

Twins stocked with talented young pitchers

Written by S.D. Buhr
Sunday, 31 March 2013 23:26 -

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Last in a series of preseason looks at the Cedar Rapids Kernels)

It's no secret that the Minnesota Twins have issues these days with regard to their pitching, but there is hope for the future and some of that future could be on display in Cedar Rapids this summer.

One of the challenges in projecting starting pitching vs. bullpen pitching is that, at the Class A level, organizations tend to ask many of their pitchers to spend time in both roles. Nobody really knows with certainty which pitchers have a Major League future as a starter and which will eventually find a role in the bullpen.

In addition, the Twins will want to limit the number of innings many of their pitching prospects put on their arms during each minor league season. One way to accomplish that is to have even those pitchers clearly earmarked for rotation roles spend a chunk of their minor league seasons in the bullpen.

Rather than try to predict which pitchers will start games and which will come in from the pen, we will just run down a list of 16 possible Kernels pitchers that fans in Cedar Rapids may get an opportunity to enjoy watching this summer.

Luke Bard – Age 22 – Throws Right

2012: Fort Myers (Rookie – GCL) and Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 7, GS - 1, ERA - 3.86, IP - 7.0, WHIP - 1.714, SO - 7, BB - 7

Bard, the brother of Red Sox pitcher Daniel Bard, was chosen by the Twins as a supplemental first-round pick (42nd pick overall) out of Georgia Tech. Like a number of others on this list, Bard was a relief pitcher in college who is very likely to get an opportunity to start games.

Bard signed late and had a minor injury or two during the year. As a result, he got very little work in at the professional level in 2012, though he did make a handful of appearances at both

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Rookie League levels and actually pitched better at Elizabethton than he did during his time with the GCL Twins.

Whether Bard starts the season with Cedar Rapids or high-A Fort Myers may depend on whether the Twins elect to use him as a starter or reliever to begin the year and, of course, how he's looked during spring training. He reportedly throws his fastball in the mid-90s, has a strong slider and decent changeup as well.

D.J. Baxendale – Age 22 – Throws Right

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

G - 17, GS - 0, ERA - 0.96, IP - 18.2, WHIP - 0.804, SO - 31, BB - 2

Baxendale was selected in the 10th round of the 2012 amateur draft out of the University of Arkansas and worked his way through two levels of the Twins system after signing his contract. He clearly outclassed the competition in Elizabethton, striking out more than two hitters per inning in his six appearances there. He gave up exactly one hit before being promoted to Beloit.

Baxendale pitched well with the Snappers, but hitters did make more consistent contact off him. In fact, he gave up more than a hit per inning while pitching for Beloit. He continued to strike out a lot of hitters, however, and walked only one batter while in Beloit and did not allow any home runs.

Baxendale very well may start the season at high-A Fort Myers, particularly if the Twins intend to use him out of the bullpen in 2013. However, indications are that the organization believes Baxendale is a candidate to convert to a starting pitcher and that could improve the chances he starts the season in Cedar Rapids.

Jose (J.O.) Berrios – Age 18 – Throws Right

2012: Fort Myers (Rookie – GCL) and Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 11, GS - 4, ERA - 1.17, IP - 30.2, WHIP - 0.620, SO - 49, BB - 4

Berrios' name appears very high on a number of Twins Top Prospects lists, as you'd expect for

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a pitcher drafted with a supplemental first-round pick in 2012 (32nd overall). He was drafted out of his high school in Puerto Rico and spent most of the summer with the GCL Twins.

Berrios did, however, earn a promotion to Elizabethton toward the end of the year, where he got three starts in to help the E'Twins finish off their championship season.

Berrios started in only half of his 14 appearances during the season, however, and as a result he pitched a total of only 30.2 innings. The 18-year-old struck out an amazing 14.4 hitters per nine innings (exceeding 14 strikeouts per 9 innings at both levels) and barely walked more than one batter per nine innings.

Berrios got a head start on his 2013 season by being named to Puerto Rico's team in the World Baseball Classic. He pitched out of the bullpen and did not get a lot of innings, but he certainly did not embarrass himself. The highlight of his WBC experience very likely was striking out New York Yankees star Robinson Cano swinging with a high, hard fastball.

Berrios is a legitimate top-of-the-rotation prospect, which is something the Twins have very few of in their organization. He won't turn 19 until May, so the Twins won't risk overworking the young man's arm, but they probably won't hesitate to promote him to the next level as soon as he shows he can dominate MWL hitters.

Hudson Boyd – Age 20 – Throws Right

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 13, GS - 13, ERA - 2.95, IP - 58.0, WHIP - 1.483, SO - 36, BB - 23

Boyd was a supplemental first-round pick (55th overall) by the Twins in the 2011 draft out of his Fort Myers (Fla.) high school, but didn't sign with the Twins until just before the deadline that summer. As a result, 2012 was his first year of professional baseball.

Rather than starting his career in his hometown with the GCL Twins, the big righty went to Elizabethton after extended spring training. Boyd didn't exactly set the league on fire last summer and it wouldn't be a terrible idea for the Twins to hold him back a bit and promote him

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to Cedar Rapids toward mid-season.

For a guy who reportedly has a high-90s fastball, he certainly didn't miss all that many bats in Elizabethton. His strikeouts per nine innings rate needs to be higher and he should not be giving up more than a hit per inning. Still, he didn't give up all that many runs, so he's finding ways to get hitters out.

The Twins historically push their top pitching prospects up the organizational ladder faster than they do their hitters. That being the case, we may see Boyd with the Kernels to start the season.

Since he threw just 58 innings in 2012, he's one of the pitchers we could see spend time both as a starter and in the bullpen during the course of the season. In fact, some project him to be a closer as he moves higher up the ladder.

Even after his inconsistent first season, he's still ranked among the Twins' top 25 prospects on most such lists.

Joshua Burris – Age 21 – Throws Right

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 18, GS - 0, ERA - 1.75, IP - 36, WHIP - 1.250, SO - 40, BB - 21

Considering that the Twins drafted Burris out of LSU-Eunice in the 17th round back in 2011, he's relatively young and will be just 21 throughout the 2013 season. He didn't sign in time to pitch during the summer he was drafted, but averaged two innings per relief appearance for Elizabethton in 2012.

Burris' name can be found in many Twins top prospects lists as he's demonstrated both a solid mid-90s fastball and an effective curve. Like many of his peers at this level, he's had no trouble striking out Rookie level hitters, but has also walked more than a few, too.

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Since he was routinely used for multiple innings last season, there is speculation that Burris could be considered for a switch to a starting pitcher role at some point this season.

J.T. Chargois – Age 22 – Throws Right

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 12, GS - 0, ERA - 1.69, IP - 16.0, WHIP - 0.938, SO - 22, BB - 5

Chargois was a second-round pick of the Twins in the 2012 draft, coming out of Rice University. He has two effective pitches, hitting the mid-90s with his fastball with a good low-80s curveball to go with it. His delivery is violent and that may result in limiting him to bullpen work.

Chargois was too much for Rookie league hitters and will either come north with Cedar Rapids or skip the Midwest League and start 2013 with the high-A Fort Myers Miracle. He has a lot of potential and the Twins are likely to want to challenge him to see whether he could move up the ladder quickly.

Tyler Duffey – Age 22 – Throws Right

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 12, GS - 0, ERA - 1.42, IP - 19.0, WHIP - 0.632, SO - 27, BB - 2

Duffey was taken by the Twins in the fifth round of the 2012 draft out of Rice University. Unlike many of the other relief pitchers drafted in the 2012 class, Duffey did not pitch at both Rookie league levels after signing.

He was assigned directly to Elizabethton and put up impressive numbers there. In fact, he was promoted to Beloit's postseason roster and was credited with the win in their only playoff victory over Clinton.

Duffey demonstrated excellent control, walking just two hitters over the course of his 19 innings of work. Also on the plus side, he struck out 27 hitters. Of course, as a college-age draftee, he was older than most of the hitters he faced, so that must be taken into account in looking at his numbers.

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David Hurlbut – Age 23 – Throws Left

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL)

G - 25, GS - 15, ERA - 2.76, IP - 111.0, WHIP - 1.171, SO - 85, BB - 25

The Twins liked Hurlbut so much, they drafted him twice! Originally picked by the Twins as a junior college pitcher in the 35th round of the 2009 draft, Hurlbut chose to go to Cal State–Fullerton rather than sign. In 2011, the Twins used their 28th-round pick to choose Hurlbut again and the lefty threw 66 innings in Elizabethton after signing that summer.

Hurlbut is one example of where the Twins have drafted a college relief pitcher and given him an opportunity to start. He pitched a full season at Beloit in 2012, racking up 111 innings in 25 games, 15 of them as a starter.

He doesn't have overpowering velocity, but his numbers at Beloit improved considerably over his Appalachian League season. His ERA dropped to 2.76 and his WHIP to 1.171, largely due to allowing almost three fewer hits per nine innings compared to his Rookie level season.

So after a respectable year at Beloit, why wouldn't the Twins promote Hurlbut to Fort Myers in 2013? That's a fair question and they may well do exactly that.

This is simply one of those situations where it looks like the rotation in Fort Myers may be pretty crowded to start the year and Hurlbut may be the odd man out for a while. Of course, he could also begin the season in the Fort Myers bullpen.

Even if he does start in Cedar Rapids, he certainly could be one of the first pitchers moved up when pitching spots open up with the Fort Myers Miracle.

Tyler Jones – Age 23 – Throws Right

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL)

G - 18, GS - 16, ERA - 4.67, IP - 86.2, WHIP - 1.442, SO - 102, BB - 35

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Jones was selected by the Twins in the 11th round of the 2011 draft out of LSU in time to get four appearances in for Elizabethton that summer. It's probably just as well he didn't get more work in because his seven innings there did not go well at all. He spent the entire season in 2012 at Beloit, where things went much better, but there's still room for improvement.

One thing Jones continues to do is rack up a good number of strikeouts. That's the good news. Unfortunately for him, he also gave up better than a hit per inning and it wouldn't hurt for him to figure out how to cut his walks a little, too.

Jones throws two different fastballs and can touch the mid-90s, but reports are that his other pitches need to improve.

It's possible that Jones could open the season in Fort Myers, but it would be tough to say he demonstrated the ability to consistently get outs in the MWL last year and the Twins should have no shortage of rotation options at the high-A level that are more advanced than Jones at this point.

If he does start the season in Cedar Rapids, however, don't expect him to stick around all summer. He's got the talent to move up quickly if he can cut down on the baserunners he allows.

Zack Jones – Age 22 – Throws Right

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

G - 18, GS - 0, ERA - 2.25, IP - 20.0, WHIP - 1.100, SO - 34, BB - 11

The Twins used their fourth-round pick in 2012 to draft Jones out of San Jose State University. At 6-foot-1, he is not as tall as many of the other relief pitchers the team drafted, but his stature doesn't prevent him from hitting the upper-90s with his fastball.

Jones stayed in Elizabethton only long enough to pitch six innings and left town with a perfect

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0.00 ERA. The Midwest League was more challenging in terms of giving up runs, but his strikeout rate actually increased at the higher level, where he struck out 16.1 hitters per nine innings.

He does walk a few hitters, but if he can work on his control, Jones could fly up the organizational ladder. In fact, it wouldn't be surprising if the Twins decided he showed enough in Beloit to warrant starting 2013 at high-A in Fort Myers.

Chris Mazza – Age 23 – Throws Right

2012: Fort Myers (Rookie – GCL) and Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 18, GS - 0, ERA - 2.05, IP - 30.2, WHIP - 0.946, SO - 28, BB - 2

Mazza didn't sign soon enough following being selected by the Twins in the 27th round of the 2011 draft to get any work in that summer, but he did pitch at both Rookie league levels in 2012. At 6-foot-4 and just 175 pounds, he has plenty of room to grow into his frame, but he did get off to a good start in his first professional season.

Mazza split his innings almost equally between the GCL Twins and Elizabethton, with similar results. He did give up more runs at Elizabethton, but most importantly he maintained his outstanding strikeout/walk ratio (13.00 SO/BB with the GCL Twins and 15.00 SO/BB at Elizabethton).

Mazza has excellent control and misses bats, and that's a combination that will move him up the ladder with the Twins.

Mason Melotakis – Age 21 – Throws Left

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

G - 20, GS - 0, ERA - 1.88, IP - 24.0, WHIP - 0.958, SO - 34, BB - 6

Melotakis was a second-round pick in 2012 out of Northwestern State University of Louisiana. He made 20 appearances (all in relief) for Elizabethton and Beloit. Melotakis pretty much cut right through hitters at both levels of competition, though hitters had more success making

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contact off him in Beloit.

Melotakis could justifiably start the season in high-A Fort Myers, based on the way he dominated hitters at both Rookie and Class A levels in 2012. At the same time, he didn't spend enough time in Class A to be 100 percent positive he's ready to face high-A hitters.

If Melotakis does start the season with the Kernels, it's likely because the Twins want to find out if he has what it takes to start games.

Christian Powell – Age 21 – Throws Right

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 10, GS - 0, ERA - 5.74, IP - 15.2, WHIP - 1.596, SO - 20, BB - 7

The Twins selected the 6-foot-5 Powell in the eighth round of the 2012 draft out of the College of Charleston and he made just 10 relief appearances for Elizabethton during the summer. Powell had limited success, giving up more than a hit per inning and not demonstrating terrific control.

He did demonstrate an ability to miss bats, however, as he struck out 20 hitters in just 15.2 innings of work. Powell threw more than 100 innings between college and his first year at Elizabethton, so he could probably handle a starting pitching role in terms of innings, but it's perhaps at least as likely that he spends most of the season in the Kernels bullpen as he works on his secondary pitches.

Taylor Rogers – Age 22 – Throws Left

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

G - 15, GS - 10, ERA - 2.27, IP - 63.1, WHIP - 1.105, SO - 74, BB - 17

Rogers was picked up by the Twins in the 11th round of 2012's amateur draft out of the University of Kentucky and pitched his way through two levels in his first partial year of professional baseball.

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Rogers dominated hitters in six starts (covering 30 innings) at Elizabethton, striking out 11.7 hitters per nine innings. He continued to pitch well for Beloit, but as you'd expect hitters had more success against him at the higher level. Still, he continued to strike out more than a hitter per inning with Beloit.

Rogers isn't overpowering with his fastball, but he's obviously doing something right. The jury is probably still out on whether he'll end up as a starter or reliever, but as long as his secondary pitches continue to be effective, the Twins will likely continue giving him opportunities to prove he belongs in future rotations.

Tim Shibuya – Age 23 – Throws Right

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL)

G - 17, GS - 15, ERA - 5.59, IP - 74.0, WHIP - 1.392, SO - 56, BB - 15

Shibuya will be starting his third season in the Twins organization after being taken in the 23rd round of the 2011 draft out of the University of California-San Diego. He has dealt with some injuries in both of his professional seasons, so it will be interesting to see if he can stay healthy this summer and what kind of numbers he can put up.

Shibuya seemed to run a little hot and cold in 2012. He had some very good outings, but too many that weren't so good. In the end, over 74 innings of work, he racked up a none-too-pretty 5.59 ERA and gave up 10.7 hits per nine innings.

He had much better numbers in 2011 at Elizabethton, so he's demonstrated some talent, but at 23, he should be anxious to step up his game a bit in 2013. Shibuya had shoulder surgery last fall and should start the season on the disabled list, but staying healthy the rest of the season would certainly improve his prospects.

Matt Tomshaw – Age 24 – Throws Left

2012: Fort Myers (GCL) and Beloit (Class A – MWL)

G - 22, GS - 14, ERA - 2.92, IP - 89.1, WHIP - 1.164, SO - 67, BB - 17

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Tomshaw was selected by the Twins with their 42nd-round pick in the 2011 amateur draft out of Jacksonville University. While the lefty doesn't have overpowering velocity, he's put up some good numbers in his first two years with the Twins organization.

He gives up a few more hits than you'd like to see, but he seldom walks anyone and that's something the Twins like to see in their pitchers.

Tomshaw doesn't come with the gaudy publicity that high draft picks garner, but he's done something that the Twins' younger pitching prospects haven't done yet - he's been a productive and effective starting pitcher over the course of a full season of professional baseball.

Lefties who can get outs have value and Tomshaw has demonstrated he can get outs. The Twins will be looking to see if he can do so for two full seasons in a row.