

SPORTS

Defense the key for USPBL catcher's big-league dream



Whit Hughes is a catcher for the Eastside Diamond Hoppers, who start the USPBL season with a doubleheader against the Birmingham Bloomfield Beavers at Jimmy John's Field on Saturday. (GEORGE POHLY for MediaNews Group)



By **GEORGE POHLY** | Macomb Daily

PUBLISHED: May 14, 2024 at 7:51 p.m. | UPDATED: May 15, 2024 at 8:28 p.m.

Whit Hughes' goal of moving higher in his craft will depend in part on how low he can go.

The catcher starts his third season with the USPBL Eastside Diamond Hoppers later this week, and he's trying to catch on with a major-league organization or win the Utica-based league's championship.

“Obviously, everybody in the league wants to put up numbers and get signed,” the former St. Clair County Community College player said Tuesday. “If that doesn't happen, the secondary goal will be to put up numbers and win a ring.

“We came close last year.”

Eastside went 23-21 in 2023, the second-best record in the four-team USPBL.

The Diamond Hoppers open with a doubleheader against Birmingham Bloomfield at Jimmy John's Field on Saturday, a day after defending champion Utica plays the Westside Woolly Mammoths to start the USPBL's ninth season.



Ryan Kottke is beginning his third season as the manager of the Eastside Diamond Hoppers. Kottke grew up in Sterling Heights. (GEORGE POHLY for MediaNews Group)

“We’re looking forward to it,” third-year Eastside manager Ryan Kottke said. “We’ve got a lot of new faces on our roster.”

Utica defeated the Woolly Mammoths in the 2023 championship game. It was the third title in four years for the Unicorns, who are managed by former big-league catcher Jim Essian.

Alex Garbacik, a Westside infielder who’s moving from third base to shortstop, is eager for the first pitch Friday.

“The atmosphere here on game days is awesome,” he said. “I think Friday nights are my favorite.”

Hughes caught from the traditional catcher's crouch when he played at Yale High and SC4. When he signed with the Diamond Hoppers three years ago, John Dombrowski, the current Birmingham Bloomfield manager who's nicknamed “Diesel” and is known as the USPBL catching guru, had advice for him.

“He said, ‘You've got to start being on a knee a little more, because the difference between pitchers at this level and college is that their misses are not as big,’” Hughes said.

“All through college, I was always the traditional two feet, blocking-comes-first type of guy. Here, blocking isn't as much of a priority as receiving and trying to steal strikes. I've adapted my game. I'm more of a one-knee-down guy now.”

The 6-foot-5 Hughes is taller than a lot of professional catchers.

“Honestly, it helps me,” he said of the knee-on-ground crouch that's popular in the pro ranks. “Being so tall, it helps my knees a little bit.

“I don't have the stress of being on two feet. The knees don't take as much of a beating.”

Hughes was concerned that his ability to block wild pitches would suffer even though he was lower to the ground when he got on one knee.

“Diesel said, ‘Listen, the guys who are throwing here are not going to be missing bad.’ The more I learned about it, the better I got. I got to where I could block comfortably.”

Hughes batted .186 with three home runs and nine RBIs last year.

He and Sterling Heights native Kottke ran an offseason hitting school, and both player and manager worked on Hughes' swing.

“Everybody’s swing has got holes,” Hughes said. “Our job is to try to minimize those. We changed some things with the swing, got it in a good spot.”

A batter’s weakness isn’t a secret for long in the USPBL, Hughes said.

“A month into the season and everybody knows everybody,” he said. “The pitchers have a good idea how to get hitters out. “They’re good. This is no joke. This is a lower-end league, but at the same time the talent is pretty legit. If a pitcher’s got good stuff, he’ll expose you. It’s all about trying to eliminate those holes.”

More than 50 USPBL players have signed with Major League Baseball organizations. The most recent was Utica right-hander Andrew Huffman, who signed with the Minnesota Twins last week.

Hughes said his chances of following Huffman to an MLB system depend on his defense.

“My job is primarily to get dirty (behind the plate),” he said. “If I find consistent (bat) barrels, as a catcher that’s all I can ask for. I’m not trying to hit for power. I’m not trying to hit for a high average.

“(Teams) are not looking for a dude who’s an average catcher and hits a (home run) every night. They want a dude who’s going to manage a pitching staff, protect the baseball and find a barrel every now and then. I pride myself on being able to manage a staff well.”

The Utica/Westside game starts at 7:05 p.m. and will be followed by a fireworks show. The first game of the Eastside/Birmingham Bloomfield doubleheader starts at 5:30 p.m.

For more information, go online to uspbl.com.

Neurologists Amazed: This Shoe Helms with Pain

Like No Other

Barefoot Vitality | Sponsored

Heart Surgeon Incidentally Discovered A DIY Solution For Dark Spots For His Wife (It's Genius!)

In this free informative video, Dr. Gundry shares his DIY solution for dark spots.

Gundry MD | Sponsored

Watch Now

Big Change Leaves Virginia Drivers Furious

Ottoinsurance.com | Sponsored

Click Here

Don't Pay For New Gutters. Get This 3-In-1 System Instead

Leaf Filter USA | Sponsored

Learn More

Do You Have Toe Nail Fungus? Try This Tonight (It's Genius)

Health Shape | Sponsored

Learn More

Virginia Drivers Enraged Over New

Otto Quotes | Sponsored

By logging in, you consent to receive emails from us. You may update your email preferences at any time.

Ditch Your Car Insurance And Do This Instead

Ottoinsurance.com | Sponsored

Learn More

Virginia Residents Get Huge Home Insurance Reduction

Homeowners should read this as soon as possible! New "Tool" uncovers how much you should really pay for home insuranc...

Experts In Savings | Home | Sponsored

Learn More

Look For Any High School Yearbook, It's Free

Classmates | Sponsored

People in Ashburn are Loving Martha Stewart's Meal Kit

Martha Stewart & Marley Spoon | Sponsored

Here's What a New Roof Should Cost You In Virginia

Enter your ZIP code on this website and share a couple of details about the current state of your roof.

HomeBuddy | Sponsored

Learn More

Here's What A New Gutter System Should Cost You In 2024

Leaf Filter USA | Sponsored

Learn More

Who Normally Has the Cheapest Car Insurance?

Get matched with the best policy using advanced data techniques to secure the best rate.

Otto Quotes | Sponsored

Learn More

Candidate for Macomb County Sheriff charged with felony

Macomb Daily

Lakeside Mall announces closing date — here's what happens next

Macomb Daily

The Horrifying Truth About CBD

Tommy Chong's CBD | Sponsored

Watch Now

Heart Surgeon Begg Americans Over 50: "Stop Eating This For Breakfast"

The top 3 common foods that you would have never guessed were the cause of your fatigue.

Gundry MD | Sponsored

Learn More

Here's What a New Walk-in Shower Should Cost In 2024

Enter your ZIP code and answer a few questions about your current bathroom setup.

Homebuddy | Sponsored

Learn More

Heart Surgeon Begg Americans: "Stop Eating This For Breakfast"

The top 3 common foods that you would have never guessed were the cause of your fatigue.

Gundry MD | Sponsored

Learn More

Locate Almost Anyone By Entering Their Name (This Is Addicting!)

Find Detailed Public Record Information About Someone. Search Records Quickly. Search Any ...

TruthFinder | Sponsored

Search Now

Failed meeting between Warren mayor, congressman called into question

Macomb Daily

Oakland County man sentenced for death of

Oakland County man sentenced for death of young mother, dumping her body on I-94

Macomb Daily

This Advanced Edema Device Helps Drain Fluid Naturally (Works Fast)

Health Insight Journal | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Take 1 Shot Of Olive Oil At Night, Here's Why

Gundry MD | Sponsored

A Teaspoon On An Empty Stomach Will Slim Waist From 38 To 29

Women over 40 may lose additional fat by doing this

Women's Health Daily | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

*Sponsored Content by UNICEF
USA*

2024 > May > 14