

Christensen could stick with Kernels

Written by S.D. Buhr

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FORT MYERS, Fla. — With the Cedar Rapids Kernels set to open their 2014 season in just a week, the Minnesota Twins Class A affiliate is headed into the final days of spring training in Fort Myers, Fla., with only a few more decisions to make.

Manager Jake Mauer indicated after Wednesday's game with the Red Sox's Class A group that the Kernels' roster is shaping up with just a handful of positions still unresolved.

One player still "on the bubble" with the Kernels is Chad Christensen, who prepped at Cedar Rapids Washington High School before playing ball for the University of Nebraska. Christensen was drafted by the Twins last June and played last summer for the Twins' Gulf Coast League rookie level affiliate in Fort Myers.

It sounds like the Kernels' manager would like to bring Christiansen to Cedar Rapids next week.

"Chad's been working real hard and he's somebody that gives us some flexibility. He's played both (corner) outfield positions and both corner infield positions, and I wouldn't be afraid to put him at shortstop once in a while," said Mauer.

"We've got about six or seven guys we've got to make decisions on and he's in that mix, but there's no doubt that he's somebody we'd like to take north with us."

Mauer knows his squad of Kernels is going to have to take a different approach than last year's team, now that last year's power hitters have moved up the organizational ladder.

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“We’re going to have to be real good at the small things right away,” the manager acknowledged. “We’re going to have to run the bases well. We’re going to have to be able to execute the small game, hit-and-runs, getting bunts down, doing things like that. Try to create runs that way.”

According to Mauer, there should be five or six familiar faces for Kernels fans to welcome back to Cedar Rapids.

Among the likely returnees are catchers Michael Quesada and Bo Altobelli.



“We plan on taking both those guys north, along with (Mitchell) Garver. We’re probably going to take three (catchers) to start, at least,” said Mauer.

That means flexibility will be key among other position players. Mauer said he expects the final roster to contain just 12 position players, allowing 13 roster spots for the pitching staff that will once again use a six-man starting rotation.

It’s that pitching staff that many in the Twins organization, as well as the fans, are eager to see.

“I think we’ll be starter-heavy. We should have some quality arms, starting-wise,” said Mauer.

“We’ve got a lot of young, quality arms. It just depends on how many we decide to bring up with us.”

A number of pitchers can push their fastballs consistently into the middle-to-upper 90s on the speed gun, including young Dominican pitchers Yorman Landa, who was hitting 96 mph in

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Wednesday's game, and Randy Rosario. In addition, Kohl Stewart, the Twins' first-round pick in 2013 (and second pick overall), is a hard-throwing 19-year-old who is still on the Kernels' roster as camp is drawing to a close.

The team's success, however, is not solely determined by the players who start the season with the club. Between injuries and promotions, it's equally important to have talented players at the lower levels of the organization preparing to join the Kernels as the season develops.

According to Mauer, plenty of potential midseason help is available.

"You know we've got some young boys down there, too, (Lewis) Thorpe and (Stephen) Gonsalves. Kids that have some pretty good arms that we'll probably see at some point throughout the year," Mauer said.

The Kernels will break camp on Monday. Opening Day at Perfect Game Field at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Cedar Rapids is Thursday, April 3, against the Clinton LumberKings.