

Mauer excited about Year 2 with Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr

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"People ask me what I do in winter when there's no baseball. I'll tell you what I do. I stare out the window and wait for spring." - Hall of Famer Rogers Hornsby

Looking out our windows in the days leading up to Christmas in Cedar Rapids, it has been pretty easy to relate to Hornsby's famous lament. Freezing drizzle. Freezing rain. Icy streets. Snow. All in all, not a view that brings to mind many thoughts of warm summer nights at the ballpark.

Cedar Rapids Kernels Manager Jake Mauer, however, has warm thoughts about what the Kernels accomplished this past season with a trip to the Midwest League playoffs and 88 victories. The Kernels kept winning even after Minor League Player of the Year Byron Buxton and other top players were promoted in June.

"What I was probably most happy with was that we really didn't miss a beat when we changed faces and really kind of changed our identity as a team," Mauer said. "In the first half we just kind of out-slugged teams and really beat teams into submission scoring a bunch of runs.

"In the second half, our pitching and defense got a lot better and we were able to win some close games there. So that was probably the most enjoyable."

The season did come to an abrupt end, however, as the Kernels dropped two straight games in the first round of the MWL playoffs to the ultimate league champions, the Quad Cities River Bandits.

The end came too soon for Mauer's taste.

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"Obviously, it ended so quickly. I remember driving home with (Kernels hitting coach) Tommy Watkins and thinking, 'What the heck are we doing?' We were not prepared for that whatsoever," the manager reflected. "But Quad Cities proved to be a pretty good team and kind of went through the rest of the playoffs pretty easily, so they're a very deserving champion."

If Kernels fans were left thinking, "what if ...?," they weren't alone. The Kernels skipper was right there with them. "If we could have won a game there and had it come down to a 'game three,' that would have been interesting to see what would have happened," he said.

"But you've got to tip your hat to them, they had a great ballclub. I think we were just as good in a toe-to-toe matchup with them, but it just didn't work out for us, unfortunately."

While Kernels fans are looking out their windows and waiting for spring along with the ghost of Rogers Hornsby, the people running the Cedar Rapids ballclub are staying busy.

"When the team arrives in early April, we will have a brand new field for them to play on," Kernels General Manager Doug Nelson said. "This fall, we re-shaped and laser-leveled the field and all of the sod was replaced.

"The warning track material (brick chip) was replaced and new wall pads are being installed. The new sod came from the same farm that supplies sod to Target Field (the Twins' home ballpark in Minneapolis)."

Nelson added that enhancements to the ballpark experience for fans are also being completed. "For the fans, we have re-done the Hot Corner Grill. We serve premium sandwiches hot off the grill at this stand and due to its success, the stand was unable to keep up with demand this past season.

"We have rebuilt the area using decorative brick and doubled its capacity. We are also working on a number of new promotions and theme nights."

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Mauer's offseason has been less eventful, so far, but that's about to change with the arrival soon of a new child.

The manager is spending the winter months working at a family-owned car dealership in the Twin Cities and, as he told MSR, "being a dad, which is a lot of fun."

"I guess you never stop thinking about baseball," Mauer added. "It's fun to watch these hot stove TV shows and see what Terry (Twins General Manager Terry Ryan) is doing to rebuild the Twins roster. And what happens (with the Twins) eventually will have an effect on who we come up to Cedar Rapids with, but we'll shake all that out when we get to spring training."

There will be some extra excitement in the Mauer family before spring training, however, and we're not talking just about his scheduled appearance at the Kernels' Hot Stove Banquet on Jan. 13.

"My wife is due February 8," Mauer said. "So unless we go early, I'll probably come down (to the Kernels banquet) and then come right back. We've gone early with our first child, she was born a month early, so I hope that doesn't happen. But I guess when the baby's ready, the baby's ready."

If he's needed at home, the Kernels and their fans will just have to get by with the other members of the Twins family scheduled to appear at the banquet as part of the Twins Caravan. They include Hall of Famer (and new Twins MLB coach) Paul Molitor, pitchers Brian Duensing and Ryan Pressly, and broadcaster Dick Bremer.

Mauer will head to the Twins spring training complex in Fort Myers, Fla., in early March. It's too early to know with any certainty which players in the Twins organization will come north to Cedar Rapids with their manager, but a few broad assumptions are pretty safe to make.

"You assume we'll probably get some of those kids from Elizabethton (the Twins' highest 'Rookie' level short-season affiliate)," commented Mauer. The Elizabethton team this year was perhaps most noted for a group of young, talented pitchers and Mauer acknowledged that

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Kernels fans should get to see some of that talent in 2014. "There's some young men down there that have pretty good arms, some guys that run it up there with pretty good velocity."

As is almost always the case, a number of familiar names are also likely to reappear in Kernels uniforms to start the season, according to the manager. "Maybe some of the guys who were there late in the year that were with us (in Cedar Rapids), who came up late. It will all really depend on who makes the big league team.

"Last year, we were able to get some (minor league) free agents to fill the AA and AAA level and when that happens, we're able to keep the younger guys where we'd like them as far as giving them another year to develop," he said.

"I think it worked out for a guy like (Tyler) Grimes, who improved, and J.D. Williams, who had an excellent year. Guys like that got a chance to repeat and really took advantage of that opportunity."

One person who won't be returning to wear a Kernels uniform in 2014 is last season's pitching coach, Gary Lucas. While Mauer and hitting coach Watkins will both be returning for a second season in Cedar Rapids, Lucas has been assigned to the Twins Class High-A affiliate in Fort Myers. He'll be replaced by Ivan Arteaga, who was the Fort Myers Miracle pitching coach last year.

"We're sorry to see Gary go, obviously, but then again, too, we're pretty lucky and looking forward to working with Ivan," Mauer said. "They're both quality guys, both have a wealth of knowledge of pitching and they've been around the game a long time, both of them.

"Luke was a lot of fun. He was great, did a wonderful job with the staff, especially the second half," said Mauer. "He really brought them together and was a big reason why we did so well. He had a good vibe with that group (of pitchers) we had in Cedar Rapids. Hopefully he'll continue that up there in Fort Myers."

Mauer has worked with Arteaga before and is looking forward to the reunion.

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“I was with him for two years as a manager (with the Gulf Coast League Twins). Ivan's outstanding, he's really good. I think he'll have a big impact on our young pitchers. He's very knowledgeable, very well-spoken and he's going to do a really good job. We're pretty fortunate to have him.”