

London Majors open their season Sunday with a roster full of eager recruits.

Majors start to put team together

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What you see Sunday at Labatt Park when the London Majors open their 36-game Intercounty Baseball League schedule is not what you'll see come June and July.

What you'll see during May is a swarm of eager recruits rounded up from the Majors' new scouting system, all vying for a spot on the roster that should form up seven or eight games into the season.

"It will be a different team in June," Majors co-owner and field manager Roop Chanderdat said. "There are seasons. One in May and one starting in June. That's what the Barrie Baycats did last year. Everyone has to be patient with us until June."

The Baycats won the IBL in just their third season.

On Sunday at 1 p.m., the Majors make their 2006 debut on the lush grass of Labatt Park, again being groomed by the city's Mike Regan, who has returned to duties at the park, against the Guelph Royals. The Majors went to the league championship round against Guelph in 2004 but were defeated by the Royals.

The different team in June of which Chanderdat speaks will be laced with local players returning from college, such bright lights as catcher Brian Blackburn, who was instrumental in the 2004 run and two right-handed pitchers, Matt Emery and Greg Shillington.

Shillington was the Ontario Baseball Association's pitcher of the year. And there's Kevin Mailloux, a junior from Chatham, left-handed pitcher Jeff Roy, who played junior D hockey for the Lambeth Lancers, infielder A.J. Reed of the University of North Alabama and centre-fielder Brad McElroy.

Outfielder Rudy Vallegos of Ottawa, at Graceland University in Iowa, comes highly recommended with speed and a strong arm. Chad McKeller of London, who played with the 2003 Majors, returns from the University of Arkansas.

"We should hit our stride in mid-June," said Chanderdat, who is looking for a club that will "be very competitive" and certainly be above .500.

There are 12 pitchers in the picture this week and the plan is to carry 11. But Chanderdat and pitching coach Harry Muir are still looking for one more bona fide starter and another solid bullpen hurler.

Chanderdat said the team won't be stronger at any one aspect of the game than another. The Majors will be strong at the corners with veterans Pete Babcock at



INFIELD PRACTICE: Pitching coach Harry Muir hits ground balls to the infielders with catcher Andrew Mercier during a London Majors practice at Labatt Park. CREDIT: MIKE HENSEN/The London Free Press



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third and Simon Galarraga at first and have one of the best outfielders in the league defensively and offensively in Vallegos, McElroy and veteran Kevin Virtue, "if they are healthy." Virtue is on the limp right now, but hopes to be ready for the opener.

There's hitting in the lineup from infielders such as Chuck Roberts, who is a .300 guy, and Kyle Piwowarczyk, who missed the league batting championship by a percentile last year.

A scouting system was put in place over the winter with a reach throughout the U.S., to Japan, Italy and South America.

Galarraga, a Venezuelan, has worked as a scout and with ball clinics in Venezuela. As a result there are five Venezuelans in London, in addition to him.

The IBL allows just three imports. Galarraga is a staple at first base and newcomer Eric Perez, a pitcher, will be the second import. The third spot is to be contended and the fans in May will see those players on a rotating basis until one secures a spot.

The reason for bringing in so many imports (with Venezuelan sponsors and the Majors paying the freight) is to acclimatize the prospects to North America and baseball here. Chanderdat said they will either be going to U.S. schools in the fall or signing pro contracts. They are being housed at the University of Western Ontario and being tutored in English and working out at Majors practices.

Signed are veteran pitchers Mike Mitro and Tom VanKasteren, along with 20-year-old Josh Palmer of Bewdley, a right-hander who has been going to college in Lethbridge and the Prairie Baseball Academy, and right-hander Adam Arnold of St. Thomas.

Last year's lefty from Sarnia, Justin Farina, has signed with an Italian pro league team through the Majors' new link with baseball in Italy.

The Majors coaching crew of Chanderdat, Muir, base coach Scott Price and James Sinfield will be joined in June by Don Dinelle from Quebec, a former Canadian Baseball League coach, who will be Chanderdat's associate coach.

Dinelle is a former Northern League player who runs baseball clinics.

"He came here a couple of weeks ago and we hit it off," said Chanderdat. "He wanted to come back."