

Kernels could 'corner' these guys in 2013

Written by S.D. Buhr

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series of articles about Cedar Rapids Kernels prospects for the 2013 season. Next: Middle infielders)

In preparation for the first season of the new affiliation between the Minnesota Twins and Cedar Rapids Kernels, we have embarked on a series of "get to know them" articles.

The intention is to give Kernels fans a little bit of information about the Twins prospects they may be seeing in Kernels uniforms over the course of the summer, understanding full well that it's impossible to know exactly who will fill the Kernels' roster until closer to Opening Day.

In Part 1 of the series, we looked at the catchers that are likely to spend time in Cedar Rapids, as well as a few that could find their way here if things fall their way. Here, we'll look at corner infielders.

A year ago, the Twins' Class A team in Beloit had a couple of its biggest power-hitting prospects covering the corner infield positions in third baseman Miguel Sano and first baseman Kennys Vargas.

The Kernels won't have the organization's top prospect playing third base for them in 2012, as Beloit did, but there are certainly some similarities between the Snappers' corner infielders and those that are likely to be manning those positions in Cedar Rapids this summer.

Rory Rhodes – Age 21 – Bats R/Throws R

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL) and Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 70, BA - .236, OPS - .697, SO - 75, BB - 27, 2B - 11, 3B - 2, HR - 8, RBI - 39

As Twins fans well know, and as Kernels fans are likely to discover, the Twins have historically had quite a pipeline of players coming up through their system from Australia. Rory Rhodes is yet another member of the fraternity from "down under."

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While still just 21 years old entering the season, 2012 was the fourth year the Brisbane native played in the Twins minor league organization. Rhodes started the year with Beloit and struggled offensively, hitting less than .200 in his 26 games with the Snappers. He fared better once back with Elizabethton, but still struck out more than he and the Twins would like.

Rhodes started his career with the Twins as a third baseman, but was moved across the diamond to first base after a rotator cuff injury a couple of years ago. He did play several games in the outfield in 2012, however. At 6-foot-7 and more than 200 pounds, it won't be hard for Kernels fans to spot the Aussie, wherever he may be positioned on the field.

Travis Harrison – Age 20 – Bats R/Throws R

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 60, BA - .301, OPS - .845, SO - 51, BB - 24, 2B - 12, 3B - 4, HR - 5, RBI - 27

The Twins used the supplemental first round draft pick they acquired by letting Orlando Hudson walk away as a free agent to draft Travis Harrison with the 50th overall pick of the 2011 amateur draft.

He didn't sign with the Twins until just before the 2011 deadline when he signed for just over \$1 million, but the late signing meant he didn't get any games in with any Twins affiliate in 2011.

Harrison spent 2012 with Elizabethton, where he put up plenty of offense with 21 extra-base hits, including five home runs. However, Harrison also committed 24 errors at third base in 143 chances covering 59 games at the position.

By comparison, Sano committed 42 errors in 361 chances at the position for Beloit last year. In other words, for the second consecutive season, the Twins apparently will be looking at their Class A affiliate to determine if one of their most promising offensive prospects can learn to play a passable third base.

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Regardless of his defensive skills, however, Harrison is likely to be among the few Kernels infielders with the most promise. He appears to be a consensus "top 15" prospect in the Twins organization among those who publish such ratings and had been listed among the top 10 Twins prospects prior to the Denard Span and Ben Revere trades that brought two highly regarded starting pitching prospects into the organization.

D.J. Hicks – Age 22 – Bats L/Throws R

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 31, BA - .270, OPS - .817, SO - 37, BB - 19, 2B - 7, 3B - 0, HR - 4, RBI - 25

D.J. Hicks, who was drafted in the 17th round in 2012 out of the University of Central Florida, signed with the Twins in time to get half a season in with Elizabethton. Hicks split his time between first base and designated hitter with Elizabethton and apparently held his own on defense, committing just two errors in his 20 games at first base.

He will need to make better contact, however, as he had six more strikeouts (37) than he had hits (31) for the season. If Hicks is a member of the Kernels Opening Day roster, fans may want to wish him a slightly belated "happy birthday" as he'll turn 23 years old on April 2, just two days before the opening game.

It's challenging to identify other corner infielders in the organization that could find their way to Cedar Rapids in 2013. It seems that, in all likelihood, the three players listed above will get the lion's share of innings at first base, third base and DH, with the odd outfielder or middle infielder taking a turn at first or third base when Manager Jake Mauer needs someone to fill in at one of the corners.

However, injuries and promotions often mean players get opportunities to move up that they might not otherwise get. With that in mind, let's at least take a look at some players that could be called on, if necessary.

Aderlin Mejia was signed out of the Dominican Republic in 2010 and played his first year of professional baseball in the Dominican Summer League. He's spent the past two seasons with the GCL Twins (though he did get a few opportunities to move across the Fort Myers complex and suit up for the High-A Fort Myers Miracle in 2012).

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Mejia hit well in 2012, with a .313 batting average and a .967 OPS. Perhaps most encouraging is that he struck out just 15 times in more than 200 plate appearances.

Mejia should perhaps be considered more likely to fill a middle infielder role, given that he played only 21 games at third base last year and 27 in the middle infield. But if the Kernels need a third baseman due to promotions or injuries, Mejia looks as likely to be a call-up option as anyone.

Bryan Haar and Joel Licon almost look like identical bookends as potential first and third basemen, respectively.

Haar was taken by the Twins in the 34th round of the 2012 draft out of the University of San Diego. Licon was chosen nine rounds earlier than Haar out of Orange Coast College.

Both signed in time to get a fair number of games in with the GCL Twins, where both put up identical .250 batting averages. Both struggled to make contact, with Haar racking up two fewer strikeouts than he had hits and Licon striking out two more times than he hit safely.

Haar is strictly a first baseman and is already 23 years old, while Licon turned 22 in December and moved around a bit, playing 10 games in the outfield, 12 games in the middle infield and 22 games at third base (in addition to 7 games at DH).

While both are most likely going to be held back in extended spring training and start their years with one of the short-season Rookie League teams, it's possible either could be called on in Cedar Rapids if injuries and/or promotions leave the Kernels in need of a corner infielder later in the year.

Finally, one of the more intriguing young (emphasis on young) corner infield prospects in the Twins organization is Javier Pimentel. Pimentel was signed for more than \$500,000 in bonus money as a shortstop out of the Dominican Republic in 2010.

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After splitting 2011 between the Dominican Summer League and the Twins GCL team, Pimentel spent all of 2012 in the GCL at age 18, dividing his time mostly at first base and third base. His stat line was not impressive.

He didn't hit well. He didn't walk much. He struck out a lot. But if you assume the scouts who liked him enough to recommend that kind of bonus saw something in him that projects into a big league ballplayer, maybe the Twins just need to be patient until he grows into his frame and figures the game out.

It may not be likely that we'll see Pimentel in Cedar Rapids this season, but for now, let's just remember the name.

While the Twins do have a history of drafting college age corner infielders, it's pretty unlikely that they would send a brand new draftee to Class A the same summer he's drafted, so the Kernels shouldn't look for much corner infield help from the 2013 draft at least until the 2014 season.