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Baseball academy attracts elite athletes

Two Grade 12 students have outside chance to get drafted this year

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Special to The Journal
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With three loves in his life, Adam Beller had to make a tough decision in the fall.

The 18-year-old Grade 12 student picked one of the three sports he excelled in — baseball, football and hockey — and left the other two behind.

A six-foot-five, 205-pound natural athlete, Beller was an elite football player at Bev Facey high school last year. Before that, he was drafted by the Western Hockey League's Brandon Wheat Kings, but chose not to pursue his hockey options.

This year, as a senior at St. **Francis Xavier** high school, Beller went with his heart and chose baseball. In June, he and the sport that's closest to his heart could take the next step together if Beller is selected in the 2009 Major League Baseball draft.

"He's a really strong kid. He does certain things that would warrant a guy taking a look at him just because of his physicality," said Mark Randall, Beller's coach at St. FX's baseball academy.

Randall's assessment of the right-handed pitcher is more than just a coach pumping up his player's tires. Randall, who is also a scout for the Houston Astros, points out that, for most of the players,

being drafted by a team is just the first step in the process of getting to the majors.

"There are lots of instances where you have a kid who you look at him when he's 17, you say he hasn't got a shot," explained Randall, referencing Edmonton's David Cooper, who was selected by the Arizona Diamondbacks in the 44th round of the 2008 draft of high school and college players.

"You never really know ... this is kind of the starting process for these kids."

"I'm not really thinking about (the draft) too much," Beller said. "As a Canadian player you don't really expect it, I guess you could say. But I've been working pretty hard."

Along with Beller, Randall is big on 17-year-old Jared Bymo — another right-handed pitcher on his St. FX team. The coach said that both of his pitchers will need to have a productive spring season for any of their draft dreams to be realized.

"Both (Adam and Jared), if the draft was to happen right now, today, they probably wouldn't get drafted," Randall said. "In three months? It might be a different story."

"When you're talking about the draft, you're talking about drafting a kid that isn't necessarily ready at this point to a certain degree," Randall continued. "He has to compete, but you're looking



four, five years down the road. It's an investment."

After a winter of working out and training indoors in Edmonton, Beller and Bymoer will head south with their St. FX teammates this March, when the team goes to Clearwater, Fla., to take part in spring training. Two St. FX squads will scrimmage against American high school competition.

This will mark the third year that the baseball academy has made a trip of this nature.

"Overall, the reason why we put this thing together from Day 1 is, first of all, you put the kids in front of (scouts), different eyes. The kids can see who they're competing against," Randall said.

"The experience has been really beneficial, I think, just showing them what spring training was all about and what you have to do to get ready for not necessarily a professional career, but to show the kids the commitment you need to have.

"Here, we can't play in the wintertime and so we've got to go south and find competition and they realize pretty quick that competition down there is pretty tough."

Having travelled to the United States to play some competitive ball in Montana and Washington State, Beller said that he's looking forward to the competition in Florida.

"It's intense," he said of the U.S. baseball atmosphere. "Their ballparks are pretty nice and it gets you ... I don't know how to explain it."

Asked if the atmosphere is comparable to hockey's

in Canada, he responds quickly.

"Exactly, yeah."

► **COLIN HODGSON,**
NAIT OOKS
First-year skip, curling

Hodgson, a first-year culinary arts student, has been

cooking up something special with his men's curling team this season.

The Lacombe native led his squad to a 7-0 record at last weekend's winter regional tournament in Red Deer.

The Ooks men's curling team sits in first place in the ACAC with an overall record of 11-3 as it heads into conference championship play Feb. 27-March 1 at Lakeland College.



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Palm trees in the background provide an ideal setting as a member of the St. Francis Xavier high school baseball academy pitches off a mound at the Houston Astros training facility in Kissimmee, Fla., last spring.