



Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler

Josh Zeid (left) and friend Ryan Lavarney in Tel Aviv are ex-major league players hoping to earn their spot on the Israeli Olympic baseball team.

## Cubs pitching analyst heads back to the mound...for Israel

By HILLEL KUTTLER

JOSH ZEID is sipping coffee but craving *shakshuka*, Israel's trendy spicy-tomato-sauce-and-poached-eggs breakfast, on a recent Friday morning on Tel Aviv's Rothschild Street.

Zeid, 32, has an appetite for more than food.

The Connecticut native, a pitcher, is competing for a place on Israel's baseball team in next summer's Olympics in Tokyo, for which the country clinched a berth last September. Zeid is pursuing that goal while fulfilling his day job as a pitching analyst and rehabilitation pitching coordinator in the Chicago Cubs organization.

For that position, which he began last winter, Zeid moved with his family from Houston, where he had been a relief pitcher for the Astros, to Arizona, near the Cubs' training complex.

Zeid works with the Cubs' athletic trainers to design throwing regimens for pitchers recovering from injuries.

He watches film, looking for flaws in pitchers' deliveries that leave them vulnerable to shoulder and arm injuries. On the analyst side, Zeid utilizes the Arizona facility's high-tech pitching lab and advanced cameras to help pitchers make their deliveries and repertoire more consistent.

His boss, Craig Breslow, the Cubs' director of pitching, said Zeid serves "as an extension of sorts of our R&D department."

"Josh's ability to wear multiple hats helps to facilitate not just a [pitcher's] return to previous levels but actual improvement," said Breslow, himself a former MLB hurler and Zeid's teammate on Israel's 2016-17 World Baseball Classic (WBC) club.

Zeid retired as a player a year after his heroic turn pitching Israel to a surprising No. 6 showing in that WBC. He yielded no runs in 10 innings across three relief appearances and one start, saved two games, won another and earned a WBC all-star selection.

Like any Olympian, Zeid must be a citizen of the country for which he

competes. He received Israeli citizenship in November. That step, like pitching for Israel in the WBC, was "about honoring my family, my past. I'm not the most religious person, so I do it through sports," Zeid said. "Every tournament I've played on with Team Israel was a life-changing experience."

The Arizona complex's fields, equipment and staff enable Zeid to train to make Team Israel. It's been an unplanned path back. After retiring, he contacted every MLB franchise seeking employment as a pitching coach. A year ago, the Cubs interviewed Zeid for a position as a scout—but offered him a pitching analyst position instead.

After Israel qualified for Tokyo, Zeid emailed congratulations to Israel Association of Baseball president Peter Kurz, who offered Zeid an opportunity to pitch his way onto the Olympics squad.

Zeid gingerly approached the Cubs, concerned that the organization would think he was neglecting his coaching job; management supported him.

Kurz and Andrew Lorraine, Team

Israel's pitching coach, stated in interviews that while Zeid starred on the mound in the past two WBCs, he'd have to knock two years of rust off his arm to make the club.

"The question is: can he help our team if he's only a percentage of what he was? Unequivocally, yes," Lorraine said. If Zeid is ready to go when management evaluates him this winter, "he definitely increases our chance to win a medal."

For a non-baseball culture nation that has sent team sport athletes only three times prior – twice in soccer, once in basketball – medaling in the Olympics would be extraordinary

The road toward his possibly reaching Tokyo will be "a lot more emotional," Zeid said. "I'll learn a lot more about myself." ■

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