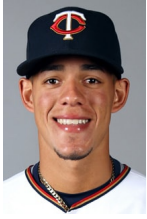


Berrios sets big goals with Twins for 2016

Written by S.D. Buhr

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Minnesota Twins pitching prospect Jose Berrios made his debut with the Cedar Rapids Kernels in late April, 2013 and has evolved into what one national organization has rated as the 17th best prospect in all of professional baseball heading into the 2016 season.

On Wednesday night, Berrios joined his former manager with the Kernels, Jake Mauer, and the Twins' minor league director, Brad Steil, for an appearance at the Kernels' annual Hot Stove Banquet at the Doubletree Hotel.

The 21-year-old Berrios, from Bayamon, Puerto Rico, was a supplemental first-round draft pick by the Twins in 2012 and his quick ascension up the organizational ladder has him on the threshold of becoming a Major Leaguer in 2016. Expectations of Berrios among Twins fans are extremely high.

He said he's not feeling any extra pressure, however, as he prepares to compete for a spot in the Twins' starting pitching rotation in spring training.

"When you prepare your mind and your soul, you don't have that pressure or anything. You can just be yourself and do your best work," Berrios said.

The young right-hander has a reputation as an extremely (some might say fanatically) hard worker in the offseason, as workout videos that he posts on social media sites would seem to support. That hard work just comes naturally to Berrios.

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"I worked hard every day when I was growing up, when I was 15 or 16, to be a professional baseball player," he said. "But now, I'm close to making my dream real of playing in the Majors.

"Now I work harder than before, more professional. But that's in my everyday ethics. Work hard, do my best work. Not just in baseball, but in my life, my family and everything. I'm going to do the best I can."

There may be some questions about whether Berrios will be ready to begin the season with the parent Twins or return to Class AAA Rochester, where he finished the 2015 campaign, but he isn't shy about his goals for the year.

He was invited to the Major League training camp a year ago and publicly stated that his goal at the time was to make the Twins' big league roster. He's going back to the Major League camp when the Twins report to Fort Myers, Fla., next month and he says his goals have not changed.

"Yeah, I'm keeping the same goals," he said. "Trying to make the 25-man roster in April with the Minnesota Twins. Then keep going, work to be selected for the All-Star Game in July and then at the end of the season, maybe the Rookie of the Year.

"That's my goal, that's what I'm preparing myself for, to make that goal."

Steil, who has been largely responsible for determining when Berrios has been deemed ready for promotion throughout the pitcher's rise through the organizational ranks, doesn't feel those goals are terribly unrealistic.

"We're looking for him to keep improving, which he's done a nice job at every level he's been through in our system," Steil said. "Last year, when he went from AA to AAA, he was a little shaky to start with at AAA, which is to be expected.

"I think once you saw him get settled in and get comfortable, he made some adjustments and

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really pitched well the last month of the season. He's going to give some guys at spring training a run for their money when it comes to competing for a roster spot there."

Coming back to Cedar Rapids was somewhat of a homecoming for Berrios and he spoke about seeing several familiar sights after arriving in town Wednesday afternoon.

"I saw things and thought, 'I remember that.' It's different though, because now you've got a lot of snow," he remarked.

Steil said he sees another strong pitching staff coming to Cedar Rapids this spring, but he thinks the offense could see improvement over last year's Midwest League runner-up squad.

"I think as the season goes on, some of the younger hitters will get better and I think we've got a chance to have a better lineup than we did last year, just because of the talent that some of these guys have that are coming here," Steil said. "I think we're going to have a few guys that can swing the bat. We should have a little bit more of a threat in the middle of the lineup than they maybe did last year."

Mauer said he hasn't seen much of the players he'll be managing this season, but new pitching coach J.P. Martinez and new hitting coach Brian Dinkelman have worked with many of them.

"I'll probably rely on J.P. and Brian quite a bit," the manager said. "They had them in instructional league and some of them in (extended spring training), so they have a feel for them. We'll shake it out in spring training and figure out who can do what and where they all fit."

Mauer said he hasn't played with or coached with either of his new coaches, but he's looking forward to working with them. He said he talked to both coaches in December.

"They're both excited," he said. "They're both heading down to Florida early to get down there and get around some of our boys a little sooner."

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The Kernels inducted three new members into the organization's Hall of Fame as part of the festivities Wednesday night. Former player Reggie Sanders, former manager Tom Lawless and former public address announcer Dale Brodt were honored during the program.