

Mauer says Kernels roster is nearly set

Written by S.D. Buhr

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With a week remaining before the Cedar Rapids Kernels take the field for the first time in 2013, a few roster spots are yet to be finalized during the final days of the team's spring training in Fort Myers, Fla.

"We're getting close," Kernels Manager Jake Mauer said Wednesday. "There are probably three or four decisions left to make. A couple of pitchers and a couple of position players.

"Our position players are in good shape. It looks like we should have good team speed," Mauer said.

Mauer indicated that Byron Buxton, the Twins' first-round draft pick in last June's amateur draft (and second pick overall), will be the club's center fielder. He will be joined in the outfield by two other highly rated Twins prospects, Adam Walker and Romy Jimenez.

Max Kepler, another top prospect, is likely to remain in Fort Myers for a while. "He has some arm issues to work through" before he will join the Kernels, Mauer explained. "There's still some competition for the fourth outfield spot, but competition always is a good thing," Mauer said.

Buxton started in center field for the parent Minnesota Twins on Wednesday in a game against the Pittsburgh Pirates. He led off with a single off Pirates starter A.J. Burnett. Buxton added a walk, two stolen bases and three runs scored for the Twins.

The Kernels' starting pitching rotation is up in the air. "(Hudson) Boyd should be there, but (Jose) Berrios and (Luke) Bard will probably stay in Fort Myers for one or two weeks," Mauer said.

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Both pitchers, according to their manager, need to stretch out their arms a little more. Berrios pitched for Puerto Rico in the World Baseball Classic, but was used in relief and had not been throwing multiple innings until he arrived back in Fort Myers less than two weeks ago.

"We're still trying to get to know some of our pitchers," Mauer said. "Some of them have never played in cold weather, so we'll want to monitor their innings. The important thing is to stay healthy through that first month."

While many core players from last season's Appalachian League champions in Elizabethton will be on the Kernels' Opening Day roster, Mauer confirmed they'll be joined by several members of last summer's Beloit Snappers.

Among those players returning for another Midwest League season will be Tyler Grimes. Grimes was an infielder for the Snappers in 2012 but spent the fall learning how to be a catcher. That transition is going well, according to Mauer.

"He throws well and is very athletic. He's working really hard at learning the details of catching, calling pitches and controlling the running game," said Mauer. "We plan to use him four or five games a week."

Players still competing for final roster spots have just three or four more games to impress the decision makers before breaking camp and traveling to Cedar Rapids on Tuesday.

The Kernels are scheduled to open the season on Thursday, April 4, against Beloit at Veterans Memorial Stadium at 6:35 p.m.