

Olympic dream still has life going into the last inning

For most kids, the dream of competing in the Olympics falls somewhere between becoming president of the United States and playing bass guitar for a famous rock band.

Since I was born in England and never learned how to strum any musical instrument, the Olympics became an elevated goal.

COMMENTARY

By Josh Chetwynd

Unfortunately, my prospects for Olympic fame didn't look great from the start. I lacked the foresight to join a curling school or an archery academy at a young age and, growing up in the USA (I've lived 26 of my 27 years here), I took to America's pastime — baseball — early on.

By the time my sport of choice became an official Olympic event in 1992, I realized that, while I was a good player, I wasn't going to represent the red, white and blue in international competition.

Instead, I played at Northwestern University for four years as a catcher, then signed a minor league contract with the Zanesville (Ohio) Greys of the independent Class A Frontier League. After being released from the Greys about halfway through my first season in the summer of 1993, I figured my baseball career was over — miles short of any Olympic glory.

Renewing the dream

But on a lazy weekday in the early spring of 1996, my youthful fantasy was renewed.

I was browsing on the Internet when I happened upon a site for the British Baseball Federation. I immediately was intrigued and sent an e-mail to the organization describing my background and inquiring about the organization.

I quickly got an answer: Great Britain had a national team, and it was hosting the Eu-

ropean B Pool Baseball Championships that summer. If the team could place first or second in the tournament, it would be elevated to the A flight — the group from which Europe eventually would decide its Olympic qualifiers for the 2000 Games in Sydney, Australia.

The Olympics. When the group asked me to come out and play on the national team, I signed up as fast as I could compose a reply.

The squad performed well in the tournament, which was, aside from the top three or four teams, a pretty weak field. I excelled at the event, hitting .417 and smacking an important home run in an extra-inning victory against Lithuania in the semifinals. With a 6-5 victory against the Czech Republic in the championship, we won the tournament and were elevated to the A pool.

My performance earned me an invite to play with the squad in the A-pool championships in

1997, but I couldn't go because I had just started a new job. The team wound up finishing ninth out of 12 teams.

It wasn't an impressive showing, but it was good enough to keep us eligible for this summer's Sydney qualifier, which runs July 23-31 in Italy. This time, no job can keep me away.

'Mind boggling'

While representing Great Britain on the world stage was stimulating fodder for impressing casual acquaintances, the concept of being only a handful of victories away from Olympic play has been mind-boggling. It probably will take six wins to be one of the two countries in the 12-team tournament to advance to the 2000 Games.

At the same time, I'm not going to fool anybody: Competing for Great Britain in the qualifier isn't like snagging a spot on the U.S. men's track and field team. Baseball is an emerging

sport in Great Britain, but I'd describe the level of fervor as essentially equivalent to America's love for Arena Football.

That's not to say that the players aren't committed. My teammates have been practicing diligently all year. Nobody gets paid, and the baseball federation is always looking for ways to raise money. It recently sent me a pamphlet on how to lure a personal sponsor.

I figure this is how athletes prepared for the Olympics before the event became mega-commercialized and peppered with famous pro athletes.

Since I live in Los Angeles, I have, of course, been unable to practice with the squad, but that hasn't prevented me from seriously training — a hard task considering I work full time for USA TODAY.

I'm playing on two local amateur teams, ensuring that I have games on Saturdays and Sundays. I also get up just after dawn three days a week to run

and lift. On a free weekday, I'll hit and throw with a friend.

Another important preparation: I've had to put aside my aluminum bat and start hitting with a wooden one. Because the Olympic tournament will allow current professionals for the first time, the International Olympic Committee has outlawed metal bats.

Fortunately, I spent a summer in a collegiate wooden bat league and played professionally for a brief stint, making the transition to the heavier, less-explosive wooden bats pretty smooth.

Reality check

I hope my effort will be enough, because the caliber of play in Europe is surprisingly strong. Both Italy and the Netherlands have professional leagues, and their national teams are starting to make waves on the international scene.

At last year's baseball world championships, for example, Italy finished fourth and the Netherlands placed sixth behind champion Cuba. Team USA, which was composed of college all-stars, came in ninth.

That said, chances of me walking in the opening ceremonies in Sydney are extremely slim, but the beauty of baseball — and sports in general — is that anything is possible on any given day.

Come July 23, when we play Italy in the tournament's opener, I'll have a better idea. Until then I can fill my mind with childhood dreams of Olympic moments. And, if things don't work out, I can always take up the bass.

Chetwynd, 27, will be spending a year's worth of vacation for the Olympic qualifier. When he is not playing catcher, he covers the television and film industries for USA TODAY's Life section.