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Tuesday, March 6, 2018

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Molitor excited about talented pitching quartet

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | March 5, 2018

CLEARWATER, Fla. -- The Twins brought a glimpse of the future to Clearwater against the Phillies on Monday, as pitching prospects Fernando Romero, Stephen Gonsalves, Zack Littell and Aaron Slegers made the trip north to be available to pitch against the Phillies in relief of Kyle Gibson.

Slegers pitched two innings in the 4-3 loss, surrendering two runs on three hits, while Romero threw a perfect seventh inning with three strikeouts and Gonsalves pitched his way out of trouble with a scoreless eighth. Littell didn't see action.

Romero (No. 68) and Gonsalves (No. 78) rank among MLB Pipeline's Top 100 prospects, and Romero is the club's second-ranked prospect, Gonsalves is third and Littell is 15th. Slegers is the only one of the four with Major League experience and isn't among the club's Top 30 prospects, although he retains his rookie status this year.

None of the four figure to make the Opening Day roster -- they're all expected to be part of the rotation at Triple-A Rochester -- but Twins manager Paul Molitor said he's excited about the future of the rotation and pleased to have some depth with up-and-coming starters who could find their way into the mix this season.

"Those guys are another year into their professional careers, and while most likely they won't be here at the start, we feel good about our options going forward," Molitor said. "It's just difficult to get these guys extended and get them innings. Once Minor League camp opens, we have to make sure they're in shape to get extended once the Minor League season starts."

Here's a deeper look at the four:

RHP Fernando Romero

2017 stats: 11-9, 3.53 ERA with 120 strikeouts, 45 walks and four homers allowed in 125 innings with Double-A Chattanooga

The skinny: Romero, 23, easily has the best pure stuff of the group, with a fastball that can reach triple-digits to go along with a plus-slider and a changeup. The 6-foot, 215-pounder has dealt with injury issues in the past, including Tommy John surgery and knee surgery that forced him to miss the 2014 and '15 seasons. He also ended last season on the disabled list with a right shoulder impingement. The Twins believe he maintains his velocity and repeats his delivery enough to remain a starter, but they could be tempted to use him in relief this season to bolster the bullpen and give him his first taste of the Majors as a reliever.

LHP Stephen Gonsalves

2017 stats: 9-5, 3.27 ERA, 118 strikeouts, 31 walks and 11 homers allowed in 110 innings between Chattanooga and Triple-A Rochester

The skinny: Gonsalves, 23, has a fastball that sits in the low 90s but has good command and can be deceiving, as is evidenced by his 514 strikeouts in 478 1/3 innings in the Minors. The 6-foot-5, 213-pounder possesses a plus-changeup, and he's working to improve his curveball. He reached Triple-A last year but had a 5.56 ERA in 22 2/3 innings there, so he'll look to improve at that level and is expected to make his Twins debut at some point this season. He's also had minor shoulder issues in the past but is currently healthy.

RHP Zack Littell

2017 stats: 19-1, 2.12 ERA, 142 strikeouts, 41 walks and eight homers allowed in 157 innings between Class A Advanced (Yankees) and Double-A (Yankees, Twins)

The skinny: The first thing that jumps out about Littell, 22, is his line from last season, and dating back to 2016, he's 28-2 over his last 30 decisions in the Minors. Littell, who was acquired along with Dietrich Enns from the Yankees for Jaime Garcia at last year's Trade Deadline, has a fastball that sits in the low 90s, a curve that flashes plus and a changeup. The 6-foot-4, 220-pounder has a great feel for pitching and gets plenty of downward plane on his pitches, inducing a 53 percent ground-ball rate that rates above average despite his below-average fastball velocity. He's expected to open the year at Triple-A.

RHP Aaron Slegers

2017 stats: 15-4, 3.40 ERA, 119 strikeouts, 29 walks and 11 homers allowed in 148 1/3 innings with Rochester

The skinny: At 6-foot-10, 245 pounds, Slegers is the tallest pitcher in the organization and has allowed only 38 homers in 601 career innings. He also had a ground-ball rate of 44.5 percent at Triple-A last year and has great control, walking two batters per nine innings in his career. His fastball averaged 91.5 mph last year and he also mixes in a slider and a changeup.

He was impressive in his Major League debut last season, allowing two runs on two hits against the Indians on Aug. 17, but pitched sparingly down the stretch and finished with a 6.46 ERA in 15 1/3 innings. He projects more as a back-end starter, but gives the Twins depth this season, as he doesn't have much more to prove at Triple-A.

Gibson working to carry over 2017 success

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | March 5, 2018

CLEARWATER, Fla. -- After making mechanical changes last season, including learning how to better utilize his slider after some advice from Byron Buxton around the All-Star break, right-hander Kyle Gibson is confident he'll be able to carry over his 2017 second-half success into this season.

Gibson was solid against the Phillies in a 4-3 loss on Monday, allowing one run on two hits over three innings, making one mistake on a 3-2 fastball that caught too much of the plate on a homer from Rhys Hoskins in the second. He struck out two, induced five ground-ball outs and has a 1.80 ERA this spring.

"It feels a lot better," Gibson said. "I went down in the 'pen during the fourth inning to work on curveballs and sliders down because I felt like my hand wasn't in the right spot. But when you look at my changeup and sinker, they move similarly, which is what I'm looking for."

Gibson again credited Buxton for his second-half resurgence, as Buxton is the one who helped him better use his slider after standing in during a July batting practice. He explained to Gibson how his slider looked similar to his fastball out of his hand when thrown a certain way, and Gibson began to use the slider much more effectively.

Through the end of July, Gibson threw his slider 15.3 percent of the time and his curveball 12.1 percent of the time, but after Aug. 1, he used his slider 20.3 percent of the time and his curveball 7.7 percent of the time, per Statcast™. He also increased his amount of pitches in the strike zone from 44.3 percent to 47.1 percent. Gibson had a 6.08 ERA through the end of July, but posted a 3.55 ERA over the final two months of the season.

"I want to be able to throw a slider that works off my inside sinker to a righty," Gibson said. "And I want my changeup to work off it. Buxton was coming off the DL and told me about my slider, and how it looked compared to my fastball, and that really helped. To have a hitter like him stand in there and tell me what he was seeing, it's the kind of advice you can use down the road."

Camp battles

- Rule 5 reliever Tyler Kinley allowed an unearned run in the fourth and walked one, but was otherwise solid, with his fastball reaching 99 mph on the radar gun. He threw 16 pitches (12 for strikes) and caught the eye of Twins manager Paul Molitor.

"[Kinley] has been a little bit hot and cold so far, but I thought today was a good day," Molitor said. "It's hard for hitters to cover a 98-mph fastball and a 92-mph slider. He's an interesting character. That arm is pretty big. We'll just keep moving him along, and as a Rule 5 guy, we'll look at his long-term value and those kinds of things. But it's still early."

- First baseman/designated hitter Kennys Vargas continued his solid spring offensively, doubling to lead off the second. He's tied for the team lead with three doubles this spring. But Vargas remains likely to be the odd man out after the surprise signing of Logan Morrison to be the club's everyday DH. The Twins, though, won't make any move with Vargas until near the end of camp.

- Outfielder Zack Granite, who is competing alongside Robbie Grossman to be the club's fourth outfielder, went 1-for-3 with a strikeout and is hitting .167 this spring. He also lost a ball in the sun in center field. Grossman went 0-for-3 and is 0-for-17 this spring.

Injury update

- Catcher Mitch Garver, who returned to the lineup on Sunday after missing three games with a tweaked right knee, felt fine after the game and will play again Tuesday. Fellow catcher Jason Castro has been out for the last week with migraines but is expected to start Tuesday's game.

Up next

- Left-hander Adalberto Mejia, who is competing for the final spot in the rotation, is slated to make his third start of the spring at 12:05 p.m. CT Tuesday against the Orioles at Hammond Stadium. Other pitchers scheduled to see action include Trevor Hildenberger, Taylor Rogers, Jake Reed and Myles Jaye.

Dodgers pair leads top prospect performers

William Boor | MLB.com | March 5, 2018

Other top prospect performances from Monday's action:

No. 68 overall prospect Fernando Romero (Twins' No. 2) made quick work of the Phillies, striking out the side in his only inning of work. Romero hasn't allowed a hit or a run in any of his three appearances and has notched six strikeouts in five innings.

Joe Mauer could see more time at DH with Logan Morrison joining Twins

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | March 6, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – The Twins' addition of slugger Logan Morrison is potentially a boost to an already effective offense and his personality already has been a hit in the clubhouse.

But there is one player, in particular, who could benefit from Morrison's arrival: Joe Mauer.

Morrison, a first baseman, will be the primary designated hitter in manager Paul Molitor's lineup. But Molitor is thinking about how much he can toggle Morrison and Mauer between the positions. Mauer could spend more time at DH as part of the arrangement. And, Molitor acknowledged, more time at DH could mean fewer days off for No. 7.

"I don't have numbers in mind, specifically," Molitor said. "You think about Joe having a healthy season and how many games does that look like and how you are going to divide them from defense to just DH days."

“[Morrison] being a guy who has played a lot of first, it will be an easy swap now and then just to keep Morrison in the game and keep Joe fresh, it’s a nice combination, potentially.”

Keeping Mauer, 34, fresh has been a priority for the Twins in recent seasons, and Molitor appeared to hit the rest button at the right times last year. The three-time AL batting champion played in 141 games, appearing 13 times as the designated hitter. Mauer was the DH 34 times in 2016 and 20 in 2015.

Molitor prefers to monitor his fellow Cretin-Derham Hall alum, picking and choosing the times when Mauer appears ready for a break.

“I think it went well last year,” Mauer said. “I don’t think we went into the season with a number in mind. That what was good about it. I told Mollie, ‘If you think I need a day, then give me a day.’”

Keeping Mauer’s quality at-bats and on-base skills in the lineup more often benefits a Twins team that was fourth in the AL with 815 runs scored last season — and aspires to make a return trip to the postseason.

Mauer batted .305 in 2017 — his highest average since 2013 — with a .384 on-base percentage. Only Mike Trout, Aaron Judge, Jose Altuve and Eric Hosmer had a higher OBP in the AL.

Molitor also has to consider the defensive ramifications of using Morrison at first base. The Twins campaigned for Mauer to win a Gold Glove last year after his best defensive season since moving to the infield from catcher before the 2014 season. He was sixth in baseball in defensive runs saved at his position and was adept at scooping throws in the dirt from his infielders.

Morrison was ninth in defensive runs saved. But Mauer outkicks him in Ultimate Zone Rating, a statistic used to determine a player’s defensive effectiveness. According to FanGraphs, Mauer led baseball with a UZR rating of 7.1, while Morrison was ninth at 1.2.

Molitor watched intently Sunday as Morrison played first base against Pittsburgh, his first time doing so since joining the Twins.

“I was watching how he held runners and his depth and the things that he did,” Molitor said. “To see where we need to communicate some of our thoughts about the position.”

The other component to the arrangement is making sure Morrison, who has never been a DH more than 17 games in a season, doesn’t have a rough adjustment. The joke used to be that being a DH is like pinch hitting four times a game, but players in the role try to avoid thinking that way.

“If I’m DH-ing that day, I’ll help the team get some hits,” said Morrison, who signed a one-year, \$6.5 million contract Feb. 28. “If I’m playing first, I’m going to get some hits, hit some homers and save some runs.

“It is important to me to stay involved as a first baseman as it is important to the team. So, I don’t really care, but if they need me at first base, I think I’m more than willing and capable to play first base and not see any drop off from Joe.”

It will be a daily decision that is worth the brain power. Third baseman Miguel Sano is expected to DH at times as well.

Keep in mind that Twins designated hitters had a .711 on-base-plus-slugging percentage last year. Only Twins catchers had a worse percentage among the position players.

Morrison’s .868 OPS with Tampa Bay last season would have led the Twins.

So, yes, you find a way to get the most out of a Mauer-Morrison mix.

“It is going to be feel, mostly,” Molitor said. “Where we’re at with Joe and lefthanded pitching and when the schedule gets bunched up. I’m going to try to keep him sharp out there the best I can, and I’m sure it will help Joe in the long run.”

Without knowing all the answers, Twins' Derek Falvey willing to explore to find right one
Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | March 6, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – The far end of the Twins’ executive offices at Hammond Stadium was once quiet and spartan. There was usually a spacious room reserved for, but not often used by, the team president.

That area has been transformed into something looking like a command center. Laptops line desks in an open floor plan, and are used by many of

the employees the Twins have hired since Derek Falvey took over as the team's chief baseball officer.

He and General Manager Thad Levine have invested heavily in research-and-development experts and other statistical analysts. He has expanded the team's minor league staff and hired a massage therapist. There is now a Class AAA bullpen coach who can help coordinate the usage and instruction of relief pitchers who bounce between the majors and minors.

Falvey, 34, has held the job for about 16 months. During a lengthy conversation in his office Monday, he came across as intelligent, well-read, friendly, energetic and, perhaps strangely, humble.

The term "analytics" is often attached to analysts who believe that because they have the access to new-age statistics, they have the access to every conceivable answer.

Falvey seems more curious than certain. He compared running a franchise to "drinking from a fire hose," yet he still sounds thirsty.

"Analytics I view as, 'How do you measure the objective stuff and how do we measure the subjective, and how do we blend the two?'" he said. "That's what was so exciting for us, with all of the established voices in the scouting department and this organization, if we could layer on some new ways of looking at the objective, the marriage of those two things is what allows a baseball team to be successful."

The Twins were last year, winning 85 games and making the playoffs for the first time since 2010 despite Falvey and Levine moving closer Brandon Kintzler at the July 31 trading deadline, and trading for, then trading away, starter Jaime Garcia.

Falvey said he and his staff have reviewed all of their moves. He did not sound regretful about decisions that enraged much of the fan base and incited, or inspired, the clubhouse.

"I think in a lot of ways we've learned about our decision-making process, going back to last offseason and trade decisions — either triggers we pulled or ones we didn't," he said. "Let's go back to last trade deadline. We acquire a player, we were in a certain position, a week later things have changed for us and a unique opportunity presents."

"I always want to question the process. Did we feel good about the process? Did that process lead to the right decision, at that time, with the information we knew?"

And? "We didn't tear the team apart at the deadline," he said. "We didn't look at it and say, 'Hey, the players who have gotten us this far have to go.' We said, 'Listen, let's make some decisions around players whose contracts are expiring, for the betterment of the club. But we also felt like we had guys who could step up on the back end, guys like Matty Belisle, Trevor Hildenberger and Taylor Rogers, or others we felt could fill Brandon's shoes."

"We weren't in position at that stage to add much more. I give the guys in the clubhouse a ton of credit. There was no quit in that group, from the players, to the coaches, to Paul Molitor."

Falvey said he spoke with each player individually, telling them: "This isn't how we feel about you guys right now. Go out and do what you can and we'll focus on what we need to control for now and the future."

This is heady stuff for a 34-year-old. He took over a team that had lost 103 games, then found himself in a playoff race. He became a public figure and replaced a beloved general manager in Terry Ryan.

Falvey has called Ryan periodically, often to compliment him on the Twins' talented young players, and has leaned on many of Ryan's closest lieutenants.

Unlike Ryan, Falvey encourages his employees to leave the office at a reasonable time, to even take the occasional day off during spring training.

Falvey will go home, tuck in his son, and after his wife goes to bed he will resume working, but he will embargo his e-mails to Twins employees so they don't send until the next morning.

"I don't want them to see an e-mail from me and think they have to jump on it right away," Falvey said.

The fire hose isn't for everyone.

Phillies ride early lead to 4-3 win over Twins

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | March 5, 2018

CLEARWATER, Fla. – Kyle Gibson made a conscious choice on a full-count pitch to Rhys Hoskins on Monday. Actually, it's an opinion he has been working on all spring.

"I'm trying to figure out which one I like least — walks or homers," Gibson said after an impressive three-inning start against the Phillies that Hoskins rendered imperfect. "I really don't like either of them. But if you're going to [give them up], make the guy put the ball in play at least."

Hoskins did, smashing Gibson's second-inning fastball far beyond the wall in left-center, giving Philadelphia an early lead that turned into a 4-3 loss for the Twins at Spectrum Field. But the other 10 hitters that Gibson faced produced a big pile of harmless: two strikeouts, three routine fly balls (one of which Zack Granite lost in the sun, technically a double) and best of all, five weak ground balls, the product of Gibson's signature sinker.

"It feels a lot better" than last year, Gibson said. "Early on [in spring training], I was really searching for the glove-side sinker. I had a live [session] with Ivan Arteaga [the Twins' Class AA pitching coach] and really worked on it. He helped me switch the grip a little bit, and that's when that pitch started turning the corner."

It didn't turn any corners vs. Hoskins, though. At 3-2, Gibson wanted to throw a slider, but he's determined not to hurt himself with walks this year. It's worked so far — Gibson hasn't walked a batter in his five spring innings — but Hoskins was waiting on the sinker.

"In that situation, I'm just trying to make sure he earns his way on base," Gibson said. "And he earned his way around all four."

Tyler Kinley gave up an unearned run in the fourth inning, and Aaron Slegers gave up three consecutive hits to surrender two runs in the fifth, putting Philadelphia ahead 4-0. Rookie righthander Fernando Romero struck out all three hitters he faced.

Twins day at camp: Rule 5 pick Tyler Kinley making an impression for Twins

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | March 5, 2018

Kinley making an impression

CLEARWATER, FLA. – It's not hard to notice Tyler Kinley. The "99" miles per hour that registers on the pitch-speed scoreboard catches your attention, as does the occasional weak swing produced by a hitter — Maikel Franco on Monday — looking for two-strike heat but getting the 90-mph slider instead.

And those aren't even the attributes that have stood out to his manager so far.

"I like everything about the kid so far," Paul Molitor said after Kinley displayed his high-heat repertoire for an inning in the Twins' 4-3 loss to the Philadelphia Phillies. "He's an extremely hard worker, he's an early arriver, doesn't seem to get too affected by the good days and the bad days, always comes back with a good attitude. So there are a lot of things that are real positive."

The Twins have three weeks to decide whether they are positive enough to devote one of their eight bullpen spots to Kinley, 27. As a Rule 5 pick, he must remain in the majors or be offered back to the Miami Marlins, who probably would take him back.

That's because triple-digit fastballs are increasingly coveted these days, and the Twins don't yet have one of their own.

"When he gets ahead [in the count], it's hard to cover a 90-mph slider and a 98-mph fastball," Molitor said. "He's an interesting character. That arm's pretty big. We're just trying to keep bringing it along."

The Twins committed two errors behind Kinley on Monday, leading to an unearned run. But Kinley appeared unfazed, Molitor said.

"He should have been off the field five minutes earlier than he was, and he kept throwing it in there," Molitor said. "The slider was a little bit better today. He's been a little hot and cold so far, but today was a good day. We didn't support him very well."

Another long haul

Four times in the past six days, Molitor, his staff and a couple dozen players have trudged into the clubhouse shortly after 7 a.m., in order to catch a bus. Five Grapefruit League opponents on this spring's schedule are located 125 miles away from Fort Myers, and the Twins have visited four of them in less than a week.

It's just part of training in Florida, but some years are worse than others. "Last year took its toll, I think, throughout the spring," Molitor said. This year, "there just happen to be a lot of the further ones compacted together."

The bright side is that only one trip of more than 100 miles remains. Next Monday, they head to Tampa to face the Yankees. And getting the long drives out of the way early also comes with the benefit of having plenty of players available, since no cuts have been made yet.

Checkup for Santana

Ervin Santana was in New York on Monday to have his middle finger examined by Dr. Charles Melone, the surgeon who removed calcium deposits last month. "Hopefully, he comes back a few pounds lighter," Molitor joked, referring to Santana's cast. If the cast is removed, Santana hopes to begin throwing exercises to strengthen the finger this week.

On deck

The Orioles on Tuesday make the first of two visits to Fort Myers, where they will face Twins lefthander Adalberto Mejia, along with bullpen fixtures Trevor Hildenberger and Taylor Rogers.

Well-traveled Twins in Clearwater, while Santana heads to New York

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | March 5, 2018

CLEARWATER, Fla. — Paul Molitor told reporters this morning that he wants Ervin Santana to lose weight.

OK, that's not exactly what he said. Molitor confirmed that the anchor of the Twins' staff caught a flight to New York this morning, in order to have his surgically repaired middle finger examined and, he hopes, have the cast removed from his right arm.

"Hopefully, he comes back a few pounds lighter," Molitor joked about the bright blue cast.

Santana is expected to fly back to Florida this evening, and could be testing that hand as soon as Tuesday, depending upon what doctors and the Twins' training staff decided.

Meanwhile, the Twins spent this morning putting even more miles on their heavily-used buses. Four times in the past six days, Minnesota players have caught 7:30 a.m. buses and rode at least 125 miles to play afternoon games. It's just part of training in Florida, but some years are worse than others.

"Last year took its toll, I think, throughout the spring," Molitor said. This year, "there just happen to be a lot of the further ones compacted together."

The bright side is that after today, only one trip of more than 100 miles remains — a week from today, they head to Tampa to face the Yankees. And getting the long drives out of the way early also comes with the benefit of having plenty of players available, since no cuts have been made yet. "Unfortunately, a lot of the same guys have been on most of the rides, the way it's worked out," Molitor said. "That's all right — [they can] earn their stripes."

Molitor has been getting extra looks at players who are less likely to make the team, which gives them a better chance to make a positive impression. Today's entire lineup, in fact, is made up of players who are not guaranteed roster spots, though Robbie Grossman and Ehire Adrianza are the favorites to keep theirs.

Here are the lineups for today's game against the Phillies at Spectrum Field, one of the most fan-friendly venues in the Grapefruit League:

TWINS

Granite CF
Adrianza 3B
Grossman LF
Vargas 1B
Heisey RF
Aybar 2B
Gordon SS
Wilson C

Wade DH

Gibson RHP, followed by Slegers, Little, Gonsalves, Kinley, Romero.

PHILLIES

Hernandez 2B

Santana DH

Franco 3B

Hoskins LF

Crawford SS

Joseph 1B

Knapp C

Cozens RF

Quinn CF

Velasquez RHP

Is that Bartolo Colon in Twins camp? No, it's Willians Astudillo

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 6, 2018

CLEARWATER, Fla. — With his baggy uniform, chunky frame and slightly bemused smile, Twins catcher Willians Astudillo resembles a certain Twins pitcher of great popularity and recent vintage.

Miguel Sano has taken note of this and, despite the fact Astudillo is from Venezuela and Bartolo Colon is from the Dominican Republic, has been good-naturedly teasing the 5-foot-9 catcher about his appearance.

“I know Miggy dropped a ‘Colon’ on him the other day,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said.

Astudillo, 18 years younger than the 44-year-old Colon, smiled when this was relayed to him before Monday’s game against the Philadelphia Phillies, in whose farm system he spent his first six professional seasons before bouncing the past two years to the Atlanta Braves and Arizona Diamondbacks.

Back down to 225 pounds after working hard with his Caribes trainer in the Venezuelan Winter League, Astudillo hooked on with the Twins as an intriguing depth player likely headed to Triple-A Rochester. His ability to play multiple positions, including third, left and first, make him intriguing enough, but what really separates him is uncommon bat-to-ball skills and early-count aggressiveness.

A .311 hitter through eight pro seasons, with a .350 on-base percentage, Astudillo has struck out in just 3 percent of his nearly 2,600 career plate appearances. His walk rate of 3.5 percent isn’t much better.

“I think he averages about 1.5 pitches per at-bat,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “He takes those things out of play.”

Astudillo said he’s always been an aggressive hitter.

“I’m swinging the bat,” he said. “I’m watching the ball — down the middle, inside, outside — and I’m swinging.”

For him, an extended at-bat is taking the first pitch and then getting to work.

“Maybe one pitch to track the ball will be down the middle,” he said. “That’s fine. I’ve got two more (strikes).”

He prides himself on not chasing pitches, saying he rarely leaves the zone in a given game.

“Maybe two swings, maybe one,” he said. “The others I swing in the zone. I don’t like to strike out. I don’t like to swing and miss.”

A right-handed hitter, Astudillo said he scans the defensive alignment in both the infield and outfield before each at-bat and tries to hit the ball to the open areas.

“That’s my plan every time,” he said. “I watch everything. I’m confident, and I think my hands are fast. I just try to keep my swing short.”

EXCLUSIVE CLUB

In light of Kobe Bryant's surprise victory at the Academy Awards, making him the first Oscar winner with a major sports championship in his past, Twins manager Paul Molitor wasn't bitter about his own missed opportunity.

In his lone acting role, Molitor played the "Jogging Cop" in the 1995 made-for-TV film "Falling For You." Molitor had one line in the film co-starring Jennie Garth and Billy Dee Williams.

Director Eric Till was a Toronto Blue Jays fan, which led to Molitor's casting in the wake of a 1993 World Series victory, but that didn't keep the bulk of his work from ending up on the cutting room floor.

"The director did the right thing," Molitor said.

With his mind on Twins spring training, Molitor couldn't immediately recall the name of the film, which had a plot twist involving amnesia. That part he remembered.

"That's the irony," Molitor said with a laugh.

Sadly, he has long since let his Screen Actors Guild membership expire.

CASTING PLAN

All-star right-hander Ervin Santana flew to New York City on Monday for a follow-up visit with hand surgeon Dr. Charles Melone.

Weekend storms pushed back Santana's originally scheduled flight from Friday, but he was due to have his cast and stitches removed in the wake of Feb. 6 surgery on his right middle finger.

"Hopefully he comes back a few pounds lighter with the cast off," Molitor said.

Santana had planned to ask Molitor to sign the cast as several Twins teammates had.

"I wasn't asked," Molitor said. "Never got to it."

BRIEFLY

Kennys Vargas has agreed on a 2018 contract at \$555,000, while lefties Adalberto Mejia and Dietrich Enns will make \$552,500 and the new major-league minimum of \$545,000, respectively.

Catcher Mitch Garver had "no issues" with his right knee, Molitor said, in the wake of Sunday's return from injury. He is slated to back up Jason Castro on Tuesday.

Right-hander Fernando Romero struck out the side in his lone inning of work, producing five swing-and-miss strikes on 17 pitches while hitting 96 mph on the stadium radar gun three times. "He was pretty filthy today," Molitor said after Romero stretched his scoreless innings streak to five.

Rule 5 pick Tyler Kinley touched 99 mph on the radar gun in his inning of work. "He's an interesting character," Molitor said. "That arm is pretty big."

Kyle Gibson worked the first three innings on just two hits, including a solo homer by Rhys Hoskins.

Twins' Max Kepler won't change launch angle in bid for more homers

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 6, 2018

CLEARWATER, Fla. — Max Kepler is one of seven players in Twins history with three home runs in a single game, yet he has yet to hit more than 19 in a season.

Some observers have suggested the young right fielder could easily boost his power numbers by joining the launch-angle revolution and starting to loft deep flies with more regularity, but the thoughtful Berliner won't be tempted.

“For me it’s not about launch angle,” he said. “It’s about getting my bat head in the zone as early as possible. I used to enter straight down. Now I’m just trying to enter more on a level path, but I’ve still got my hands going a similar route.”

He shakes his head and frowns.

“I’m not going to be swinging up and doing all that,” he said.

Now 25 and entering his third full season in the majors. Kepler is pleased with his career trajectory and patient enough to let the normal timeline run its course. With each experience, he salts away a little more knowledge, a little more ammunition as he strives to make the most of his immense, late-blooming talent.

So, no “elevate to celebrate” for him?

“It’s not me, you know?” he said. “You’ve got to know what you’re capable of as a player of your own kind. It doesn’t work for everyone.”

For every Justin Turner or Logan Morrison who joins the power elite in mid-career, there are dozens of hitters who fail to complete the makeover. Instead of three-run jacks and walk-off parties, they find only spiking strikeout rates and ultimate disappointment.

Some will experiment their way right out of the game.

“I say if you want to go just strictly for fly balls, if you don’t have speed, go for it,” Kepler said. “For guys that can run a little, you’re giving yourself a better chance if you hit it hard and not just try to hit fly balls. The ball’s going to go out if you square it up, regardless.”

Kepler, it should be noted, spent part of the 2016-17 offseason working on his hitting with Barry Bonds, nominal holder of baseball’s single-season and career home run records. Those sessions, however, weren’t so much about hitting the ball over the wall as stinging it repeatedly and menacingly.

Kepler’s hard-hit percentage last season was 35.2, according to Baseball Savant, and his average exit velocity was 88.2 mph, tied with Yasiel Puig and just a tick behind Francisco Lindor. Kepler ranked just 244th, however, out of 387 qualifying hitters with barreled balls in 3.2 percent of his plate appearances.

So there is definitely room for improvement as Kepler continues his work with Twins hitting coach James Rowson.

According to Fangraphs.com, Kepler shaved his groundball rate by 4.4 percentage points (from 47.2 percent to 42.8) while pushing his flyball rate up from 36.5 percent to 39.5. Look for another move in that direction this year.

“I think you’re going to see that range continue to drop a little bit more on the groundball side and him get a few more balls in the air, but not because he’s trying to get it in the air,” Rowson said. “It will be because he’s getting a better idea of what pitches he can drive and where those pitches are in the zone that he does damage with. It’s more or less getting a good pitch to hit.”

Kepler had just come off the Bonds Sessions when he met Rowson last spring. Rather than roll back anything the controversial ex-sluggish might have given Kepler, Rowson has sought to expand on that knowledge.

“I think you’ve got to build on the things the guy has done,” Rowson said. “Barry Bonds was short and direct to the baseball. That’s what Kepler wants to be. He wants to be short to it, long through it. He’s getting the feel of a good, short, direct swing path.”

What Rowson watches for with Kepler are the times when he “gets really steep” in his approach to the ball, almost as if he’s chopping wood. The more they groove his preferred swing path, the more line drives that should leap off Kepler’s live bat.

Should he close up the holes that lefties have exploited in his first two full seasons, Kepler’s production could be devastating.

“He’s still gaining that experience,” Rowson said. “I feel really strong about the year he’s going to have and where he’s at right now. He’s starting to really understand his swing and how to make adjustments pitch to pitch. I really feel confident about where he’s going to go this year.”

Zulgad: Twins aren’t giving Brian Dozier security but is that a bad thing?

Judd Zulgad | ESPN 1500 | March 5, 2018

The Twins’ front office duo of Derek Falvey and Thad Levine spent much of last offseason shopping Brian Dozier before deciding they couldn’t get the return they wanted.

The decision to hang onto Dozier turned out to be a wise one.

The second baseman hit .271/.359/.498 with 34 home runs, 93 runs batted in and 106 runs. He also won the American League Gold Glove at second base. This came a season after he hit .268/.340/.546 with 42 homers (a single-season AL record for a second baseman), 99 runs batted in and 104 runs.

So after back-to-back seasons in which he established himself as one of the top offensive second basemen in the big leagues, Dozier is on the verge of finding security in Minnesota, right?

Not exactly.

Entering the final season of a four-year contract that is set to pay him \$9 million this year, Dozier has talked numerous times this offseason about his situation and the fact there have been no talks with the Twins about a contract extension.

Dozier, 30, discussed it with reporters, including 1500 ESPN, at TwinsFest in January; touched on it again last month in a conversation with the website Twins Daily; and, most recently, went in-depth with Star Tribune sports columnist Jim Souhan on the matter over the weekend.

“I will be a free agent this fall,” Dozier told the newspaper. “That’s the bottom line. You can only say you want to be here so much, and nothing gets done. That’s just the way it is. I understand everything. At the same time, you’re six months away from free agency. That’s intriguing.”

I’m guessing Dozier’s comments will result in the usual reaction that this is the Pohlad-owned Twins being cheap and that nothing has changed, despite the fact Falvey, the team’s chief baseball officer, and Levine, the general manager, are now heading into their second season running the show.

But Dozier and everyone else needs to let this situation play out.

While it would seem unlikely Dozier will receive a contract extension during the season, it’s possible the Twins will approach his agent at some point this summer. It’s also possible that if the Twins under perform after making a shocking run to the AL wild card game last season that Dozier will be used as a key chip near the trade deadline.

And then there is the chance that Falvey and Levine will allow Dozier to hit the open market next winter so he can explore his options. He might not like what he sees, especially if there is a repeat of what happened this offseason when many players sat on the market without receiving what they considered to be fair offers. There are still plenty of quality players looking for jobs.

Keep in mind, Dozier would be joining a free-agent class that could include Bryce Harper, Clayton Kershaw, Manny Machado, Josh Donaldson, Dallas Keuchel, Craig Kimbrel and Andrew Miller.

It’s difficult to believe that many in that group are going to be on the market for long, but once they are gone what’s the appetite going to be for teams to keep spending? So does a team that doesn’t get one of the above stars say, “Since we didn’t get Machado, we’re going to pay Dozier big money?” Or do they say, “We didn’t get Machado and now we’re done”?

The Twins, meanwhile, would have more money, and options, if Dozier goes elsewhere. This would include a short-term fix of Jorge Polanco at shortstop and 2014 first-round pick Nick Gordon at second base. Gordon was drafted as a shortstop but has spent time this spring at second.

The long-term solution would be Polanco or Gordon at second base with Royce Lewis, the first-overall pick in the 2017 draft, at shortstop. And then there is the chance that Dozier hits free agency, doesn’t get an offer he likes, and ends up returning to the Twins.

“We’ll see what happens, but at the same time you can only wait so long and then it’s all just focusing on the season and getting yourself ready to win,” Dozier told the Star Tribune. “I’m a firm believer, man. ... I go with the flow and let things take care of themselves.”

It sounds as if the Twins’ front office might be doing the same thing.

Notes from Fort Myers: Will Tyler Duffey be back in the starting rotation?

Jake Depue | ESPN 1500 | March 5, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla.—The Twins traveled up the Florida coast to Clearwater Monday, losing to the Phillies, 4-3. Top pitching prospects Fernando Romero and Stephen Gonsalves each tossed a scoreless inning, with Romero striking out the side.

Some notes from Fort Myers on three Twins who didn't make the trip:

Tyler Duffey on starting versus relieving

Assuming they stay healthy, J.O. Berrios, Jake Odorizzi and Kyle Gibson should be locks to open the season in what will likely start as a 4-man rotation. In the bullpen, Fernando Rodney, Addison Reed, Zach Duke, Trevor Hildenberger, and Taylor Rogers should be the first five pieces in an 8-man bullpen.

That leaves four open spots on the 12-man pitching staff; one in the rotation and three in the bullpen. Tyler Duffey is a candidate for both. Duffey has pitched in both roles in his Twins career. In 2015, he made 10 very strong starts, finishing the year with a 3.10 ERA, 131 ERA+, and 21.9% strikeout rate. He struggled in 2016, pitching to a 6.43 ERA, 66 ERA+, and 19.1% strikeout rate.

Those struggles led to Duffey being moved to the bullpen last year, where he stuck all season. He had a very strong start to the season as one of Paul Molitor's most trusted bullpen arms, and had an ERA of just over 3 in mid-June. His numbers faded in the second half, and he finished with a 4.94 ERA in 56 games. Duffey says relieving took a greater toll on his body than starting.

"I enjoy relieving," he said. "But towards the end of last season, even into the offseason, the feeling at the end of the season is completely different. You're worn out. Whereas in '16, when I was starting in the regular rotation, I went into the offseason strong and kept going, never really hit that bottom in energy level."

The plan for Duffey is to get stretched out for a potential return to starting this spring, as he competes with Phil Hughes, Adalberto Mejia and Anibal Sanchez for the fourth spot in the rotation. Duffey's been "piggybacking" Phil Hughes early this spring, pitching and taking his bullpens on the same day as Hughes. That plan would allow Duffey to begin the season as the long man out of the bullpen if he doesn't make the rotation. Duffey, though, wants to be a starter first.

"I had a lot of fun doing what I was doing last year," he said. "But obviously for anyone who's been a starter, they want to be a starter, that's just the way it is. I look forward to the opportunity now to be able to try and do that. And if I end up in the role I was in last year so be it, and that's great. I'm not going to complain about that at all. It's a win-win for me."

Max Kepler on his swing

Twins right fielder Max Kepler had a solid season at the plate last year, despite struggling against left-handed pitching. Though he hit just .152/.213/.240 against southpaws, Kepler's .243/.312/.425 batting line was respectable, and there's certainly reason to believe the talented Kepler hasn't yet hit his offensive ceiling.

Kepler's smooth swing has drawn comparisons to former Twins great Justin Morneau. Kepler's entering his age-25 season, which is how old Morneau was when he had his breakout season in 2006, winning the American League MVP. As you'd expect, Morneau's huge power surge that season was accompanied by an increase in line drive percentage. In 2005, Morneau had a LD% of 18.5%, but increased it to 23.5% the following year.

Kepler has yet to see the same success early in his career driving the ball. Among hitters with at least 100 plate appearances, Kepler had the lowest line drive percentage on the Twins (17.6%), and hit the fourth highest percentage of groundballs (42.8%).

I asked Kepler about his swing, and specifically whether he looks at launch angle, a metric he saw improvement in last season.

"I wouldn't say launch angle," he said. "People who think it's launch angle, there are a couple of guys saying hit the ball up, you need to hit home runs, you're not going to get paid to hit singles, or a ball on the ground. But not everybody is that person, not everybody can do that. Yeah, you can mold your swing upright, but not everybody has the pop to hit every fly ball out. To me, watching Joe [Mauer] hit, he's very good at keeping the barrel through the zone as long as possible, that's why he has so much room to see [the ball] deep and go the opposite way."

Kepler said he's working on keeping his bat in the zone longer and hitting the ball hard the other way.

"What I've started working on is getting my bat head in the zone as soon as possible, and keeping my bat in the zone as long as I can," he said. "You can pull the ball, which I think I'm good at, but I'm now just learning how to draw the ball to left with authority. That opens up a lot of good stuff for me."

Along with Eddie Rosario and gold glover Byron Buxton, Kepler was part of one of the top defensive outfields in baseball last season. He's particularly adept at reading sinking line drives off the bat, making countless diving catches in shallow right field over the past two seasons. Kepler still wants to get better at running down deep fly balls and playing the wall.

“Defensively, balls over my head,” he said about where he can improve with the glove. “Be more aggressive at the wall. Buxton’s a good example of that. Some people tend to shy away from the wall and just let it bounce off. But knowing that my partner is going to back me up gives me a good opportunity to work on that.”

Hildenberger on making adjustments

Trevor Hildenberger had a phenomenal rookie season in 2017, emerging as perhaps the best reliever in the Twins’ ‘pen in the second half of the season. In 42 innings, Hildenberger had a 3.21 ERA, 137 ERA+, 25.9% strikeout rate and 3.5% walk rate.

Hildenberger’s unorthodox sidearm delivery creates a lot of deception, and the league struggled to make solid contact off him most of the season. Hildenberger says as the year went on and scouting reports on him became more detailed, he noticed a change in hitters’ approach.

“By the end of the season, hitters were making adjustments,” he said. “Both looking for my changeup in big situations and swinging more when I changed arm angles and came over the top. Scouting reports got out there a little bit, and they got video on me. I have to continue to make adjustments as they adjust back.”

Last season, Hildenberger came over the top occasionally to change the hitter’s eye level. Typically he did that late in the count, but wants more variability this season in when he switches to the more conventional delivery.

“Coming into this year, I’m going to try to use it not just late in counts or with two strikes, but a little bit earlier,” he said.

Despite putting up excellent minor league numbers, Hildenberger’s success was unexpected last year. He noted yesterday that this was his first big league spring training—despite pitching in the playoffs last year—and wasn’t added to the 40-man roster until mid-season. If he can repeat last year’s success, he’ll be one of Molitor’s most potent weapons out of the ‘pen.

Meet new Twins DH Logan Morrison

Ryan Lund | Fox Sports North | March 5, 2018

Paulie 3k, meet LoMo.

That’s the nickname first baseman and designated hitter Logan Morrison gave his new boss upon arriving in Fort Myers, Fla., for spring training.

Twins manager Paul Molitor, whose 3,119 career hits inspired the nickname, hadn’t yet been introduced to Morrison when the newest member of the Twins hosted his initial press conference.

“I’m just going to be me. And I think if I’m me, we’re going to have a lot of fun, we’re going to win a lot of games, and if I’m DH-ing or playing first, whatever,” Morrison told reporters.

So far, so good.

Morrison broke out last season, his second with the Tampa Bay Rays, hitting 38 home runs and finishing the season with a .246/.353/.516 slash and a .868 OPS.

There was a time when a 30-year-old’s sudden ascension was cause for alarm, but the scouting report on Morrison checks out.

After hitting 84 home runs in seven seasons as a run-of-the-mill first baseman, Morrison embraced advanced stats. He altered his swing, adjusted his launch angle, upped his fly-ball rate and started murdering the ball. He started walking more, finishing eighth in the American League with 81, a figure that would have led the Twins.

Once a 22nd-round draft pick of the Miami Marlins back in 2005, Morrison was in-and-out of the minors until 2009, when he spent 62 games with the Marlins. He caught on full time in 2011, appearing in 123 games and hitting .247 with 23 home runs, a career high that would stand until last year.

The Marlins traded him to the Mariners in 2013, where he was reasonably productive, hitting .241/.307/.398 with 28 home runs in parts of two seasons.

The Mariners dealt him to the Rays in 2015, where he was a regular at first base, hitting .238/.319/.414 with 14 home runs before a wrist injury cut his season short in mid-September. He returned to the Rays on a one-year, \$2.5 million contract a year later, when the breakout began.

Morrison elevated his launch angle from 12.1 degrees in 2016 to 17.4 degrees in 2017, developing an uppercut-like swing and hitting 38 home runs.

What does that sort of production cost you in 2018?

Just \$6.5 million guaranteed.

That helps explain why, after upgrading their bullpen and starting rotation, the Twins opted to address a position that wasn't exactly a huge need coming into 2018. The Twins have plenty of bodies at both first and DH heading into the season, but none of them are likely to even approach 38 home runs.

The move could mean the end of Kennys Vargas' Twins career, while Robbie Grossman will also be hard pressed to earn DH opportunities with a guy like Morrison on the roster.

Twins' Santana to get injured finger examined in New York

Staff Writers | Associated Press | March 5, 2018

CLEARWATER, Fla. — Minnesota Twins right-hander Ervin Santana left spring training for New York to have his injured middle finger examined.

Santana, out until mid-to-late April following surgery on the finger, could have a cast removed.

“Hopefully he comes back lighter ... with the cast off,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said before Monday's exhibition against Philadelphia.

Santana went 16-8 with a 3.28 ERA in 33 starts last season for the Twins, who earned an AL wild-card berth one year after losing 103 games.

Twins come up short against Phillies 4-3

Staff Writers | Fox Sports North | March 5, 2018

Down 4-0 in the eighth inning, the Minnesota Twins rallied for two runs and added another in the ninth, but their comeback effort fell just short in the 4-3 loss to the Philadelphia Phillies in spring training.

Kyle Gibson took the loss after allowing one run in three innings of work, and Aaron Slegers yielded two earned runs to Philadelphia on three hits.

Prospect Fernando Romero whiffed all three hitters he faced in the seventh inning. He owns a 0.00 ERA in five innings this spring.

Twins infielder Gregorio Petit tallied two RBI in the final two innings.

Report: Twins, Byron Buxton have discussed contract extension

Bill Baer | NBC Sports | March 5, 2018

Jim Bowden reports that the Twins and outfielder Byron Buxton are interested in a long-term contract extension and have had conversations about it.

Buxton, 24, will become eligible for arbitration after this season and can become a free agent after the 2021 season. The Twins would likely want to buy out those years plus a couple of his free agent years as well.

Last season, Buxton hit .253/.314/.413 with 16 home runs, 51 RBI, 69 runs scored, and 29 stolen bases in 511 plate appearances while playing superb defense in center field. He was awarded a Gold Glove during the offseason.

Buxton will be a major part of an upgraded Twins roster as they attempt to return to the playoffs. The club went 85-77 last year, losing the AL Wild Card game to the Yankees.

Buxton, Twins interested in a long-term extension, though no deal is close just yet
R.J. Anderson | CBS Sports | March 5, 2018

The Minnesota Twins were one of baseball's biggest surprises in 2017, authoring an unlikely 85-win season that netted them a spot in the American League Wild Card Game. The Twins have since had a busy offseason, making move after move with an eye on returning to the postseason. They've either signed or traded for Jake Odorizzi, Logan Morrison, Fernando Rodney, and Addison Reed, among others, addressing each unit of their roster.

While most Twins fans are hoping the club makes one more free-agent addition -- adding a Lance Lynn or Alex Cobb to the rotation -- it seems like Minnesota's next big splash could be signing center fielder Byron Buxton to a long-term extension:

@JimBowdenGM

Byron Buxton has interest in signing a long term deal with the #Twins and the feeling is mutual as both sides have had conversations according to sources

@MikeBerardino

Checked Saturday and was told there was no traction yet on a multiyear deal for Byron Buxton, per person with direct knowledge. This will ebb and flow for some time. First Ian Kinsler multiyear in Texas took 18 months for Thad Levine to hammer out. #mntwins.

Buxton, about to enter his age-24 season, is coming off his best year at the plate. He hit .253/.314/.413 (94 OPS+) with 16 home runs and 29 steals on 30 attempts. He's an elite-level defender and baserunner alike, and Baseball Reference's WAR model suggests he was worth five wins -- or above all-star levels. Add in his age and prospect background (he was ranked either the best or second-best youngster in the game by Baseball America three years in a row), and there's ample reason to believe he could continue to improve upon his marks.

As such, locking in Buxton would be a sensible play for the Twins. He'll be arbitration eligible for the first time after the season, at which point he'll have three more years of team control remaining. Sure, re-signing Buxton will cost some coin -- he's a former no. 1 pick who received a \$6 million signing bonus -- but the Twins have the means: they're about to enter their fourth Opening Day in a row with a payroll exceeding \$100 million, and after this year they'll shed Joe Mauer's \$23 million salary (not to mention Brian Dozier's \$9 million).

Alex Kirilloff recovered from Tommy John surgery, set to play again in Twins system
Doug Gulasy | Trib Live | March 4, 2018

Alex Kirilloff's house sits a 15-minute drive from the Minnesota Twins' training facility in Fort Myers, Fla., but that proximity didn't help the former Plum star in 2017.

Sidelined after season-ending Tommy John surgery, Kirilloff could watch baseball last year — and he did, plenty of it — but he couldn't play. And considering the Twins' 2016 first-round draft selection first picked up a bat at about the same time he learned to stand up and walk, that became a difficult circumstance.

The 20-year-old outfielder reports to Twins minor-league camp this week with a healed elbow and a new perspective, eager for his first full season of professional baseball.

“It's been highly anticipated and long-awaited,” said Kirilloff, ranked the Twins' sixth-best prospect by MLB Pipeline. “I'm ready to get rolling again.”

A star pitcher and outfielder who led Plum to WPIAL and PIAA runner-up finishes in 2016, Kirilloff rocketed up draft boards in part because of how he performed in showcases. He won the home run derby at the Perfect Game All-American Classic at San Diego's Petco Park in 2015.

The Twins made Kirilloff the 15th overall pick in 2016, and he did his part to justify the selection by hitting .306 with seven homers and eight doubles for the Elizabethton Twins of the rookie-level Appalachian League, earning league MVP honors.

Lingering arm soreness revealed his injury: a tear in Kirilloff's elbow. He first pursued a nonsurgical treatment of platelet-rich plasma injections, but when they didn't work, he opted for the surgery last March.

“It was hard at first, especially being surrounded by all the excitement — people coming in and getting ready for a new year and a new season and getting the news that you're not going to play the whole season,” Kirilloff said. “It was hard, but I just tried to move past that.”

Kirilloff attempted to make the most of his year off. He bought Major League Baseball's extended television package and watched more games at the Twins facility. He also spent more time at home with wife Jordan, whom he married in October 2016.

He believes the year away from playing baseball was a “blessing in disguise.”

“Not having to travel this year has set a great foundation for my marriage, and being married at a young age, I think that's gone above and beyond where it could have gone if I was traveling and busy the whole year,” he said. “I think just watching baseball from a different perspective this entire year instead of playing it, I've learned stuff about the game and my maturity and mentality and hitting and everything. Being able to watch more baseball than I ever have before, I think I've picked up on a lot of minute things that will make my game better.”

The injury also caused Kirilloff to pay more attention to general maintenance of his body, and he believes he will come back stronger. He began throwing in July, taking dry swings in August and was fully cleared by the end of November.

“Those mini milestones throughout the process are really what keep you engaged,” he said. “Being healthy every day, you take those things for granted, but after having surgery, picking up a baseball again and being able to lift weights again, stretch it, do band work again, it's stuff you take for granted. But throughout the rehab process, they're checkpoints. They're milestones. You're working to get to that next one throughout, and that's kind of what takes you through.”

Kirilloff does not yet know where the Twins will place him to begin the season. But after the Twins made a surprise run to the American League wild card last season and boosted an already strong farm system — ESPN analyst Keith Law ranked Minnesota's crop of prospects the 10th best in baseball in February — Kirilloff is ready to get going.

“It's an exciting time to be a Twin,” he said.

“I'm looking forward to playing a full healthy season and being a part of a great team, wherever I am, and just building bonds and relationships with teammates and fans.”