

Kellen Sweeney promoted to Bluefield Blue Jays

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:42 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:53



Kellen Sweeney woke up Saturday morning in the cool mountain air in Bluefield, W.Va., refreshed and ready for his next stop in professional baseball.

The Toronto Blue Jays have assigned Sweeney to the Bluefield Blue Jays in the Appalachian League, a 10-team rookie league with teams in Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia and Tennessee.

Sweeney had been in extended spring training in Dunedin, Fla., since late February, living in the same hotel for four months and playing baseball in hot, sweaty conditions.

The Blue Jays told him last Thursday to pack his bags, because he was moving up in the world after playing in the Florida Gulf Coast League in 2010. He flew to Charlotte, N.C., on Friday and had a three-hour bus ride to Bluefield.

He already likes the climate, especially compared to Florida.

"The weather is very cool. Everybody is loving it," Sweeney said Sunday. "We're not sweating before we even stretch.

"It would be really hot in Dundedin. You'd be drenched by the time you were done stretching. You had to wear two shirts every day."

Sweeney (Cedar Rapids Jefferson, 2010) is one of four Metro athletes who will be playing in the minor leagues this season, joining Scott Schebler (Cedar Rapids Prairie, 2009), Matt Holland (Marion, 2006) and Nate Woods (Xavier, 2007).

Kellen Sweeney promoted to Bluefield Blue Jays

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:42 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:53

Schebler has been assigned by the Los Angeles Dodgers to the Ogden Raptors in Ogden, Utah, in the Pioneer League. Holland will be playing for the Clearwater Phillies in Clearwater, Fla., in the Florida Gulf Coast League. Woods will be playing for the Florida Marlins in Jupiter, Fla., in the Gulf Coast League.

The Appalachian League, Pioneer League and Gulf Coast League all begin this week.

Sweeney was selected by Toronto in the second round (69th overall) in the 2010 draft. He signed for \$600,000 and hit .267 with one home run and seven RBIs in 16 games in the Gulf Coast League last August.

The Gulf Coast League and Appalachian League are both rookie circuits, but the Appalachian League is a higher level. Sweeney said most of the players who were picked by Toronto in the 2010 draft have been assigned to Bluefield after playing in the GCL last year.

Sweeney was a shortstop at Jefferson High School, but the Blue Jays moved him to third base in pro ball and he said he likes the position.

Bluefield opens the season Tuesday night with a three-game series against the Elizabethton Twins in Tennessee. Bluefield is scheduled to play 68 games in 71 days, so it will be a rugged summer with few days off, but they play mostly night games.

The teams in the Florida Gulf Coast League played day games, in the middle of the summer heat and humidity. Sweeney would get up at 6:30 or 7 a.m., head to the ballpark in Dunedin and start sweating.

"Now I get to sleep in and go to the field around 2 or 3 (p.m.)," he said. "It's going to be a lot more fun."

Bluefield draws about 1,000 fans for home games, which should be more fun for the players as

Kellen Sweeney promoted to Bluefield Blue Jays

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:42 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:53

well. Those day games in the Gulf Coast League drew only a handful of spectators, mostly parents.

Bluefield was associated with the Baltimore Orioles for more than a half-century, but they parted company after the 2010 season and the Blue Jays took their spot. Cal Ripken Jr. began his Hall of Fame career for the Orioles in Bluefield.

"The Orioles were here for like 53 years, so everybody was fans of them," Sweeney said. "And now it's our first year here, so we've got to make them like us."

Sweeney and his Bluefield teammates are living in what he described as a hotel and dormitory. Each player has a host family that welcomed them to town.

"They actually have a family that kind of takes you in and helps you, like if you need to go someplace for anything," he said. "I got a really good family. They took care of me Saturday night and took me to Walmart and got me food and everything."

Bluefield is located in the Appalachian Mountains, with an elevation of 2,600 feet about sea level. It's located in coal mining country, but its population has declined from 25,000 in 1940 to roughly 11,000 with the closing of mines.

Sweeney said there are lots of hills and lots of trees. "It's actually quite beautiful here," he said.

Ryan Sweeney, Kellen's older brother, played for Bristol (Va.) in the Appalachian League at the start of his pro career with the Chicago White Sox. Ryan Sweeney is now a Major League outfielder with the Oakland A's.

The Toronto Blue Jays have a Class A Short Season team in Vancouver, so that could be Kellen Sweeney's next stop in pro baseball. They also have a team in Lansing (Mich.) in the Class A Midwest League, so if Sweeney gets promoted to Lansing he might make a trip to

Kellen Sweeney promoted to Bluefield Blue Jays

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:42 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 June 2011 19:53

Cedar Rapids to play the Kernels some day.

"It's up to them," he said, "but I'm hoping so."

The Bluefield Blue Jays are officially based in Bluefield, W.Va., but their ballpark (Bowen Field) is located on the Virginia side of the border. All of the teams in the Appalachian League travel by bus, with trips to Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina, but it's a fairly compact area.

"They said our longest trip is like five hours, if that," Sweeney said. "So that's not too bad."