

Kernels outfield could be loaded in 2013

Written by S.D. Buhr

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth in a series of preseason articles about the Cedar Rapids Kernels. Next: Pitchers)

We've worked our way around the horn in the first three parts of this series, covering many of the catchers, corner infielders and middle infielders who possibly could put on a Kernels uniform in Cedar Rapids this summer.

In Part 4 of our series, we are checking out a number of outfielders who could take the field for Cedar Rapids at some point during 2013.

Obviously, we can't know exactly who will come north to Iowa out of spring training to start the season, but regardless of which of these prospects starts the season in Cedar Rapids, the Kernels' outfield could be loaded.

A number of the organization's top prospects played at Elizabethton in 2012, and many of them should start the season in Cedar Rapids.

Byron Buxton – Age 19 – Bats R/Throws R

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

G - 48, BA - .248, K - 41, BB - 19, 2B - 10, 3B - 4, HR - 5

The only benefit to having the second-worst record in Major League Baseball in 2011 was that it earned the Twins the right to the second overall draft pick in the 2012 amateur draft. The Twins used that pick to select Buxton out of his Georgia high school. Less than a year later, he's

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generally considered either the first- or second-ranked prospect in the Twins organization.

Buxton played 27 games with the GCL Twins before moving up to Elizabethton to finish the 2012 season. While his .216 batting average in the GCL wasn't flashy, he had more extra-base hits (11, including four HRs) than singles (8).

His Appalachian League stats were much more "normal," but he still had eight extra-base hits among his 22 hits overall at that level.

The Twins don't historically push their teenage prospects up the organizational ladder quickly. Buxton will be 19 throughout the 2013 season, but he is likely to be an exception. He's a legitimate "five tool" prospect, and the Twins are likely to move him up as soon as he demonstrates he's mastered Midwest League pitching.

Max Kepler – Age 20 – Bats L/Throws L

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 59, BA - .297, K - 33, BB - 27, 2B - 16, 3B - 5, HR - 10

In 2009, the Twins gave Kepler, a 6-foot-4 outfielder from Germany, the largest signing bonus paid to a European baseball player at the time. He moved to Fort Myers, Fla., and finished school at the high school that neighbors the Twins training facility.

In three seasons of rookie league ball, Kepler has steadily progressed, showing the athletic prowess one might expect from the son of European ballet dancers.

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Kepler turned 20 in February and has grown into his body since arriving in the U.S. In 2012, his second season at Elizabethton, he made real progress in almost every aspect of his game, adding 35 points to his batting average and a whopping 211 points to his OPS, most of that a result of showing significantly more power. After hitting just one home run in his first two years of professional ball, Kepler jacked 10 of them in 2012.

But Kepler isn't just big. He's got speed, as well (he stole seven bases without being caught even once) and a strong arm. He played 67 games in center field for Elizabethton last year and 23 games in a corner outfield spot, mostly left field.

Kepler was appearing in most offseason "top 10" lists of Twins prospects before the Denard Span and Ben Revere trades added a couple of highly rated minor league pitchers to the organization, but he easily remains a consensus top 15 Twins prospect heading into 2013.

As with Buxton, the Twins are likely to want to move Kepler up a level to Fort Myers as soon as he demonstrates an ability to consistently hit MWL pitching well. So he may not spend the whole season in Cedar Rapids.

Romy Jimenez – Age 21 – Bats R/Throws R

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 35, BA - .347, K - 25, BB - 19, 2B - 12, 3B - 1, HR - 8

Jimenez was signed in 2009 out of the Dominican Republic and started his professional career with two very good seasons in the Dominican Summer League. An injury limited him to just eight games with the GCL Twins in 2011, but he came back very strong in 2012.

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Jimenez won't turn 22 until several weeks into what should be his first experience on a full-season roster in Cedar Rapids. He has shown the ability to hit and hit with power, but it's curious that he didn't steal a single base in 2012 (and only attempted one) at Elizabethton, although he stole 24 bases in 34 attempts in his two Dominican seasons.

Like Kepler, the 6-foot-2 Jimenez saw time in all three outfield spots during 2012, though most of his time was spent in left field.

Adam Walker – Age 21 – Bats R/Throws R

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 58, BA - .250, K - 76, BB - 19, 2B - 7, 3B - 4, HR - 14

Walker was taken by the Twins in the third round of the 2012 amateur draft. After signing quickly, the 6-foot-4, 225-pound Walker was assigned to Elizabethton in time to play 58 games. His batting average in his first professional season won't raise eyebrows, and his .310 on-base percentage could be improved.

He needs to cut that strikeout rate down considerably, but look at those extra-base hits: seven doubles, four triples and 14 home runs in just 58 games. That would project to 20 doubles, seven triples and close to 40 home runs over a 162 game Major League schedule.

Walker exclusively played right field for Elizabethton. He made a few errors out there, but he also threw out half a dozen baserunners. He also stole four bases, without being caught stealing.

The Twins obviously saw a potential power hitter in Walker when they drafted him out of Jacksonville University, and he gave them no reason to question that in his first professional experience. If he can slash those strikeouts in Cedar Rapids, while maintaining anything even

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close to his 2012 power numbers, Walker could climb up the organizational ladder quickly.

Drew Leachman – Age 23 – Bats R/Throws R

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL)

G - 107, BA - .272, K - 64, BB - 44, 2B - 13, 3B - 4, HR - 5

Leachman was the Twins' 37th round draft pick out of Birmingham-Southern College in 2011 and signed early enough that summer to play 44 games with the Twins GCL Rookie League team. His performance was unremarkable that year, but he stepped up a bit in 2012 at Beloit.

The 6-foot-3, 220-pound Leachman spent most of his time in left field for the Snappers, but also logged 22 games at first base. Like several of his Beloit teammates, he probably could benefit from more time in the Midwest League. But with some of the Twins' most highly regarded outfield prospects likely to be in Cedar Rapids, it's an open question as to whether Leachman would get much playing time in the Kernels' outfield.

Of course, if the Twins decide he's more likely to have a future at first base, that position could be more open at this level. Leachman showed some ability to be a productive hitter in Beloit last year, and the Twins may want to give him another opportunity in Class A to lift his game.

JaDamion (J.D.) Williams – Age 22 – Bats Both/Throws R

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL)

G - 97, BA - .234, K - 115, BB - 39, 2B - 16, 3B - 2, HR - 6

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Williams was selected out of his Tampa, Fla., high school by the Twins in the 10th round of the 2010 amateur draft. He signed in time to play 37 games with the GCL Twins in 2010, but struggled at the plate.

He had more success in his sophomore year of professional baseball, hitting .324 for Elizabethton in 2011. Williams' productivity dipped some in his first year of full-season ball at Beloit in 2012, but he did finally show some of the speed the Twins expected him to have on the basepaths.

He stole 23 bases in 32 attempts at Beloit, but could have stolen more if he could have cut down on his strikeouts. Williams spent a lot of time in all three outfield positions during 2012, including 23 games in center field. He also threw out seven runners.

At the end of the 2012 season, Williams seemed destined to open 2013 with the Kernels and could perhaps use some extra time at the Class A level. But with the Twins trading Denard Span and Ben Revere, the bottleneck of outfielders in the organization could open up enough to allow him to start the year at high-A Fort Myers, along with many fellow Snappers teammates from last season.

That's six potential outfielders and, if Candido Pimentel, who we covered with the middle infielders, starts the season in Cedar Rapids, that would give Kernels Manager Jake Mauer a full contingent of players to move in and out of his outfield to begin the season.

Others worth mentioning

Since at least a couple of these outfielders could start the season in Fort Myers or be promoted during the season, there are a few more outfielders who warrant a mention. If needed, look for some combination of these four outfielders to find themselves in Kernels uniforms.

Jeremias Pineda, from the Dominican Republic, is 22 and came over to the Twins from the Red Sox organization in the Danny Valencia trade last summer. The move didn't exactly agree with him, however, as he hit just .237 while putting up a .640 OPS with the GCL Twins after putting

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up .421 BA and .981 OPS numbers for the GCL Red Sox before the trade.

Dereck Rodriguez, 20, was taken by the Twins in the sixth round of the 2011 amateur draft. He struggled with the GCL Twins after signing in 2011, but improved a great deal last year while repeating that level. He suffered a hamstring injury that possibly kept him from being promoted to Elizabethton. He hit .263 with a .783 OPS with a bit of power. Rodriguez is the son of former Major League catcher Ivan "Pudge" Rodriguez.

Kelvin Ortiz is a 21-year-old Dominican who has played two seasons in the Dominican Summer League and two seasons with the GCL Twins while compiling a .221 batting average. But if he gets off to a good start at Elizabethton this summer, he could be in line for a promotion to Cedar Rapids.

John Murphy was selected by the Twins in the 19th round of the amateur draft last year out of Jacksonville University. He didn't get his professional career off to the best start, hitting just .216 in 52 games for the GCL Twins, but the Twins hope they'll see evidence this summer that Murphy shares some of the baseball genes of his brother, New York Mets infielder Daniel Murphy.

Next, in our final part of this series, we'll run down some of the pitchers who may call Cedar Rapids home this summer.