

## Blue Jays put Kellen Sweeney on extended path

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 24 April 2011 17:10 - Last Updated Monday, 25 April 2011 23:04

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Kellen Sweeney wakes up by 6:10 a.m. and gets to the ballpark by 7, even though stretching won't start until 9 or 9:30.

"You like to get there early," he said.

Sweeney, 19, is a professional baseball player now and doesn't want to miss a thing or miss an opportunity to accelerate his rise with the Toronto Blue Jays.

He's currently in extended spring training with the Blue Jays in Dunedin, Fla., less than a year after being selected in the second round of the 2010 draft and about nine months after signing for \$600,000 and college tuition.

Sweeney was an all-state shortstop at Cedar Rapids Jefferson High School, but he's a third baseman now and learning a new position. "I actually like it a lot," he said.

He hit .270 in 16 games with the Gulf Coast League Blue Jays last summer after signing and was hoping to be assigned to a Class A team when the 2011 season began in early April, but Toronto kept almost all of its 2010 draft picks in extended spring training.

"I was upset, obviously," Sweeney told the Metro Sports Report, "but they already had their minds made up, probably before spring training. But it's OK. You just have to play and hopefully you'll get moved up there."

Sweeney could be assigned to the Gulf Coast Rookie League again in June, or he could be shipped to the Bluefield (W.Va.) Blue Jays in the Appalachian League or the Vancouver Canadians in the Northwest League, all short-season teams. A more remote possibility would be assignment to the Lansing (Mich.) Lugnuts in the Midwest League or the Dunedin Blue Jays

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in the Florida State League, both long-season Class A teams.

"They haven't told me anything," he said.

"I just want to work hard and move up as quick as possible," he said. "It's their decision now how fast I move up, and how well I perform."

The Sweeney family has two sons in pro baseball, and neither one is thrilled with his current assignment. Ryan Sweeney is a reserve outfielder with the Oakland A's after being a starter for several years, and Kellen is toiling in extended spring training when he was hoping to make a full-season club.

The brothers communicate with text messages and occasional phone calls, but they're on different cycles. Ryan lives on the West Coast and plays mostly night games, while Kellen is living on the East Coast and plays mostly day games. They live three time zones apart, one in the major leagues and one trying to get there.

They try to lift each other's spirits.

"He's got to stay in there and hopefully he'll get his chance and get to play every day," Kellen said. "He tells me to work hard so I can get to where I want to be."

Kellen got hit in the head with a fastball last Monday and was OK, but the trainer pulled him from the game as a precaution. Major League Baseball is concerned about concussions, so Kellen was sent to a doctor for tests and wasn't allowed to play for two days.

He had to take an "impact" test to make sure he was all right. They compared the results to previous routine standardized tests and found something interesting.

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"I scored higher on it than I ever had before I got hit in the head," he said, laughing.

Sweeney returned to the lineup after missing two games and went 2-for-4. He said his hitting is "coming along."

"I got off a little slow in spring training just trying to get my timing back," he said. "I'm trying to stay back and keep my balance."

Sweeney has fully recovered from Tommy John surgery, performed on his right arm in August of 2009, and is not having any problems with hamstring issues. He had a minor problem with his eyes and got a new prescription for his right eye (the dominant eye for a left-handed batter like Sweeney).

"Every once in a while my eyes would get a little bit blurry," he said. "I got it taken care of and got new contacts."

He said he's seeing the ball "a lot better" now.

Sweeney said he enjoys pro baseball a great deal, despite playing in mostly empty ballparks in extended spring training. He signed with the University of San Diego for college baseball, but had his heart set on turning pro. He was selected 69th overall in the 2010 draft and was Toronto's top position player in the draft.

Sweeney said he likes getting up early and going to work. They practice in the morning, then play games in the afternoon against the Yankees, Phillies and Pirates farmhands.

"You really don't think of it as a job," he said. "It is your job, but you go to the field and you're thinking about playing baseball, you're not thinking about it being your job. You worry about performance sometimes, but you have to know it's a long season and you're going to have ups and downs."

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Sweeney lives in a hotel with the other players and receives meal money, but the players do not get paid in extended spring training.

"It makes you want to work that much harder," he said.

Overall, Sweeney described pro baseball as awesome. "It's fun to go to the field and play baseball for your job," he said.