

Kernels will go as far as pitching carries them

Written by Mike Koolbeck
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There is one common denominator when looking at a team's prospects no matter what the level of baseball.

Pitching.

Cedar Rapids Kernels Manager Jake Mauer assessed his club Tuesday. He talked about an exciting corps of youngsters led by center fielder Byron Buxton and a solid group of veterans. Then he got to the bottom-line.

"To be honest, it will be like anything," Mauer said from his Veterans Memorial Stadium office. "It will depend on how our pitchers do.

"If we keep the ball down and get the boys off the field, we should be as good as anybody."

Mauer tabbed Taylor Rogers, Hudson Boyd and Mason Melotakis as the top three hurlers in a six-man rotation. He said the other three starters likely will be Tyler Duffey, David Hurlbut and Brett Lee. Rogers, Melotakis, Hurlbut and Lee are southpaws. Rogers will start Thursday's Midwest League season opener against Beloit at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

"We have a lot of left-handed starters, which is something we haven't had for a while," Mauer said.

Jose Berrios, a highly regarded pitching prospect who pitched for Puerto Rico in the World Baseball Classic, was left behind in extended spring training and could be of help to the Kernels once his arm strength builds up.

"He has to get caught up, innings-wise," Mauer said. "(But) what a great opportunity it was for him to pitch in the World Baseball Classic.

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"We've seen him a little bit in the spring. He's pretty good. When the time comes when he's ready, I wouldn't be surprised if we see him here."

Mauer said right-hander Manuel Soliman, who appeared in only two games at Fort Myers in the Florida State League last year before being sidelined by shoulder surgery, is a guy he is counting on out of the bullpen as a possible closer.

"Soliman has a lot more experience," he said. "We'd like to see him maybe take the role on, but we're not going to designate anybody (as a closer)."

So long as they can get the boys off the field ...

"Hopefully, we'll score some runs," Mauer said. "We have some guys that have a little pop and we have some guys that can run."

"We're not going to wait around for a three-run home run and we're not going to steal 500 bases. We're going to try to manage the situation and go from there."

Mauer said he doesn't really have a set lineup, other than Byron Buxton batting leadoff and playing center field.

"I'm a believer that you need every player on your roster to contribute at some point in the year," he said. "There's nobody that's going to be buried in our bullpen or get buried on our bench. They're all going to get an opportunity to play. That's why we brought them all here."

"You never know when it comes down to it if, whether it's an injury or situational, you need somebody to be called upon for the good of the team. Everybody will have a role on this team, without a doubt."