

Kernels pitcher towers above the crowd

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 02 April 2014 20:34 -



Aaron Slegers is 6-foot-10 and a star athlete, so you might automatically assume he was a star basketball player somewhere.

Actually, he never made it past the junior varsity team in high school. Baseball has been another story, however.

Slegers helped the Indiana Hoosiers reach the College World Series last year as a 6-foot-10 righthander and he'll get the starting nod Thursday night when the Cedar Rapids Kernels begin the 2014 Midwest League season against Clinton at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

The first pitch is scheduled for 6:35 p.m., weather permitting (bring your parkas and umbrellas).

Slegers did not reach his full height until he was a senior in high school in Arizona. He'd already abandoned the basketball court by then.

"I decided - before the growth spurt - that baseball was the sport. I stuck with it and never looked back," he said.

The basketball coach at his high school in Scottsdale, Ariz., kept trying to get Slegers on the team, to no avail.

"After my growth spurt my senior year, the coach was begging," he said, smiling. "But he didn't get a bite."

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Slegers migrated to Bloomington, Ind., to pitch for the Hoosiers. He battled injuries his first two years, but put it all together last season as a redshirt sophomore with a 9-2 record, 2.04 ERA and a cherished trip to the College World Series in Omaha.

The Minnesota Twins selected him in the fifth round of the 2013 draft and gave him a \$380,000 bonus to leave school early. He rewarded their investment with a good showing at Elizabethton in the Appalachian League last summer, striking out 18 batters in 19 innings with only two walks and a 0.47 earned run average.

Kernels Manager Jake Mauer and pitching coach Ivan Arteaga like Sleger's mechanics for such a tall guy. "It looks like he's reaching out and dropping the ball in the catcher's glove," said Mauer.

Slegers said it took awhile to adjust to his height as a pitcher, in terms of staying compact and having good fundamentals.

"Early when I was in high school and I grew, that was the hardest part," he said. "And then in college I figured out how to adapt to it. Lift weights and run and kind of develop coordination over time."

Slegers has been clocked in the mid-90's. He's part of a promising pitching staff that includes Kohl Stewart, a first-round pick in 2013 from a Texas high school, and Ryan Eades, a second-round choice in 2013 from LSU.

Six other members of the pitching staff spent time with the Kernels last year and are back for another shot after helping Cedar Rapids compile an 88-52 record and make the playoffs.

It's a deep staff, and Mauer picked his 6-10 righty to start the first game of the campaign.

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"It's definitely an honor to throw that opening night," said Slegers. "Just go out there, throw strikes and get rolling."

The Kernels featured a powerful lineup last season with stars like Byron Buxton, Adam Brett Walker, D.J. Hicks and Travis Harrison, but those guys have graduated to higher rungs in the Minnesota Twins organization. Mauer said he has players who can hit home runs, but suspects he'll have to try and manufacture runs this season with the bunt and hit-and-run.

"Last year with the boys that we had that could hit the ball over the fence, you'd score 8-9 runs real quick," he said. "We're probably not going to have that luxury."

The Kernels are scheduled to host Clinton in a four-game series on Thursday (6:35 p.m.), Friday (6:35 p.m.), Saturday (2:05 p.m.) and Sunday (2:05 p.m.). If the Thursday or Friday games are postponed due to inclement weather, General Manager Doug Nelson said the club would try to play doubleheaders on Saturday or Sunday in an effort to play all four contests.