

Atherton making most of 2nd chance

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 26 August 2013 22:08 - Last Updated Monday, 26 August 2013 22:19



Cedar Rapids Kernels Manager Jake Mauer smiles when he talks about Tim Atherton and the job he's doing with the ballclub this season.

Five years ago, Mauer was the guy who called Atherton into his office and told him the Twins were releasing him from their team in the Rookie Gulf Coast League after an incident in a Florida hotel.

Atherton, from Australia, was 18 and an outfielder at the time. He bounced around after the Twins let him go, but Minnesota gave him another chance a few years ago and signed him as a pitcher. He's flourishing now in his new role and a key member of the Kernels this season.

Atherton pitched seven strong innings Monday night as Cedar Rapids trimmed Peoria, 3-1, before 1,132 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium to climb a season-high 35 games over the .500 mark at 83-48.

Atherton, now 23, has an 8-4 record and 2.61 ERA as a stalwart in the Kernels' starting rotation. He's struck out a team-high 97 batters in 89.2 innings and allowed only 71 hits and 33 walks. He's a far cry from the slightly immature outfielder who found himself in the doghouse five years ago.

"He was a young guy who made some bad decisions," said Mauer. "He's really matured (as a person). And he's matured as a pitcher."

Atherton making most of 2nd chance

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 26 August 2013 22:08 - Last Updated Monday, 26 August 2013 22:19

"I'm proud of all of our guys, but I'm probably the most proud of him, with the adversity that he's gone through and the things that he's dealt with. For him putting up these numbers, it's just been great."

Atherton remembers being summoned to Mauer's office in Fort Myers, Fla., that fateful day in 2008 when he was given his walking papers by the Twins. "It was the worst day of my baseball career," he said.



Atherton is a little reluctant to talk about what happened at the hotel. "There was an altercation with a BB gun," he said, letting it go at that.

The incident involved Atherton and another player from Australia, who also got released by the Twins that day. Atherton may have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he ended up sharing the blame and being dismissed from the club.

In retrospect, Atherton wonders if he should have asked his teammate to accept the blame for what happened. Instead, he kept quiet and took his punishment. "At the time, I thought it was the right decision," he said. "That was just guilt by association."

The Twins decided to release Atherton and asked Mauer, their Gulf Coast League manager at the time, to deliver the news.

"It was just something that happened at the hotel, just being stupid kids, making bad decisions," said Mauer. "He probably was covering up for his buddy and they both got it, unfortunately. It wasn't for performance (on the field) or anything like that."

Atherton making most of 2nd chance

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 26 August 2013 22:08 - Last Updated Monday, 26 August 2013 22:19

"It wasn't much fun," said Mauer. "Both of them were young kids. They're thousands of miles from home."

Atherton played with San Diego's team in the Arizona Rookie League in 2008 after being cut by the Twins, but San Diego ended up releasing him as well. He played in the new Australian Baseball League in 2009 and 2010, then resurfaced with the Twins as a pitcher in 2011 and appears on the right track again.

"I don't want to jinx anything, but things are looking pretty good," he said.

Atherton played rugby, soccer and cricket in Australia when he was growing up, along with baseball. He was a state champion in cycling and also loves to surf. He grew up in Shellharbour in New South Wales in eastern Australia, about two hours south of Sydney and right on the water.



"Every year I go back and surf. I'm a big surfer," he said. "I've surfed my whole life."

Atherton also has won a couple of triathlons, combining his talents as a swimmer, biker and runner. It's as a pitcher, however, that he's making his mark now.

"He's getting a second chance and he's making the most of it," said Mauer. "He's a good kid. He really is. Deep down, he's always been a good kid. When something gets taken away, you appreciate it a lot more."

Atherton making most of 2nd chance

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 26 August 2013 22:08 - Last Updated Monday, 26 August 2013 22:19

Atherton left after the seventh inning Monday with a 3-1 lead. Mason Melotakis collected two strikeouts in the eighth inning for the Kernels, then Brian Gilbert pitched a scoreless ninth for his fifth save.

Jeremias Pineda went 3-for-4 for the Kernels and drove in a run. Tyler Grimes went 2-for-4 with two doubles and Bo Altobelli was 2-for-4 with an RBI.

Max Kepler, who received 11 stitches to the middle finger on his right hand Sunday following a freak injury, was in uniform Monday for the Kernels but did not play. He wore a protective wrap on his finger and is listed as day-to-day.

"I'll be back before the playoffs," he vowed. "With pain or without."

The Kernels will open the Midwest League playoffs next Wednesday on the road, most likely at Davenport against the Quad Cities River Bandits.

The Kernels have swept the first three games of their four-game series with Peoria by a total margin of 13-2 with excellent pitching and timely hitting. They'll play again Tuesday night at the stadium at 6:35.

PEORIA (1): McElroy, cf, 4 0 0 0, Martini, rf, 4 0 1 0, Caldwell, 2b, 4 0 0 0, Valera, lf, 4 0 2 0, Walton, 1b, 4 1 1 0, Martin, 3b, 4 0 1 0, Herrera, dh, 4 0 1 0, Vargas, ss, 4 0 1 1, Velazco, c, 4 0 1 0. Totals 36 1 8 1.

KERNELS (3): Murphy, cf, 5 0 0 0, Grimes, 2b, 4 1 2 0, A.Walker, rf, 4 0 0 0, Gonzales, dh, 3 0 1 0, Altobelli, 1b, 4 0 2 1, Licon, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Quesada, c, 3 1 1 0, R.Walker, ss, 4 1 0 0, Pineda, lf, 4 0 3 1. Totals 34 3 9 2.

Peoria 010 000 000 - 1 8 2
Kernels 021 000 00x - 3 9 2

Atherton making most of 2nd chance

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 26 August 2013 22:08 - Last Updated Monday, 26 August 2013 22:19

Perry, Sabatino (7), Llorens (8) and Velazco. Atherton, Melotakis (8), Gilbert (9) and Quesada. W - Atherton (8-4). L - Perry (2-3). S - Gilbert (5). 2B - Grimes 2 (9), Quesada (11). E - Walton (11), Vargas (12), R.Walker 2 (2). T - 2:31. A - 1,132.