

Mauer enjoyed his time with Twins

Written by S.D. Buhr

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MINNEAPOLIS - The Cedar Rapids Kernels fell one game short of a Midwest League championship this season following an emotional one-run loss to West Michigan.

One day later, Kernels Manager Jake Mauer was in the Minnesota Twins dugout beginning a two-week term as a supplemental coach on the Twins' bench.

Thanks to that assignment, Mauer had a first-hand view of the Twins' surprising but ultimately ill-fated playoff drive. The Twins were eliminated from postseason contention Saturday following a loss to Kansas City in the next-to-last game of the regular season.

The stint with the Twins was Mauer's first opportunity to work with the big league team.

"It's been awesome," Mauer said in the Twins dugout Saturday. "It's been a lot of fun, obviously, being in the mix here for the playoff spot and watching how these guys prepare and go after it."

Mauer, who has coached and managed at three different minor league levels in the Twins organization over the past decade, had the opportunity to get a close-up look at a number of his former players, including three members of his 2013 Cedar Rapids Kernels squad with Tyler Duffey, Byron Buxton and Max Kepler.

"It's been really interesting, especially watching these young guys, some of the guys that I had in the Florida State League (Class High A) or even in GCL (rookie level Gulf Coast League), seeing them five, six, seven, eight years down the road here. Watching them mature and see some of them have a big impact on what's going on and the success that they have had here has been pretty exciting."

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While there may be a sense of pride in Mauer, similar to what a school teacher might feel at seeing former students grow to become successful adults, the Kernels skipper was quick to point out that each Major League player gets help along the way from a lot of people.

"There's a lot of guys that have their fingerprints on guys," Mauer pointed out. "Granted, these guys are all supremely talented, there's no doubt about it.

"But that's what's neat with the minor leagues, each level you go to and each person you play for is going to have a different personality and the way they run teams and the way they approach the game. Some guys may be more aggressive than others, other guys may be more power oriented. Whatever it is.

"Part of it, too, is learning how to adapt yourself, how you fit on a team. I'm sure Miguel Sano (the Twins rookie designated hitter) has never DH'd this much in his life and that's how he fits on this team. He's done a really nice job and it's been a new experience for him.

"Guys that hit three, four or five (in the batting order) in the minor leagues come up here and they're the eighth or ninth hitter. It's just how you fit."

Of course, the Twins didn't bring Mauer to Minneapolis just to watch his former players play baseball. He has normal coaching duties and he was also there to learn more about how his chosen craft is performed at the big league level. After all, Mauer, like his minor league players, would ultimately like to land a position with the Twins' Major League staff at some point.

On game days, Mauer hit ground balls to infielders, much the same way he does during batting practice with the Kernels before each game. But much of his work took place behind the scenes in the batting cages and elsewhere.

"I've hung around a lot with Bruno and Rudy (Twins hitting coach Tom Brunansky and assistant hitting coach Rudy Hernandez) in the cages and listening to them talk about approach," he said.

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“What’s really interesting is the amount of information these guys have about opposing players and opposing pitchers. We’ve seen a lot of shifts and things like that. We don’t have the luxury of that much information, obviously, in Low-A.”

It’s not at the same level, but technology and the information it can provide about pitchers, hitters and fielders is increasing at the minor league level as well. The Twins organization and the Kernels coaches benefited from the installation of TrackMan technology at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Cedar Rapids this past season.

Mauer acknowledged that the use of such technology is increasing, even at the levels at which he’s been managing.

“More and more,” he said, “and that’s what’s nice now. The guys that we have, we can expose them at our level. When they get up here, it’s not so overwhelming when they see the binders full of stuff they’ve got up here.”

A side benefit of Mauer’s time with the Twins has been getting to spend time with his brother, Joe Mauer, the Twins’ veteran first baseman. Other than the rare injury rehabilitation assignment, such as the one that saw Joe spend a few days playing for his brother in Cedar Rapids in 2014, the two brothers have not regularly shared a dugout since they were minor league teammates.

Typically during the season, they would talk on the phone once or twice a week. That obviously changed over the past two weeks.

“Yeah, we hung out on the road (during the Twins’ recent trip to Cleveland and Detroit),” Jake Mauer said. “It’s just kind of nice to reconnect and catch back up and see the things that he’s got to go through to prepare to play and what he does.

“He was almost always the youngest guy on about all the teams that I was with him on. Now he’s kind of on the other end. It’s kind of neat watching him interact with a lot of these other guys.”

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While the 2015 season has wrapped up, Mauer said he doesn't know whether he'll be assigned to manage the Kernels next season for the fourth year in a row.

Last year, the Twins didn't announce their minor league managing and coaching assignments until the week before Christmas, but Mauer doesn't expect the assignments to take as much time this year. The difference is that, this year, the Twins won't be conducting a search for a new manager and coaching staff for their big league club.

"Last year was kind of unusual where it was so late, but that was mostly because (Twins minor league director Brad Steil) was waiting to see what would happen here," he said. "Instructional league lasts another two weeks or so, so it would probably be around early November. Brad usually is nice enough to let us know at least early enough to where we can make plans and get things going."