

PLANETS ALIGN FOR WONG IN JAPAN

Contract with third-tier team makes him first Singaporean to join pro baseball club

Kimberly Kwek

For as long as national baseball player Kohei Wong can remember, he has dreamt of joining a professional team.

When he was 16, he had an opportunity to play and study at a Japanese high school, but the move did not materialise owing to financial difficulties.

Eight years later, Wong is finally getting to first base after signing a training contract with Japanese team Ibaraki Astro Planets in April – he is the first Singaporean to join a professional baseball outfit.

The team compete in the third-tier Baseball Challenge League, one of the independent leagues in Japan. The leagues are a stepping stone for players to move up to the Nippon Professional Baseball league, the highest level of professional baseball in the country.

The 23-year-old had nearly given up on his dream to play overseas as Covid-19 hit shortly after he completed his national service.

That changed in November 2021, when he came across a livestream of trials for the BC League on YouTube. It reignited his interest but, even then, he had reservations about trying out for the league.

“The fear is that no one in Singapore has even gone for these tryouts before and everyone thinks you’re not good enough to go and a lot of people also don’t know how to go about doing it,” said the national team vice-captain.

Wong picked up softball at the age of five before transitioning to baseball when he was 12. His Japanese mother used to be a scorer for the Singapore national baseball team, while his Singaporean father was an umpire.

The National University of Singapore undergraduate decided to



National team vice-captain Kohei Wong took a one-semester leave of absence from his undergraduate studies at the National University of Singapore to sign a training contract with Japanese professional baseball team Ibaraki Astro Planets in April. They play in the third-tier Baseball Challenge League. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

give it a shot and travelled to Osaka for the three-day trial in November 2022. Out of the 300 players who took part, the 1.7m infielder was among the 20 who made it to the last of three rounds.

To his disappointment, Wong was not picked by any team during the drafting session, with just one player in his position selected.

But it was also at the trial that he met Toma Irokawa, the general manager of Ibaraki Astro Planets, who had previously coached in Pakistan, Hong Kong and Thailand and had a good understanding of what baseball was like in countries where the sport was still developing.

Wong contacted him via Facebook and, after multiple calls, he was offered the team manager role. He eventually joined on a train-

ing contract while undertaking administrative duties, which included scouting and translating for his foreign teammates.

Wong said: “I want to see baseball outside of South-east Asia and I want to grow the sport in Singapore but I know if I stayed in South-east Asia, I can’t do that because that’s all I know.”

“I have to see what it’s like at a higher level and how professional teams function as a management and business. But deep down, I knew I also wanted to play.”

To join the club, Wong took a one-semester leave of absence from his undergraduate studies till August and his goal is to earn a playing contract to compete in the league.

As he is on a training contract, he is not paid and is relying on his sav-

ings to cover his expenses, although the club provides accommodation and a car.

His first two weeks in Japan were eye-opening. While the club is in the third tier, where monthly salaries range from \$1,000 to \$4,000 in the first year, he noted that the environment is competitive as players are vying for spots in the higher leagues.

They are disciplined and focused on getting better as players can get bumped up to a playing contract or moved down to a training contract in a matter of days. In his first fortnight there, he saw four players leave the team.

Game days can stretch from 6.30am to 10.30pm, but after that, players will often hit the gym to stretch for two hours or go to a hot spring.

The level of play was also very different from what Wong was used to. Pitchers in South-east Asia usually have throwing speeds of 125kmh but, with his current team, the minimum speed is 145kmh.

While some have questioned his decision, what keeps him going is his desire to grow the sport in Singapore. He said: “Baseball is a minor sport in Singapore and most people don’t even know that we have a national team.”

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“That is also why I continue to play because I love the sport and want to take the game to a higher level, that’s my ultimate goal.”

kimkwek@sph.com.sg

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

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KOHEI WONG, Singapore national baseball team vice-captain, who hopes to earn a playing contract in Japan.