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By Christine Rivet

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## 'Baseball lifer' back to take his swings in Waterloo

WATERLOO — Even if your kid doesn't quite make it to major-league baseball, Aaron Hornostaj is here to tell you, there is always the basepath less travelled.

The Waterloo native and 15-year pro carved out a living playing baseball, but took an entirely unexpected route doing it.

"Baseball is a certain lifestyle. I was lucky I was able to live my dream," said the middle infielder and former San Francisco Giants farmhand who climbed the traditional baseball ranks to Triple-A baseball before jumping into the international game.

"For me, baseball has opened up the doors to the whole world."

After travelling the globe with his glove and bat, Hornostaj, 33, has slid safely into home plate. He said it's time to help others achieve their baseball dreams.

Hornostaj has recently relocated back to his hometown and intends to instruct young players and serve as an adviser to their parents who hope to get their sons to the next level.

He's already signed on with Waterloo Minor Baseball to serve as the association's development co-ordinator, working with players and coaches this coming season.

"Aaron's experience in the game will be helpful to us. There aren't too many players around here who made it as far as he did in baseball," said Scott Ballantyne, the association's treasurer and secretary.



*Coaching*

*Aaron Hornostaj coaches little leaguers at Playball Academy in Kitchener on Monday. Hornostaj returned to Waterloo recently after many years playing professional baseball with the San Francisco Giants farm teams and in Europe.*



*At the plate*

*Aaron Hornostaj shows what he can do at the plate.*



*Batting advice*

*Aaron Hornostaj coaches little-leaguer Thomas Morgan at Playball Academy in Kitchener on Monday.*

Hornostaj, a former Team Ontario and Team Canada junior player is already running skill development camps and one-on-one training sessions locally.

"My expertise could be valuable. I want to see the kids who play baseball reach their dreams and succeed in life. But there is a process to it."

Hornostaj, a former 34th round draft pick of the Major League Baseball's Giants, figures there are 300 Div. I baseball schools and many more college teams operated at lower divisions.

And that means there are bountiful opportunities for young Canadian players at the U.S. colleges and even here at Canadian universities.

"Canada has sent a lot of players down south to play ball. We can send even more if those players had more coaches up here.

"Thanks to the Blue Jays, baseball is already huge in Canada. It just needs a little boost."

With more specialized training and coaching, the next generation of Canadian players will be even more advanced than the last, he said.

Hornostaj set out for his baseball career as a high school senior when he moved from the family home in Waterloo to attend St. Thomas of Villanova High School in LaSalle, Ont.

The move allowed him to play an enhanced schedule in the Detroit-era Catholic league and to be seen by more college scouts.

After that, Hornostaj attended Connors State Junior College in Oklahoma to hone his baseball skills during his freshman season before he signed a \$114,000 U.S. contract with the Giants at age 19.

He slugged it out in the minor leagues for a couple years until he landed with San Francisco's Triple-A affiliate, the Fresno Grizzlies in 2006.

After that, and through his network of friends, Hornostaj travelled to Australia to play and coach the game.



*Batting tips  
Aaron Hornostaj gives Nolan Bhrendt some tips.*



*Showing how it is done  
Aaron Hornostaj shows how it is done to William Dubuc.*



*Making a point  
Aaron Hornostaj points something out to little leaguer  
Thomas Morgan.*

A stint with the Edmonton Capitals in the Golden Baseball League followed.

And then, once again through friends, he unpacked his bags in France which led to professional baseball stops in 20 European countries including Spain and Poland.

Because of baseball, he's also been to Asia, South America and the Middle East.

He never got rich playing the game, but Hornostaj was able to have his expenses covered and earn a little bit of pocket money.

"The friendships, the travelling, the experiences — those things are priceless," he said.

An injury suffered while playing ball in Germany this past season has almost certainly put the brakes to Hornostaj's playing career, he said.

Although, now that he's back home in Waterloo, nearly every day he receives a text message from the Intercounty Baseball League's Kitchener Panthers, inquiring about his services.

"Well, I'm not ready to give my retirement speech just yet," Hornostaj said with a laugh.

That's a good thing as far as the Panthers are concerned.

"I bring it up every time I see Aaron," said Ballantyne, also the Panthers general manager.

"Aaron is a baseball lifer. I'm working on him."

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