

Murphy takes larger role with Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr
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A year ago, Jonathan Murphy was a 22-year old 19th-round draft pick out of Jacksonville University just starting his professional baseball career in the Minnesota Twins organization. His first assignment was with the Twins' rookie level Gulf Coast League team in Fort Myers.

Today, Murphy is the primary leadoff hitter and center fielder for the Cedar Rapids Kernels.

It's not at all unusual for a second-year professional player drafted out of college to be spending time with the Kernels, but Murphy, the younger brother of New York Mets infielder Daniel Murphy, didn't take the normal path to Cedar Rapids this season.

Murphy didn't set the world on fire in his 52 games with the GCL Twins in 2012, hitting just .216 and reaching base at a .288 clip. So it's probably safe to say that expectations for Murphy this season, based on last year's results, were marginal at best.

Murphy started 2013 in extended spring training in Fort Myers while awaiting news of which affiliate he would be sent to begin his season. The rookie league team in Elizabethton, Tenn., seemed logical, or perhaps Class A Cedar Rapids would need an outfielder.

Instead, the Class A Advanced Fort Myers Miracle ran into a bit of bad luck with injuries. Murphy was dispatched across the parking lot from the back fields where the GCL Twins play to Hammond Stadium, home of the Miracle.

"I was just in the right place at the right time. It had nothing to do with my own merit," Murphy explained last weekend. "It just had to do with (the Miracle) had a lot of injuries and I happened to be the oldest guy, I think, running around in (extended spring training), so they decided to ship me over there."

Regardless of the circumstances, Murphy valued the experience.

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“It was really a great opportunity for me. A great learning experience, too, just getting to go to a higher level like that and learn from some of those guys that have some experience and see what it’s like to be a professional, with this being my first (full) professional season.”

Murphy said he definitely noticed the higher level of competition. “The game was moving pretty fast, but it was exciting. It was a challenge and an opportunity for me and I was appreciative of the organization for it.”

A few days after Twins top prospect Byron Buxton was promoted from the Kernels to Fort Myers, Murphy found himself assigned to the Kernels. His jobs were essentially to replace Buxton in the Cedar Rapids outfield and, eventually, at the top of the Kernels’ batting order.

Was Murphy worried about replacing perhaps the top rated minor leaguer in America?

“I was worried about him replacing me in Fort Myers,” Murphy responded, laughing.

“No, Byron’s a great guy and an unbelievable player. He’s got more talent than I’ll ever imagine having. To try to compare myself to him wouldn’t be real fair. He’s a great player and I’m just going to try to play the best that I can.”

Murphy certainly doesn’t see himself competing with Buxton. “Byron’s a Major League baseball player and I don’t think there’s a lot of doubt about that. He’s going to play in the Major Leagues. So, if I were to get caught up in trying to compare myself to him constantly, it would drive me crazy.

“Basically, all I can do is show up every day and whoever is pitching that day, it’s my job to compete against him and do the best I can. If I can do that every day and compete and be successful, then maybe I’ll look up in a couple of years and find myself in the Major Leagues, too.”

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Murphy knows there's no guarantees in his line of work, though. "Maybe (it will turn out) I'm not quite good enough. But all I can do is come out here and compete every day and as far as I'm concerned the pressure is taken off me. I have a job to do every day and however good I am and how much talent I have will dictate where I go as long as I put the effort forth."

While not competing with Buxton, Murphy has filled in well for the departed star. Through the past weekend, Murphy was hitting .311 in 23 games for the Kernels and had put up a .398 on-base percentage, while showing good range in the outfield.

So, after spending a couple of weeks facing Class A Advanced pitching, apparently Murphy is finding Midwest League pitchers relatively easy to hit, right?

That question pulls a laugh from Murphy. "Not at all! You must not have come to many of the games! Oh, my goodness, no. There are still plenty of talented arms and talented pitchers. It's been exciting, though, to have the opportunity to come here and get to play every day."

Murphy's got one advantage that most minor league ballplayers don't: an older brother who has already made it to the big leagues. Daniel Murphy is in his fifth season with the Mets and the two brothers are close.

"We encourage one another," Murphy said. "We send each other texts. He had a day game yesterday and he had a real good day. I think he had like three or four hits (texted), 'I think you win today, I don't think I'm going to be able to match that.'"

"Sometimes whenever we're both going well, we'll try to encourage one another like, 'Hey, you got two today, I'll try to join the party,'" Murphy added. "Then when we're struggling, it's nice to have someone to bounce ideas off of and he's always there for me when I need him. It's a great tool and resource to have for baseball and for life. He's just been a good role model for me."

Asked what he likes to do away from the ballpark, Murphy gave an answer quite different than most ballplayers do.

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"I just got engaged, so that takes up a lot of my free time, in a good way. We've been doing some wedding planning." Murphy and his fiancée chose October 12 for their wedding date. "Right after the season. Hopefully, the Mets won't be in the World Series. I think we'll be OK there."

Picking that date was a little dicey with a brother playing Major League Baseball, where mid-October is right in the middle of the postseason. The Mets, however, are having just about as much success this season as the Twins are, which is to say, not much success at all.

The timing was questioned by at least one member of Murphy's family, however.

"My dad sent me a text, 'What if the Mets are in the World Series?' I said, 'I think this year we'll be OK dad.'" Murphy then smiled and almost mumbled, "I might catch some heat for that one."

But Murphy is clearly looking forward to the event as the culmination of an exciting year. "My family will be there, we're going to have a nice small wedding. I'm really looking forward to it and excited that God's really blessing both of us and it's been an exciting time in my life.

"Getting to come out (to the ballpark) and do something I love every day and now I've found a wife I'm going to get to spend the rest of my life with. So, I've really been blessed here in the last few months."

Kernels players who have spent time playing at lower levels in the organization, or at Beloit during the last season or two of the Twins' affiliation with the Snappers, have expressed their enthusiasm for the facilities and environment in Cedar Rapids.

Murphy, however, has a different perspective, having arrived in town after playing at the next level up in the organization. The Fort Myers Miracle, after all, play their home games at Hammond Stadium, the spring training home of the parent Twins.

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That said, Murphy's assessment of the environment in Cedar Rapids is much the same as those who've moved up the ladder to reach the Kernels.

"It's unbelievable (here)," Murphy said. "Fort Myers was good and it was exciting, but as far as crowds go and the fans, they're way better here. Just numbers-wise and they seem to care a lot more.

"When I go around town and I run in to someone and I say, 'I play for the Kernels,' almost every single person has said, 'Oh, yeah, I went to a game last week,' or 'I love going to the Kernels games every once in a while.'"

Murphy said that was not necessarily the case in Fort Myers.

"It's definitely more of a community here. It's been enjoyable and the fans really care a lot. It makes it a lot of fun to play in front of them. They're passionate."