.

One of the longest Intercounty Baseball League seasons on record will go the distance as the Brantford Red Sox stayed alive in the championship series with a 6-2 victory over the London Majors before a jammed house last night at Arnold Anderson Stadium.



Toshikazn Sasa of the London Majors fouls off an attempted sacrifice bunt in Game 6 of the IBL final last night in Brantford. (Mike Hensen, Sun Media)

The Majors missed a shot to wrap up their first title since 1975. They have one more chance to end that 33-year drought tomorrow night at 7:30 p.m. at Labatt Park.

Will London turn to ace pitcher Josh Palmer, who is already due to report back to Oklahoma Baptist university? London manager Roop Chanderdat stays mum.

"We're going to sit down with our coaches over the next day and discuss our pitching situation," he said. "That's all I'm going to say."

Though anything can happen in Game 7, London has reason to be confident no matter who they send to the mound. The home team has won all six games in a series that has featured phenomenal pitching.

"We've earned the right to play the final game at home by winning (the pennant) and we've won all our games at home in the series already," Chanderdat said. "So of course, we like our chances. Game 7s are exciting. It's all or nothing."

Nobody knows that better than Brantford. The Red Sox, in their third straight final, played a Game 7 for all the marbles last year and lost 13-5 to the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"We've been there before, we have a lot of experience here and we know how it feels to lose in a Game 7," Red Sox left fielder Josh McCurdy said. "Hopefully, this will be different. But we've given ourselves the opportunity again."



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Brantford, looking to eliminate London for a third straight summer, ensured the final trip to the Forest City with a three-run sixth inning kick-started by their No. 9 hitter. Centrefielder Al Stephens belted a solo shot to left and the Red Sox rallied for two more on an RBI single by Hyung Cho and a sharp double to left from Lee Delfino to make it 4-1.

That final blow chased London starter Adam Echlin, who had matched Brantford's outstanding moundsmen Gabe Ribas pitch-for-pitch over the first five innings.

Ribas, who threw 11 innings in Game 2 and finished a perfect 5-0 in the playoffs, allowed a leadoff single to Jeff Helps before mowing down the next 12 London batters. Brantford flied in their ace hurler from Illinois, where he works for Northwestern University, to make the season-saving start.

The pitchers posted nine straight zeroes on the scoreboard and combined to strike out 14 in the first five innings -- eight by Ribas and six by Echlin.

But the London starter, who has surrendered just a measly infield single to his first 15 batters, blinked first in the fifth. It took an act of Parliament -- a long solo blast to left by Brantford right fielder Adam Parliament -- to open the scoring.

"When you're in a game with pitching like that, every at bat counts," McCurdy said. "You have to be locked in and we did a good job."

London tied it in the sixth on Toshi Sasa's single to no man's land in right but Brantford would not be denied.

Choosing not to fold, Majors manager Roop Chanderdat replaced Echlin with usual closer Mehdi Djebbar London to try to stop the bleeding. He couldn't and gave up a pair of runs in the seventh after London had pulled within two.

"We had our chances against Ribas," Chanderdat said. "We had Helps lead off the game on second and didn't do anything with hit. We had first and third with Jess Bechard up (in the sixth) and you'll take that anytime -- but we didn't score.

"You take the 2-1, 3-1 lead there and it's a different mindset."

The Brantford win denied a short-staffed London club from pulling off a remarkable series win contested mostly without two of their best players -- top hitter Kyle Piwowarczyk, who departed early for pro hockey in Germany, and all-star short stop David Narodowski, who has already gone to school at Kansas.

It also cost Bechard a chance to celebrate on his hometown field. The Majors standout played baseball for parts of three seasons with the Red Sox in his younger days.

"It's a special series because, to me, we have the two best ball park atmospheres in the league," Bechard said. "Our fans travel to Brantford. Theirs come to London. There's nothing worse than playing a big game in front of 200 people. We've had great crowds all year. This has been nice -- you go to work and after a big win the night before, people want to talk about the game or the highlights they saw on the news.

"You ask major leaguers and they'll tell you it's not about the paycheque or the playoff bonus you get. It's about the feeling you get and the celebration afterwards. It's being able to pop the cork on the champagne. That's what you play for here."

One team will feel that tomorrow night -- after Game 7 is in the books.

Intercountry playoffs

Red Sox 6, Majors 2

(Best-of-seven IBL final tied 3-3)

Game 7: Tomorrow, 7:30 p.m. at Labatt Park 2

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