

## Mauer making plans for MWL playoffs

Written by S.D. Buhr

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Cedar Rapids Kernels Manager Jake Mauer has been in an unusual situation for the past couple of months, since his Kernels nailed down a Midwest League postseason berth by finishing second in the MWL's Western Division during the first half of the season.

Only in minor league baseball is a manager occasionally faced with the challenge of keeping his roster focused on winning games even after locking up a spot in the postseason with 70 games remaining on the regular season schedule.

Recently, Mauer talked about that challenge as well as the steps he and his coaching staff are taking to prepare for the Midwest League playoffs that begin for the Kernels on Sept. 4.

"We're a lot different team than we were at the beginning of the year," Mauer said. "Obviously, (Byron) Buxton and (Dalton) Hicks and (J.D.) Williams were a big part and they've moved up, along with some of our pitchers, (Steven) Gruver and (Tyler) Jones and (Tyler) Duffey. That's kind of what happens and how the nature of the beast is.

"But you're getting a chance to see (Max) Kepler a little more and you're getting to see (Joel) Licon on an everyday basis. (Jonathan) Murphy's another guy that came up and has been helping us. (Mike) Gonzales is kind of on the comeback trail a little bit here, but a guy with a little bit of experience.

"So we've been fortunate. When we've lost some guys, we've been able to get some pretty good guys to replace them."

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If you compare the final standings in the first half of the MWL season with the current standings, you'll see what can happen as team rosters change significantly. The Beloit Snappers slipped past the Kernels in the final few days of the first half to claim first place in the league's Western Division, but the Snappers now sit several games under .500 in the second half.

Yet, the Snappers have fared far better than the Fort Wayne Tincaps, who won the Eastern Division in the first half. The Tincaps have been struggling to escape the cellar of their division during the season's second half.

While Mauer's Kernels have had significant roster turnover as well (only nine of the opening day Kernels remain on the current 25-man roster), Cedar Rapids has continued competing at a high level. They have held or shared first place in the West for all but four days since the All-Star break.

### **Pitching has been key**

Mauer believes much of the reason can be found on the pitcher's mound.

"Really, our pitching has been the key this second half. The pitching has been way better. Guys are throwing the ball over the plate," said the manager.

Although the team lost several effective pitchers to promotion, the replacements have stepped right in and done the job, Mauer said.

"Adding a (Madison) Boer and a (Brian) Gilbert to the back end of the pen, that's two pretty reliable guys. (Alex) Muren has been pretty steady the whole year," said Mauer. "Our starters are doing a pretty good job. (Tim) Atherton has done a wonderful job starting. (Josue) Montanez has been a lot better."

Of course, talking about pitching brings up another topic rather unique to the world of a minor league coaching staff. A number of the Kernels' most reliable starting pitchers this season are putting more innings on their young arms than they ever have before. This is particularly true of guys who spent last season as relief pitchers or pitched in some combination of high

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school/college and short-season leagues.

Pitchers such as Mason Melotakis, Brett Lee and Jose Berrios, who have been cornerstones of the rotation much of the season, are seeing their innings limited down the stretch. That has required Mauer and pitching coach Gary Lucas to find other guys to plug into the starting rotation, and part of the Kernels' continued success can be attributed to how those pitchers have performed.

"They've been real good," said Mauer. "Atherton has been excellent, throwing more strikes and still striking guys out like he has been. Berrios has gotten better.

'Brett Lee's been great. He had a little scare there with that elbow thing," Mauer said, referring to the week Lee spent on the Disabled List with a sore elbow.

"But he seems to be OK," Mauer said. "We're going to have to keep an eye on him a little bit. I don't think you'll see a complete game until, hopefully, the Fourth" of September.

Was that Mauer tipping his hand concerning his plans for the starting pitching assignment in the first playoff game? Mauer would only admit that they're starting to think about who will be starting those postseason games.

"Some of the things we have to start thinking about," Mauer conceded. "Who are we going to use in the playoffs? Who's going to be our starters? I think the young man we got, (Miguel) Sulbaran, is going to help us."

Sulbaran was obtained from the Dodgers organization in a trade recently.

"(Tim) Shibuya's going to help us," continued Mauer. "(Brandon) Bixler has done a nice job. Gilbert has been pretty dominant, thus far. Hopefully we can keep that going."

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### Focus and refocus

Clearly, one ingredient a manager needs to keep his team competitive in both halves of a Class A season is talented replacements for the players who are promoted. But these are still young ballplayers, many just a year out of college or high school, and a 140-game season can be a grind.

A couple of weeks ago, the Kernels went through a stretch where they lost six of eight games in series with Burlington and the Quad Cities. The club's pitching, hitting and defense all seemed to collapse at the same time. Is it hard to keep a team focused when a postseason spot is locked up halfway through the year and some players are still wondering if/when they'll be getting promoted?

The answer is "it shouldn't be," according to Mauer. "Every time you go out there, you should want to win the game. There's a difference between wanting to win the game and doing things to help you win the game.

"In that stretch, Burlington and Quad Cities, they took it to us pretty good, but again we gave them a lot of opportunities, extending innings (with errors). That's not going to do it.

"So you try to refocus. It shouldn't have anything to do with whether you're in (the postseason) or not, whether you're playing for something or not. It should just have to do with you understanding what it takes to play every day and being a professional player.

"When you get in the game, it's time to (think about) we've got to win this game today," continued Mauer. "We've got to win this inning, win this pitch. You can break it down as far as even pitch to pitch.

"If you do that, if you win every pitch, then you're going to win just about every inning and you're going to win a lot of your games and you're going to get noticed and that's how you get promoted. A lot of it is controlling what you can control.

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"There's some guys in there (the clubhouse) that probably should be in Fort Myers," Mauer said, "but they're backlogged or whatever and they're still here. Maybe they're a little (ticked) and maybe they should be, but you've got to keep putting numbers up. You've got to keep doing your job and you've got to keep showing up every day."

"It's hard to tell" what the specific problem was during that early August swoon, according to Mauer. "We just weren't playing very good and it all just kept going downhill. It just kind of gets going that way and you're going to go through phases throughout the year where you're not going to be playing good and others where you're going to be playing pretty good."

"What you try to do is you try to keep the focus be the same, whether you're high or whether you're low, it shouldn't matter. Whether you've won eight in a row or lost eight in a row, your focus should be the same and that's what you're trying to teach."

It's not just the postseason success that the players are playing for, of course, and the manager acknowledged that fact as well. The players and the Twins organization are already looking toward 2014.

"A lot of them are playing for a spot in Fort Myers next year and a lot of them are playing for a spot anywhere. That's a reality," said Mauer. "Those boys that are in (Elizabethton) and any guys that come in from (this year's) draft generally are newer."

"They get a little more opportunity than some guys that have been around, where we've got a decent feeling of what they can and can't do. We're going to give these other guys some of those at-bats."

"You're really playing for a job, whether it's here (in Cedar Rapids), whether it's in Fort Myers or wherever it might be. You've got to make an impact in these last two weeks."

### Manager's strategy to change

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Mauer said he'll be managing the team a little differently heading into the final couple of weeks of the regular season.

"I know we're going to play some teams that are in the playoff chase, but we've got to get a little healthier for Wednesday, the Fourth (of September)," said Mauer. "The next week at Peoria and Quad Cities, we'll probably rotate quite a few guys. When Peoria comes back here (Saturday, Aug. 24), we'll try to get us cranked up again to where we're getting ready and trying to get sharp again for the playoffs.

"I don't like to sit my guys right before the playoffs. I'd like to do it this next week and then we can button some things up and hopefully, they've got enough rest and here we go."

Evidence of the change has already become evident. For instance, Tyler Grimes, one of the Kernels' catchers and a converted middle infielder, had done nothing but catch and DH all season, until Friday night. When Murphy left the game after being hit in the head by a pitch, second baseman Licon moved to left field and Grimes entered the game as the new second baseman. The next night, Grimes started at second base.

"(Grimes) is going to play some middle (infield) through these last two weeks here. He's been an infielder his whole life, so he can still go out there. We'll try to give some of our middle guys a little bit of a (rest)," said Mauer. "You'll probably see guys like (Adam) Walker get another day off here. Kepler, (Niko) Goodrum, (Jorge) Polanco, guys like that, that have been playing a lot are going to get some rest. (Travis) Harrison is another one, too.

"Try to freshen them up and try to walk that delicate line between becoming stale and becoming fresh -- sit guys for a maybe a day, maybe two days at the most, and get them back out there if you can."

(Polanco is currently on the Seven-Day Disabled List with a hamstring injury).

There will be a few other, more subtle, changes that most fans won't likely notice. "We probably won't hit for as long or take infield as much, things like that. We'll pick our spots with that. We'll

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rest,” said Mauer.

### **Team will be ready for postseason**

The Kernels’ skipper was asked whether he thought there was an advantage entering the postseason, either to teams that qualified with their success in the first half of the season or with a playoff run at the end of the second half.

Mauer likened it to the NFL. “Those wild card teams show up in the Super Bowl because you’re playing for your life every week. And that’s the intensity that you should have, even if you’re (already) in.”

Still, it’s nice to have the luxury of resting your players and setting up your pitching rotation the way you want to start the postseason while the teams who have yet to qualify, as the manager puts it, “have to go pedal to the metal.”

“Each team is going to be different,” Mauer said. “You just try to feel the best you can. Gauge how you’re feeling health-wise. Who’s doing what and who can help you. But you want to try and make sure you go into September as ready as you can.”

At the end of the day, Mauer feels his group is going to be ready when the postseason begins.

“Yeah, we’re excited,” Mauer concluded. “We’ve got a good group and these kids have worked hard and the new additions have been doing a nice job. We’re happy with how we’re progressing and we’ll see how these last two weeks end up.

“Hopefully, we’re playing better two weeks from now, you don’t want to peak too soon. We want to be playing our best baseball in September.”