

Sweeney makes bid for spot with Twins

Written by S.D. Buhr

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FORT MYERS, Fla. - Ryan Sweeney was drafted by the Chicago White Sox shortly after graduating from Xavier High School in Cedar Rapids back in 2003. He signed his first professional contract that July and from that time on, he spent every summer of his adult life playing professional baseball – until last summer.

Sweeney, 31, had spent parts of nine seasons in the Major Leagues for the White Sox, Oakland Athletics, Boston Red Sox and Chicago Cubs before being released by the Cubs at the end of spring training a year ago.

This spring, Sweeney is back on the diamond, this time trying to claim a spot in the Minnesota Twins' outfield.

The Twins have a number of highly rated young outfielders in camp, but lost an important veteran presence from a year ago when Torii Hunter retired following the 2015 season. Sweeney will take whatever role the Twins want to give him if it means a spot on their big league roster, but he feels he has more than just a veteran presence to offer.

"They do have a lot of good young outfielders," Sweeney observed before he and the Twins played the Red Sox in a spring training game Wednesday night. "I think most of the guys that are competing out there are right-handed. I'm left-handed, so that kind of helps, and I can play all three outfield spots."

An MRI following the 2014 season showed that Sweeney had been playing for over a month with a torn plantar fascia muscle and a stress fracture in his foot, which in turn led to problems with his hamstring. He healed up in time for spring training with the Cubs a year ago, but

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despite having signed him to a two-year contract before the 2014 season, the Cubs elected to part ways with the outfielder.

Knowing he'd continue to collect a paycheck from the Cubs during the 2015 season gave Sweeney the flexibility to take the season off.

"I didn't know what was going to happen," he said. "I had two offers to go play probably a month after I was at home last year. I just didn't want to do the whole Triple-A thing again. I felt like I had proved myself enough that I didn't need to.

"Maybe if I wasn't under contract like I was with the Cubs, I might have reconsidered. But since I was getting paid, I felt I just needed to rest my body and try to get healthy."

Sweeney wasn't ready to make his retirement from the game permanent, however.

"I was fortunate enough to sign here with the Twins and be able to get an opportunity," he said. "I felt like I just wanted to see if I could make a team out of spring training."

Sweeney was signed to a minor league contract by the Twins, with an invitation to the Major League team's spring training camp. That means he has a narrow window of opportunity to impress Twins Manager Paul Molitor and their General Manager, Terry Ryan.

If Sweeney feels extra pressure from those circumstances, he's not showing it. He has appeared in 11 spring training games and is batting .273, with a pair of doubles among his six hits. He has walked six times and struck out just twice.

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Still, the veteran outfielder has been around long enough to know that teams don't often make roster decisions based solely on a handful of spring training statistics.

"I've been on all different sides of it," he remarked. "I've been the starter, the back-up, the whatever. Fighting for a position to get on a team and knowing I have a position on a team. I've got to come in here and show them that I can still play and I feel like I've done that, but it's all about numbers.

"For the older guys that are on a team, they're just trying to get their work in and do stuff that they need to do to be prepared for the regular season. That's what I usually did in the past, but I don't have that luxury (this spring). Spring training is tough. You're facing a different pitcher every single at-bat. It's just a different situation to be in."

It has been a full year since the Twins, or anyone else, have seen what Sweeney could do on a baseball field, but he doesn't feel taking a year off has hurt his game.

"Taking a year off, I didn't know what to expect," he said. "I just kind of started my workouts earlier this last offseason, to get ready. I think I've been doing it for so long that I feel like I didn't even stop playing.

"I knew I'd be fine in the outfield. I've taken all the (batting practice) and Tee and all that stuff that you can take. It's just facing live pitching and getting your timing. So that was the last thing that I needed to work on. We were one of the last (teams) to report to camp so we only had like three or four days to get ready, but after the first couple of days, I was ready to go."

Sweeney is aware that he's not just trying to impress his own front office, but the talent evaluators of the other 29 big league teams as well. After all, if the Twins don't end up having room for him on their Major League club, maybe someone else will.

All of that is out of his control, however. He's focused on what he can control and that's his performance between the white lines.

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"I'm just taking it day by day and seeing what happens," he said. "I've been around long enough that I know how most of this stuff works. So we'll see what happens."

Sweeney is looking for a role with the Twins and feels he's still got plenty to offer, if he can stay healthy. Other than that, his hopes for the upcoming season reflect a veteran's maturity.

"With not playing a full season in the last couple of years, my main goal is first-off to make the team, but then stay healthy. When I'm on the field, I play well. I've just had so many nagging injuries and it seems like they come at the wrong time. When I'm just getting hot, then I get hurt or something.

"I don't really put too many expectations on myself like I did when I was younger," he said. "Now, I just kind of go out and play and do whatever I can do to help the team. Playing in the National League the last couple of years, being in a bench role or starting role or pinch-hitting, whatever it may be, I'm used to it all now. At first, I had a tough time with it, but now I just do whatever I can do when I get in there to show that I can still play."