

Kernels could be strong up the middle

Written by S.D. Buhr

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third in a series of preseason position-by-position articles about the 2013 Cedar Rapids Kernels. Next: Outfielders.)

In preparation for the first season of the new affiliation between the Minnesota Twins and the Cedar Rapids Kernels, we've embarked on a series of "get to know them" articles.

The intention is to give Kernels fans information about the Twins prospects you may see in a Kernels uniform over the summer, understanding that it's impossible to know exactly who will fill the Kernels' roster until just before Opening Day.

In Part 1 of the series, we looked at catchers and in Part 2 we covered corner infielders. In this article, we'll look at middle infielders who could spend all or part of their summer in Cedar Rapids.

There's no shortage of possible middle infielders at this level of the Twins organization.

Adam (A.J.) Pettersen – Age 24 – Bats R/Throws R

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL)

G - 93, BA - .248, K - 53, BB - 28, 2B - 13, 3B - 2, HR - 2

In all likelihood, Pettersen will start the year at high-A Fort Myers. However, when you consider all the other middle infielders who could/should play at the high-A level, there may not be room for Pettersen with the Miracle.

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Pettersen was selected in the 25th round of the 2011 draft from the University of Minnesota. After just a few games with Elizabethton at the end of the 2011 season, he spent the entire 2012 campaign in Beloit.

He was the epitome of a “utility player” with the Beloit Snappers, playing 2B, 3B, SS, LF and DH. He even pitched an inning.

His offensive stat line would indicate that spending a few more weeks at Class A while he waits for things to shake out a bit in the middle infield further up the organizational ladder wouldn't be the worst thing for Pettersen.

If Pettersen does start the season in Cedar Rapids, his versatility and experience could make him among the first position players promoted to Fort Myers during the season.

Stephen Wickens – Age 23 – Bats R/Throws R

2012: Beloit (Class A – MWL) and Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 59, BA - .307, K - 32, BB - 34, 2B - 12, 3B - 2, HR - 2

Wickens was taken a few rounds behind Pettersen in the 2011 amateur draft out of Florida Gulf Coast University and will turn 24 before Opening Day. Unlike Pettersen, Wickens stayed behind in extended spring training to start the 2012 season and played 10 games with Elizabethton before getting a promotion to Beloit.

While in Elizabethton, Wickens hit .424 and put up a 1.106 OPS. He found the MWL to be more of a challenge, though he still hit .286 at that level and got on base at a .411 clip while serving as the Snappers' primary shortstop through the second half of their season.

He made 11 errors in 159 chances at that position. He also played several games at second

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base. If Wickens impresses early, his age also would make him a candidate for promotion by midyear.

Niko Goodrum – Age 20 – Bats: Both/Throws R

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 58, BA - 2.42, K - 56, BB - 38, 2B - 12, 3B - 8, HR - 4

Goodrum was the Twins' second-round draft choice in 2010 out of his Georgia high school. He got time in the GCL the summer he was drafted and has spent the past two seasons with Elizabethton.

His batting average dipped a bit last season, compared with 2011, but he apparently found more gaps as he increased his extra-base hits across the board. He also increased his number of walks, though he continued to strike out as often as he hit safely, which is something to work on.

At 6-foot-3, there's been some question whether shortstop will ultimately remain Goodrum's primary position, but he played 50 games at that position in 2012 as opposed to just seven at third base, so the Twins appear to be giving him every chance to stick at shortstop.

He cut his errors at shortstop almost in half, compared with 2011, so there seems to be every reason for the Twins to keep sending him out to that position.

Many Twins fans already talk about Goodrum potentially being one shortstop in the organization with a chance of providing some long-term stability at that position. That kind of optimism is evident as Goodrum's name appears high on most published "Top Twins Prospects" lists for 2013, making him a player to watch closely during his time in Cedar Rapids.

Jorge Polanco – Age 19 – Bats: Both/Throws: R

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2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 51, BA - .318, K - 26, BB - 20, 2B - 15, 3B - 2, HR - 5

Polanco was signed to a \$700,000 bonus as a Dominican 16-year-old in 2009. He played several games in the Dominican Summer League in 2010 before moving up to the GCL Twins to finish the year. By then, he was already projected to be a top-tier defensive infielder who could also contribute offensively.

He repeated the GCL in 2011 and then moved up to Elizabethton for 2012. Polanco showed steady improvement in his offensive game during his first couple of professional seasons, but took a major leap offensively in 2012 as he showed some power for the first time.

Polanco played 35 games at shortstop and 15 at second base for Elizabethton, committing just eight errors in 233 chances. That's not bad, especially considering that he's reported to have an excellent range and gets to a lot of balls lesser infielders won't.

Candido Pimentel – Age 22 – Bats: Both/Throws: R

2012: Elizabethton (Rookie – Appalachian)

G - 56, BA - .330, K - 42, BB - 26, 2B - 10, 3B - 3, HR - 1

Pimentel was signed as a free agent outfielder out of the Dominican Republic. He played in the Dominican Summer League in 2009, for the GCL Twins in 2010 and 2011 and for Elizabethton in the Appalachian League last summer.

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After being exclusively an outfielder for his first three years with the Twins organization, Pimentel actually played a few more games at second base for Elizabethton than he did in the outfield. That flexibility could serve Pimentel well in Cedar Rapids, especially since learning the new position didn't seem to negatively affect his bat skills.

In fact, after seeing his offensive stats dip in 2011, he turned things around a bit in 2012. In addition to hitting .330, Pimentel got on base at a .405 pace. That's important, because once he gets on base, he's a threat to steal. He also found more gap power in 2012.

It certainly looks like the players listed above will be more than enough to adequately handle the middle infield for the Kernels in 2012, especially if Pettersen does start the season in Cedar Rapids.

The one other name that bears mentioning is Aderlin Mejia, who we included in Part 2 when we looked at corner infielders. Because the Twins organization appears to be deeper at this level in the middle infield, it is likely that if Mejia finds himself in Cedar Rapids at some point in 2013, it would be primarily at third base.

That said, if a need for middle infield help does arise later in the season, Mejia could just as easily get a call to fill that role, too.