

Gonsalves makes strong pitch for Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr

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FORT MYERS, Fla. - Ask Minnesota Twins pitching prospect Stephen Gonsalves about his offseason and the first thing he may mention is his vacation to Australia with fellow Twins pitching prospects Lewis Thorpe and Sam Gibbons.

"It was Sam's 21st birthday so we made a little vacation out of it," Gonsalves said Friday while watching his Cedar Rapids Kernels teammates face a group of Tampa Bay Rays Class A prospects.

But hanging out with Aussies Thorpe and Gibbons "down-under" for a couple of weeks was just one small part of his winter.

The 20-year-old lefty starting pitcher played a crucial role in the playoff drive the Kernels put together during the second half of the 2014 season. He notched a 3.19 ERA while striking out 44 batters in just 36.2 innings in eight starts.

Some young pitchers might have felt satisfied with those numbers and focused their offseason workouts on simply adding some muscle or improving their conditioning, but not Gonsalves.

The young Californian combined a 90 mph fastball with an effective slow curve and an equally effective changeup to solidify his ranking as a consensus top 20 prospect within the Twins' organization heading into 2015. Gonsalves went home after participating in the fall instructional league and went to work on broadening his arsenal of pitching weapons.

"Right after instructs, I went home and started working out that next week," he said.

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“Home” for Gonsalves is San Diego, and he wasn’t working out alone there. He worked out with a couple of other well-credentialed pitchers with San Diego ties.

“I was able to work out with Stephen Strasburg this whole offseason, got to pick his brain a lot,” Gonsalves said. “James Shields was there, also. So I got to mix in a lot with those guys and kind of pick their brains the entire offseason. Helped me out a little mechanically on the hill, also.”

Strasburg and Shields were both rotation leaders for Major League postseason participants last year, Strasburg with the Washington Nationals and Shields with the Kansas City Royals. Shields inked a new deal as a free agent this offseason with the San Diego Padres.

“I was working on a slider,” said Gonsalves. “That’s what Shields is known for, his slider, so I got to work with him for about a month just specifically on that pitch for awhile. It’s coming along nicely. The Twins are starting to like it.”

So far this spring, the results seem to be positive. He’s been in Fort Myers since March 1, well before the minor leaguers began playing games.

He’s made three solid appearances, building up his pitch count and getting ready to head north to Cedar Rapids when camp breaks the first full week of April.

Gonsalves acknowledged he’s likely to be one of just a small number of 2014 Kernels returning to open the new campaign in Cedar Rapids, but he’s looking forward to opening the year with the new crew.

“We’re going to have a whole new team, pretty much, (but) we’re going to have a good little squad together. It’s going to be fun. We’re going to be a little scrappy team,” he said.