



# Guardisman coaches pro ball

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Members of the Air National Guard wear many hats; the hat of a member of the United States Air Force, the hat of a civilian at work in the community, and sometimes their hobbies lead them to wear hats of another kind.

Col. (Dr.) James Balsarak, flight surgeon and 162nd Medical Group commander, wears the hat of a first base coach for the Tucson Toros, the city's minor league baseball team.

In 2004 Colonel Balsarak started out as a team physician for Tucson's former minor league team, the Sidewinders, and Arizona's major league team, the Diamondbacks. This year, when the Sidewinders moved to Reno, Nev., and the Toros came to Tucson, he became their physician and took on the additional role of first base coach.

"I have a rudimentary understanding of baseball but I've learned a lot about the game by working with the coaching staff; when to keep players on base, when to send them to second, and looking out for pick offs," said Colonel Balsarak.

Before coaching the Toros, he coached several seasons for his son Kevin's Sabino Canyon little league team. Kevin, 11, serves as a bat boy for the Toros.



Col. (Dr.) James Balsarak with the Toros mascot.

"I really got involved with baseball playing in the Men's Senior Baseball League in town with [Senior Master Sgt.] Dave Crocker. There are a lot of former pro ball players in that league from triple A to the majors," said Balsarak.

"Professional athletes are a lot like fighter pilots. They're 'type A' personalities, they are driven and they expect perfection out of themselves," he said.

Six Toros players have major league experience, two have already been picked up by the Chicago White Sox and the Milwaukee Brewers this year, and some pitchers for team throw more than 90 miles per hour.

Fan attendance at Toros games has improved over the Sidewinders' attendance, partially due to Hi Corbett Field's central location and also due to the Toros' performance. The team comfortably holds first place in the Golden League and is close to a playoff birth.

"We're having a great season and Doc Balsarak is definitely part of it. He understands baseball and he's done a great job. He's never made a mistake at first base," said Pete LaCock, Toros hitting and third base coach. "He's like one of the guys. It's a like the camaraderie you have in the military. It's his team and we feel like he's one of us."

The colonel makes time for baseball despite a hectic schedule. He's deployed to Iraq twice in the last five years and recently completed a tour in Afghanistan.

"It's a lot to take on. I'm getting my masters in public health at night and I've had to adjust my private practice hours to be able to be a part of the team. I get the home game schedule and make sure I'm able to leave work early on those days. Since I'm a volunteer, I lose income to coach, but that just how much I love to do it."



Courtesy photos

Col. (Dr.) James Balsarak, right, coaches a Tucson Toros runner at first base during a game at Hi Corbett Field.

"My only goal as a coach is to be invited back," said Balsarak whose sacrifices have not gone unnoticed by the team.

"There are a lot of patriotic guys on the team and they love the idea that he spent three tours going over there defending our country and helping guys who got hurt. It's unbelievable to me. The respect that the players have for him goes above and beyond what you can imagine," said LaCock.

In mid July, he was put in the batting line up during a game against the San Diego Surf Dogs and came away with his first pro ball hit.

"I was kind of joking around with the coaches and I said, 'You should put me in.' The manager put me in batting cleanup and I was terrified. The first at bat the pitcher walked me. The second at bat I struck out. And the third at bat I got a hit into left field. They paid me a buck to make it professional," said Balsarak with a laugh.