

New affiliation ignites enthusiasm for Kernels

Written by Mike Condon
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Bob and Janean Blake have been season-ticket holders and have served as a host family for the Cedar Rapids Kernels for 13 seasons.

When the Marion couple heard the Kernels were going to be affiliated with the Minnesota Twins last fall, they couldn't wait for opening day.

They were in attendance Thursday night as Cedar Rapids opened with a 9-7 win over Beloit at Veterans Memorial Stadium and are thrilled about what the new affiliation will mean to the community and them personally.

"I'm was excited because I think there will be a lot more bus trips to the Twin Cities to see games and people from all over Iowa will come here to see games instead of just in the area because of the affiliation with the Twins," Bob Blake said. "I think attendance will be up, I think there will be a lot of enthusiasm and it looks like we're going to have a pretty good team."

The Blakes are hosting pitchers Chris Mazza and Matthew Tomshaw. Janean Blake has already noticed a difference from previous years after just a couple days.

"These boys are so much more polite, so much more personable," she said. "They are more like part of the family already. They are playing with our 3-year old grandson already and they have only been in our house for a day. They ate lunch with us today and that was one more time than the players we had last year did."

Another difference for the Blakes will be the possibility of seeing those they host someday in the major leagues. With the prior arrangement with the Anaheim Angels, it just wasn't feasible to travel to California.

"If we ever have a player progress and get promoted, we will have a chance to go see them," Janean Blake said. "From that aspect it will be good. If we ever get a player to the bigs, it is just a four-hour trip to go watch them play."

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That four-hour trip worked in reverse on Thursday for Bob Eischens and his wife Pam. They are Twins fans from the Minneapolis area who have a partial season-ticket package at Target Field to watch the Twins. The chance to see the Twins of the future brought the Eischens to town.

"We enjoy coming down here to watch minor-league ball," said Bob Eischens. "We are going to stay in town for the entire opening series. We have been down here before when the team was with the Angels and we really enjoy the ballpark."

Eischens made plans to come to Cedar Rapids shortly after the Twins and Kernels came to an agreement.

"We were hoping that they would," he said of the Twins joining up with the Kernels. "It is exactly four hours from our home. We didn't get to go to spring training this year, so we'll dump that money into coming down here along with going to Target Field."

As one might expect, there were several fans in the Bimm-Ridder Diamond Shop looking to purchase updated Kernels' gear before the game.

Jessica Zeimet was in the shop looking over the selections. Recently relocated to Cedar Rapids from the Quad Cities area, Zeimet was attending her first Kernels game.

"I just love baseball and this is a pretty cool little stadium," she said. "I am looking forward to getting out here quite a bit."

Zeimet is a Boston Red Sox fans, but said that doesn't matter as she always likes supporting her hometown team. She believes the Twins connection will be a good one in Cedar Rapids.

"It's cool that the Twins are pretty close to us," she said. "It's a team that a lot of fans around

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here really like, so I think it will help the attendance out here quite a bit. This should be a win-win for Cedar Rapids and the Twins."