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### Home cooking to fuel Majors

Fri, July 4, 2008

By **STEVE GREEN**, FREE PRESS SPORTS REPORTER

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Apart from a touch of Blue Jay Syndrome and a few nagging injuries, the London Majors are in good health heading into the final 10 games of their Intercounty Baseball League season.

At 18-8, they're in third place, two games behind the leading Guelph Royals, heading into tonight's game against the fourth-place Brantford Red Sox (18-10) at Labatt Park at 7:30 p.m.

The schedule really favours the Majors, who have Brantford and Guelph twice each among their remaining home games and only face last-place Stratford (twice) and eighth-place Kitchener on the road.

Majors manager Roop Chanderdatt is thankful for the chance to load up on the home cooking.

"We're a little banged up right now," he said, mentioning Toshi Sasa (hamstring) and pitchers Medhi Djebbar and Geoff Mann (arm), "and we'll miss some guys for personal reasons, so it's nice we're at home a lot now."

The Majors are sending four players to tomorrow's all-star game in Toronto against the defending league champion Maple Leafs. And those four are among the main reasons the Majors are where they are.

Pitcher Josh Palmer is 5-0 with a 2.84 earned-run average

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and 28 strikeouts over 38 innings; centre fielder Christian Ruiz is second in the league in bating (.443 in the latest statistics) and among the league leaders in hits and doubles; Dave Narodowski is second among league shortstops with a .924 fielding percentage and combines with second baseman Jeff Helps -- a late addition to the all-star roster -- to form one of the league's best middle infield combos.

"With Josh I know what I'm getting from Day 1," Chanderdat said. "He's a real pro who can do anything I ask, either start or come out of the 'pen. Dave and Christian came in this year with good scouting reports and we expected good things from them, not only on offence but on defence.

"Dave's the best shortstop in London in a while and Jeff is a natural shortstop who's made the move to second look easy. I'd take those two over anyone -- up the middle they're as good a combination as any in the league."

But with a doubleheader at Labatt Park against the Maple Leafs on Sunday, Chanderdat, an all-star coach, is crossing his fingers.

"Get 'em in for a couple of innings and get 'em out. Bang on wood nothing happens to them."

If there's one area where the Majors need improvement, it's in driving in baserunners, something the big-league club in Toronto is having trouble doing.

"We need to take advantage of our opportunities," said Chanderdat, whose team left eight runners in scoring position in a Canada Day doubleheader split with Oshawa. "We need to develop that killer instinct to put teams away early when we have the chance."

A little more power would always help -- Ruiz and Jess Bechard share the team lead with four homers.

"You'd like that, but you've always got to go to your strengths," said Chanderdat, who shaped the Majors in part to cope with the spacious Labatt Park. "So we'll do a lot of situational things the average fan might not notice, but that's baseball."

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