

Berrios creating buzz with Kernels

Written by Jim Ecker

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BURLINGTON - Jose Berrios graciously signed a few autographs as he stood outside the Cedar Rapids Kernels locker room at Community Field in Burlington Sunday.

He was dressed in street clothes, rather than a uniform, but the fans knew who he was and wanted his name on a shiny new baseball and a scrap of paper.

The line of autograph hounds might grow after he actually pitches for the Kernels, and that's scheduled to happen Monday when Cedar Rapids and Burlington meet in Game 2 of their three-game series at Community Field at 6:30 p.m.

Berrios is a talented 18-year-old from Puerto Rico who represented his country in the World Baseball Classic this year. He created a buzz when he struck out New York Yankees star Robinson Cano in a WBC ballgame.

"Fastball, up," he said of the pitch that got the all-star second baseman.

"That was good," Berrios said in halting English, his improving second language. "He's great. Good batter. Good strikeout."

Berrios, a slender 6-footer, was selected by the Minnesota Twins with the 32nd overall pick in the 2012 draft. He was a supplemental first-round pick and the highest drafted pitcher ever from Puerto Rico.

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Berrios signed for \$1.55 million and excelled for the Gulf Coast League Twins and Elizabethton last year in Rookie ball. He went 3-0 with a 1.17 ERA in 11 games (four starts) with the two ballclubs and compiled some dazzling numbers.

He struck out 49 batters in 30.2 innings and walked only four guys. He allowed only 15 hits and opponents had a team batting average against him of about .140.

Berrios spent two extra weeks in extended spring training this year, working on his endurance after seeing limited duty in the World Baseball Classic. He joined the Kernels late last week and will make his debut Monday night.

"I'm ready," he said. "I'm ready for tomorrow. Excited."

He thinks he'll be allowed to throw 75 to 80 pitches in his first start.

"He's a fastball/curveball/changeup pitcher," said Kernels pitching coach Gary Lucas. "A young 18-year-old pitcher. Has no fear. Will attack the hitters. So it's going to be fun to watch."

"I expect him to go out there and compete real well."

Lucas thinks Berrios will be able to pitch five or six innings. He saw Berrios briefly in spring training and is looking forward to seeing him in action against Burlington.

"As they say in the trade, a very high ceiling," Lucas remarked. "He's got stuff. Poised and composed for 18 years old."