



Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald

A.J. Fystro seeks to help young baseball talent in his new coaching duties for Baseball Calgary's Midget AAA Cubs program.

Fystro ready to polish city's diamond gems



JEFF MACKINNON
AMATEUR SPORTS

AJ. Fystro doesn't want kids to suffer like he did. From shock. Ten years ago, Fystro took his glove and headed off to Merced College in California to play baseball. He was amazed at the calibre of play when he arrived.

It's why the Peace River native is so anxious to help talented young Calgarians be better prepared should they be lucky like him and get a scholarship to play America's pastime in America.

Fystro has taken over as head coach for Baseball Calgary's Midget AAA Cubs program. The 16 to 18 year olds have the same thing on their minds as Fystro, now 31, did when he was coming out of high school.

"You're trying to open these kids' eyes," he says.

"They're able to play 12 months out of the year in the States. Our kids have to make baseball a year-round thing, even if it's just working out indoors during the winter."

Fystro stuck around Merced after his playing days to serve as an assistant coach for six years. He returned to Calgary for the summers of 2004 and

2005 to serve in the same capacity with the Calgary Dawgs of the Western Major Baseball League, the summer college circuit.

The Dawgs are taking the summer off because they couldn't find a suitable home for the 2006 season. It's likely they'll play out of a new facility in Okotoks when they return.

Fystro has inherited a group of players who have been together for five years and who won the Canadian bantam title in 2004 under coach Kirk Reiniger, who has stepped aside this year as the midget skipper.

"Because of the quality coach that Kirk was, I don't do much coaching. I just fine-tune their skills."

Reiniger grew up in the same St. Albert neighbourhood as the Fystro family. Reiniger played minor ball with Fystro's older brother Doug, a former member of the Canadian national team.

Reiniger remains Baseball Calgary's technical director. He says he wanted Fystro to coach his team because of his college connections.

"These kids are a year, and in some cases two years away from playing college baseball themselves," says Reiniger.

"What a wonderful opportunity to take advantage of a guy who has played and coached at the college level and expose the kids to some different ideas and concepts."

Fystro is optimistic that Calgary will start churning out more and more U.S. college players.