

Sweeney belts homer in return to Iowa

Written by Bill Seals

Friday, 12 April 2013 23:13 -

DES MOINES - Only the die-hard Iowa Cubs fans hung around for the latter parts of a home opener played in near-freezing temperatures Friday night, but Cedar Rapids native Ryan Sweeney still managed to greet the home-state crowd with a two-out, two-run homer in the eighth inning of a blowout loss to Albuquerque.

The shot over the right-center field wall off reliever Steve Smith was one of the few highlights during Iowa's 15-5 loss to the Isotopes. Playing his first game in his home state since his days at Xavier High School, Sweeney finished 1-for-4 in the Triple-A game.

"I don't think I've ever played in it this cold before, especially with the snow coming the last couple innings," said Sweeney, a 2003 Xavier graduate who was selected by the White Sox in the second round of that June's First-Year Player Draft. "That was definitely a first for me.

"It was freezing out there. I don't think anything can get you ready to play in 20-or 30-degree weather."

Another thing Sweeney can't quite get re-accustomed to is the not-so-plush minor league lifestyle. His team wrapped up Friday's game just after 10:30 p.m., marking the end of a marathon day.

Sweeney and his teammates arrived at Principal Park just 2 1/2 hours before Friday's first pitch. The I-Cubs wrapped up an eight-game road trip Thursday night in Round Rock, Texas, and took a long, winding trip to Des Moines on Friday.

The club boarded a plane in Texas early Friday morning, was later delayed at Chicago's O'Hare Airport and didn't board its connecting flight to Des Moines until 3 p.m. The Cubs then took the field at 7:05 p.m. for a game which took nearly 3 1/2 more hours to complete.

Major League teams have special charter flights, but the I-Cubs travel on commercial planes. Des Moines can be a long way from the big leagues.

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Following his first game in the state of Iowa in nearly a decade, Sweeney was more worried about getting caught up on sleep than reflecting much on his return.

"Today was an especially tough day," he said. "It was so cold outside and there were some guys that woke up at 3:30 this morning and got in (to Des Moines) at 4:30 this afternoon.

"You kind of take the big leagues for granted sometimes. Everybody should have to come down here one time and feel what it's like to be in the minor leagues again. It's definitely no cakewalk."

Crazy travel itineraries such as these were a thing of the past, or so Sweeney thought. But he's found himself back in Triple-A ball after spending much of the past five seasons in the big leagues with Boston and Oakland.

He signed a minor-league contract with the Chicago Cubs less than a week after Boston did not offer him a Major League contract for 2013 and granted him his release on March 30th. He hit .217 in 52 Grapefruit League plate appearances this spring.

The road back to the big leagues is under way for Sweeney as a regular member of the Iowa Cubs lineup. While success has been hard to come by for the 1-8 Cubs, he has held his own by hitting .375 with nine hits in 24 at-bats during his first seven Triple-A games.

Sweeney recorded hits in five of his first six at-bats, including a homer and double, after cracking the lineup in the middle of a four-game series at Albuquerque.

"I'm just trying to have good at-bats here and do what I need to do to get back to the big leagues," he said. "Even though it's frustrating when you have games that you don't win here, you're trying to do what you can to help the team win. Ultimately, everybody is trying to get to Chicago."

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The 6-foot-4 outfielder, who has long been coveted by Chicago Cubs President of Baseball Operations Theo Epstein, thought the Cubs provided him the best chance to make a return to the majors.

"It sounded like a good fit for me," Sweeney said. "I think Theo was trying to get me over to Boston when he was over there too, but I don't think the A's would trade me. And then I ended up going over there after he left.

"I felt like it was a good fit with Chicago and they said they needed a left-handed bat. I'm going to get some at-bats here and hopefully go help them."

Another baseball man who has been familiar with Sweeney for awhile is I-Cubs Manager Marty Pevey, a former coach with Toronto who first watched the outfielder with the A's.

"It's not like he's an old guy. He just was in the big leagues as a really young player," said Pevey, who is in his first year as I-Cubs manager. "At that age he's just coming into his prime.

"Now that he's a National Leaguer, he can play any outfield position or first base. Hitting from the left side, he's starting to drive the ball better. He's going to be an everyday guy and hit in the middle of the order."

Sweeney, 28, hopes his time back in the state of Iowa is short, and that he'll soon be headed back to the city of Chicago as a member of the Cubs. The career .280 hitter with 1,719 Major League at-bats under his belt broke into the big leagues with the cross-town White Sox in 2006.

Baseball America rated Sweeney as the White Sox's No.2 prospect entering the 2005 season, after he posted a respectable .283 batting average with seven homers and 66 RBIs at High-A Winston-Salem. The former highly rated prospect was traded to Oakland prior to the 2008 season and spent four years with the A's.

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After signing with Boston as a free agent in January of 2012, Sweeney got off to a hot start with the team, hitting .373 in 19 April games with 12 extra-base hits. He finished with a .260 batting average with 21 extra-base hits and 16 RBIs.

Sweeney played 60 games with the Red Sox before suffering a broken left hand in late July that ended his lone season in Boston. Now he's in Des Moines, trying to get back to the big leagues again.