



Rheal Cormier's stint with Moncton Mets nears end; Not only do New Brunswickers get to see major leaguer, Cormier gets to return to where it all began before heading to the Olympics.

Here - Fredericton

Fri Jul 4 2008

Page: A8

Byline: **Chris Fox**

When he stepped onto the mound at Summerside's Queen Elizabeth Park two weeks ago, Rheal Cormier knew he was as far as he could get from the bright lights of the majors.

The Moncton born lefty, who pitched for five different major league teams over a 17-year career, becoming a New Brunswick icon in the process, was now a member of the Moncton Mets - one of five teams in the New Brunswick Senior Baseball League. Playing against the 1-3 Summerside Chevy's, Cormier was matched up with a cast of players half his age, who for the most part had long since abandoned their professional baseball dreams.

He gave up a single to the first batter, a two-run homerun to the next, and was soon back in the bullpen after giving up five hits and four runs in a little over one innings work.

"I gave up four runs, and I wondered did I just lose it or something. My velocity wasn't there and I wasn't sharp at all," he said. "The game can humble you like that, though. It's not a game where you can just walk to the park and pitch; there are steps you need to take. Whether it's amateur league or professional league, the guys you're facing want to hit the ball, and I just said to myself that this was only a stepping stone to getting my arm back to where it was."

Cormier who last played with the Mets as a junior aged player between 1986- 87 is back in the familiar surroundings of Kiwanis Park this summer, using a five week stint with the Mets ending July 17 to get ready to pitch for team Canada at the upcoming Olympics.

"It definitely feels different to be playing with the Mets again. The surface and facilities I'm pitching in are definitely not the same as the majors, but you never forget where you come from, and I'm just glad to be able to come home and pitch in front of the people I used to pitch for 20 years ago," he said. "I might be a little bit better than I used to be, but it's still baseball and I'm just happy to get ready for the Olympics in a place where I got my start."

Since his disappointing debut two weeks ago, Cormier has improved steadily, recording nine strikeouts in his last five innings pitched while only allowing four hits. He has been used mainly as a reliever.

"From my first game things have went from one extreme to the other," he said. "My control is where it's supposed to be, my velocity is back, and everything's positive right now."

Cormier made the decision to return to Moncton a month ago after getting a call from national team coach Greg Hamilton, offering him a spot in Beijing if he could get in shape. He hadn't played since being released by the Atlanta Braves a year earlier.

After talking it over with his wife and two kids, Cormier accepted and then started searching for a place to launch his comeback from. He said Moncton was at the top of his list from the start, but he wasn't sure if they'd take him - the NBSBL limits each team to one import player, and Moncton already had Australian catcher Kieran Cooke.

"I had a couple of options, but I really wanted to come home. I called (Moncton general manager) Ralph Chambers and he was excited, but he said he had to run it through league management and I said that's fine, if it works out its great and if not I'll find something else. Luckily it worked out."

Brian Richard, president of the New Brunswick Senior Baseball League, said bending the rules to let Cormier in was an easy decision.

"I contacted all the teams and every team was 100 per cent in favour of it. Rheel is a home grown boy and everybody wanted to support him," he said. "It's just a no brainer. He's a New Brunswicker, he played in the majors and he pitched in this league at one time, and we're just happy to have him."

There were two restrictions placed on Cormier's return. He can't pitch more than two innings a game, and he must pitch at least one game in each team's ballpark. Richard said it was important to the league that Moncton fans weren't the only ones to benefit from Cormier's return.

"This gives every community an opportunity to see this guy, something that before we could only do on TV," he said. "Now we can all see him pitch in person."

Cormier leaves to join team Canada in Toronto July 28. From there he will go to Durham, North Carolina for a four game exhibition series against team USA starting August 1 and then Beijing on August 5. It will be his second Olympics after competing in the 1988 games in Seoul, South Korea, but he said this time will be more special with wife Lucienne, son Justin, 14, and daughter Morgan, 13, making the trip.

"When I was in Seoul I was younger and it was like a blur. This time will be a little more special," he said. "My family will be there, they'll get an opportunity to see another part of the world, but at the same time see their dad compete in the Olympics, and I think that will be kind of cool."

As for a possible return to the majors, Cormier isn't getting ahead of himself. He said his main priority now is getting Canada into the medal round at the Olympics, but if an opportunity to pitch again does come up after the Olympics, he wouldn't rule it out.

"I'm pitching in this, and I'm going to leave the door open. If something comes along that's fine, but if nothing does I'm completely content," he said. "I played for a long time and I do miss it, but at the same time I've had a great career. I got paid for 17 years to go out and play a kids' game everyday, and I have cherished every moment of it."

Length: 1016 words
Idnumber: 200807040018