

Kernels keep winning despite roster moves

Written by S.D. Buhr

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With just 40 games remaining in the regular season, now seems like a good time to step back and take a look at the state of the Cedar Rapids Kernels.

It's almost laughable to even question whether or not the affiliation switch from the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim to the Minnesota Twins has been good for Cedar Rapids. Of course it has, by pretty much every measurement.

The Kernels have already qualified for the Midwest League postseason by virtue of their second-place finish in the first half of the season and fan interest is up.

Attendance has increased, but even more telling, the fans who show up for games are enthusiastically engaged in what's happening on the field. That has not always been the case at Veterans Memorial Stadium the past few years.

It certainly didn't hurt that one of the Twins' top prospects, Byron Buxton, got off to such an incredible start this spring. He drew fan and media interest from well beyond the local community.

But even after the inevitable promotion of Buxton to the Twins' Advanced Class A affiliate at Fort Myers in June, the Kernels have continued to win games. That may come as a surprise to those so blinded by Buxton's aura that they didn't notice the Kernels' roster included a number of other very talented players.

Of course, Buxton isn't the only Kernels player the Twins have rewarded with a bump up in

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playing level. The Kernels have sent about a dozen players, in total, to Fort Myers already this season.

The Twins, as an organization, have a reputation for being conservative with their promotions. They historically have preferred to see most players spend at least an entire season, if not more, at most minor league levels.

No doubt, Kernels officials were hoping that trend would continue. In past seasons, the Angels seemingly couldn't wait to promote players as soon as they demonstrated any level of productivity in a Kernels uniform.

Among position players, Buxton was the only key offensive contributor to be lost to promotion until J.D. Williams and Dalton Hicks were bumped up to Fort Myers about a week ago.

It's not easy to replace players found in the top 10 of most Midwest League offensive statistical categories like Williams (on-base percentage, OPS), Hicks (home runs, RBIs, slugging percentage, OPS) and Buxton (almost everything), but players brought in to Cedar Rapids by the Twins to replace the departing hitters have done well.

Max Kepler joined the Kernels once he completed rehabilitating his injured elbow in Fort Myers. He arrived four days before Buxton was promoted and has hit for a .263 average. Thirteen of his 31 hits have been for extra bases.

Jonathan Murphy is hitting .333 in the 17 games he's played since his arrival at the beginning of July and Joel Licon has performed well in a utility infielder role since he joined the team in early June.

It's too early to know for certain how well Mike Gonzales will fill in for the departed Hicks, but the big first baseman had four hits in his first eight at-bats as a Kernel. Gonzales hit .289 and stroked 15 home runs for the Beloit Snappers in 2011. He missed much of his 2012 season in Fort Myers and after starting this season again with the Miracle, a wrist injury sidelined him for the past several weeks.

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On the pitching front, the Kernels lost Taylor Rogers before most fans even got to know him. He made three unimpressive starts for the Kernels before being moved on to Fort Myers. Jose Berrios, a supplemental first round draft pick in the 2012 First Year Player Draft and one of the top pitching prospects in the Twins organization, essentially took Rogers' spot in the Kernels rotation.

The subsequent promotion of Tyler Duffey in early June left a much more significant hole at the top of the Kernels' rotation. Duffey carried a 2.78 ERA and a 0.943 WHIP through nine starts when he left Cedar Rapids.

Josue Montanez initially worked from the Kernels bullpen after his promotion to Cedar Rapids in June, but has shown some potential since joining the rotation about a month ago.

Perhaps even more critically, the Kernels have seen four important members of their bullpen earn promotions. Matt Tomshaw and Manuel Soliman had contributed a total of 59 innings of work over a combined 30 appearances before they were promoted. Last week, the Twins elevated Steve Gruver and Tyler Jones, who had combined to provide a formidable left-right relief combination late in games.

Reliever Alex Muren has been relatively effective since arriving from extended spring training in early May, and the early returns from more recent additions Madison Boer, Dallas Gallant and Tim Shibuya are encouraging.

But the bottom line in baseball is all about wins and losses.

The Kernels were 44-28, for a .611 winning percentage, with Buxton on the roster. Since his promotion four games into the second half schedule, the Kernels are 17-9 (.654) and they are leading the MWL West Division by three games over first-half champion Beloit.

It's certainly too soon to know what effect losing the four players promoted a week ago will

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have on the team's fortunes. However, the Kernels have won five of the first six games played (all on the road) since Hicks, Williams, Jones and Gruver got their well-deserved promotions.

On Tuesday, the first member of the Twins' draft class of 2013 was promoted to Cedar Rapids when seventh round pick Brian Gilbert was added to the Kernels' roster.

Roster turnover is just a fact of life in minor league baseball. When the local team starts out winning a lot of games, it's probably because a lot of players are performing very well and players that perform very well deserve promotions to the next level in the organization.

One way to measure the strength of an organization is to look at how a minor league team performs after a number of their best players are promoted. If the new players perform well and the team continues winning, that's a very good sign.

So far, that's what we're seeing in Cedar Rapids. That bodes well, this season, for the Kernels and for the Twins in the long run.