

Mauer anxious to put Kernels together

Written by S.D. Buhr

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FORT MYERS, Fla. - In less than two weeks, Cedar Rapids Kernels Manager Jake Mauer will be bringing a fresh crop of 25 ballplayers north from their spring training home in Fort Myers, but the exact constitution of that roster is still a work in progress.

Mauer said he'd like to get things finalized soon.

"Ideally we'd like to have who we're going to take to Cedar Rapids by that last week of spring training," Mauer said Thursday, just before his squad faced a Class A group of Boston Red Sox prospects.

"You can do different things and put in different signs, things we're going to use throughout the year. Make sure we get all the kinks out before we start up there at Kane County (where the Kernels open their season April 9)."

Mauer will be entering his third season as manager of the Kernels. In fact, among all of the Twins organization's full-season teams, he's the only manager assigned to the same club he led a year ago.

The Twins hired Hall of Famer Paul Molitor to manage the big league team this season and former Chicago Cubs manager Mike Quade is taking over the AAA Rochester Red Wings. Jeff Smith and Doug Mientkiewicz swapped their

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assignments this year, with Mientkiewicz managing AA Chattanooga and Smith taking over high-A Fort Myers.

Mauer was not surprised to be assigned to Cedar Rapids again.

"No, I wouldn't say surprised," he said. "Obviously, Cedar Rapids is a pretty good fit for me on a personal level, family-wise.

Professional-wise, baseball is baseball, wherever you're at and at the level I'm at, I really enjoy being around the young guys and teaching every day."

Kernels fans will recognize the team's manager this season, but they are going to want to pick up a program early on their first trip to the ballpark and study it closely, because there probably will not be a lot of familiar names.

Starting pitchers Stephen Gonsalves and Mat Batts are likely to return to start their new season with the Kernels and both have been "throwing it well," according to their manager. John Curtiss, who joined the Kernels to make a start during their playoff run a year ago, is also likely to start his season in Cedar Rapids.

"As far as those starters, folks in C.R. have seen those guys a little bit, but our bullpen is going to be pretty much all new guys from what it looks like," Mauer said. "As far as position players, I don't think we'll have too many guys that were there last year. Maybe a few guys that were there for a portion of the year, we may get back."

Outfielders Zack Larson and Max Murphy are the only position players with time in a Kernels uniform who have been assigned to the most recent Kernels spring training working group. Mauer was quick to point out that the roster is not set, however.

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"It will depend, with Molitor running the big league club, who he likes, who he wants to keep," said Mauer.

The parent Twins are still about 10 players above their opening day roster limit, so as the big club makes further cuts, there could be additions and/or subtractions from the current group of prospective Kernels.

Once the season gets under way, Mauer indicated he felt the team may be relying on its starting pitching early on. "I think we'll have some starting pitchers with a little bit of experience that I think we'll lean on, especially early in the year. They'll need to go out there and set the tone," he said.

Offensively, the Kernels are going to be relying on players with little or no experience above rookie-level short season ball at Elizabethton last season.

"We're still trying to kind of get to know these guys a little bit," Mauer said. "As far as team speed, I don't know if we're going to have a lot of it. We're going to have some guys that put up decent numbers in E'Town.

"Obviously, we all know it's different going into the Midwest League, facing a little different caliber of pitching."

A number of players are having strong springs, but Mauer was philosophical about his expectations for the Kernels once they leave the mid-80 degree temperatures of Fort Myers behind and head north.

"We may go through some growing pains, but hopefully it'll all shake out," he said. "We'll see how we react when it's 30 degrees out."