

# SPORTS

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## BASEBALL

# Buckle locks down spot on junior national team with two-way play

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Every baseball game boils down to a series of one-on-one battles while still fitting within a team concept. It's this aspect of the game that has kept Blake Buckle playing the sport since he was three years old.

"There's not a better battle than between a batter and a pitcher," Buckle says.

For the batter, he must read the pitch as it comes out of the pitcher's hand and make a split-second decision whether or not to swing. It's a skill at which 17-year-old excels.

But presented with a couple of recent highlights, his decision-making fails him. Asked what was better, stepping into the batter's box to face the Toronto Blue Jays' Marcus Stroman or hitting a home run in the Rogers Centre, Buckle is like a batter anticipating an off-speed pitch who is suddenly frozen by a fastball down the middle.

"They were both pretty cool," he says. "You step up to the plate, and Russell Martin is behind the plate

and Marcus Stroman is on the mound. And everyone dreams of playing in a major league stadium and to be able to hit a home run — they're both pretty special."

The only thing that could have made it better was if the events happened on the same day. Alas, Stroman got Buckle to ground out to second base — no shame in that, considering the World Baseball Classic MVP allowed just one runner (a walk) in his two innings of work against the Canadian junior national team in their spring training game in March.

The home run came last September at T12, the annual tournament hosted by the Blue Jays for Canada's best college-eligible players. Buckle belted a 2-2 pitch into the right-field bullpen for a two-run shot that sparked a six-run Ontario Green inning in a 10-8 win over British Columbia.

In the 19 games played during the tournament, the Craig Kielburger school student was the only player to drive a ball out of the yard. He finished with a .333 batting average (5-for-15), a



Baseball Canada

The past year has provided Blake Buckle with some unique opportunities, from facing Marcus Stroman in a spring training game to hitting a home run at the Rogers Centre.

.421 on-base percentage and a tournament-high six RBI.

Whether he's facing his peers or Stroman, Buckle said, it's important to concentrate on what you're trying to accomplish at the plate.

"You have to go in with

the same mindset as you would with any other pitcher," he said. "You have to look for a pitch to hit and get a swing on it. You can't be focusing on things like 'e's got a better breaking ball.'"

Buckle's contributions haven't been limited to the

plate. A catcher with the Ontario Blue Jays, he's been playing outfield with the junior national team. And during the team's spring training schedule in Florida, he made his presence felt.

Against the Fort Lauder-

dale Stars, he made two diving catches, the second robbing the Stars of a hit in left-centre and getting his pitcher out of a bases-loaded jam. In the game against the Blue Jays, he threw out the speedy Dwight Smith Jr. trying to go first to third on a single.

"Being able to catch, play first, play outfield — I think it will only increase my value as a player," Buckle said. "I'll play third base. I'm up for anything that gets me on the field."

And there have been a lot more opportunities to be on the field. Buckle is in the Dominican Republic this month for his fourth training camp with the junior national team since October. As they have at previous camps, they will play nine games in nine days. It's a taste of the life of a pro ballplayer Buckle hopes to enjoy one day.

"The guys who play 162 games, plus spring training and playoffs — it gives you some perspective on how they do it," he said. "It's not easy. You've got to really love the game. It's hard, but it's sure better than having an office job."

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