

It's no secret that the new baseball season opened up in Cedar Rapids with high expectations for this year's group of Kernels.

In addition to cracking the seal on the first year of the new affiliation between the Kernels and the Minnesota Twins, it's been widely reported that this year's team has the potential to be one of the best collections of prospects Cedar Rapids fans have had the pleasure of watching in Kernels uniforms for a number of years.

So, with the first series of the year under our belts, what kind of impression have the Kernels made?

I only had the opportunity to watch three games of the four-game series with Beloit at Perfect Game Field, but it's impossible not to come away impressed. With the obvious "small sample size" warning label appropriately affixed, here are just a few things that stood out to me over the first four games:

1) Byron Buxton appears to be everything he's been advertised to be.

So much had already been written about the Kernels' center fielder before he even set foot in Cedar Rapids that it seemed almost impossible for Buxton to live up to the lofty expectations. The Twins' first- round draft pick from last year's draft, and second selection in the draft overall, has been compared to seemingly every outfield phenom you can think of.

In an attempt to temper those expectations somewhat, fans have been reminded that this would be the Georgia native's first exposure to full-season professional baseball, as well as his first time playing ball in chilly Midwest April temperatures, so we shouldn't be surprised if it takes Buxton a while to become acclimated to Midwest League play.

Through the first four games of the season, Buxton leads the MWL in hitting with a .563 average. He also leads the league in On-base Plus Slugging (OPS) at 1.549 while accumulating

Kernels get high grades so far

Written by S.D. Buhr
Monday, 08 April 2013 19:25 -

a home run, a triple and a double among his league-leading nine hits.

So far, I think he's acclimating well.

2) The six-man rotation.

Even before arriving in Cedar Rapids, Kernels Manager Jake Mauer had indicated an intention to open the season utilizing a six-man pitching rotation.

The Twins are trying to find out whether some of the power-arms they have drafted the past couple of years can be converted from bullpen roles to starting pitchers and the six-man rotation allows them to look at more starting pitching candidates.

In addition, it helps them limit the number of innings the pitchers put on their arms over the course of the season and, in particular, during the cooler days and nights of April in the Midwest.

Aware that the longer rotation could put a strain on his bullpen, Mauer asked for and received a 13th pitcher from the Twins as a replacement for infielder Drew Leachman, who went on the 7-day Disabled List with a bum shoulder.

Of course, that could leave the Kernels manager a little short on position players on the bench, especially considering the team carries three catchers.

Mauer acknowledged Sunday that he's crossing his fingers a bit that all of his position players stay healthy, but pointed out that catcher Tyler Grimes, who's in his first season behind the plate, would be available to play the infield in an emergency.

Kernels get high grades so far

Written by S.D. Buhr
Monday, 08 April 2013 19:25 -

Through four games, there are obviously a couple of guys we haven't seen get their initial starts yet, but overall the Kernels pitching has been pretty impressive.

How impressive? Consider this: Last week, the writing staff at MiLB.com, which covers the entire minor league landscape across the country, published their picks for the top offensive lineups in each affiliated minor league in the country.

Their pick for the top lineup in the Midwest League was the Beloit Snappers. MiLB.com specifically mentioned Snappers Matt Olson, Renato Nunez, Bruce Maxwell and Aaron Shipman as demonstrating the "remarkable depth" of the Snappers' offense and concluding, "This potent collection of youth and talent give Beloit the lineup with the most upside top-to-bottom in the league."

Maxwell had a nice series for the Snappers, but all together the Kernels pitching held that foursome to a .183 batting average with 23 strikeouts over the four-game series.

Cedar Rapids pitchers finished the series holding down a 1.75 ERA, which is good enough for second best in the MWL, behind only the Lansing Lugnuts.

3) The Kernels hitters can hit the ball.

While Buxton understandably gets most of the attention, there were other impressive performances with the bat over the first four games.

Dalton Hicks has started the season hitting .357 and getting on base at a .471 clip. Add in his .714 slugging percentage and you get a tidy 1.185 OPS to start the season.

Speaking of tidy, check out J.D. Williams' slash line: .400 BA/.500 OBP/.500 SLG for an even 1.000 OPS. You can't get much tidier than that. And that's coming from the ninth spot in the batting order.

Kernels get high grades so far

Written by S.D. Buhr
Monday, 08 April 2013 19:25 -

These weren't the only three Kernels hitters to perform well in the first series, as every time through the order it almost seemed like someone new was stepping up in crucial situations. (Only Hicks had as many as four RBIs in the series.)

In total, Cedar Rapids has the second highest team batting average in the MWL at .276, has a team OBP of .329 (4th in MWL) and are slugging at .425 (3rd in MWL). Kernels hitters struck out 22 times in the first four games, putting them at the top of the league with the fewest strikeouts as a team.

4) The no-hitter.

I'd never seen a no-hitter at the professional level before Sunday. The closest I'd come was being present at the Metrodome a few years back when the Royals' Mike Sweeney broke up Twins pitcher Scott Baker's perfect game in the ninth inning.

Thanks to Tyler Duffey and friends, I can check "see a no-hitter" off my Bucket List.

Duffey was remarkable through his seven innings of perfect work. Between he and his catcher, Jairo Rodriguez, they had the Snappers off balance through most of those innings.

That said, he got some pretty impressive defensive help behind him as well. Just off the top of my head, I can recall outstanding plays by Travis Harrison at third base, Williams in left field, Niko Goodrum at shortstop and Hicks at first base. I'm sure there were others as well.

It was tough for Mauer and pitching coach Gary Lucas to pull Duffey from a perfect game, but it's April and this is Iowa and there's no way they, or the Twins brass, would allow Duffey to go much beyond his allotted 75 pitch limit - nor should they.

Kernels get high grades so far

Written by S.D. Buhr
Monday, 08 April 2013 19:25 -

You can't fault Josue Montanez, who arrived in Cedar Rapids the night before as the replacement for Leachman, if he was a bit nervous coming in to relieve Duffey in the eighth inning. He walked three and coughed up the shutout on a sacrifice fly, but he kept the no-hitter intact.

Tim Atherton walked one hitter in the ninth inning, but struck out the other three batters he faced to put a pretty emphatic exclamation point on the no-hitter.

5) What's next?

The opening series really could not have gone much better. Even the one game the Kernels lost was by just a 2-1 score.

Now the Kernels hit the road for a three-game series against the defending MWL champion Wisconsin Timber Rattlers (Brewers affiliate). Following that, there's a four-game "commuter series" at Clinton (Mariners affiliate) before they play for the home crowd again in a three-game series starting Monday against the Rattlers.

By that time, we should have a clearer idea what to expect from this group of Kernels. For now, though, they've certainly made a good first impression.