

Berrios is hot pitching prospect for Twins

Written by S.D. Buhr
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In the days following last June's MLB Amateur Draft, most of the chatter among Twins fans seemed focused on two subjects: Byron Buxton, the high school outfielder the Twins selected with the second overall pick of the draft, and the number of hard throwing college-age relief pitchers the team picked in the first couple of rounds.

Everyone wanted to discuss just how good Buxton might become and whether or not the Twins would be able to successfully convert any of those strong college arms into starting pitchers. Almost overlooked in the discussions was Jose Berrios, a young high school pitcher the Twins obtained with a supplemental first-round pick out of Papa Juan XXIII High School in Bayamon, Puerto Rico.

It's understandable, perhaps. Buxton was the near-consensus "best athlete in the draft" and the college pitchers all seemed to be at least 6-foot-4, 210-pound men with mid-90s fastballs who had proven themselves with some of the premier college programs in the country.

Berrios, on the other hand, appeared to have to stretch to reach six feet in height and reportedly packed on about 20 pounds during his senior year of high school just to get up near 185.

Some even suggested the Twins had reached a bit in selecting Berrios where they did. ESPN's Keith Law had the young righty pegged as the 73rd best ballplayer available in the draft, but the Twins used the 32nd overall pick to select him.

Almost immediately, there was speculation that Berrios' size and mechanics indicated he'd likely need to convert to a bullpen role.

Berrios pitched at both Rookie League levels in the Twins organization last summer after inking a deal with the Twins for a \$1.55 million signing bonus. He threw 30.2 innings across 11 games (four of them starts) and put up a combined 1.17 ERA.

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That's nice, but here are the real eye-popping numbers: Berrios struck out 49 batters in those 30.2 innings while walking just four. No matter what level of minor league ball you're at, those are impressive stats.

His effort didn't go unnoticed outside the Twins organization, either. In January, Berrios was named to Puerto Rico's World Baseball Classic pitching staff.

That honor also got the young pitcher an invitation to the Twins' Major League spring training, where he would not only get much needed work in preparation for the WBC tournament but would also have the opportunity to get in front of the eyes of Twins Manager Ron Gardenhire and the rest of the big club's coaching staff.

While Berrios has not pitched in any of the Twins' "official" spring training games, he has pitched in the "B" games and intrasquad games in order to get enough work. Even without taking the mound for an official spring training game, however, he's made an impression.

Gardenhire observed after Berrios took one of his turns throwing live batting practice to the Big Leaguers, "He can throw it. He can wing it."

Minneapolis Star-Tribune Twins beat reporter LaVelle E. Neal III has also been impressed with Berrios, writing, "I can't believe he's just 18. His stuff is live and he goes after people."

In his final game experience prior to leaving to join his team mates for the WBC in Puerto Rico, Berrios threw two innings against a team of Red Sox prospects in a 'B' game and retired all six batters he faced.

Berrios pitched in only one of Puerto Rico's three first round WBC games and while his stat-line wasn't impressive, he did make an impression. His appearance came against a Dominican team that was stacked with Major League talent. He certainly did not appear starstruck. He induced groundball outs from big leaguers Jose Reyes, Erick Aybar and Nelson Cruz and struck out Robinson Cano swinging at a letter high fastball. While he took the loss in his team's 4-2 defeat at the hands of the Dominicans, his team advanced to round two of the WBC in Miami.

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It will be interesting to see how the Twins handle Berrios once the WBC wraps up and the minor league season gets under way in full force. The Twins are not an organization known for overtaxing the arms of their young pitching prospects, and ordinarily it wouldn't have been surprising to see an 18-year-old like Berrios stay in extended spring training for a few weeks rather than subjecting him to the chilly Iowa weather in April.

But with his early start and the WBC work, they may be more likely to send him north to Cedar Rapids for Opening Day.

In any event, it's not so much a matter of "if" but "when" Berrios will pitch in Cedar Rapids this season. He could show fans of the Kernels and Twins in Eastern Iowa a bit of what has been impressing everyone in Fort Myers this spring.