

Mauer likes what he sees of possible Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr
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With local temperatures finally working their way into the 40's in Cedar Rapids, local baseball fans can allow their minds to wander to even warmer days ahead when the Cedar Rapids Kernels open their season April 4 against Beloit.

It's still a bit chilly for baseball at Veterans Memorial Stadium, but the minor leaguers in the parent Minnesota Twins organization are hard at work in the warm sunshine at the Twins' spring training site in Fort Myers, Fla.

While there's plenty of speculation about which young Twins prospects may fill out the Kernels roster, it's still too early to know with certainty who those players will be.

As Kernels Manager Jake Mauer pointed out this week, "It depends on who they keep in Minnesota at a number of positions. Once those decisions are made, the rest takes shape off of that. There's kind of a trickle down effect."

While the Major League camp has been humming for about a month, the minor leaguers began official workouts less than two weeks ago and have played only a handful of games. In fact, Mauer himself hasn't necessarily been working with all the players tentatively earmarked for the Kernels.

With the Major League spring training roster still roughly twice the size it will be during the season, the Twins shift their coaching staffs up a level until more cuts are made by the big league club. As a result, Mauer has spent much of his time working with players likely to spend their season with the Fort Myers Miracle in the Florida State League.

Still, Mauer has had opportunities to work with a number of players widely expected to wear Kernels uniforms this season and he's well aware that many of those players are among the Twins' highest rated young prospects. That can certainly lead to some lofty expectations, both for the team and for those players individually.

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Mauer's take on the high expectations is what you might expect from the club's manager. "It's the old cliché, you're not as good as people say and you're not as bad as people say.

"It's nice to get recognition, but you've got to go out on the field and play. 'Prospect' is just a tag," he remarked.

With the voice of someone who's seen these things play out first hand, he added, "I played with a lot of guys who were top prospects who never made it. It doesn't affect how you play. You still have to put in the work."

Mauer believes the players he's working with are doing just that. He specifically mentioned outfield prospect Max Kepler, the German native who signed with the Twins in 2009 as a 16-year-old.

"Max looks pretty good," he said. "I saw him down here as a 16-year-old and he has really physically developed."

Byron Buxton, the Twins' top draft choice in last June's amateur draft, also has impressed Mauer. "Buxton looks pretty good. He's really working hard," the skipper reported.

Another prospect many Twins fans are anxious to see in action for the Kernels is third baseman Travis Harrison. Harrison's reputation is one of great offensive potential, with some question concerning his ability to continue playing third base as he progresses up the organizational ladder.

But Mauer likes what he's seeing so far, pointing out that Harrison is focusing on improving the defensive aspect of his game this spring.

"He came in with a very good attitude," said Mauer. "He wants to be good on defense and he's working pretty hard on it."

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"He's not a finished product, without a doubt ... We may see some errors, but I think he'll be OK."

One top prospect that Mauer hasn't had an opportunity to see much of thus far is Jose Berrios. Berrios reported with the Major League pitchers and catchers in mid-February to help him prepare to play for his native Puerto Rico in the World Baseball Classic.

His team survived the first round of the WBC, so Berrios has yet to work out with his minor league teammates in Fort Myers.

While Berrios has been expected to open the season in the Kernels' starting rotation, there's some speculation that his participation in the WBC could change those plans. Berrios has been used sparingly out of the bullpen for Puerto Rico, so as long as the team remains in that tournament Berrios won't be getting his innings stretched out the way a starting pitcher normally would during spring training.

Could that affect the organization's plans for Berrios to start the season?

"It could," Mauer admitted. "Obviously he's not starting (for Puerto Rico). But he's getting exposed to some intense situations."

Mauer doesn't think it would take Berrios long to get ready for the season, noting he pitched in winter leagues during the offseason. If Puerto Rico is eliminated this week, Mauer added, "he will come here in shape and just need a tuneup. He came in to camp before the WBC in pretty good shape."

The next week or so will go a long way in determining who will be wearing a Kernels uniform on Opening Day.

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“We'll probably start to see our roster take shape with about 10 days left. There are a few pitchers who are a little tender, so that could affect which pitchers start with us,” said Mauer.