

SPORTS

WATERLOO CHRONICLE

Let's play ball

*New program wants to give talented baseball players a chance at southern exposure*By BOB VRBANAC
Chronicle Staff

After losing talented junior-aged players to the provincial baseball league for years, two local coaches with a life-long passion for the game decided to do something about it.

"When I moved back to the area about five years ago the one thing I noticed pretty quickly was that the level of baseball and the calibre of baseball had dropped off a little bit," said Rausch.

"I was a little naive about the elite programs that had cropped up everywhere and kind of drained a lot of the talent from the local centres."

Rausch and Jeff Amos had both been playing baseball practically since they were toddlers. After the playing days were over they decided to give back to the game and both coach at the midget or junior level.

The local Intercounty league served as a launching pad for them during their playing days, and they were disappointed to see players going on to play for provincial teams after being enticed by promises of scholarships and exposure to Major League Baseball scouts.

"For example at the midget level we're down to four centres, most other levels have eight to 10 teams," said Rausch. "We're down to four because a lot of people are looking for that opportunity and thinking they're getting that exposure."

"They're being sold something but I haven't talked to a lot of people or heard a lot of success stories that people have got what they paid for."

"I think it's important for kids who might not be able to shell out all that money to still have the same opportunities," said Amos. "It shouldn't be about writing a cheque."

"I'm tired of seeing these kids leave the local system and never coming back."



The Can Am Reds Baseball program recently won a prestigious tournament in Evansville, Ind. Members of that team included coach Jason Rausch, Josh Puddephatt, Nathan Morin and Jeff Amos.

BOB VRBANAC PHOTO

That's when Rausch and Amos came up with the idea to start a new program that would allow players to stay in their local leagues until August and join them after the season was over. They would then take those interested players and travel to tournaments in the U.S. and expose them to the opportunities they enjoyed.

That's why they started the Can Am Reds Baseball program, which is open to players from Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph and all the other centres in the local Intercounty Baseball Association.

Rausch knows a little bit about what he's talking about when discussing playing at the next level. After graduating from the Kitchener Dodgers program he played Division I baseball for Canisius College.

He was also a member of the Kitchener Panthers in the Intercounty Baseball League from 1988-1996, and was the IBL player of the year in 1995. He retired as the ninth leading home run hitter in league history with 50.

Rausch was a three-time academic all-American at the Buffalo, N.Y., based school, and was inducted into the school's Hall of Fame 205. He also played in three collegiate all-star games, including one at the old Yankee Stadium where the lifelong New York Yankee's fan got a hit in the, "house that Ruth built."

The coaching duo were able to interest enough local players this season that they were able to put a team together and entered them in the Pastime Tournament Fall Wood Bat Tournament at the University

of Evansville in Indiana in October.

The Can Am team went on to defeat some of the top under-18 programs from the Midwest to win the championship. The tournament win included victories against teams like the Indiana Yankees, put together by Buddy Swift a scout for the Seattle Mariners, and the Kentucky Baseball Club, ranked 38th in the U.S. at that time.

Rausch and Amos said they concentrated on the fundamentals during that tournament and focused on the basis like respect for the game, respect for the coaches and respect for each other.

They also know the importance of academics and want to make sure the kids involved in the program take a balanced approach to

their future. While it might be great to play baseball at the next level, it's also important to get a good education so you have something to fall back on.

"I was fortunate to do the right thing and get a great education," said Rausch. "We want them to learn life skills from this program as well."

The approach is enjoying success from the players who participated like Nathan Morin and Josh Puddephatt.

"I wanted to continue to play baseball and explore my opportunities of going to school in the States," said Morin, 18.

"This was great because at the tournament in Indiana there were a bunch of pro scouts and college scouts.

"There are a lot of opportunities down there."

Puddephatt said he played for Rausch before and knew about the high level of coaching he provided. So when he was invited to try out for the team he jumped at the chance.

"They gave us a great opportunity," said the 18-year-old.

"We were Canadians and no one really knew what to expect but we went 4-0 and showed them we just don't play hockey, we play baseball."

The Can Am Reds Baseball program will be holding a prospect camp for next season at the University of Guelph Sportsdome on Dec. 6 from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. The cost of the camp is \$25 per player.

The organization has also partnered with Top Prospect Canada to take the team down to Sarasota, Fla., in March to take part in the annual Florida Showcase event. The event will feature a U.S. college and pro showcase and a minimum of three games against the top high school teams from the Tampa area.

For more information go to Can Am Reds Baseball programs website at www.canambaseball.com.

ROYAL LEPAGE REAL ESTATE UPDATE

WATERLOO REAL ESTATE

I just returned from the National Association of Realtor convention in San Diego where I attended many interesting seminars. One of our speakers was Condoleezza Rice, who gave a wonderful speech on what the USA stands for on a world basis. The general confidence level is starting to rise in the United States but many still feel there will be a 12-month to 18-month period before recovery is reached.

Locally in Waterloo, the housing market remains strong and home sales are up month to date by almost 25% according to the Kitchener Waterloo Real Estate Board stats. House prices this month are up to an average of \$295,958 over \$289,855 last November. Houses are selling quicker too as the average time is 39 days on market versus 46 days on market last year.

Once again, Waterloo stands strong in a revitalized real estate market.

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