

3 amigos are running the Kernels

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 07 April 2015 20:29 - Last Updated Tuesday, 07 April 2015 20:39



Jake Mauer, Tommy Watkins and Henry Bonilla were promising young ballplayers in the Minnesota Twins farm system in 2004 for New Britain in the Class Double-A Eastern League, all hopeful of reaching the Major Leagues at some point.

Only Watkins made it, playing in nine games for the Twins in 2007. Mauer hurt his arm and had to retire, never climbing above Double-A. Bonilla reached the Triple-A level with the Twins, but was unable to take the final step.

But 11 years ago, all things seemed possible.

"We were really good, too. Back then," Mauer said Tuesday, only half in jest with the passage of time.

But the truth is, they were good. Mauer hit .258 as a versatile infielder, a heady ballplayer with a great feel for the game. Watkins, mostly a third baseman, hit .267 with eight home runs and 47 RBIs. Bonilla, a pitcher, went 11-10 with a 4.54 ERA and made it to Triple-A that year.

Now it's 11 years later and Mauer, Watkins and Bonilla are all teammates again in the Twins

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organization, this time as the brain trust of the Cedar Rapids Kernels.

Mauer is back in town as the Kernels manager for the third straight year. Watkins, his buddy and sidekick, is also back for his third year as the hitting coach. Now Bonilla has joined them as the pitching coach.

They also were teammates in 2003 with Fort Myers in the Florida State League, so they go back away. And Mauer is delighted to have them at his side heading into the 2015 Class A Midwest League.

"Both these guys are extremely gifted and qualified," Mauer said Tuesday at a press conference, flanked by his two top aides. "Really, it makes my job a lot easier. I can trust these guys."

Mauer and Bonilla are both 36 years old. Watkins is 34. Their playing days are over, but all three appear to have bright futures in the Twins organization as managers and instructors.

Bonilla told a funny story Tuesday about his first year in pro baseball. The Twins held an intrasquad game at a mini-camp and who do you suppose was the first batter he faced? None other than Watkins, who promptly ripped a triple off him and whooped it up after sliding into the bag.

"Welcome to pro ball!," Watkins quipped Tuesday after Bonilla finished telling the tale.

All three of them had a good laugh about that one. "It's been nothing but fun," said Bonilla. "I'm proud to be with these two."

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Mauer said he "oversees" the general direction of the Kernels, letting Watkins and Bonilla do their jobs.

"I have complete faith in both of these guys," he said. "It's going to be a fun year, no doubt about it."

The Kernels open the season Thursday night with a three-game series at Kane County with Mat Batts on the mound. The home opener is Sunday against Beloit at 4 p.m.