

Hall of Famer Molitor mentoring Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr

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Paul Molitor's Hall of Fame Major League career spanned 21 seasons with the Milwaukee Brewers, Toronto Blue Jays and Minnesota Twins. He accumulated more than 3,000 hits, had a career batting average above .300 and stole more than 500 bases. No other Major Leaguer in the past 70 years has accomplished that combination of career milestones and only three other players in history have done so (Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner and Eddie Collins).

These days, Molitor is sharing his knowledge and experience with young players as the Twins' Minor League Coordinator for Baserunning and Infield Play. That title may sound like a mouthful, but as Molitor, who is in Cedar Rapids working with the Kernels during the current homestand, says, "Titles are overrated a little bit."

"It's an opportunity for me to travel around the system and help try to teach, along with the staff on each club," Molitor explained, prior to Thursday night's game between the Kernels and Quad Cities at Veterans Memorial Stadium, "and I do focus on those two areas, but invariably I get involved with some of the hitting aspects."

Any young ballplayer would be foolish not to pick the brain of a Hall of Famer like Molitor for tips on pretty much any aspect of the game of baseball, but he sees his role with the Twins as going beyond what happens between the lines on the field.

"One of the things I enjoy, in addition to the teaching, is that a lot of these guys are transitioning from wherever their roots have brought them from and it's a process of evolving from sometimes teenagers into men and so there's mentoring involved, too," said Molitor. "How to help these guys develop an understanding of the professional lifestyle. We try to do what we can to try to help them progress in those areas, too."

That transition involves a lot more than just learning to hit with wood bats.

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"A lot of times it's a big transition from maybe never having left home, particularly maybe never left your country, and you have to try to claw your way into professional ball and learn a system that particular organization teaches," Molitor explained. "We don't try to overwhelm them. We let them play a little bit in the beginning until we kind of get a feel for who they are and what they do, what they do well and what we need to improve on."

Kernels star center fielder Byron Buxton, the Twins first round draft choice a year ago, is a player that hasn't seemed to have much difficulty with the transition to professional ball.

"He's just a rare individual with a skill set that's off the charts," Molitor said of Buxton. "I saw him last year in instructional ball for a little bit and you could see the rawness of a high school kid. But somehow this winter I think he put a lot of time into conditioning and preparation. He was much more advanced this spring than I expected him to be and he's been able to carry it, undoubtedly, into the first nine or 10 weeks of the season."

Molitor isn't ready to give Buxton a complete pass, however.

"He's got things to work on, I'm sure," Molitor said. "I'm looking forward to seeing him now compared to even two months ago. Over the next five days, I'll be watching particularly how he handles himself on the basepaths."

That may sound peculiar to fans who have seen the speedy Buxton leg out triples for the Kernels, but Molitor is looking to help the young player refine his skills.

"I haven't, for the past three decades, seen many players that can compete with him in terms of just raw speed," Molitor said. "Now how he can translate that into base stealing is going to be the key."

Buxton has been caught stealing nine times in 35 attempts this season. That hasn't escaped Molitor's attention, but he doesn't appear overly concerned, either.

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“He’s been caught some, but he’s been fairly successful for a young guy and probably in some ways, in this league, he’s been outrunning the ball. A lot of times, when you get caught is when you should learn the most. There’s a lot of ways to learn to get better. So it’s a process. The more you do it, the better you get at it. We’re glad to see he’s out running. At least not having fear in that area to this point.” □