

Kernels banquet draws record crowd

Written by Jim Ecker

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It looks like the Cedar Rapids Kernels have hit a grand-slam by joining forces with the Minnesota Twins this season.

A record crowd of more than 500 baseball fans attended the 17th Annual Hot Stove Banquet at the Cedar Rapids Marriott Thursday night to mingle with Twins Manager Ron Gardenhire and members of the Twins Winter Caravan.

Several dozen fans were dressed in Twins attire and many others identified themselves as Minnesota fans, delighted the Kernels are the new Class A affiliate of the Twins in the Midwest League.

The Kernels drew approximately 325 fans to their banquet last year when they were still affiliated with the Los Angeles Angels. Kernels fans, and Twins fans in particular, seem delighted with the new arrangement.

"We haven't had a buzz like this since the new stadium was built in 2002," said Kernels broadcaster Morgan Hawk.

Gardenhire made his debut as a minor league manager with Kenosha (Wis.) in 1988 and remembered coming here that season to play the Cedar Rapids Reds in the Midwest League playoffs.

"You guys kicked my butt and sent me home," the good-natured skipper remarked. "I always said I'd like to come back. Well, here I am."

Gardenhire acknowledged the Twins have struggled the past few years, but sees better days

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ahead.

"We're on the up-and-up," he said. "These kids have talent. They have tools.

"You're going to love this organization," he said. "We do it the right way."

Doug Nelson, the general manager of the Kernels, was delighted with the turnout and hoped to sell a few tickets to Kernels games before the night was done.

"Wow. What a great crowd," he said during his turn at the dais. "It's all thanks to our new major league partners.

"Welcome to Cedar Rapids," Nelson told Gardenhire and the other members of the Twins Caravan. "As you can see, we're excited to be part of the Twins family now."

Several fans wore Joe Mauer jerseys to the banquet in honor of Minnesota's all-star catcher. Mauer's brother, Jake, is the new manager of the Kernels, and he remembered playing in Cedar Rapids as a ballplayer in the Midwest League.

Mauer told Kernels fans to expect a competitive, hard-nosed club this season.

"I promise you they'll get after it on the field and they'll be held accountable," he said. "We look forward to seeing you on April 4th."

The Kernels open the season on Thursday, April 4 against Beloit at 6:30 p.m. at Veterans Memorial Stadium. Ironically, the Twins ended their affiliation with Beloit after the 2012 campaign to join forces with Cedar Rapids.

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Minnesota infielder Brian Dozier, bench coach Terry Steinbach, TV play-by-play broadcaster Dick Bremer, Twins mascot T.C. Bear and Twins minor league pitcher B.J. Hermesen from Manchester (Iowa) also joined the caravan.

Hermesen, 23, who played at West Delaware High School, was named the Twins Organizational Pitcher of the Year in 2012 and has been added to the major league club's 40-man roster after reaching Double A last season.

Dozier played for Jake Mauer in the minor leagues in Fort Myers (Fla.) and said Cedar Rapids is getting a terrific manager. "You guys are going to absolutely love him," he said.

Bremer spent three years as a sportscaster at KGAN in the late 1970's and early 1980's and fondly recalled his time in Cedar Rapids. He praised the people he worked with at KGAN and jokingly blamed the station's low ratings at the time to a misguided slogan by the promotions department.

"If it's happening in Cedar Rapids," the slogan said, "it's news to us."

Bremer said the Twins are actively seeking a radio affiliate in Cedar Rapids that will broadcast Twins games this season. He also said Minnesota's television package of 150 games on Fox Sports North is being made available by satellite providers.

The banquet also featured the induction of five new members into the Cedar Rapids Ballclub Hall of Fame with Al Monchak, Pat Harmon, Trevor Hoffman, Casey Kotchman and Jim Curran saluted.

Monchak, 95, is the ninth-oldest living former Major League Player and the man who managed the Cedar Rapids Braves to the Three-I League championship in 1958. Monchak attended the banquet and said a few words to the crowd.

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"I was so happy to play and manage here in Cedar Rapids," he said. "I've been fortunate and I'll never forget Cedar Rapids. Thank-you very much and God bless you all."

Monchak enjoyed a long and successful career as a coach in the major leagues and was a member of the Pittsburgh Pirates' staff in 1979 when they won the World Series.

Harmon, 97, was the sports editor of the Cedar Rapids Gazette from 1947 to 1951 and played an instrumental role in getting pro baseball re-established in Cedar Rapids after World War II. Harmon was not able to attend the banquet due to health concerns, but was represented by family members.

Hoffman pitched for the Cedar Rapids Reds in 1991 and enjoyed a long and successful career as a relief pitcher in the major leagues. He ranks second in Major League history with 601 saves and was a six-time All-Star.

Kotchman hit .281 with 50 RBIs in 81 games for the Kernels in 2002 and has played in the Major Leagues for nine seasons.

Curran is a member of the Kernels' Board of Directors and is a long-time member of the grounds crew.