

Twins GM likes what's happening in minors

Written by Jim Ecker

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Minnesota Twins General Manager Terry Ryan looks around at Minnesota's teams in the minor leagues and likes what he sees, including what's happening in Cedar Rapids.

However, he looks at what's happening with the Major League club and is not pleased with a 49-62 record and a 17 1/2 game gap between the Twins and the first-place Detroit Tigers.

"It's obvious we're struggling in the big leagues. There's no question," Ryan said during his visit to Cedar Rapids earlier this week. "We're not pitching well enough.

"I think our bullpen is fairly solid up there. Our starting pitching has struggled through the last couple of years now. We need to get headed back in the right direction."

The minor leagues are the lifeblood of any organization, and in that respect the Twins are doing well with a 297-248 record with their six minor league clubs.

That includes Rochester in Triple-A (66-54), New Britain in Double-A (55-61), Fort Myers in High-A (67-42), Cedar Rapids in Low-A (68-45), Elizabethton in the Appalachian League (20-25) and Fort Myers in the Gulf Coast League (21-21).

That's a collective winning percentage in the minor leagues of .545, which is good.

"I think we're in pretty good shape in the minor leagues, but that doesn't count," said Ryan. "Nobody wants to hear about the minor leagues in Minnesota. They want to know, 'OK, when are they coming? And what are they going to do when they arrive?'"

That's the great unknown in baseball. Byron Buxton looked terrific in Cedar Rapids, but what will he do at Target Field in Minneapolis if and when he gets there?

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Minnesota normally gets high grades for its minor league organization.

"I think if you talk to independent people who write for these baseball periodicals, they'll probably tell you we're in the top-5 (of 30 organizations)," said Ryan. "That's good minor league stuff. Yeah, I like to hear that. It's always good for me to mention that.

"It doesn't do you much good until your Major League record starts to indicate you are heading in the right direction. We're better than we were (in Minnesota), but we're still not good enough.

"When we play the Tigers, their starting five (the five-man rotation) is very impressive. And they've dominated our division for the last couple of years, although Cleveland and Kansas City are giving them a pretty good run.

"We've got a lot of good things going. Unfortunately the record doesn't show that."

Ryan said the Twins have money to spend on free agents, but does not think that's the answer.

"You can do that," he said about buying players. "I don't think that's the way you should do it. Free agency very rarely works. There are a couple of players that have certainly responded well to free agency, but for the most part, if you're trying to put a team together, you better concentrate on these types of development areas.

"If we're going to be good, it's going to be because we drafted well, we found well, we're got some international talent, we made some decent trades. That's kind of how we did it back in the day.

"We'll dabble in the free agent market. I don't think there's any doubt you have to use that. We will," he said. "It's a combination of making better decisions and staying relatively healthy."

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Ryan was impressed with his tour of Cedar Rapids, even though he was momentarily locked in the stadium after Sunday's game and needed assistance to find a way out. Ryan has visited Cedar Rapids before, but this was his first trip since the Twins and Kernels joined forces this season.

"I love the fact that geographically it's in our market," he said. "It's on the fringe, but we would consider this town in our market. We can develop that and grow that, I think."

The Twins moved their Midwest League team from Beloit, Wis., to Cedar Rapids.

"The facility, the weight room, the cages, the attendance, the front office, the fan base here, the host families ... This has been a great transition for our club," he said. "I'm very pleased that we've got a good team in here to give people hope that we're going to provide you with a good product."

Ryan was pleased to see quite a few Twins fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

"I've seen a lot of Twins caps, I've seen a lot of Twins jerseys," he said. "And I've had a few people come up to me, which is a rarity, and a lot of them are from Minnesota."

"This has been a pretty good go here," he said. "It's been quite a first five months."