

Venezuelan pitcher a winner for Majors

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By **ERIC BENDER**, FREE PRESS SPORTS REPORTER

Lefthanded pitcher Erik Perez, who calls Venezuela his home, recorded his first victory on Canadian soil yesterday.

And it was at historic Labatt Park he went six innings to stake the London Majors to a 4-3 win over the Guelph Royals before a season-opening Intercounty Baseball League crowd of about 400.

Another Majors newcomer, righthander Josh Palmer, pitched the final three innings of shutout ball to seal it.

"I can see the quality of baseball here," said Perez through his interpreter and fellow countryman Simon Galarraga, the Majors first baseman. "It's better than I've seen in the last two years."

Canada is the fourth country 34-year-old Perez has played in. In 2003 and part of last year, he played in the New Brunswick senior league. In 2004, he played in France and in 2002 he worked in the Czech Republic.

Plans are for Perez to be a Majors starter this season while the coaching staff assess several other Venezuelans who are in London to further their baseball careers. Galarraga heads the Majors Venezuelan scouting and baseball clinic operation. The Intercounty Baseball League allows teams three imports. Galarraga and Perez are two for the Majors with a third to be determined this month.

Galarraga contributed to the Majors' cause yesterday with a solo home run in front of his wife and two daughters who moved to London this year. Galarraga came to London with the Frontier League London Werewolves and stayed to play with the Majors.

But it was a two-out sixth inning clutch single by left fielder Kyle Piwowarczyk that scored the winning run as the Majors came back from a 3-2 deficit.

Thirdbaseman Chad McKellar led off with a single and moved to second on a passed ball. Centre fielder Ryan Gauthier struck out. Shortstop Chris Hamilton hit a blooper behind third base the Royals converged on but bobbled while McKellar raced in with the tying run and Hamilton made it to second.

Venezuelan Oswaldo Troconis struck out. Then, Piwowarczyk's shot into centre field scored Hamilton from second.

"It's a big win because we've got a lot of new guys and new coaches," said Majors field manager Roop Chanderdat. "Our pitching was phenomenal and we got hitting from the veterans. It was a good team win and we were doing some of the little things right."

Perez allowed seven hits and had three strikeouts while Palmer, with the save, allowed one hit and had four strikeouts. Guelph's Kyle Leon hit a sixth inning leadoff solo homer.

The Majors scored in the third inning when designated hitter Chuck Roberts' single brought in right fielder Kevin Virtue who had walked on board.

Guelph's first run came in the second when catcher Sean Reilly's single scored shortstop Frankie Hare from third. With Leon's homer in the sixth, the Royals took the lead 3-2 when right fielder Steve Coates singled in Reilly from third base.

The Majors next action is in Oshawa on Saturday.