

Molleken makes history as 1st Canadian to appear in Japan World Series

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Japan Series helps put Canada on baseball map



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Baseball is hardly the first thing that springs to mind when Canadian sports are discussed. Hockey is king in Canada, and slap shots and glove saves stoke the nation's fire more than home runs or diving catches ever could.

A part of history: Giants reliever Scott Mathieson should see some time on the mound in the Japan Series. **Fighters pitcher Dustin Molleken became the first Canadian to appear in a Japan Series game on Saturday.**

The Toronto Blue Jays' World Series wins in 1992 and 1993 sparked celebrations, but the day one of the NHL's seven Canadian teams brings Lord Stanley's Cup home might just be deemed a national holiday. The 1993 Montreal Canadiens were the last team from Canada to win the NHL title.

Canada prides itself on its hockey prowess, but baseball has its niche and the number of Canadian ballplayers is not only growing, but also beginning to spread to other parts of the world.

Even Japan is not exempt, Nippon Ham Fighters reliever Dustin Molleken becoming the first Canadian player to participate in the Japan Series. Molleken entered Game 1 during the fifth inning, after the Giants roughed up starter Mitsuo Yoshikawa.

He won't last very long as the only Canadian to play in the Japanese version of the Fall Classic. Yomiuri reliever Scott Mathieson is expected to pitch at some point during the series.

"It's pretty cool actually," Mathieson said before Game 1 at Tokyo Dome. "We just had our picture taken together, so we're going to send that off to Baseball Canada. They wanted a picture of both of us. At least one Canadian will be going home with a ring this year.

"Hopefully me. I told him I hope we win this in four."

There have been 11 Canadian players in Japan, a fact discovered through the painstaking research of longtime Japan Times columnist Wayne Graczyk, but none had played in the Japan Series.

Molleken grew up in Regina, the capital of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, partially known to the nation's sporting community for its curling teams as well as being the home of the Canadian Football League's Saskatchewan Roughriders. Like many Canadian youths, Molleken played hockey growing up, "I was an enforcer, a tough guy," he says, but he got into baseball through his father, Doug.

"I'm from an area in Saskatchewan," Molleken said. "It's straight, flat land. Hockey's big there. My dad (Doug) was actually a pitcher. So I just hung around the baseball park with him and then I just got started throwing baseballs and just got better and better."

The right-hander was drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates in 2003 and touched just about each level of their minor league system before spending 2011 and the first part of 2012 in the Colorado Rockies organization before joining Nippon Ham in July.

Mathieson was also a hockey player growing up.

"I wasn't bad," he said. "I was a goalie. I always played at the highest level. I don't think I would've ever made it as high as I did in baseball, but I'd like to think I was pretty good."

It was the experience of playing in the national baseball system that inspired the Aldergrove, British Columbia, native to pick up a baseball for good.

"I was 17 when I first joined the junior national team," Mathieson said. "That was definitely a turning point in my baseball career. I always played hockey growing up. Baseball was always kind of second; it wasn't very big where I was. Then when I got with Team Canada, that's probably when I realized I had a chance to play pro ball. When I was 17 and we got to go down and play all the rookie ball teams, I proved to myself that I could compete and have some success in pro ball. It definitely gave me the confidence."

Mathieson was drafted by the Philadelphia Phillies in 2002, making 15 appearances for the team over parts of three seasons. He spent most of his time in the Phillies' farm system before joining the Giants this season.

He credited Baseball Canada as a big influence on his career.

"It's definitely getting better and better," Mathieson said of Canadian baseball. "There's not a ton of baseball players in the (majors), but Greg Hamilton, who is the director of Baseball Canada and pretty much started the program, has really done a great job and really helped promote a lot of Canadian players and get them into professional baseball."

Mathieson and Molleken are living proof of that, and one of them will head back to Canada with a championship. Mathieson hopes that honor is reserved for him; Molleken, however, had other ideas.

"He and I went to dinner, and I said we're going to beat you either in four or five," Molleken said half-jokingly. "He's an unbelievable guy. He can throw the ball well, outstanding guy, but I told him, four or five."