

Minor Jays have a year to remember



By Jeff Doner

The Aurora AAA Minor Midget Jays are having a year to remember and have done something that Aurora sports hasn't seen before ? becoming Aurora's first AAA baseball squad.

Many of the players have been working hard together for the past four or five years, with just a handful of players coming in and out since the team began playing competitive ball.

Head coach Ian MacKinnon said the team worked up from B level all the way to where they are now and that the large majority of credit goes to the players.

“They bought into the concept,” he said. “Other players would see us having fun, we've got great sponsors and they saw the swag and the boys progress. That attracted players.

“We're the first Aurora team to win a AAA tournament and we beat last year's Ontario champions 15 ? 5 in the round robin and 8 ? 4 to win the championship at the Vaughan Invitational. Then we went into Mississauga, we walked through that tournament and we ran into another big team from Niagara Falls, NY, which is New York's number one travel team.”

Although they didn't come out with a win, at least they made it interesting by carrying a 7 ? 4 lead into the seventh inning, before dropping the game 9 ? 7.

MacKinnon said the fact that the players are training together all year has helped them become a stronger team.

“They all want to be here and they all practice together in the winter, so they play as a team,” he said. They never get down on each other. Last week we played a game after the championship to fill out the schedule, we went down 8 ? 0 in the first inning, just a complete meltdown after the tournament, and we came back and tied that one. The enthusiasm of these guys is terrific and they're all supportive of each other. That's what makes a big difference.”

In addition to some big tournaments up here in Canada, the team also traveled to the States to gain some solid experience and, hopefully, some exposure.

Recently, they competed in the Elite World Series in South Bend, Indiana, and then returned home to win the York Simcoe Baseball Association Championships two weeks ago.

“That's also a first for an Aurora AAA team, so now we go to the Ontario Championships in Hamilton,” added MacKinnon.

Going into grade 11, the players are still young, but realize how good of a season they've had overall in their development.

“Everybody works together and there's never any problems; the coaches make sure everybody has fun. When it comes down to game time everybody is serious, but before and after the game it's all fun,” said pitcher and third baseman Alex MacKinnon about his team's success.

“Four years ago we were terrible and we'd be lucky to get a win, but coming up to now everything has just been good and continued to get better.”

Catcher Ethan Kopel is just wrapping up this third year on the team and commutes from Thornhill to play with the team.

“It's definitely the best season I've had in my playing career,” he said. “We came in first place in our division, won the YSBA's for AAA, so it's all-around amazing and also just so much fun. [Playing in the US brought] just a whole new atmosphere and a different style of play.”

Aside from gaining experience and collecting hardware, another goal for many of the players is to be seen by scouts to help them earn scholarships to play baseball in Canada or the US.

Nick Bell, who bounces between pitching and playing outfield, has his goals set.

“I want to go as far as I can with it and just see where it takes me,” he said. “Hopefully play in university or college, whether it be in the States or in Canada and hopefully go pro someday. I've always wanted to be involved in baseball somehow, whether it be as a player or as a broadcaster or journalist. As a player, I'll just see how far it takes me.”

Coach MacKinnon said that the coaching staff has that same goal for the players and is committed to helping them get there.

“All we can do is create the environment for them to succeed. We've got another year, because they're going into grade 11, so this summer was important to them to get seen, next year we'll make sure that those who stay in Aurora will be seen by scouts across the United States and Canada. We'll make sure they get that opportunity.”