

'Luke' teaches Kernels the right stuff

Written by Jim Ecker

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Gary Lucas enjoyed his share of thrills in the major leagues with the Padres, Expos and Angels in the 1980's. He made a few million dollars, pitched in the American League playoffs, rode private jets, stayed in five-star hotels, played on the same team with Hall of Famers and led all National League pitchers in appearances one year.

Lucas, or "Luke" as everyone calls him, pitched in the big leagues before any of his current students on the Cedar Rapids Kernels were born, but they know all about him thanks to the Internet and those long bus rides around the Midwest League.

"On the bus, we actually had videos of him pitching," Kernels left-hander Brett Lee said, smiling at the vision of the 6-foot-5 lefty on the mound. "It was interesting to watch. Different times back then."

Lucas, 58, has a smile and a kind word for everyone. Some former big leaguers might view an assignment to the low minors as cruel and unusual punishment, but Lucas loves what he does. He's been coaching in the minors for more than 20 years and still pitches batting practice every day, although he's glad it's from 45 feet and from behind an L-Screen.

"Deep down, he's a teacher," said Cedar Rapids Manager Jake Mauer. "He loves the game, as we all do. He had the opportunity to pitch on the big stage for a long time. And for him to come back and give that knowledge to these kids, it's really priceless."

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Lucas compiled a modest 29-44 record in the Major Leagues, but that's a little misleading. He compiled a fashionable 3.01 ERA in 409 games, mostly as a relief pitcher and spot starter. He made his first big-league start for the Padres against San Francisco on April 16, 1980, struck out Giants slugger Willie McCovey and combined with Rollie Fingers to pitch a shutout.

"And I got a hit in my first at-bat against Ed Whitson," he said. "Yeah, it was all downhill from there."



Lucas can relate to the young pitchers in the Minnesota Twins organization. The Cincinnati Reds selected him in the first round of the major league draft in 1973 when he was a teen-ager and living in California. He turned them down and went to college instead, but it's not like he turned down a million-dollar bonus. Things were much different 40 years ago.

"Years later the scout told me we couldn't have given you enough to pay for your college education as a No.1 pick," he related.

Upon reflection, Lucas is glad he did not sign a pro contract as a young kid. "I wasn't really ready to leave home," he said. "I was really immature at 17. As much as I wanted to play pro ball it was the best thing I did, because it helped me grow up."

The Padres picked Lucas in 1976 in the 19th round. Four years later, he was in the majors. He made \$513,500 in 1985, dipped a little to \$500,000 in 1986 and reached \$662,000 in his final year in the major leagues with the Angels in 1987 (according to USA Today), so he cashed some nice paychecks along the way.

He's been coaching in the Midwest League since 1992, except for a two-year stint with Minnesota's Double-A club in New Britain (Conn.) in 2006-07. He and his wife, Taffee, live in Wisconsin, so he's close to home. They have three grown daughters, not to mention all the Kernels pitchers that he treats like favorite sons.

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The Kernels have had 26 different pitchers on their roster this season due to promotions, injuries and a few retirements. They've actually used 28 pitchers, if you count a reserve catcher (now departed) who pitched in one game and count Minnesota Twins right-hander Mike Pelfrey, who made a rehab start here.

Lucas has found a role for all of them this season, whether as a starting pitcher, long relief or short relief - and sometimes all of the above. Everybody needs to stay ready, from the top prospects on the staff to the lower draft picks.

"I try to put myself in their shoes when I was in the big leagues as a reliever," he said. "I didn't want to sit too long. So I've made it clear to them ... You need to be strike-throwers."

Lucas normally sits perched at the end of the dugout, intently watching every pitch of every game, watching his students as they try to execute and improve. Mauer is the skipper, but Lucas runs the pitching staff.

"Right from the get-go, Jake has been a privilege to work under," he said. "He told me on Day 1, 'Luke, you've got the pitchers. You do whatever you need to do.'"

"He hasn't interrupted me, he hasn't gotten in my way. He's given me all the leeway necessary to help these guys do their best."

If Lucas sees something wrong, he'll make a quick trip to the mound to offer a few words of advice. Sometimes he goes out there to give his pitcher a chance to catch his breath, but usually it's to make a suggestion and jog quickly back to the dugout.

"If I'm in their shoes, I don't want to hear about what I just did wrong, I want to hear about how I'm going to get myself out of this jam," he said. "These young kids, they're rattled. So if they can get a positive thought and it carries them, maybe that's the ticket."

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Lee, a 10th-round draft pick in 2011, has enjoyed a fine season this year and credits Lucas with helping him make great strides as a pitcher.

"He's very knowledgeable," said Lee. "He definitely knows how to teach it the right way. He's helped me more than any coach I've had."

Lee credits Lucas with making an adjustment in his two-seam fastball that has become an important pitch for him this season. "He's got my two-seam amazing. Outstanding," said Lee. "He's got my confidence built up on it. The results have shown and it helps a lot.

"He goes about coaching in a way that I can relate to. He teaches it the best way it could be taught for me to learn. He's outstanding."

Mauer is perfectly happy to let Lucas run the staff, because he knows the hurlers are in terrific hands. The Kernels (82-48) have the best record in the Midwest League and the pitching staff has steadily improved to one of the best in the league.

"He's done an outstanding job," said Mauer. "He's got a good temperament. He doesn't get too high or too low. I rely on him a lot."

Lucas thoroughly enjoys his job, even though bus rides have replaced chartered flights and economy hotels have supplanted the fancier digs in the Major Leagues.

"I think I'm giving back to the Twins and baseball," he said. "The Twins have employed me for 14 years and trusted me to get these guys better.

"The thing that really gets me going is coming to work every day and seeing what these guys are going to do between the white lines. I don't know why, but that's enough for me.

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"If they want me in the big leagues tomorrow, that would be great, I'd love to be there," he said.
"But I really feel I owe a lot to the Twins for giving me this opportunity.

"I get to see baseball every day, try to get kids better, see if they can reach their dream like I reached mine."