

Kernels fill 'Top Prospect' list for Twins

Written by S.D. Buhr

Monday, 21 October 2013 21:53 - Last Updated Monday, 21 October 2013 22:01

The 2013 season was, by almost all measures, a successful maiden campaign for the affiliation between the Cedar Rapids Kernels and their new Major League parent, the Minnesota Twins.

Now, the fall is bringing out the first of what will be many published organizational “top prospect” lists, signaling that it’s not too early to begin looking at what kind of talent the Twins will be sending to Cedar Rapids in 2014.

John Sickels publishes The Baseball Prospect Book and is one of the more respected minor league experts in the business. Last week, he released his list of the Twins’ Top Twenty Prospects on his minorleagueball.com website.

A peek at that list not only confirms for Kernels fans that they had the opportunity to watch a number of likely Major Leaguers on Perfect Game Field this year, but also gives a clue as to what local fans can expect to see next summer.

Sickels wrote that the “Twins system is among the elite in the game,” and a number of recent Kernels are among the reasons for that high praise. He also believes that, “There are some lively arms of promise at the lower levels,” in the Twins organization, which should tip off Kernels fans to what they can expect to see in 2014.

Sickels uses a grading system (A, B, C, etc.) to rank the prospect status of minor leaguers and he is not an easy grader. As he writes, “Grade C+ is actually good praise, and some C+ prospects (especially at lower levels) turn out very well indeed.”

Of the hundreds of minor league players in the Twins organization, 24 attained that C+ grade or better from Sickels this fall. While that may sound like very few, it's actually a high number of C+ grades for a single organization.

Byron Buxton, who patrolled center field for the Kernels during the first half of the 2013 campaign, was one of two Twins prospects (along with Class AA slugger Miguel Sano) to attain

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Grade A prospect status from Sickels. Wrote Sickels, "Few organizations can boast a pair of potential superstar Grade A talents like Buxton and Sano, and the Twins have good depth beyond them."

Buxton ranks as the No.1 prospect in the organization on Sickels' list, but five other Kernels alumni also rank in his Top Twenty.

Right-handed pitcher Jose Berrios gets a B grade from Sickels and ranks sixth among Twins prospects. Both infielder Jorge Polanco (B) and outfielder/first baseman Max Kepler (B) made the organizational Top 10, coming in at numbers nine and 10, respectively.

Third baseman Travis Harrison earns a B-/C+ from Sickels and the No.11 ranking, while outfielder Adam Brett Walker's C+/B- grade placed him at No.13.

Four additional Kernels, infielder Niko Goodrum and pitchers Mason Melotakis, Taylor Rogers and Miguel Sulbaran, pulled C+ grades from Sickels and fell just outside the Top 20. In essence, this means 10 members of the 2013 Kernels are among Sickels' Top 24 Twins Prospects going into the offseason.

As for the future, grading recently signed or drafted ballplayers that haven't yet competed in a full season of professional baseball is a tricky business, but Sickels placed five such Twins prospects among his organizational Top 20. All five are pitchers.

Kohl Stewart, a righthander who was the Twins' top draft pick last summer, leads that list with a B+ grade from Sickels and a No.3 ranking in the organization. Sickels wrote that Stewart, "was the best high school pitcher in the draft and showed good command of plus stuff in his pro debut."

Reports are that lefty Lewis Thorpe, an Australian 17-year-old, grew an inch and added something close to 50 pounds and several miles per hour to his fastball this past summer. Sickels grades him at a B- and places him seventh among Twins prospects.

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Thorpe pitched in the Gulf Coast League (the lowest U.S. rookie league team among Twins affiliates) in 2013, making it highly unlikely that he'll start 2014 in Cedar Rapids and may not arrive until the following summer.

Felix Jorge (number 17), Stephen Gonsalves (19) and Ryan Eades (20) slip into Sickels' Top 20 as well, all with C+ grades.

Jorge is a righthander from the Dominican Republic who had a very good year for Elizabethton in 2013, striking out 72 hitters in just 61 innings covering his 12 starts.

Gonsalves, a lefty and the Twins' fourth-round pick last June, threw only 28 innings combined during his time with both Twins rookie league teams in 2013, but was a strikeout machine and posted a 0.95 earned run average.

Eades, another righthander, was the Twins' second-round pick in 2013 out of LSU. He accumulated just 15 2/3 innings of work for Elizabethton this summer but will be 22 years old by opening day in 2014, making it possible the Twins would try to accelerate his movement through the organization.

It could be years before Cedar Rapids fans see another collection of hitters in Kernels uniforms the likes of the group the Twins sent through town in 2013. Buxton could well be wearing a Minnesota Twins uniform and calling Target Field in Minneapolis his home by the end of the coming season. By 2016, several of his Kernels teammates could be joining him with the Twins.

While Kernels hitters in 2014 are not likely to measure up to what fans saw this year, a pitching staff that could include Stewart, Jorge, Gonsalves, Eades and, possibly by the end of the season Thorpe as well, has the potential to be among the best in the Midwest League.