

Kepler ready to go for Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr

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It may surprise some Cedar Rapids Kernels fans to learn that, even with the promotion of fan-favorite Byron Buxton on Sunday, the Kernels still have an outfielder in their lineup that was ranked among the Top 10 prospects of the parent Minnesota Twins coming into the season.

The reason for the surprise is that few Kernels fans have yet to see that prospect on the ball field.

Max Kepler was promoted to Cedar Rapids last week and arrived just in time to join the team for their trip to Appleton, Wis., to face the Wisconsin Timber Rattlers. He had five hits in the four-game series and three of those hits were doubles.

Kepler, who was ranked as the No.8 Twins prospect by mlb.com and the No.10 Twins prospect by Baseball America before the season started, was expected to open the 2013 season as a member of the Kernels outfield. An elbow injury suffered during spring training resulted in Kepler being held back in extended spring training.

Kepler is a native of Berlin, Germany, and was given an \$800,000 signing bonus by the Twins in 2009. That was the highest bonus ever given to a European player by a Major League organization. He was just 16 years old at the time of his signing and moved to the United States shortly after signing with the Twins. He finished high school at the Fort Myers high school that adjoins the Twins' spring training facility.

He has played for the Twins' short season rookie league teams the past three years and was expected to begin his first full season of minor league ball with the Kernels in April.

In an interview Sunday, Twins General Manager Terry Ryan shared his thoughts on Kepler.

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"Yeah, he's had a bad elbow and it's been frustrating for all of us because we can't figure out what the problem is," commented Ryan. "Now he's playing and he's playing the outfield. He can play left, center and right. He can play first.

"He's got a lot of life in his bat. We'll wait for him to get up to par here, because he's way behind everybody. But I think you're going to like what you see in Kepler as the summer progresses."

Kernels Manager Jake Mauer concurred with his boss, saying, "Kepler's going to help us. He's going to be a pretty good hitter."

But just who is this young German outfielder?

Kepler sat down with Metro Sports Report before Sunday's game in Wisconsin to answer some questions that may give Kernels fans some insight into that question.

Metro Sports Report: You were expected to open this season with the Kernels. Can you tell us what happened and what you've been doing the past couple of months?

Max Kepler: I've been rehabbing. I've been set back three times and it was due to an elbow strain that happened during spring training. I made a throw to home and it just didn't feel good in my elbow and I was taken out of the game right then and there.

I got an MRI and got the results and it was said to be an elbow strain. We worked on it, but I've been set back a couple of times and that's why I've been out for so long, which is unfortunate. But now I'm back!

MSR: It had to be tough staying back in Florida while the guys you were training with and playing with during spring training in March were going north to Cedar Rapids.

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Kepler: You know, it happens.

Yeah, this is the same team we had back in E'town (Elizabethton, the Twins rookie league team that won the Appalachian League championship last season), so I missed leaving with them, but I'm glad to be back with them now.

MSR: I have to ask, you were growing up as a kid in Germany - why baseball? It's not exactly the German national sport, right?

Kepler: That's true. I went to an international school and my mom's from Texas, so she kind of got me into baseball.

I was doing like four to five sports at the time and it came down to soccer and baseball and I had to make a decision between either one. I just chose to go with baseball. I wanted to go to the States, go abroad.

Soccer's real big in Germany so I would have spent the rest of my life in Germany if I'd stuck to soccer. So, yeah, I went with baseball.

MSR: You said you played four or five sports, what were the others that you were playing when you were younger?

Kepler: I played soccer, baseball, I had a scholarship in tennis, I swam, played basketball and some minor little sports on the side.

MSR: For a lot of the international guys, the down side to playing minor league baseball is that the family doesn't get to watch them play a whole lot. Does your family find a way to follow you or get to see you play at all?

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Kepler: Yeah, you know the time zone is a lot different there so they're up until 2 or 3 in the morning just getting to see the first half of the game. But they love doing it and they'll be down pretty soon, a couple weeks.

MSR: I saw you in your first spring training with the Twins three years ago and I saw this skinny looking guy on one of the back fields. That's not you anymore and the difference showed up a bit in your power numbers (10 home runs) last year.

Kepler: Yep. I gained some weight (laughing). It happens.

I put on some weight and learned to pull the ball better in those couple of years and it paid off!

MSR: Do you have a particular hitting philosophy? Do you see yourself as a power hitter or are you just concerned about driving the ball and if it goes over the fence, fine?

Kepler: I used to strictly see myself as a contact hitter. I came to the Twins as a contact hitter, just going (opposite field) all the time.

Now, basically, it's just a start to a new season, first couple games, just see the ball right now and hit it. But when I'm in a groove, I like it to go far, the ball to go deep.

MSR: Off the field, in your down time, what sort of things do you like to do when you're not playing baseball?

Kepler: I like staying active. Last year, in E'town, we used to go out on lakes, go fishing. E'town didn't have much to offer, but we found stuff to do.

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MSR: What about during the offseason?

Kepler: I love working out. Just getting back with friends and family. Spending a good time with family.

MSR: Do you go back to Germany in the offseason?

Kepler: Yes, that's very valuable to me. I only get like a month because they (the Twins) usually send you somewhere to play winter ball. I spend most of that time with family.

Kepler will make his home debut at 12:05 Tuesday afternoon when the Kernels open their first home series of the second half against the Burlington Bees.