

CORREA HITS THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE



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By Dan Vaughan

St. Paul, MN. – Saturday night the Kansas City T-Bones played 11 innings to beat the Saint Paul Saints in the first game of a three-game series. After the 8,000 plus fans had headed home and with the stadium sitting empty, Christian Correa made the long walk across CHS Field in St. Paul to the T-Bones’ team bus behind the stadium, one of the longer walks in the American Association to the team bus, if not the longest. The long walk and the short ride back the hotel was a mere pit stop on the way to a much longer trip that could one day lead to Olympic glory for Correa.

Over the next seven days, the T-Bones’ catcher will have played key roles in the T-Bones win over the Saints as the club’s starting catcher on a Saturday night in Minnesota, and he will start the week by representing Team Colombia at the Pan Am games when they open play against Cuba on Monday in Lima, Peru. He will have squeezed a month’s work into a week when it is all said and done: He will leave St. Paul on a Sunday morning, arriving in Peru and then play Monday in the Pan Am games. He will also play two more games before he heads back on the road to rejoin the T-Bones club in Lincoln.

“On the way back, I leave the 2nd (Friday August 2nd) around 11 at night. I fly all night to Newark and get in around 7:50 a.m. (Saturday). From Newark I go to O’Hare (Chicago) and from there to Lincoln to meet you guys. I should join the team in Lincoln around 2:30 p.m. in the afternoon,” said Correa.

It is a whirlwind trip that has something special in it for Correa. He was raised in Florida and went to college at Nicholls State in Louisiana, but Correa’s roots go deep in Colombia. “I am really excited to represent my heritage. Everyone in my family is Colombian, and although I was raised in the states, I have Colombian blood and dual citizenship,” Correa said.

When you think of baseball in Latin America, the countries of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Venezuela come to mind. Colombia, however, is more known more for its soccer success, but it also has a growing baseball program, one that could land Correa in the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

“If we finish higher than a couple of teams, we get into an Olympic qualifier, and if a team wins it all, they qualify for the Olympics outright.” Correa continued, “It is a once-in-a-life time opportunity, and I am just glad to have this opportunity and that I was chosen to do this.”

Colombia has spent money to build new stadiums and invested in the growth of the game. The new 12,000 seat stadium in Barranquilla, Colombia, is named after former Big Leaguer Edgar Renteria, who spent 16 years in the Major League. The National Baseball Stadium is named for the Colombian legend and is one of the best in Latin America. There is a growing winter league in the country where Correa has played as well during the off-season in the states, and that league— along with the National Team—has Major League Baseball has taking notice.

“The stadium I played in in Barranquilla is brand new, and it is MLB approved. They are hoping to get some kind of MLB sponsorship with the league, and that is there goal. It is growing, and it is good competition.”

Team Colombia will play Cuba on the 29th and then Argentina on Tuesday the 30th, wrapping up their pool play with Canada on the 1st of August. He will return to Lincoln the next weekend in time to jump back in to try to help the T-Bones play meaningful games in August.

“With us having two catchers, I told Joe (Calfapietra) that I wanted to stay and to play here as much as I could but that I’d like to take advantage of this opportunity, and we came to an agreement (of me being gone) that allowed for seven days, playing for five and traveling for two.”

The quick trip means that Correa will miss the opening ceremony of the games, and should the team make it to the finals, he will already be back with the T-Bones. In that case, the Colombian Team will have already made it to an Olympic qualifier, which is the goal of the team as they head into the Pan Am games.

Life in the American Association is a little different than playing in international tournaments. Latin America has long been known as a vibrant place to play baseball, with crowds that overflow with excitement. Yet, take it a step further and add that 12 teams make the Olympics, and with Colombia ranked number 13 in the world, the intensity is even dialed up another notch.

“I think it is a little different. It is a little more emotional, and it is do-or-die. You either sink or swim. You got to go out there and be ready to go,” Correa added.

The American Association currently has several players representing various countries in international competition. Wes Darvill of Winnipeg will play for Team Canada in the Pan-Am Games, and teammate Willy Garcia will play for the Dominican Republic. The European Championships qualifying series has also been going on in July, and the league has seen

players—like right-handed pitcher Joey Wagman from Milwaukee and infielder Mitch Glasser of Sioux Falls—play for the Israeli National Team.

In years past there have been plenty of connections from the league in international competition. Former T-Bones catcher Adrian Nieto played for the Spanish Team the 2013 World Baseball Classic, and Lincoln has a players like Randolph Oduber and Curt Smith who have been parts of the Dutch National Team in years past. The St. Paul Saints have Team Australia member and right-handed closer Todd Van Steensel on their roster, and injured short stop Joey Wong also played in the 2017 World Baseball Classic for Team China.

Then you have most of the Grand Prairie club that are members of the Chinese National Team on the T-Bones August schedule. That core group played in the Asian Games last summer and the 2017 World Baseball Classic playing Cuba, Australia and Japan in Tokyo. The league encourages and wants players to represent the league in international play. T-Bones Manager Joe Calfapietra is on board, and he realizes the special opportunity that awaits Correa.

“It’s always nice anytime you have the opportunity to represent your country and have opportunities to do different things internationally. We are all for it, and we are supportive of him (while he is gone for the week),” said T-Bones Manager Joe Calfapietra.

Correa will fly from Minneapolis to Newark then on to Lima, Peru on Sunday, then the next weekend he will return, flying back from Lima, Peru to Newark to Chicago and on to Lincoln. The grueling flight schedule might have Correa so tired that he would prefer to be propped up in the corner of the dugout, just trying to stay awake, but don’t bet on it! Correa said laughing, “I will be good to go (when he returns). I will try to get some sleep on the flight back.”

KC will miss Correa, but if the week goes well, this journey could be part of a longer trip for some and could end with some #FunWellDone in the 2020 Olympics. “It’s unreal. It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity. I am just glad I got chosen and have the opportunity to do it. I was just happy to be able to go the first time to a qualifier. That is all I ever wanted—to represent a country, said a smiling Correa. “It is a big honor, especially since baseball in Colombia is growing a lot.”

The T-Bones family is proud to have Christian Correa on the international stage. If he looks a little weary when the team gets back from Lincoln, who could blame him. His walk to the team bus last night was the first step to a once-in-a-lifetime baseball journey.

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