

Great expectations for Twins prospects

Written by S.D. Buhr
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On April 4, a new era of Kernels baseball will dawn on Cedar Rapids.

Following 20 years as an Angels affiliate, the team will take the field for the first time as the Midwest League affiliate of the Minnesota Twins. But outside of the small Twins logo on the sleeve of their uniforms, will local fans even notice a difference?

In a word ... yes.

After qualifying for the Midwest League playoffs every season from 2006 through 2010, the Kernels have suffered through two consecutive seasons of losing baseball. The Angels' minor league system has fallen on hard times in recent years and simply has not had many high-ceiling prospects to send through to its affiliates.

The Twins, on the other hand, have some of the most highly regarded young prospects in baseball poised to work their way up through the minor leagues and many of those players should spend time in a Kernels uniform this summer.

This season's Kernels roster may include as many as five players drafted by the Twins either in the first round of the Amateur Draft or as supplemental first-round picks. Three additional likely Kernels were second-round picks of the Twins.

In addition, the roster is likely to include at least a couple of very highly regarded players signed as international free agents.

Three players that Kernels fans should take particular note of include pitcher Jose Berrios and outfielders Byron Buxton and Max Kepler.

Berrios, just 18 years old, was a supplemental first-round pick in last year's June draft. He was

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invited to the Twins' Major League spring training this year in order to provide him an opportunity to prepare to pitch for Puerto Rico in this year's World Baseball Classic.

Berrios was broadly considered one of the top 10 prospects in the Twins organization during the offseason and his work thus far this spring has, if anything, improved his credentials as a top pitching prospect.

Buxton, at age 19, may or may not open the season in Cedar Rapids, but there's little doubt that the Twins' first-round pick last June (and the second player taken overall in the draft) will see time in the Kernels' outfield this season.

After signing with the Twins, he played with both of the organization's Rookie League teams and was named the top prospect of both the Gulf Coast League and Appalachian League by Baseball America. Buxton is widely considered one of the top two or three prospects in the Twins organization and among the top few outfield prospects in baseball.

Kepler was signed in 2009 as a 16-year-old out of his native Germany to the highest bonus ever given to a European player. He had a breakout season in 2012, hitting .297 for Elizabethton with 31 extra-base hits, including 10 home runs, in just 59 games. He's now considered a consensus top 10 Twins prospect among most experts.

Other names for Kernels fans to get to know include outfielders Adam Walker (third round 2012 draft) and Romy Jimenez (international free agent signed in 2009); infielders Niko Goodrum (second round 2010 draft) and Travis Harrison (supplemental first round 2011 draft); and pitchers Hudson Boyd (supplemental first round 2011 draft), Luke Bard (supplemental first round 2012 draft), Mason Melotakis (second round 2012 draft) and JT Chargois (second round 2012 draft).

It's possible some of these prospects will stay behind in Fort Myers for extended spring training in April and others could possibly start the season with the Twins' Advanced Class A Fort Myers Miracle. But the Twins are very deep in talent at the lower minor league levels. Their farm system is now a consensus Top 10 organization and was recently ranked No.2 in all of baseball by ESPN's Keith Law.

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That bodes well for the Kernels this summer and beyond.