

AN INTERNATIONAL FOCUS

Twins Looking Elsewhere to Build from Within

by Josh Johnson

For years, the Twins have been known as having one of the best farm systems in baseball. The organization relies on its minor league pipeline as much as any other in baseball. That often starts with the MLB draft because, unlike many teams, the Twins have displayed a refusal to sign free agents that would cost a draft pick as compensation. This has limited the Twins to signing second-tier free agents and also put more pressure on producing players from within.

Ten years ago, many considered the Twins to have the best farm system in baseball. But that reputation has diminished, and as the decade comes to a close the Twins find themselves trying to rebuild what some consider a depleted system. Despite having quality depth in several areas such as pitching and the outfield, the system as a whole lacks the high-impact prospects that once flooded its upper levels.

The scouting department has done an admirable job of both trading for and drafting prospects over the years. However, one area where the Twins have historically fallen short of opposing clubs is scouting internationally. The organization has had only a couple of players make it to the major leagues this decade that were signed as international prospects, the majority of whom have been pitchers. On the current roster, the Twins only have one player (Jose Mijares) that they signed as an international free agent.

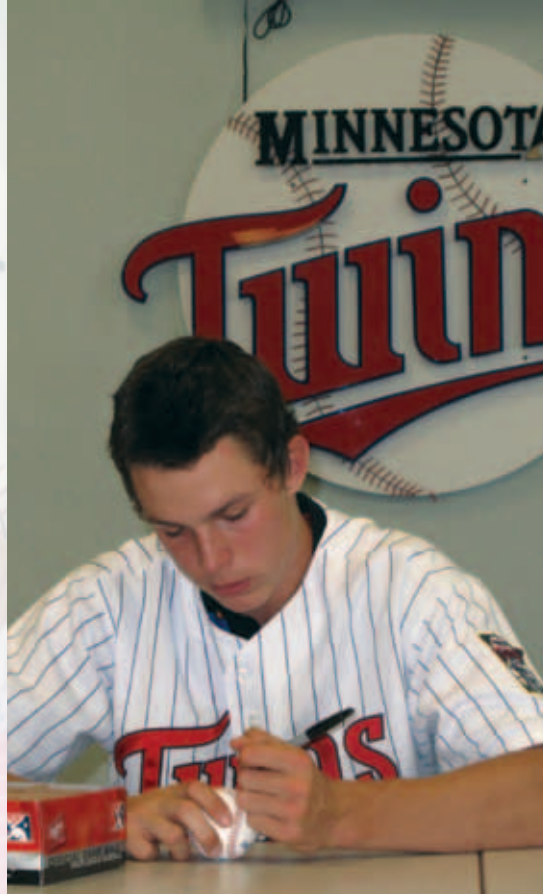
The Twins have spent the majority of their time on international scouting in countries such as Australia and Venezuela. They now have most of Europe covered as well. Neither Australia nor Europe has ever been considered

a baseball haven, but Venezuela has had a lot of success producing major league players. The country that has had the most success in producing quality baseball players outside of the United States, however, is the Dominican Republic. Other countries such as Cuba and Japan are also considered to be hot spots for baseball scouting, but both have obstacles that make it harder for teams to sign players. In the Dominican Republic, there are no posting fees and the government isn't blocking players from leaving.

The Twins generally have not been as aggressive, at least compared to other teams, when it comes to signing players from the Dominican Republic. But that may be changing in the coming years.

On July 2, teams were free to negotiate with and sign international prospects that had turned 16 years old. Every year, there seems to be one prospect that turns more heads than the others, and in 2009 that prospect was Miguel Angel Sano. Listed at 6'3" and 200 pounds, this shortstop was immediately considered to be the best prospect in the Dominican Republic. But even while he was showing people what he was capable of on the field, a black cloud hung over his head. There was uncertainty that the age he claimed to be (16) was his actual age. Some thought that he may be as old as 18. Major League Baseball launched a full-fledged investigation to discover whether Sano was, in fact, 16.

Months and months of testing provided inconclusive results. He underwent bone grafting and even DNA testing to assure that he is related to the woman claiming to be his





Miguel Angel Sano will play under the last name of "Jean" for the Twins.

mother. Teams were concerned that Sano may have been trying to impersonate a child his mother lost at birth in an attempt to seem younger, which led to the DNA tests. That appeared to be baseless when investigators learned that Sano's brother would have actually been 18 years old instead of 16.

Sano eventually cleared most of the tests but the process took a toll on his reputation and teams were still wary of signing him for fear that it would one day be discovered that he did lie about his true age. The Twins swooped in on September 29 to lock up Sano with a signing bonus of \$3.15 million, well below what many predicted he would sign for on July 2. The only test that Sano still had to go through before signing with the Twins was the test of attaining his work visa for the United States. Shortly after his signing, he attained his visa and now the Twins appear to have successfully acquired a great young prospect for below his estimated value.

Sano's potential at the plate has drawn comparisons to players like Hanley Ramirez, Alex Rodriguez, and even Albert Pujols. Even though nothing is a certainty, there's little question that he will be able to handle himself just fine at the plate. But there is a question concerning what position he will play in the field. He is currently listed as a shortstop and the Twins will keep him there as long as he plays well. However, most scouts believe that his size will eventually force him to third base or the outfield.

So Sano, who will play under his father's surname "Jean" (instead of his mother's surname "Sano") when he comes to the United States, was the biggest splash the Twins made on the international market. But he wasn't the only one. In fact, the Twins didn't wait until September to make an impact.

Immediately following the opening gun for international signings, the Twins struck quickly, signing German outfielder Max Kepler-Rozycki with a bonus of \$755,000. Kepler-Rozycki, 16, is considered by many to be the "toolsiest" player to ever come out of Europe. Kepler-Rozycki is a left-handed batter and thrower, listed at 6'3" and 190 pounds. Unlike Jean, there were no worries over his age, despite his similar body frame.

Kepler-Rozycki is believed to have the five tools scouts are looking for: running speed, hitting for contact, hitting for power, arm strength, and fielding. He's a high-upside player, drawing comparisons to Grady Sizemore of the Cleveland Indians. He and his family moved to Florida from Germany prior to the school year so that he could be enrolled in a Ft. Myers high school to get acclimated to both the climate and culture before playing baseball next summer.

Shortly after signing Kepler-Rozycki, the Twins tabbed Jorge Polanco, a switch-hitting shortstop from the Dominican Republic. According to *Baseball America*, Polanco was considered the 22nd-best Latin American prospect. For reference, Jean was unsurprisingly the top-ranked player on the same list. Polanco is not believed to have a lot of power in his bat, but the majority of his value lies in his defense. The Twins also signed Jonatan Ynojos, who has a lot of the same qualities of Polanco without being as highly touted.

Twins ownership has given approval to spend more money on scouts, facilities, equipment, camps, and more. The Twins now have a presence all around the globe. A look at the 2009 Gulf Coast League Twins roster shows players from the United States, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Curacao, Russia, Czech Republic, France, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia. The Twins also have players in the organization from Aruba, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, Saint Maarten, and South Africa.

The team appears to be taking a slightly different approach in rebuilding their farm system than they might have in the past. There can be as much risk in signing international prospects as there is in drafting players believed to be looking for more money than their estimated slot recommends. Over the past ten years, the Twins have worked hard to improve their scouting efforts, facilities, and ability to sign players from around the globe. They have invested more money internationally, as well as in the draft, to add players they feel are more talented. This course of action could be a first step to building not only a championship team, but a diverse championship organization. **MSP**

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