

## Grimes catches on with Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr  
Thursday, 18 July 2013 11:14 -

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A number of this year's Cedar Rapids Kernels have had to make an adjustment to wearing a Kernels uniform this summer after playing last season for the Beloit Snappers, who were the Minnesota Twins' Midwest League affiliate during the eight prior years. It no doubt felt a little odd to some of them.

But to Tyler Grimes, who was the Snappers' primary shortstop much of last season, the change in geographic location was far from the most drastic of the adjustments he's had to make.

A couple of weeks before the Snappers' season ended, Grimes was informed by the Twins' minor league field coordinator, Joel Lepel, that the organization intended to convert him to catcher during the fall instructional league. Grimes said he hadn't caught since Little League.

"At first, I didn't know how to take it," he said recently. "There were a lot of things going through my head. I just didn't know how I was going to approach it when I got down there, at first.

"I got down there and everything started working out and I started to like it more and more. But it was tough, don't get me wrong."

And now, how does Grimes feel after spending dozens of games behind the plate in the catchers' gear that ballplayers have long dubbed "the tools of ignorance?"

"It's been a tough transition, but here in July I can honestly say I enjoy going out there each night that I catch and I'm having fun with it," he said. "It's like a new love for the game. I've got a new challenge and I'm always up for a challenge."

That challenge has had some down sides, of course.

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"My body, I've got to take care of it differently. I wasn't used to taking ice baths, but I've been in the ice bath a lot," he said with a bit of a smile.

As a shortstop, Grimes had responsibilities for communicating with his fellow infielders, but he's learned those responsibilities pale in comparison to what he's had to take on as a catcher. Being the team's "quarterback" behind the plate hasn't always come naturally to him.

"Yeah, it was a little mind-boggling for me at first," he admitted. "(Lepel) is always on me, 'Hey, you need to be more talkative and let those guys know.' I wasn't used to that. I'm not really like that. I'm not too loud out there on the field. I kind of let my game play itself and keep my mouth shut."

But Grimes feels that part of his game is progressing. "That's coming more into everything now, I think. At first, it was position for blocking and other mechanics. Now I'm getting used to that more and more. I've still got a lot to work on and I do every day. But the talking side of it, and getting to know your pitchers, is starting to come more and more."

Grimes takes a professional approach to his new responsibilities.

"It's a tough thing when (pitchers) aren't hitting their locations or not hitting the vicinity that you think it's going to be," he said. "You're trying to call a curveball and those guys are trying to throw it for a strike and it's in the dirt."

"It's your job to block the ball. At these levels now, you need to block the ball. We're not in college or high school, this is our job, this is what we're paid to do. So I take a lot of pride in blocking now. Even if it looks bad or weird, I'm going to do whatever I can to throw my body at it."

Kernels Manager Jake Mauer likes the progress Grimes has made this season.

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"He's progressing pretty good, starting to receive the ball better, throws great," said the manager. "His game-calling has gotten better. (I'd like to see) if we can get him to receive a little bit better on the low pitch, which a lot of catchers have trouble with."

"He's come a long ways," said Mauer. "He wants to catch, which is a good thing. He wants to be good at it, which is better."

One aspect that Grimes has had success at this season is controlling the running game of the Kernels' opponents. He has thrown out about 44 percent of opposing baserunners that have attempted to steal a base against him. That's a percentage most Major League catchers would love to have.

"It always feels good when you throw somebody out," Grimes admitted. "You can block a ball and everything like that, but once you throw somebody out, it's kind of like, 'OK, I'm starting to like this more and more,' you know?"

Still, it takes a certain kind of fearlessness for a player to willingly adjust from playing a position that's a relatively safe distance from the hitter to being the guy setting up right behind the hitter. As it turns out, Grimes comes by that trait naturally. He played hockey until a series of concussions forced him to give up that game and focus on baseball.

That's a fact he may regret revealing to Lepel.

"(Lepel) likes to get on me, which is fine, because I can take it," Grimes said, smiling. "Ever since then, he's been like, 'We're going to be on you about it because if you're a hockey player, you're not scared of nothing.'"

"But it is my mentality, catching is my mentality. I just had to get used to it and, like I said, I'm loving it now."

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He may be loving catching now, but there's little question about which sport was Grimes' favorite growing up – and it wasn't baseball.

“We traveled in hockey from Houston to Canada,” Grimes related. “Every spring break we’d go to Calgary and Toronto. Being from Kansas, a lot of people wouldn’t expect that. We actually had a good group of guys and we traveled all over and had fun with it.

“I tell you what, if I didn’t have the concussions that I have, then I probably wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you, to this day.”

Shortly after arriving in Cedar Rapids, Grimes had an opportunity to attend a Cedar Rapids RoughRiders USHL game. Did watching the RoughRiders make him feel like grabbing a stick?

“Oh man,” Grimes responded with a head shake. “I called my dad and said, ‘I’m going to have to leave.’ I ended up leaving because I can’t watch it. I haven’t put on a pair of skates since I was 17 years old.”

The teenage Grimes “retired” from hockey after a championship game.

“My friend actually passed away this past year and they had a little get-together skate and I couldn’t even go to that,” he said. “I showed up to the funeral but I couldn’t go to (the skate) because I can’t put on another pair of skates or I’ll be done with baseball and that’s no lie.”

Grimes' demeanor turns serious when asked about his family and how they keep up with how he's doing during the season.

“I’m a big family guy. My dad’s my best friend. I’ve got four little sisters and my mom, so it’s a big deal to me,” he said. “I’m really tight with my little sisters. I went to Wichita State and played there and the reason I chose there was because I wanted to watch my sisters grow up. Not only do I play for myself, but I play for them and I play for our last name. I take a lot of pride in that.”

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Obviously, they have a tight-knit family.

"I can sit here and tell you everything about my family and tell you how tight we are, but there's really no words to describe how me and my family are," he said. "It's about being real and that's how my personality is. I think that's why I like catching, because if a pitcher needs to hear something or a pitcher needs to tell me something, I'm not going to be afraid to say anything and that's how I look at it. But yeah, my family is my everything."

Grimes also is enjoying the time he's spending with his Kernels baseball family this season, but he's also quite philosophical about the life of a minor league ballplayer.

"Now that I'm here, you've got to enjoy these guys, got to enjoy the clubhouse, because you never know when your last day is going to be," he said. "Two of my friends just got released last week. It just happens that quick."

"All these fans that come out and support us would do anything to be in our position. You know what, sometimes as players, we get away from how we have it. Minor League baseball is a grind, but at the same time, if it pays off and you get (to the Major Leagues), you're going to be accepting a pretty good check every two weeks."

Whether he achieves his goal of playing Big League ball or not, Grimes feels his time in the minor leagues is preparing him for life after baseball.

"You meet guys in the clubhouse that you don't like or you dislike or you love, you have to find a way to get along with everybody," he said, "because that's what's going to take our team to a winning team or a losing team or a mediocre team. You just never know."

Grimes believes the Twins organization does a good job of finding players with character.

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"I don't know how deep (the Twins) go into background checks, but everybody in our organization is a classy guy. Everybody gets along," he said. "The friendships that you build, it's not just towards baseball. You never know if (former Kernels outfielder) J.D. Williams is going to own a business or if (Kernels infielder) Joel Licon's going to be the owner of a hotel and you get put on with him and guys just keep in touch. It's just good because it's more than baseball.

"As much time as we spend together and as much as we get on each other's nerves, you can't explain the minor league life to the outsiders. It's just impossible."

One thing Grimes could explain, however, was his feeling about playing baseball in Cedar Rapids this season.

"I called my dad after about the first two weeks, and said, 'I don't know what the big leagues feels like, but this feels like the big leagues to me,'" he said, adding that the host family program was another aspect he appreciates about his Cedar Rapids experience.

Talking about the fan turnout for Kernels games, compared to other places he's played, Grimes was effusive in his praise for the local support the Kernels fans have shown the team.

"To be able to play in front of an atmosphere like we go out in front of every night, it makes us enjoy what we're doing," he said. "I actually feel like a professional baseball player here."