



Minnesota Twins Daily Clips

Friday, July 17, 2015

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Brian Dozier is having a better week than you are

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | July 17, 2015

Terry Ryan might have provided the 2015 Twins with their down-the-stretch rallying cry. The weird thing is, he did it in 2014.

"Why not us?" Minnesota's general manager said, on the occasion of signing free agent Kendrys Morales 13 months ago, about his underdog, overlooked team. "Why not the Twins?"

It became clear shortly after Ryan uttered those words why not: awful starting pitching; an outfield that consisted of the team's two slowest players and a shortstop; a roster that, even in "rebuilding" mode, ranked among baseball's eight oldest. In retrospect, those Twins were overmatched, outmanned and doomed to a last-place finish.

But 2015? As the second half begins Friday and the race for the American League's five playoff spots takes shape, it's worth asking — why not the Twins?

"I hate bringing up previous years, because obviously it's not even comparable" to this year, said second baseman Brian Dozier. "It's night and day. This is a different team, different mind-set, different confidence level — it's everything."

If it sounds like he barely recognizes his team, there's a reason for that: This doesn't feel like the team the Twins broke camp with in April. Eddie Rosario jumped directly into the lineup from Class AAA Rochester in May and has added timely hitting and surprising gap power. Byron Buxton, called up in June, made every at-bat an occasion, even when he was hitting .180. Miguel Sano, two weeks into his big-league career, looks like the most polished young hitter the Twins have added since Joe Mauer more than a decade ago.

They own the second-best record in an unusually mediocre AL, and resume their season by occupying a wild-card slot, four full games ahead of the closest non-playoff team.

The Twins certainly have addressed the flaws that consigned them to a 92-loss season a year ago. Their outfield defense, with Rosario, Aaron Hicks and Torii Hunter, has transformed from appalling to promising, particularly with Buxton due back soon. Their roster, with Rosario, Buxton, Sano and Danny Santana, is rapidly becoming younger. And the starting pitching?

"If there's any [area] where the word 'surprise' might be applicable, it would be the efficiency of our rotation," manager Paul Molitor said of his overcrowded group of starting pitchers. The 2014 rotation was last in the majors in ERA, the only one above 5.00. The 2015 version, with Kyle Gibson and Tommy Milone stepping forward, ranks fifth in the AL at a svelte 3.86.

"I was hoping we'd be better," Molitor said. "I knew we'd have to be better to have a chance [to compete], and we have been."

Future is now

Eddie Rosario, Miguel Sano, Ervin Santana

So are the Twins pennant contenders? Can they follow the lead of the 2014 Royals, who had a worse record than this year's Twins at the break, were further out of the division lead, and didn't own a wild-card spot (as the Twins do now) — yet charged to the AL pennant and came a ninth-inning hit away from winning a World Series?

Proof of the Twins' own belief might not lie in their words as much as their actions.

By promoting Buxton and Sano, who have played fewer than 200 Class AA games — and zero Class AAA games — between them, the Twins made it clear how seriously they take the 2015 pennant race. By demoting Kennys Vargas, Caleb Thielbar, Oswaldo Arcia, Chris Herrmann, Aaron Thompson, Hicks and Santana (the latter two temporarily) to the minors, by cutting Tim Stauffer and Jordan Schafer when they didn't produce, the Twins demonstrated their thirst for the postseason, and their unwillingness to wait for players who can't help now.

"We're probably the most patient team in the game," Ryan insisted last week, but patience turns to exigency when a chance to break a four-year pattern of despair can be broken.

In other words, it wasn't just spring-training exuberance when Ryan said in February, "We're not trying to win five years from now. We've got to get this turned around now." With a 49-40 record, the Twins sense an opportunity.

"We've gotten to a point now where it's like, 'OK, this is something that we can do, not only for a month or two months, but for a season,'" Molitor said. "I haven't tried to look too far out, as far as talking to these guys about the playoffs, but I hear them. I feel them. They're believing."

Problems to fix

They're believing in him, too, a rookie manager who, funny thing, orchestrates big changes by focusing on small changes. He preaches getting one more hit, taking one more base, and trusting that the cumulative effect will win games.

"He asks everybody to do the little things," third baseman Trevor Plouffe said, "and it hits you how much better everyone is if we work together."

More changes are needed, some of which could be addressed before the July 31 trade deadline. The bullpen, aside from All-Star closer Glen Perkins, isn't as reliable in July as it was in May. The relief corps strikes out fewer than any other team's, putting more pressure on an improving but average defense. The Twins have a wealth of minor league prospects (see the above list of demotions) to dangle for a veteran reliever.

The bullpen is not the only shortcoming. Santana has been a drag on the offense, having drawn only three unintentional walks while striking out 59 times, and a spotty shortstop. Catcher Kurt Suzuki's on-base percentage has slipped below .300, his OPS an anemic .604.

Molitor also has ambitions to improve his team's execution on the bases.

"Offensively, our base stealing has not been as good as I'd like it to be," he said, "and some of the outs we give up on the bases is concerning at times."

He's also putting pressure on his pitchers to do a better job holding runners, too.

"We tried to emphasize the running game against us this year. And we've done OK, [but] I think we can do better," he said.

Molitor can fix those problems, but the Twins have some history to defeat, too; they haven't played even .400 baseball over the second half of the past four seasons, as playoff contenders used them as target practice. Add that to the list of changes the Twins must make.

Ironically, the most optimistic assessment of the Twins' playoff chances comes from someone who isn't eligible to take part if it happens. Ervin Santana, a veteran of five postseason series, must sit out October as part of his punishment for testing positive for steroids. That's going to hurt, he fears.

"I watched a lot of games [during his 80-game suspension], and got more excited. This team is getting better every day, and that's the kind of team that wins," Santana said. "Young guys, hungry guys. They're not afraid. They just want to play, and they just want to win."

In year of parity, nearly every Major League Baseball team has chance to reach playoffs

Associated Press | July 17, 2015

NEW YORK — Clayton Kershaw looks around the major leagues and sees opponents convinced they can reach the playoffs.

"It's just a matter of everybody beating up on everybody," the Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher said. "We want everybody to feel like they're in it."

It's the year of parity in the major leagues, when almost no one has managed to break away from the pack or fall way behind. Kershaw, a three-time Cy Young Award winner and the reigning NL MVP, has a won-lost record reflecting the parity — he's 6-6.

Every team in the American League reached the All-Star break with a .450 winning percentage or higher. It's the first time an entire league did that since 1944, according to STATS, and many rosters that season were depleted of stars because of World War II.

"It's fantastic to see," Pittsburgh pitcher Gerrit Cole said. "All the teams at .500 all think they're going to finish over .500, and all the teams that are over .500, and even us, we're always fretting, looking behind our back."

Boston headed to the All-Star break in last place yet just 6 1/2 games from first — only the second time since division play began in 1969 the AL East spread was that close. The first-to-last gap has been that narrow in any division just nine times overall in the expansion era, STATS said.

"We're at the bottom of the barrel right now, but we're not that far out," Red Sox All-Star Brock Holt said. "It's just about going out and taking care of our business, and the standings will kind of take care of themselves towards the end of the year."

Oakland has the worst record in the AL but at 41-50 is just 8 1/2 games behind the West-leading Los Angeles Angels. While last in the AL Central, the Chicago White Sox are 41-45 and only 5 1/2 games out for the AL's second wild card.

"We have an unbelievable level of competitive balance," new baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said. "When I look at the standings, I think we're in for one heck of a ride in the second half of the season."

There is a little more spread in the NL, where the St. Louis Cardinals have the major leagues' best record at 56-33 and Philadelphia owns the worst at 29-62. Other than the Phillies, Miami and Milwaukee, every team is within single-digit games back of a playoff berth.

"It just shows that there's not really that a monopoly of a franchise right now," Baltimore closer Zach Britton said.

Kansas City was 48-46 at the All-Star break last year, 6 1/2 games behind AL Central-leading Detroit and 2 1/2 back of Seattle for the league's second wild card. By October, the Royals were one win shy of their first World Series title since 1985.

Royals manager Ned Yost said the bunching gave his AL players extra incentive in the All-Star Game.

"Everybody in that locker room is going to have a chance to continue to move forward and be playoff bound," he said before the AL's 6-3 victory.

Toronto, Seattle and the Marlins are the only teams that have not made the playoffs since 2005. Increased revenue sharing, the luxury tax on payrolls and restraints on amateur signing bonuses have helped more teams become competitive.

While the Dodgers opened the season with a payroll of nearly \$273 million for their 40-man roster, according to Major League Baseball's calculations, there was a huge dropoff after that to the Yankees at \$220 million and Boston at \$187 million. Six teams were at \$140 million to \$175 million, seven at \$120 million to \$125 million, and six more above \$100 million.

"A lot of teams that are expected to win are learning that the revenues that they are making ... they're actually going to have to spend some of those revenues to create the gap and not stay where they're at, because teams are getting close to them," agent Scott Boras said.

All that crowding in the standings has its impact on talks as general managers approach July 31, the last day to deal players without passing them through waivers first.

"It makes the trade deadline a lot harder, obviously," Kershaw said. "Not as many teams think they're out of it. It makes it tougher to get pieces, which means you've got to build your team earlier in the offseason, in my opinion."

Souhan: Molitor's approach winning approval from players

Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | July 17, 2015

On the Sunday morning before the All-Star break, Paul Molitor walked beyond second base at Target Field and threw pop-ups to his children, who sprinted and dived in the sun.

Molitor walked with them to the dugout, turned, looked across the field, and on an idyllic day reflected on what has become an idyllic life.

"I haven't really stopped to measure it all," he said. "But every once in a while, in your humble moments, when you think about the journey you've been able to travel through, from growing up here and having family here and playing and fulfilling dreams and all of that good stuff, it's all gone to another level with this opportunity.

"I'm trying to soak it all in. You know me. Whatever I've been challenged with in terms of opportunities, I've tried to meet them head-on, tried to do my best. The reward in this job comes in watching the development of men, and how their development affects not only their profession, but how they mature, and the responsibilities they're willing to accept, and how they accept accountability.

"Leadership is about that. We all try to make people better at skills, but I think when you see guys figure out how to be good people, everything from how it affects their performance to how they carry themselves here, and with their families and in their communities.

"I've made so many mistakes along the way that I hope, with the things I've gone through, I can communicate those to people to help them just become better."

In his first year as Twins manager, Molitor is enjoying the view. He took over a team that had lost 90 games for four consecutive seasons and guided it to the second-best record in the American League, adding a chapter to a storybook life that seems so perfectly scripted as to be fictional.

He grew up in St. Paul, played at Cretin High, then the University of Minnesota. He became a star in Milwaukee and a champion in Toronto before returning to Minnesota to collect his 3,000th hit and be elected into the Hall of Fame.

After spending years as a scout, instructor and coach for the Twins, he became manager of his hometown team. The result has been a rare thing: A Hall of Famer whose managerial style is defined by humility.

He doesn't criticize players publicly. He second-guesses himself publicly. When rookie Miguel Sano missed a sign recently and was thrown out trying to steal second, Molitor said it was the responsibility of the manager and the coaches to communicate with the player.

After a recent game, he bolted from his office immediately after his news conference to hand the lineup card to Ryan O'Rourke, a 27-year-old reliever who had just made his big-league debut.

Brian Dozier, Trevor Plouffe, Torii Hunter and Glen Perkins rave about Molitor's approach. Sano and top prospect Byron Buxton have called Molitor the person they rely on most in the organization.

"There is no panic with him," Twins vice president Rob Antony said. "He's got the players playing relaxed. If you make a mistake you don't fear that you're going to be benched. And please, this isn't a knock on the previous manager, but I think these are traits that I think are really important.

"You lose a game, he doesn't dwell on it. He's always looking forward. The preparation and attention to detail and the ability to communicate with players while maintaining a mutual respect with them has been very important.

"He's got everybody believing in themselves and each other. It's not easy to do all of those things, especially given our recent history."

Ron Gardenhire, Molitor's predecessor, brought intensity to the job but seemed deflated in his last year or two.

Molitor has a different personality and approach. He has connected with his players on a personal level.

"I had a bad outing the other day, and he came and checked on me, to see if I was OK," Kyle Gibson said. "He does things like that all the time."

"It is a stressful job," Molitor said. "... The stress is that there is responsibility that people are looking to you for leadership and guidance in how you make decisions day to day, whether in game or out of game.

"You want to meet people's expectations the best you can by making sure you do your homework and you're prepared. It's not always going to work out. Some days you're going to fail. But if you're willing to admit that ...

"I think people know that as you're trying to make them better that you're trying to get better at the same time."

Torii at 40: Hunter's leadership has lifted contending Twins, and so have his 14 home runs

Dave Campbell | Associated Press | July 17, 2015

MINNEAPOLIS — Torii Hunter turns 40 this weekend. He's been bracing for trouble.

Not from his body or mind, despite that daunting number for a professional athlete, but from his Minnesota Twins teammates.

"I don't know what they're going to do to me, but it doesn't sound good because they keep saying, 'When is it? When is it?'" Hunter said. "When the guys start talking about your birthday a week out, they're up to something. I'm scared."

The special occasion is Saturday, and his concern ought to be limited to potential pranks. The way his season has gone, Hunter needn't be worried about an age-related regression. Returning to his original team in a mentoring role has been energizing. He even said being back in Minnesota has made him feel younger.

The Twins, though, have been the ones experiencing the rejuvenation. Their 49-40 record was the second-best in the American League before the All-Star break, and Hunter's presence has played a real part.

"He's a very funny guy. He knows how to play the game. He's a leader, you know?" Twins pitcher Ervin Santana said. "Everybody follows him, because he's doing a lot of the right things."

Signing Hunter to a one-year, \$10.5 million contract gave the Twins a durable right fielder, a five-time All-Star who has played just as well if not better in his 30s than in his 20s. Another reason: Leadership for a team that averaged 96 losses over the last four seasons.

"The mentality that he brings in, that we've kind of embraced, of that short memory, forgetting about yesterday, forgetting about the game that happened an hour ago, that's something that's really helped us," third baseman Trevor Plouffe said. "That's kind of been the difference in the team from the years past."

For outfielders Byron Buxton and Aaron Hicks, having another fellow former Twins first-round draft pick has been invaluable. Hunter's impact has transcended his position group, too.

His affable, jokester nature has given the Twins clubhouse the kind of life it hadn't had since, well, Hunter was here the last time a decade ago. He has initiated an elaborate ritual following victories by the Twins at home, featuring fog machines, laser lights and dancing in the middle of the room for the unofficial player of the game.

"I just go out there and do what I have to do that's a part of me, and I always want to make guys around me better," Hunter said.

Santana played with Hunter for five seasons with the Los Angeles Angels. He'd love to have a few more together.

"The way he's treating himself, the way he's eating, he can play four more years," Santana said. "I tell him that all the time, and he's like, 'Stop.' I'm like, 'I'm right, dude.'"

Hunter is the second-oldest active position player in the majors, behind only Ichiro Suzuki, who at 41 is a part-timer for the Miami Marlins. Two of the seven 40-plus pitchers are currently on the disabled list.

His range in the outfield isn't what it was when he was collecting nine Gold Glove awards with the Twins and Angels. His career-high errors total is five, established last year with the Detroit Tigers, and he had four by the All-Star break. His .312 on-base percentage projects to the third-worst of his 19 major league seasons.

Still, he has 14 home runs, a pace that would give him 25, the most since he went deep 28 times in his last year with the Twins in 2007. He's driving in runs at the same rate he has in that span, too. Last Saturday against the Tigers, he hit a two-run homer into the third deck at Target Field, a place only a few right-handed sluggers have reached. In the ninth inning that night, he made a tumbling catch of a sinking line drive.

"I've been really, really pleased," manager Paul Molitor said, citing aloud his estimates of Hunter's statistics. "It's just a lot of production. Good at-bats. When you hit him second, he knows what to do there as far as taking pitches and using the whole field. And he can still ambush a fastball."

Hunter gave his performance a C-plus midseason grade. He's just as determined to keep satisfaction from saturating the team, with a road trip to Oakland and Los Angeles facing the Twins after the break and the Kansas City Royals still leading the AL Central division by a healthy margin. That the Twins have even found themselves in this conversation, though, has a lot to do with their ageless leader.

"When you're producing," Molitor said, "it's a lot easier to lead."

Have Twins finally found a DH in rookie Miguel Sano?

Jace Frederick | Pioneer Press | July 17, 2015

The search is over. The Twins appear to finally have found their designated hitter.

Since the Twins called Miguel Sano up from Double-A Chattanooga two weeks ago, the rookie is hitting .378 with four doubles, two home runs, eight runs batted in and eight walks in 11 games. In 10 of those games, Sano has been the DH.

The Twins hope Sano, one of baseball's top prospects, will be a corner infielder. But at 22 years old, and listed at 6 feet 4 and 260 pounds -- although general manager Terry Ryan insists he's lighter -- Sano looks like a prototypical DH.

"He just kind of fits the mold," said manager Paul Molitor, for years one of baseball's best designated hitters. "He's a presence there. You can already tell people are pitching him carefully. It just stretches us out."

But don't expect Sano to be there for long.

"We don't consider him a DH. He's going to be a player," Ryan said. "He can be a force on the defensive side, as well. It's just right now that's the best fit. But down the line, I don't think anybody in this organization considers him a DH at all."

The Twins haven't had a presence like Sano in the DH role since Jim Thome's first year with the club in 2010, when he played in 108 games and hit 25 home runs with 59 RBIs. He was the DH in 79 of those games.

Minnesota hasn't had a player DH more than 100 games in a season since Molitor did it 115 times in 1998.

The Twins weren't particularly good that season, finishing 70-92 and fourth in the American League Central, but history has shown a regular designated hitter can be an asset.

Seven of the past 10 AL champs, for instance, have had one player fill the DH spot for at least 100 regular-season games, including five of the past six.

The New York Yankees' Alex Rodriguez has been the DH for 75 games this season, hitting .278 with 18 home runs and 51 RBIs, while Tampa Bay has used 17 players at DH, hitting a combined .298 with 10 homers and 38 RBIs.

"You can go about it any way you want," Ryan said. "You can put somebody in there that might need a day (off) ... you can have a guy like (Orioles DH Jimmy) Paredes, a switch-hitter that can do other things besides hit it over the fence; the Yankees have A-Rod. ... It doesn't matter how you do it, as long as you've got some production out of that position, which is good."

Minnesota hasn't gotten much of that in recent memory. In the past 15 seasons, the Twins' DH production has placed in the top five in the American League just three times in terms of OPS -- on-base plus slugging percentage, which measures a hitter's ability to get on base and hit for power.

One of those years came in 2010 with Thome. Another came in 2001, when David Ortiz filled the position for 80 games. The third year came in 2009, when Jason Kubel was the DH for 82 games and hit .300 with 28 home runs and 103 RBIs.

The Twins placed second in the AL Central in 2001 and won the division in both 2009 and 2010.

Before Sano, the Twins used eight designated hitters who hit for a combined .249 with six home runs and 30 RBIs in 69 games this season. If Sano isn't the DH of the future, he has at least been a plug for a gaping hole.

Since Sano entered the lineup on July 2, the Twins are averaging 4.9 runs a game and won five of eight games against AL Central rivals Kansas City and Detroit.

"If you can have that piece in the American League, obviously to have some good production out of that slot when you've got the opportunity to use it, it's a good thing for our team," Molitor said.

But Molitor doesn't think it's a necessity in order to compete, as shown by the Twins' success without any presence to speak of at DH for much of the first half of the season. Neither does Ryan.

"You don't necessarily have to have a prototypical DH," Ryan said, "which most teams don't."

Still, most of the best teams have at least a consistent presence in that spot. And Ryan would prefer to have one guy to plug in there every day.

"Boston's done it with David (Ortiz) for many, many years," Ryan said. "That isn't too bad. That should have happened here, and I screwed that up. That's not a bad way to go to let him get into the lineup for about 160 games a year and let him go, and you'd take that."

Ortiz, 39, is hitting .231 with 15 homers and 34 RBIs for Boston this season.

Sano could have that sort of presence in the Twins' lineup the rest of this season, much like he did the past two weeks. And while he has limited experience at DH, he's comfortable in the role. Plus, he's bigger than Ortiz was as a rookie.

"It's not a big deal," Sano said. "I would play DH. I feel really good when I play DH."

But he also feels good in the field. Sano has played one seamless game at third in the big leagues and has been doing some work at first and in the outfield before games.

Ryan said Sano believes he could play shortstop, as well.

"He can run, he can throw, he can field, he's got enough range, he can play probably a couple of positions," Ryan said. "I wouldn't worry too much about him being a DH."

Then who will be?

"I think all of us a year ago were probably thinking that (Kennys) Vargas was going to be that guy for many years," Ryan said, "but we had to regroup."

"More importantly," Ryan added, "is how many runs are you go to score with the lineup that you put out there."

Twins' three areas of concern: setup relievers, catcher, shortstop

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | July 17, 2015

Problem: A Twins bullpen that ranks 18th in the majors with a 3.71 earned-run average would see that figure spike to 4.12 (25th overall) if three-time all-star closer Glen Perkins were removed from the equation. Take out Perkins' 36 strikeouts in 37 1/3 innings, and the Twins' remaining relievers have a nine-inning strikeout rate of just 5.70.

As a whole, the Twins' bullpen ranks last at 6.12 strikeouts per nine innings, more than a full strikeout per game behind the Detroit Tigers, who are 29th with a K/9 of 7.25. A whopping 21 clubs have bullpens that strike out batters at a rate of eight or better per nine innings.

Perkins aside, the Twins have used 12 relievers for a total of 234 appearances. Right-hander Blaine Boyer reached the all-star break tied for the American League lead with 42 outings.

Possible solutions: Converted starter Trevor May has looked solid through his first three relief outings. More likely, the Twins will look to acquire a veteran setup man, possibly one with closer experience, before the July 31 non-waiver trade deadline. Early reports have linked them to right-handers Joaquin Benoit (San Diego Padres) and Steve Cishek (Miami Marlins), but there will be no shortage of bridge relievers made available in trade.

CATCHER

Problem: Since making his first all-star team and signing a two-year, \$12 million extension in July 2014, Kurt Suzuki has struggled at the plate.

Over his past 418 plate appearances, dating to Aug. 1 2014, the durable veteran has slumped to a .240 batting average and .294 on-base percentage. He has grounded into 13 double plays while producing 38 extra-base hits (24 doubles, four home runs) in that span.

While Suzuki receives high marks for his game calling and staff preparation, he had thrown out just six of 39 attempted base stealers this season (15.4 percent). Charged with just two passed balls, Suzuki has seen 21 wild pitches uncorked on his watch in 2015.

Possible solutions: The Twins made contract offers to both A.J. Pierzynski and Dioner Navarro before turning to Suzuki in December 2013. They could seek to acquire either veteran as a loose platoon partner for Suzuki, even though he hits lefties no better than he hits righties. Or they could give more playing time to journeyman backup Eric Fryer, recently promoted from Triple-A Rochester.

SHORTSTOP

Problem: Switch-hitting speedster Danny Santana has struggled in the return to his natural position, although he closed the first half with a flourish.

The Twins have used four different players at this key position, including bat-first prospect Jorge Polanco for one game, holdover starter Eduardo Escobar (17 starts) and fellow utility man Eduardo Nunez (13 games). That group has combined to make 16 errors and ranks 29th in the majors with minus nine defensive runs saved, according to Baseball Info Solutions.

At the plate, Twins shortstops have combined for a .288 on-base percentage that ranks 11th in the AL and just 0.5 Wins Above Replacement, as measured by Fangraphs.com. That's 10th in the league.

Possible solutions: Giving Polanco a full shot at the position seems unlikely in light of his 23 errors at three levels, including the majors, but his bat may be potent enough to offset that shortcoming. Milwaukee's Jean Segura and Colorado's Troy Tulowitzki might be available in trade, but Segura has been just as erratic, and Tulowitzki, 30, is signed through 2020 at close to \$20 million per season.

Wetmore: Grading Twins outfielders at the All-Star break

Derek Wetmore | 1500espn.com | July 17, 2015

For this report card I will exclusively focus on the three outfielders I think Minnesota will use in the short-term future. I didn't see enough of Byron Buxton to hand him a fair grade, even though I think he'll be the team's center fielder beginning next year. Shane Robinson is on the team as an extra defender, and I'm not sure there's a fair way to grade his numbers in a context-neutral setting. [Oswaldo Arcia](#) gets an incomplete, although I'm interested to see what happens when he eventually [gets back to the big leagues](#). And [Eduardo Escobar](#) has played more in left field than anywhere else and honestly I'm not sure what the Twins are doing with that decision.

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The grades

Torii Hunter

Grade: B+

Last fall after the baseball season ended for the Detroit Tigers, I wrote a column wondering whether or not a reunion with Hunter would make sense for the Twins. I wrote that I didn't think it would be a good fit.

Here I stand before you, corrected.

Hunter's return to the Twins has been a coup for the team's front office, and considering his off-field contributions like being the team's unofficial ambassador and his on-field performance, Hunter has been a great one-year signing.

His batting line this year is fairly similar to his final season in Detroit. Last year with the Tigers, Hunter hit .286/.319/.446 with 17 home runs and 83 RBIs. In his year back with the Twins, Hunter is hitting .257/.312/.444 with 14 home runs and 49 RBIs at the All-Star break.

I've been surprised by how Hunter has played this season. He turns 40 years old Saturday and hasn't shown signs of slowing down at the plate. Baseball fans in Minnesota are somewhat spoiled by the recent performance of [Jim Thome](#) as he approached 40 years old. Guys at that age simply aren't supposed to be this effective, but every once in a while a player defies that generalization and Hunter is doing that so far this season.

There was a lot of hand wringing this offseason outside the Twins organization as to whether Hunter could still play in the field. He's been an adequate right fielder, in my opinion, even though he's made a couple glaring mistakes and you can tell he doesn't have the foot speed he had in his younger days.

(Fielding metrics like Ultimate Zone Rating and Defensive Runs Save seem to confirm that Hunter has been better in the outfield this year, but I always caution people about using these numbers because we don't yet have publicly available way to accurately quantify defense. I'm especially skeptical of UZR and DRS in a half season worth of innings-that's a very noisy data set.)

Hunter said before the season began that if he was productive this season he wasn't ready to retire at the end of the year, so barring some kind of massive drop-off or injury, it seems reasonable to expect he'll want to return next season. If that's the case, it'll be awfully interesting to see how the Twins think Hunter fits into their outfield plans.

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Eddie Rosario

Grade: B

Rosario has held his own at the plate in his rookie year and his glove represents a demonstrable upgrade over Oswaldo Arcia in left field. In the three games he started against the Tigers before the break, Rosario went 7-for-12 with a triple and five runs scored.

I like Rosario's game because he makes smart decisions on the bases (most of the time) and while he's no Alex Gordon in left field, he's certainly capable of holding down the position from my perspective. He makes good reads on balls off the bat, takes fairly consistent routes to fly balls, has fair range and an arm, and he's almost always making an accurate throw to the right place.

His approach at the plate offers some reasons for concern. He strikes out in about 23 percent of his plate appearances, which is fine considering he offers the tradeoff of some power. Sure, he only has four home runs at the All-Star break (including the first pitch he ever saw in the Majors), but his eight doubles and three triples mean that he's holding his own the slugging percentage department. The concern is that Rosario has one of the lowest walk rates among rookies with at least 200 plate appearances. He strikes out almost six times as often as he walks, which is a sign to me that he doesn't have well-refined strike zone control. There are players who can get away with this, but I feel it limits the offensive upside.

Rosario's minor league numbers never jumped off the page, and his name wasn't in the same conversations as Miguel Sano or Byron Buxton. But he was a prospect and had a good Arizona Fall League last year. That fall he hit .330/.345/.410, which is a strong line, but also suggests to me that for Rosario to have a good on-base percentage, he'll need to have a very good batting average. For comparison, Brian Dozier was so good at drawing walks last year that he had a .345 on-base percentage despite a batting average that was 88 points lower than Rosario's stat line from the fall league.

Like several other young players, I'm curious to see how Rosario fits into the Twins' long-term plans. An outfield with him in left field and Byron Buxton in center field would cover a lot of ground.

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Aaron Hicks

Grade: B

I don't know if it's fair to say that Aaron Hicks' career is at a crossroads this year, but that's how I view it. Despite his prolonged struggles two years into his MLB career, people within the Twins' organization privately remained confident in Hicks' underlying ability.

Two years into his MLB career, Hicks had more than 500 plate appearances and showed very little sign of being able to handle the level of competition. Hicks batted a combined .201/.293/.313 in 150 games, which is the kind of batting line that has you looking for work if your organization doesn't see some longer-term potential. Combine that with the fact that Byron Buxton finally was going to be healthy and racing to the big leagues and it wasn't hard to see Hicks was in a tight spot.

But the Twins have stuck with him and now he's shown signs that he might have figured something out. Entering the break Hicks is hitting .266/.333/.387, which is about in line with what the league-average outfielder is hitting this year. Add to that the fact that Hicks is playing much more solid defense in center field, he's got a real solid 20:13 strikeout-to-walk ratio, and he's swiped seven bases in 10 tries, and Hicks has been

a contributor to the bottom of the Twins' lineup.

Hicks didn't make the team out of spring training, and he responded by tearing up the International League for a month at Triple-A Rochester. Hicks hit .336/.415/.561 before earning the call-up in mid-May. He's carried some of that success up to the big leagues with him.

Hicks has dramatically cut his strikeouts this season and is finally delivering at the highest level on some of the promise that originally made him a first-round draft pick. In his final 15 games before the break, Hicks hit .304/.411/.543, with an impressive nine walks and five strikeouts. Hicks, a switch hitter, still hits much better right-handed, but he's no longer embarrassing himself from the left side of the plate.

A lot remains to be seen about whether he'll be a long-term option on this team, but Hicks has acquitted himself well so far in 2015 and if anyone outside the Twins organization had given up on him having a future in the big leagues, his good start to the year might have them re-thinking that assessment.

Preview: Twins at Athletics

Associated Press | July 17, 2015

After stumbling through the last four seasons, the **Minnesota Twins** have summoned several of their best minor leaguers this summer, some straight from Double-A.

The prized prospects have provided further reinforcement of the assumption the franchise is headed for brighter days. The funny thing about this rebuilding phase? The Twins have become contenders again, and they'll try to pick up where they left off to conclude the first half Friday night in Oakland.

The Twins (49-40), winners of three straight and six of seven, are 4 1/2 games behind AL Central-leading Kansas City, but they're four games ahead of Tampa Bay, the closest to the second wild card spot.

"We've gotten to a point now where it's like, 'OK, this is something that we can do not only for a month or two months, but for a season,'" manager Paul Molitor said. "Let's make it fun. I haven't tried to look too far out, as far as talking to these guys about the playoffs and those kinds of things, but I hear them. I feel them. They're believing."

Minnesota has the second-best record in the AL and is a game away from reaching 10 games over .500 after the All-Star break for the first time since concluding 2010 at 94-68 and winning the division by six games.

"We're getting better, and part of that is the influx of young talent we've been able to insert into our lineup from time to time," Molitor said.

Molitor has helped instill a sense of self-assurance in a team comprised largely of players influenced by his past teaching as a roving minor league instructor in the organization. His Hall of Fame status, attention to detail and fresh perspective have commanded him built-in respect in the clubhouse despite a mere 89 games as manager.

He's not the only rookie who's made an impact on this team, either.

Miguel Sano has immediately become an imposing presence in the middle of the lineup, though the sample size is a mere 11 games. Eddie Rosario has quietly become a reliable everyday player. Byron Buxton was overmatched at the plate during the 11 games he played before hurting his thumb, but his speed brought instant energy and an elite caliber center fielder.

Two other members of the 25-and-under club, Aaron Hicks and Trevor May, have contributed. Kyle Gibson, the rotation's youngest, has been the best starting pitcher.

The youngsters now have veteran **Ervin Santana** back from his 80-game performance-enhancing drug suspension, and he'll be on the mound against the **Athletics** (41-50).

Santana (0-0, 6.00 ERA) was sharp in his first start but regressed in last Friday's 8-6 home win over Detroit. The right-hander gave up six runs and eight hits - three home runs - in four innings.

The longtime Los Angeles Angels starter is 6-2 with a 2.12 ERA in 13 games in Oakland while allowing more than two earned runs once in 11 starts. Santana has held Brett Lawrie (1 for 11) and **Ben Zobrist** (2 for 16) in check, but **Billy Butler** is 8 for 31 with five home runs.

He may have no room for error against Sonny Gray, who threw his third career shutout in Sunday's 2-0 win in Cleveland. Gray (10-3, 2.04) gave up two hits to drop his AL-leading opponent batting average to .198, and he trails only the Los Angeles Dodgers' **Zack Greinke** in ERA.

"He smells blood and he just goes for it," catcher Stephen Vogt said.

Gray is 2-0 with a 5.40 ERA in two starts against the Twins. Oswaldo Arcia is 2 for 5 with a home run off him.

While the A's are still at the bottom of the AL after digging themselves 16 games under .500 by May 22, they've since gone an AL-best 27-20.

The poor start included losing three of four in Minnesota from May 4-7, but the A's have won 18 of 24 in the series and 11 of 13 in Oakland.