ESPN's top 100 MLB prospects list reflects next wave of Twins
Michael Rand | Star Tribune | February 1, 2017

If there has been one place to look for hope when it came to the Twins in recent years — in spite of five 90-loss seasons in the past six — it was in various rankings of the organization’s minor league system.

Fans became accustomed to seeing a handful of increasingly household names dominate the lists — from Byron Buxton (at the top of some MLB-wide lists) to Miguel Sano to Jose Berrios to Max Kepler, just to name a few, talented prospects gave Twins fans genuine hope for the future.

That hope still exists, of course … but they guys we also became so accustomed to thinking of as “prospects” are no longer that — at least not in the truest sense of the word. They’ve all received somewhere between a taste and a big bite of major league action. And while the Twins’ fortunes this season and beyond still largely hinge on their development, it is also time for fans to get more acquainted with the next wave of prospects now populating those rankings.

Keith Law at ESPN, for instance, just put out his top 100 prospects list for 2017 (Insider required). You won’t find an Twins players in the top 50, but you will find five of them between 51 and 100. Three of them are pitchers — the area where one could argue the Twins are currently most deficient at the major league level — meaning these young guys could have just as much influence over the future as all the names we had been hearing about (and waiting for) over the past handful of years.

The five on Law’s list are: shortstop Nick Gordon (No. 53); right-handed pitcher Fernando Romero (No. 65); right-handed pitcher Kohl Stewart (No. 87); left-handed pitcher Stephen Gonsalves (No. 91); and outfielder Alex Kirilloff (No. 97).

All of them are 22 or younger, meaning there is still plenty of development ahead. That said, some of them could make it to Target Field sooner rather than later.

In particular, Gonsalves and Stewart both had extended runs at Class AA Chattanooga last season. And if we’re being even more specific with the analysis, Gonsalves — named the Twins’ minor league pitcher of the year for 2016 — is burning through his levels at an impressive pace.

After Gonsalves dominated high-A Fort Myers to start 2016, he was moved to Class AA — where he was even better. In 74 1/3 innings at Chattanooga, he went 8-1 with a 1.82 ERA while striking out 89 batters. He’s only given up 6.2 hits per nine innings during his minor league career, which started in 2013 after he was a fourth-round pick out of Cathedral Catholic High in San Diego.

Gonsalves accepted his minor league pitcher of the year award last week at the Diamond Awards — and was introduced by new Twins president
of baseball operations Derek Falvey, who couldn’t stop saying good things about Gonsalves. Once Gonsalves took his turn at the microphone, it seemed apparent he’s quite mature for 22 — seemingly just as good off the field as he is on it.

A lot can happen, of course, between now and the majors. But this time next year, Gonsalves might have joined Buxton, Sano and co. in the transition from prospect to big league player — the first of the next wave.

**Inbox: What will Vogelsong’s role be with the Twins?**

Rhett Bollinger | MLB | February 1, 2017

MINNEAPOLIS -- The Twins Winter Caravan, the Diamond Awards and TwinsFest are all in the rearview mirror, which means Spring Training is right around the corner.

But as general manager Thad Levine said at TwinsFest over the weekend, he doesn’t believe Minnesota is done adding to the roster, despite the fact the club reports to Spring Training in less than two weeks, on Feb. 14. So there are still questions about this roster and plenty of other subjects, which leads right into this week’s Twins Inbox.

@_Hang_Em_High_
@RhettBollinger what pitchers are we looking @ to help the staff? I understood the Castro signing, but there’s been NOTHING done w pitchers

Well, it’s true the Twins haven’t signed any pitchers to Major League deals, but they did add a few veterans via Minor League deals such as Ryan Vogelsong and Nick Tepesch. They’ve had success with Minor League deals in the past with pitchers such as Brandon Kintzler, Fernando Abad, Casey Fien and Jared Burton.

But as Levine stated, the Twins are monitoring the pitching market, and they appear more interested in adding relief help than a starter. Names they’ve checked in on include right-hander Joe Blanton and lefties Boone Logan and Craig Breslow. There are other intriguing names out there, and it’s hard to say if a deal will get done, but Minnesota is actively trying to add pitching.

@areynolds0
@RhettBollinger could Vogelsong take a long relief role if he doesn’t win a starter job?

Vogelsong, 39, was an interesting signing for the Twins given his experience and leadership. He’s played in the big leagues for 12 years, winning the World Series with the Giants in 2012 and ’14. But he seems like a long shot to make the club as a starter, so he’s much more likely to make the team as a long reliever. He could also be depth at Triple-A Rochester if he doesn’t make the team.

@michaelgodell
@RhettBollinger with the state of our SP rotation, what is your opinion of Rule 5 pick, Justin Haley sticking with the club?

Much like Vogelsong, Haley doesn’t have a great chance to make the rotation, but he is more likely to compete for a spot in the bullpen. The rotation figures to include Ervin Santana, Kyle Gibson, Hector Santiago and Phil Hughes (if healthy), and then several others will compete for the fifth spot such as Jose Berrios, Trevor May, Haley and Vogelsong.

@pnuy15
@RhettBollinger Opening Day Starter possibilities?

If healthy, Santana is a lock to start on Opening Day for the second straight year. Hopefully this time the weather cooperates, as he lasted two innings last season before a rain delay caused him to exit his Opening Day start early in Baltimore.

@BSatterlie
@RhettBollinger what are the pros and cons of having many young talented prospects since many of them have struggled at the top level?

One of the pros is that many of these prospects such as Byron Buxton, Miguel Sano, Max Kepler and Jorge Polanco have all come up together and won at different levels in the Minor Leagues.

While it hasn’t happened yet in the Majors, it often takes time for young players to settle in, and last year was an example of the problem with having too many young players going through growing pains. But if this young core develops the way the Twins believe it can, it’s similar to the early 2000s when the club had a crop of prospects all come up together and establish the groundwork for a successful decade that saw Minnesota win six division titles in nine years.
It's similar to the young core the Royals counted on to win their World Series two years ago, and much of the Cubs' strength is in their young talent as well. Having a young core also allows for financial flexibility to add veterans where necessary.

@cjorgenson3
@RhettBollinger How's Teddy looking? Oops, wrong team. Do you think Eddie holds down LF all season?

Rosario has plenty to prove this year after he was unable to build on his promising rookie season in 2015. He's still too much of a free swinger, which hurts his average and his ability to draw walks. But he's still an above-average defender and baserunner, so he provides value even though his on-base percentage will never be very high.

Robbie Grossman will compete for the job in left with Rosario, and the Twins do have a few intriguing non-roster candidates as well, including J.B. Shuck and Ben Paulsen. But it's Rosario's job to lose, and if he can learn to control the strike zone better, he'd be a solid all-around contributor.

And as for Teddy Bridgewater, I'll let Vikings reporters keep you updated on if he'll play next year.

Park's power worth second look in 2017
Travis Sawchik | MLB | February 1, 2017

Many of the relatively well-known imported bats from foreign pro leagues have adapted quickly and proficiently to Major League pitching in recent years, and that's why the Twins were so optimistic about Byungho Park in 2016.

We're familiar with what Yoenis Cespedes and Jose Abreu have accomplished. Jung Ho Kang, when he's on the field, has silenced questions about his ability to hit velocity. Dae-Ho Lee arrived with more modest expectations but was still a league-average bat (102 wRC+) last year in his first year in the Majors, and Hyun Soo Kim posted a .382 on-base mark and 119 wRC+ in his first season in transitioning from the KBO to the Majors.

Which brings us back to Park, who came advertised with 80-grade power, according to some evaluators. He demonstrated last year that the power was very, very real.

Of course, Park didn't display that power very often, because he didn't make contact often enough. He struck out in 30.1 percent of his plate appearances in April (73 plate appearances), struck out 32.6 percent of the time in May (95), and at a 35.5 percent clip in June (76). He was trending in the wrong direction. His wRC+ fell from 119 in April, to 84 in May, to 37 in June. His struggles became so severe that he was dispatched to Triple-A Rochester in July, where he slugged 10 home runs in 31 games but also hit .224.

His season ended in August when Park had wrist surgery. At the time, he explained how long it had been an issue:
"It's been bothering me, not seriously, but the pain's been there from time to time," Park said through interpreter J.D. Kim. "After I got sent down to Rochester, the pain got a little worse and I thought it was time to get it checked out."

I suspect the Twins would like to believe the wrist discomfort explains much of his contact and/or timing issues.

When observing him in the KBO, scouts saw holes in Park's swing. The Davenport Translations, which attempt to convert foreign stats into MLB expectations, thought his 2015 KBO performance would convert to 153 strikeouts in nearly a full season of Major League play, along with an .837 OPS. There was enough doubt to explain why Park's rights were won for a significant, if not astronomical, posting fee of $12.8 million. Park later signed a four-year, $12 million deal with the Twins.

To be fair, there's some really harsh truth with regard to the contact issues. If he qualified, his 15 percent swinging-strike rate would have tied Park for the seventh-worst mark in the Majors, in the same neighborhood as Chris Carter and Melvin Upton Jr.

He saw fastballs 54 percent of the time last season and his weighted-runs mark (-5) on that pitch type would have placed him as the 16th-worst fastball hitter in the league had he qualified. If Park is going to struggle against Major League fastballs, if he's going to have to cheat to catch up to them, then there are some deep-rooted concerns. All his value is tied to his bat -- at a time when teams are not valuing bat-only players.

But, I don't want to quit Park just yet.
@mike_petriello
Every time I look up an interesting power-based #statcast number, Byung-ho Park appears. I know he hit like .190, but I’m not out on him yet

If you examine the Statcast™ leaderboards, you will notice Park among impressive company when it comes to quality of contact (barrels per batted ball) and the force with which he drives line drives and fly balls. When Park makes contact, he hits the ball really hard. For example, look where he ranks in terms of barrels (a metric that combines exit velocity and launch angle to find the best possible batted balls) per plate appearance. It’s a who’s-who of top sluggers.

**Barrels per Batted Ball, 2016**
- 18.8 percent -- Gary Sanchez, NYY
- 18.7 percent -- Park, MIN
- 18.2 percent -- Khris Davis, OAK
- 17.8 percent -- Nelson Cruz, SEA / Chris Carter, MIL
- 17.4 percent -- Mark Trumbo
- 17.3 percent -- Giancarlo Stanton, MIA / Tommy Pham, STL
- 16.9 percent -- Chris Davis, BAL
- 16.5 percent -- Miguel Cabrera, DET
*(minimum 75 batted balls)*

He also appears in the Top 10 of highest exit velocity on flies and liners, a good proxy for power hitters.

**Average Exit Velocity on Flies and Line Drives, 2016**
- 99.2 mph -- Cruz, SEA
- 98.9 mph -- Pham, STL
- 98.7 mph -- Pedro Alvarez, BAL
- 98.2 mph -- Franklin Gutierrez, SEA
- 98.0 mph -- Davis, OAK
- 97.8 mph -- Sanchez, NYY / Josh Donaldson, TOR
- 97.4 mph -- Stanton, MIA
- 97.3 mph -- David Ortiz, BOS
- 97.2 mph -- Park, MIN
*(minimum 75 batted balls)*

But going forward, how often is Park’s barrel going to find fastballs? Is he going to be able to make adjustments? And how much did the wrist affect him last season?

Can Park make a Kris Bryant-like adjustment? Bryant reduced his strikeout rate from 30.6 percent as a rookie to 22 percent last season. Can Park make a Paul Goldschmidt-like adjustment? Goldschmidt, who arrived at the Major League level with contract-rate concerns, reduced his strikeout rate from 29.9 percent in a 177 plate appearances as a rookie to a 22.1 percent rate in his second year, which is in line with his career average.

To not only learn a new league but a new culture in transitioning when traveling from a foreign pro league to the Majors is a lot to expect of a player. Perhaps Kang, Cespedes and Abreu have created unfair expectations in trailblazing the path for those who follow. Perhaps Park will be much more comfortable, and healthy, in his second year in the States.

Said Twins manager Paul Molitor to the Pioneer Press:

"There's people that are weighing in that have seen him more than others that expect the second time around to be significantly different as far as expectations and the pressure he puts on himself and those type of things. I'm glad he's healthy. That's the main thing, and we'll see how he comes in the second time around."

There’s no doubt Park needs to make adjustments in his second time around to be more than a fringe roster piece who puts on a show in batting practice. But if he can make an adjustment, if he can simply get his barrel to more pitches, then some special things could happen. The underlying power traits are there and they are real. I’m betting that Park can make some level of adjustments, and even some modest improvements to timing, perhaps swing length or pitch recognition (perhaps to also boost walk rate) could be significant.
Wetmore’s 2017 Twins outlook: Why I see a superstar in Byron Buxton
Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | February 1, 2017

There is no more pivotal player to the fortunes of the 2017 Minnesota Twins than Byron Buxton.

The gap between his worst-case outcome and best-case outcome is probably wider than any other player on the roster. The up-and-down start to Buxton’s big-league career caused some fans to question all the hype they’ve heard for four years about the uber-talented top prospect. That potential still exists. And for the first time last September, Buxton showed that ability at the highest level of pro ball. Buxton posted superstar numbers in the final month of the season.

Buxton was an all-around monster in the season’s final month, whether we’re attributing it to a lengthy phone call from Torii Hunter, a natural maturation process or the fact that Buxton threw mechanical minutiae to the wind and let his big leg kick bubble to the surface.

Check out these numbers.

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<th>AVG</th>
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Source: FanGraphs.com. May and August excluded because Buxton was demoted, too few plate appearances.

OK, so it was only one month and 113 plate appearances. The skeptical stats observers among us would say that’s far too small of a sample size to trust, especially when the rest of his big league career comprises more than 350 plate appearances that he’d prefer to forget. Even after his breakout month at the end of last year, Buxton’s career MLB batting line is .220/.274/.398, which is below average even for the best defensive centerfielders like Buxton.

And fair enough. On the sample size point, we won’t have more hard evidence until things get going again in April. Here are two things worth pointing out to your friends who are skeptical about Buxton’s abilities going forward.

The first is that Buxton’s great month of September is more or less exactly in line with what he’d accomplished in the minor leagues, except with an added surge of power. The second is that Buxton turned 23 years old in September.

We’re spoiled to be following baseball right now in an era in which young players can surface at the big leagues early in their 20s and dominate. My opinion is that’s skewed expectations for Buxton, and the Twins almost definitely rushed him to the Majors in 2015. Take a look at the chart above. Those Double-A numbers came as a 21-year-old one year after having most of a development season wiped out by various injuries. The Triple-A numbers came after a couple demotions when he couldn’t cut it at the plate in the big leagues.

And the September numbers – the ones that, if they continue, would make him a legitimate superstar – were posted by a guy who was 22 years old and previously had failed during a handful of attempts in the Majors.

Buxton’s confidence was not lost, and nor was his ability to be a game-breaking baseball player.

So far we’ve only talked about his performance with a bat in his hands. Buxton also impacts games with his excellent defense and his speed. And here’s the catch. Buxton, in my opinion, is already a Gold Glove-caliber outfielder, and I believe there’s room for improvement. He also is incredibly speedy on the bases, and there, too, I think he could continue to refine his game.

I don’t expect him to hit 9 home runs every month, but the power isn’t unheard of. I had one evaluator tell me last year even before the September power surge that Buxton could be the type of player to hit 10-15 home runs if he could start making more contact—and there might be more power on the way as he matures physically. That was in the middle of the summer.

We got a taste of that in September. It’s the combination of elite defense (range and arm strength/accuracy) plus some power and blazing speed that makes Buxton’s peak potential higher than anyone currently on the Twins’ roster. And with regard to the team’s 2017 fortunes, Buxton’s the most pivotal player.
The 2017 Fort Myers Miracle coaching staff looks both fresh and familiar but with one glaring absence.

Jim Dwyer, 66 and a Cape Coral resident, has retired following a lifelong professional baseball career, first as a player for 18 seasons with six major league teams, then as a coach for 26 seasons in the minor leagues with the Minnesota Twins.

Dwyer spent the last 11 years as the Miracle hitting coach.

Nicknamed “Slice” by the late Kirby Puckett in the late 1980s over a clubhouse card game, Dwyer said he considered coaching with manager Doug Mientkiewicz and leading the 2014 Miracle to the Florida State League championship his career coaching highlight.

“Everybody was battling for the team to win,” Dwyer said. “They did everything they possibly could. It’s fun when you get that kind of atmosphere.”

After losing a game during the championship series against the Daytona Cubs, Dwyer recalled Daytona’s general manager visiting the Miracle clubhouse.

“He said, ‘I’ve got to tell you guys something. You guys battle like no team I’ve ever seen. You guys never give up,’” Dwyer said. “That was a game we lost. That’s the highest compliment we’re going to get.”

The Miracle went on to win the series, something Mientkiewicz hopes to replicate with his new staff after two years managing the Double-A Chattanooga Lookouts in Tennessee.

Mientkiewicz requested the transfer in order to be closer to his wife and son and their Florida Keys home.

Naples High grad Jeff Smith named Minnesota Twins first base coach

“‘Slice’ will always be a huge part of the Twins and for me personally,” said Mientkiewicz, who played first base for the Miracle in 1995-96, when Dwyer was the Twins roving minor league hitting coach. “I had him as a player at such an important time in my playing career. I also had him my very first year as a manager, which was so beneficial for my growth as a coach.

“He’s been around the game a long time. His experience will be hard to replace. I promise you there will not be one day that goes by that someone doesn’t bring up his name and laugh during our staff meetings.”

Mientkiewicz will have a supporting staff of returning pitching coach Henry Bonilla, 38, and new hitting coach Steve Singleton, 31.

Bonilla, a native of El Salvador, pitched for the Miracle in 2002 and had a 4.66 ERA over 10 minor league seasons.

Singleton spent part of 2016 as a Florida SouthWestern State college assistant and the rest as a Gulf Coast League assistant coach. He played as an infielder for the Miracle in 2008-09. He had a career .281 batting average in six minor league seasons but never advanced past Triple-A.

Mientkiewicz said he looked forward to getting to know Singleton and a new wave of players, which will be determined in March and early April.

Tommy Watkins gets promoted, Doug Mientkiewicz returns to Fort Myers Miracle

“I’m excited to come back to Fort Myers and work with a new wave of players who don’t know me from Adam,” Mientkiewicz said. “Even though I’m coming home, it feels fresh and new. I’m looking forward to working with the coaching staff and continuing the success we had here in my first time, both on the field and developmentally.”

As for Dwyer, Mientkiewicz hasn’t seen the last of him.

“On dog night, we’ll bring the dogs out,” Dwyer said of he and his wife, Cookie. They have a Yorkie named Raven and a Morkie (a mix of a Maltese and Yorkie) named Rascal.

Dwyer said he expected more great things from Mientkiewicz.

“I think he’ll be great,” Dwyer said. “I’d love to coach with him again. He’s a great motivator of players. He knows how to bring individuals
together as a team. I think that’s his biggest strength.”

**Spring training countdown: Minnesota Twins**

John Perrotto | FanRag Sports | February 1, 2017

Spring training site: Fort Myers, Fla.

Manager: Paul Molitor (third season)

2016: 59-103, fifth in the American League Central

Key addition: C Jason Castro

Key subtractions: LHP Pat Dean, LHP Tommy Milone, 3B Trevor Plouffe, C Kurt Suzuki

Projected payroll: $102 million

**PROJECTED LINEUP**

2B Brian Dozier (.268/.340/.546, 42 HR, 18 SB)
SS Jorge Polanco (.282/.332/.424, 4 HR)
1B Joe Mauer (.261/.363/.389, 11 HR)
3B Miguel Sano (.236/.319/.462, 25 HR)
RF Max Kepler (.235/.309/.424, 17 HR)
DH Kennys Vargas (.230/.333/.500, 10 HR)
C Jason Castro (.210/.307/.377, 11 HR)
CF Byron Buxton (.225/.284/.430, 10 HR, 10 SB)
LF Eddie Rosario (.269/.295/.421, 10 HR)

**PROJECTED ROTATION**

RHP Ervin Santana (7-11, 3.38, 1.21 WHIP)
LHP Hector Santiago (13-10, 4.70, 1.36 WHIP)
RHP Kyle Gibson (6-11, 5.07, 1.56 WHIP)
RHP Phil Hughes (1-7, 5.98 1.50 WHIP)
RHP Jose Berrios (3-7, 8.02, 1.86 WHIP)

**PROJECTED KEY RELIEVERS**

RHP Brandon Kintzler (0-2, 3.15, 17 Sv, 1.23 WHIP)
LHP Glen Perkins (0-0, 9.00, 3.00 WHIP)
RHP Ryan Pressly (6-7, 3.70, 1 Sv, 1.35 WHIP)

**Prospect to watch:** LHP Stephen Gonsalves. The 22-year-old left-hander has dominated in four minor-league seasons, going 32-13 with a 2.13 ERA in 70 games since being selected in the fourth round of the 2013 amateur draft. Gonsalves put himself in line to reach the major leagues at some point this season following a 2016 in which he had a 13-5 record and 2.06 ERA in a combined 24 starts with high Class-A Fort Myers and Double-A Chattanooga.

**Key position battle:** Coming off a rough rookie season, Jose Berrios will be challenged for the fifth spot in the rotation by right-handers Tyler Duffey and Trevor May, who will get another chance to start after pitching exclusively in relief last year.

**Outlook:** The Twins begin their first season under a new front office structure with former Cleveland Indians assistant general manager Derek Falvey in the newly-created role of chief baseball officer and former Texas Rangers assistant general manager Thad Levine serving as GM. However, much of the roster remains the same as the only significant addition has been catcher Jason Castro. The Twins feel Castro will make
their pitching staff better because of his pitch-framing and game-calling abilities. They also remain on the lookout for relief-pitching bargains in free agency.

Executive’s take: “I love Terry Ryan, as does everybody else in the game, and he was a good general manager for a long time but the Twins had to make some changes and get up-to-date with other organizations. Derek Falvey was pretty much an unknown outside of the Indians’ front office but he’s a sharp guy and he made a great move in hiring Thad Levine. I think they’ll do a good job there but it might take some time. They have a lot of good young hitting talent but now they need to add pitching, which is never an easy task.”

Scout’s pick to click: 3B Miguel Sano. “For me, this kid has the biggest raw power in the game because he hits home runs to places nobody else can reach. He’s still young and there’s way too much swing-and-miss in his game. I’d like to see him drop a little weight, too, because I worry about that being a potential problem in the long run. He could really turn out to something special, though.”

Park reveals new form
Lee Hyeong-Seok | Korea Joongang Daily | February 2, 2017

After a disappointing rookie season at the Major League Baseball (MLB), Korean slugger Park Byung-ho of the Minnesota Twins is set to spend his second season being more productive. Going into the spring camp soon, he will go into the new season armed with a new batting form.

“This year will be clearly more difficult than last year, but I’ve been working hard because I knew what went wrong last year and knew what I had to do to fix it,” Park told reporters at Incheon International Airport before departing for Florida on Thursday to join the team for the spring training later this month.

Other than rehabilitation for his injury, another important thing on his agenda during this offseason was changing his batting form.

After a disappointing rookie season at the Major League Baseball (MLB), Korean slugger Park Byung-ho of the Minnesota Twins is set to spend his second season being more productive. Going into the spring camp soon, he will go into the new season armed with a new batting form.

After spending a rough first year, Park decided to make some changes on his swing since September last year when he finished his season early due to an injury to his right middle finger. Although he heard about the need for a change in his swing form through his friends and teammates, it wasn’t easy with the injury to recover from.

But now, Park is more confident than before that he is prepared to take on the Major League pitchers. For one thing, he’s made his swing more concise. “I’ve been trying to get the timing right,” Park said. “I don’t think it’s possible to spot the difference with naked eyes.”

Still, concise form doesn’t mean he’s lost his power. One of the most notable moments of Park’s first year in the MLB came on April 16 last year when he blasted a dinger that traveled 466 yards in true distance. Out of the 12 homers he had that season, eight of them traveled more than 400 yards, an impressive figure that demonstrates his power behind the plate. Park is confident that even with the changes, he can still blast one beyond the fence. With the spring camp and exhibition games coming up soon, he will be able to sort out his form before the opening.

Park will be clearing up his swing through the spring camp and the practice games.

“ I’ll have to go all-out right from spring training,” Park was quoted as saying by the Yonhap News Agency. “I guess I had an excuse to make last
year with my injury, but I’m not feeling any pain right now.”

“I need to forget about bad games quickly and get ready for the next day,” he added. “Last year, I kept thinking too long and hard about each and every game.”

The home opener for the Twins is slated for April 3.