

Will St. Paul lure Twins away from C.R.?

Written by S.D. Buhr

Wednesday, 18 June 2014 19:00 -



In September of 2012, the Minnesota Twins announced a four-year affiliation agreement with the Cedar Rapids Kernels with Twins then-Senior Director of Minor Leagues Jim Rantz telling the media, “We are confident that this relationship will grow into one of the strongest affiliations in minor league baseball.”

Less than two years later, the Twins organization appears to be flirting with another minor league ownership group with a possible eye toward moving their Class A Midwest League affiliation to nearby St. Paul, Minn.

Potentially, that could force the Kernels to shop for another new Major League affiliate when their current Player Development Contract with the Twins expires following the 2016 season.

According to a story Tuesday in the Business Journal, Minnesota Twins President Dave St. Peter and Derek Sharrer, the General Manager of the St. Paul Saints, an independent minor league team, expressed mutual interest in a future affiliation agreement between the two teams.

Their comments were made at the Business Journal’s Business of Sports Power Breakfast Tuesday morning.

“Long-term, there are aspects that make a lot of sense,” St. Peter is quoted as telling the group. “Short-term, it’s more challenging. We have a tremendous partnership with Cedar Rapids and the Kernels. It’s been a home run for the Twins. It’s been strategic for the Twins relative to marketing in the state of Iowa.

“I think it’s something that will require some additional discussions and I’m guessing that dialogue will take place.”

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The Twins' president did point out that the potential arrangement comes with challenges.

"It's a bus league, and when you're in St. Paul and there are teams east of Cleveland, that's a tough bus trip for your players," St. Peter said. "Things like that need to be addressed long-term."

The Saints are in the process of building a new 7,000 seat stadium in St. Paul that's being built to meet or exceed standards required by baseball for Class AA and lower affiliated teams. The stadium is scheduled to open in 2015.

The Saints are owned by a group that recently agreed to sell the Twins' Class high-A affiliate in Fort Myers, Fla.

"Our organization has a tremendous amount of respect for Derek and his team," St. Peter said of the Twins' relationship with the Saints organization. "We've worked very closely with the Saints' ownership ... for 20 years."

As the Twins president alluded to, there are a number of obstacles that the Twins and Saints would need to overcome before placing an affiliate in St. Paul.

The most likely arrangement would be for the Twins to place their Class A Midwest League affiliate in St. Paul. There are no high-A or AA leagues located in the Midwest and the new Saints stadium is not being built for AAA standards.

However, putting a Midwest League team in St. Paul would not be a simple matter.

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For the Twins and Saints to make the plan work, they would need to either seek to have the Midwest League expand by two teams (to keep the number of league teams at an even number for scheduling purposes) or acquire an existing MWL team and move it to St. Paul.

Every Major League team already has a full season Class A affiliate, which would seem to make expansion unlikely. Acquiring a team and moving it would only be somewhat easier.

Under the current Professional Baseball Agreement between the Major and Minor League governing bodies, every current affiliated minor league team is guaranteed an affiliation. Baseball cannot just tell an existing affiliated team that they are being kicked out of affiliated Minor League baseball.

The Saints ownership would likely need to acquire an existing Midwest League team and relocate it to St. Paul, rather than looking to acquire a team currently competing in another Class A league.

While it would not be totally unheard of for a team to move from one minor league to another, the same scheduling issues that affect expansion would also require any movement between leagues to result in each affected league retaining an even number of teams.

With the eastward migration of Midwest League teams over the past two decades, virtually every club in the Eastern Division of the league is playing in relatively new ballparks and before generally larger crowds than is the case among their Western Division brethren. This would make it much more likely that a current Western Division club would be targeted.

With relatively new or recently renovated ballparks in Appleton (Wis.), Kane County (Ill.), Peoria (Ill.), the Quad Cities and Cedar

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Rapids, it would be unlikely that the teams in those communities would go on the sale block.

That leaves Beloit (Wis.), Clinton and Burlington, three teams with the most difficult stadium situations left among potential MWL targets.

However, all three of those teams are, like the Kernels, long-time MWL members. More importantly, also like the Kernels, all three clubs are community owned. Prying ownership away from those communities would likely be no easy task.

Finally, even if an existing ownership group were made an offer they could not refuse, the team would need approval of the other members of the MWL to relocate. That hurdle might not be so easy to overcome, either.

St. Paul is well outside the current MWL footprint. Cedar Rapids is the closest current league city and it's a good 250 miles from the Twin Cities. Every other MWL community, except Appleton (270 miles), is at least 300 miles from St. Paul.

South Bend (Ind.), at 495 miles, would be the only MWL Eastern Division location less than 500 miles away.

That's an important consideration for the league, because under the terms of the Professional Baseball Agreement rules, players must be given an off day any time they are bused 500 miles or more. Having a team that far outside the league's current footprint could present a nightmare for MWL schedule-makers.

It also would increase travel costs, not only for the team that relocates, but for every other team in the league that would have to send teams to St. Paul on road trips. Those travel costs are primarily

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the responsibility of the local team, not their Big League affiliate.

St. Peter is certainly correct in cautioning Twin Cities fans that putting an affiliate in St. Paul would be difficult to arrange, but if the Twins were to decide to make such a move a priority, it's not beyond the realm of possibility that they could throw enough weight around to get what they want. It remains to be seen whether the Twins and Saints are truly interested enough in a marriage to overcome the obstacles.

The agreement between the Kernels and Twins will have young Twins prospects calling Cedar Rapids their summer home for two more years after the current season.

Nevertheless, it's no doubt disappointing to Twins fans in Eastern Iowa to learn that at least one Twins executive may no longer be interested in seeing the relationship between the Twins and Kernels "grow into one of the strongest affiliations in minor league baseball."

Kernels General Manager Doug Nelson, reached Tuesday afternoon while in Comstock Park, Mich., for the Midwest League All-Star game, was asked for his reaction to St. Peter's statements to the Business Journal.

"The Kernels view our affiliation with the Twins as a long term partnership," Nelson stated via email.

It is less clear whether the Twins continue to share that view.