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HCC in the News: Baseball journey of Curacao native brings him to Wausau's Woodchucks

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Orsen Josephina has a repertoire of four pitches he can throw over the plate for a strike — an arsenal that has helped him become one of the top closers in the Northwoods League this season.

Josephina's success in changing the rotation and speed of the baseball also earned him the chance to close out the league's All-Star Game at Athletic Park last week. He struck out both batters he faced to end the contest.

Josephina is just as versatile off the mound. The Curacao native is able to speak four languages: Papiamentu, the country's main dialect, as well as Dutch, Spanish and English. And the player known as "OJ" by his teammates, has become the talk of the Chucks this season.

"He is just an awesome kid and a leader on and off the field," Chucks coach Andrew Fabian said after the All-Star Game. "He is someone who brings a lot of energy to the park every day and always has a smile on his face. Then the way he goes about his business every day and the work he puts in, the results have shown (this summer)."

It's been an interesting journey for Josephina. Curacao is a tiny island just off South America's north coast, about 40 miles north of Venezuela. Josephina hopes that his time in the Northwoods League and central Wisconsin this summer is just one more step toward his dream of playing professional baseball.



He got his start as a teenager through the Dutch Caribbean Baseball Academy, a government-funded program on the island which provides training and skills development with the goal of getting players noticed by a Major League Baseball scout or earning a college scholarship in America.

"I told my mom I wanted to try it and she just asked if I was sure," said the 21-year-old Josephina,

The Dominican Republic and Venezuela have traditionally been a Major League Baseball pipeline for Latin American talent, but Curacao produces big league players as well. There are three Curacao natives on a current Major League baseball roster — Jurickson Profar of the Texas Rangers, Jonathan Schoop of the Baltimore Orioles and the Los Angeles Angels' Andrelton Simmons.

Baseball can also be an opportunity for Curacao players. A report by The Borgen Project in 2016 [2]highlighted that more than 25 percent of the households in the country lived below the poverty line as of 2011.

Josephina showed promise in the Academy, and the next step in his baseball career was a senior year prep season at Lake Worth Christian High School in Boynton Beach, Florida in 2015. He lived with a host family and ended up earning second team All-Palm Beach area honors as an infielder and earned an offer from Hillsborough Community College in Florida, and was one of the top starting pitchers for the team this past spring in his sophomore season.

Fabian, who is an assistant coach at Hillsborough, offered Josephina a chance to further develop with the Woodchucks this summer and made him the team's closer. Josephina's fastball was clocked at 93 mph this spring, and he also can throw a

curveball, slider and change-up. The last two are ones he considers his "out-pitches" against right-handed and left-handed batters, respectively.

“To get that last out is always the hardest," Fabian said, but Josephina has "the mentality and makeup to handle that situation.”

Josephina, a right handed pitcher, has more than adapted to the closer role. He entered Wednesday with 14 saves this summer and 26 strikeouts in 19 ⅔ innings pitched.

“I totally love the role, I’m not going to lie,” Josephina said. “It’s a pressure role and if (the team) loses the game it’s on you. It is hard when you blow the save because you feel that you have let your team down. But you need to have that mindset that you are going to bounce back the next time.”

Josephina’s first save opportunity came in the second game of the season as he allowed one hit and struck out three in the ninth inning of the Chucks 5-3 win over Green Bay.

“I was kind of nervous that first time but after a couple of (save opportunities) you start to get used to it,” said Josephina, who heads this fall to Palm Beach Atlantic University, which fields a NCAA Division II baseball program.

Josephina will also have the opportunity to show MLB scouts his ability during the NWL Major League Dreams Showcase in Madison on Aug. 8. He will be among roughly 80 of the NWL's top talent who will spend the day working out and then playing a game in front of the scouts at Warner Park.

It’s another step in chasing a dream, a journey that has kept Josephina away from his family for the past three years. There is a video posted on the Hillsborough Community College Facebook page [3] that shows Josephina being surprised by his teammates in November 2016 with a plane ticket back home for winter break.

“It is tough,” Josephina said of being away from his family. “But you have fight through it. I just look at this all as a blessing.”

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