

HARD WORK PAYS OFF FOR LIAM

Western Australia's Liam Hendriks pitching with the Oakland Athletics // Getty Images, Lisa Blumenfeld

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erth native Liam Hendriks is one of 31 Australians to play in MLB, and looks to have another strong season after a career year in 2015.

Hendriks talks with 'Pathways' reporter Nina Zimmerman about his long international career and offers his best advice to junior players.

Though he's a decade removed from his junior days, Oakland Athletics relief pitcher Liam Hendriks' best advice for the next generation of Australian ballplayers is simple: work hard and watch as much baseball as you can.

"Hard work will pay off. I didn't get to where I am now through just sitting on the couch and every Sunday rolling out and just playing," Hendriks said. "I worked extremely hard. In between seasons of minor league ball I was coming home, working odd jobs. I worked for a couple different construction companies, a landscaper, I worked for a company that builds truck-mounted cranes. It's just anything

you can do, even if your side job requires you lifting things it's usually a good thing because you'll get kind of that muscle memory. But all I can say is keep working hard and just watch the game as much as you can.

"I remember I was shadowing around a personal trainer for a couple of weeks when I was in high school and... I'd get to the gym early before I had to actually start work and I'd sit down and I'd put a game on and I'd just ride the bike so I could hear the sound," he continued. "I love watching the game of baseball and the more I watched the more I could get kind of the feel of what they were doing, what their kind of approach was, everything like that. And you learn so much from just watching the game and actually paying attention to it."

Hendriks followed his own advice last MLB season, putting together the best season of his career and breaking a playoff record with the Toronto Blue Jays as the team reached the American League Championship Series, one step from the World

Series. Pitching for Toronto was a unique experience, since the team represents not just a fan base but an entire country.

"That was my first time pitching in the playoffs and it was utterly insane," Hendriks said. "Toronto as a team, they travel really well, because if you go to the west coast of the states to play like Seattle, we had more Blue Jays fans at a Mariners game than the Mariners had because it's so close to Vancouver. It's an unnatural thing because it's so popular, it's so like there's so much emotion going in because the entire country is behind this one team."

He was traded from the Blue Jays to the A's in December, and said the adjustment to his new team has been easy, partially because of the path pre-paved by fellow Australian pitchers Grant Balfour, Travis Blackley and Rich Thompson, all of whom spent part of their careers in Oakland.

"Australians have had relatively good careers here while they've been here, and it's exciting because I get to put the green and gold back on, which is always a huge plus," Hendriks said. "Now I'm just hoping to reward them with my efforts on the field and we can get back here and start winning."

Growing up in Perth as a third-generation Aussie rules football player, Hendriks had to choose between AFL and baseball. Choosing the diamond over the oval turned out to be the right decision, since Hendriks' career, from junior to professional, has allowed him to traverse the globe.

"With baseball, I've played in Taiwan, I've played in Mexico, I've played in the US, I've played in all of these places - Italy and Prague, and... this is almost an avenue for me to travel," Hendriks said. "Travel, but also play the game that I love in a different country and learn all about their culture. You get a chance to travel around, visit different countries, and it's something that you don't get in an ordinary

everyday job."

Australian junior teams have been traveling the world for decades, a common characteristic of national programs in this region. Several new doors have opened in the past few years, beginning with automatic qualification to the Little League World Series in 2013 and continuing with the same entry to the Junior League World Series this year. The first two LLWS teams were from Perth, Hendriks' hometown.

"Any time the Little League World Series is on, we've pretty much got those games on in our clubhouse," he said. "Almost all clubhouses across the league will be watching the Little League World Series. So it's an awesome experience and it was cool being able to actually watch a team from my hometown."

"You never really heard anything about Australia 10-15 years ago, especially juniors-wise. It was always like 'oh we played juniors but I mean we're not eligible or we're not able to get to this stuff.' I think just getting teams to go to [the LLWS and JLWS], it's huge because it's something that these kids train for. Any time you get a chance to play for your country it spurs that love for the game, that passion for the game on even more."

And though Hendriks is the only player from Down Under in MLB right now, he doesn't think that'll be the case for long, with longtime veteran and current Triple-A pitcher Peter Moylan "too good not to be here" and several other young players working their way up the minor league ranks.

"It's tough being the only Australian, but it's very humbling knowing the fact that you're the only guy from your country in the big leagues right now," Hendriks said. "It's a good feeling but at the same point in time you want more guys because you want the game of baseball to grow in the country. You don't want to be the only guy."

HENDRIKS BIG LEAGUE CAREER

BY THE NUMB3RS*

4 TEAMS

6 SEASONS

101 GAMES

198 STRIKEOUTS

259 INNINGS

*STATS AS OF 20/4/2016