

Young, inexpensive Twins making a killing in A.L. so far

by Sean Deveney
The Sporting News

Playing baseball in Minnesota is different. The Twins have the lowest payroll in baseball - \$24 million - and only six players make more than \$1 million per season. The home stadium, the Metrodome, was once the American League's most intimidating, but now, Garrison Keillor draws rowdier crowds than the Twins.

Minnesota averaged 13,083 fans last year, drawing fewer than 10,000 for 38 games. The fans who did show up saw the league's least exciting team, one with a record of 528-699 (.430) over the last eight years. While other teams have been mashing home runs at record rates, only one Twins player - Matt Lawton in 1998 - has hit more than 20 home runs in a season during the last five years. With the limited budget, limited fan support and limited winning, the Twins are always exhibit A in any discussions of reducing the number of major league teams.

"It's different," says pitcher Eric Milton. "We did a lot of losing in the last few years, so that's something that definitely affects the way you think of things."

This season, things have gotten even weirder in baseball's weirdest outpost. As of Wednesday morning, the Twins were 14-4 and in first place in the A.L. Central. Baseball's black sheep are now one of baseball's best bunches. They swept the White Sox, the defending A.L. Central champs, at Comiskey Park over the weekend. They already had swept them in Minnesota a week earlier. If it seems inexplicable that a team could go from the worst in the American League with a 69-93 record in 2000 to the best in 2001, that's because it is inexplicable.

"I don't have a good answer," says Manager Tom Kelly. "We are keeping games close, giving ourselves the chance to win. When you do that, sometimes things will fall for you. But you have to realize, they can fall the other way. And it's a long summer, so a lot can happen."

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Twins, one that Kelly repeats after each improbable victory. Of all the teams off to good starts, the Twins are the least likely to maintain it. They have a good young pitching staff behind ace Brad Radke, who is followed in the rotation by Milton, Joe Mays and Mark Redman. And Minnesota is hitting .288 as a team, boosted by some early-season overachievers.

But the Twins, who had five regulars hitting .324 or higher through the first 17 games, have not hit higher than .270 as a team in five years. Only one Twin, third baseman Corey Koskie, has hit .300 over the course of a season before.

The best way to explain Minnesota's success might be plain luck. The Twins have developed a knack for getting clutch hits in the late innings. Koskie, for instance, had been pressing himself to hit for power to suit his new role as cleanup hitter.

Then he spoke to former Twins catcher Terry Steinbach, who told Koskie to forget about power and focus on base hits. It was well-timed advice. The next day, Koskie came to bat with the bases loaded in the ninth and the Twins down, 5-4. Remembering Steinbach's tip, Koskie went the opposite way on a fastball from Royals reliever Jason Grimsley for a game-winning, two-run single.

"That was funny," Koskie says. "He tells me that one day, and the next night, there I am in that situation in the ninth inning. That's just how things have been going."

As a follow-up, the Twins fell behind the Royals, 3-1, in the eighth inning the next day. They came back to tie the

score, then got an RBI double down the third-base line from rookie Bobby Kielty. The 24-year-old center fielder's hit gave the Twins the lead, and Minnesota eventually won, 5-3. Replays showed Kielty's hit was a few inches foul, but umpire Eric Cooper blew the call. That's the kind of break that has been going Minnesota's way during this improbable start, the kind of break that has led to 10 come-from-behind wins.

"They have some talent over there, some good pitching," says White Sox pitcher Jim Parque. "But they also have some luck. That's what we had last year."

It hasn't been all blind luck, though. The Twins are a team built with shrewd moves, including the trade of star second baseman Chuck Knoblauch to the Yankees in 1998, which brought Milton and shortstop Cristian Guzman to Minnesota. There also has been hard work on the part of the players and a willingness to extend themselves for the sake of their struggling organization.

Take Koskie, who spent much of last winter trudging through layers of snow to the University of Minnesota's football practice facility in order to work on fielding grounders. When Koskie was brought up to the big leagues in 1998, he was considered a good hitter with a shaky glove. Koskie did not like that "shaky" label, so he began winter fielding sessions, and his defense improved dramatically. Last year, he was one of the American League's most reliable fielders, ranking fourth in the league among third basemen in fielding percentage (.966).

Considering all the work he already

was putting in, Koskie could have politely said no when the Twins' marketing folks approached him about recording a series of ads. Weren't hours of ground balls enough dedication for one winter? But Koskie agreed, and soon he was the subject of a radio spot that lightheartedly exaggerates his burly physique and Canadian ancestry. When he was growing up in British Columbia, Koskie once had a job as a lumberjack. The ad points that out, then claims Koskie carves his own bats and eats hundreds of flapjacks for breakfast.

"I don't really," he says. "But it's a fun thing, so I don't mind it. We all have to do what we can here."

As an organization, the Twins need all the help they can get. The team has been trying for four years to get the Minnesota legislature to agree to a plan for a new stadium, putting on a lobbying blitz in the last few months that cost \$347,000 - more than the salary the Twins are paying any of their infielders. The plan was generous on the team's part. The state would pay \$150 million, and the state would kick in \$140 million as a loan.

But while the Twins were beginning their winning weekend in Chicago, the stadium bill died in the Minnesota House. There's still hope for a privately financed stadium, but the chances are dwindling.

Without a new stadium, the chances also are dwindling that the Twins can survive. That adds to the oddity of their fast start. The best team in baseball might go away sometime in the next few years.

"Well, you don't think about any of that stuff," Milton says. "All we can do is go out and play, and you hope that if we play and we win, people start coming to see us and supporting us. It's much nicer to win than to lose, trust me. If people are coming and supporting us because we are winning, then you have to figure the other stuff works out for the best."

With the Twins, you sometimes have to do more, whether it's getting in extra practice, pretending to be Paul Bunyan or saving the franchise from oblivion.

Dubya and the Dames



President George W. Bush jokes with members of the Notre Dame women's basketball team during a White House ceremony Monday. Bush invited both the Duke men's basketball team and Notre Dame women's basketball team to the White House for a ceremony honoring their national championships in the NCAA tournament.

Bucs look super coming out of draft

by Charean Williams
Knight-Ridder Tribune
April 24, 2001

Today is the first day of the rest of the 2001 season.

Today, every team had a good draft. Today, every team is a Super Bowl contender.

For the truth, come back in January. For now, it is the Tampa Bay Buccaneers who look Super.

The Bucs have addressed every hole, filled every need, answered every question. Brad Johnson has replaced Shaun King at quarterback.

Simeon Rice has replaced Chidi Ahanotu at defensive end. Ronde Barber has resigned at cornerback. Kenyatta Walker, the No. 14 pick in the draft, has replaced Jerry Wunsch at right tackle. Richmond Webb is expected to replace Pete Pierson at left tackle. Don't you believe?

The Seattle Seahawks have improved themselves leaps and bounds, too, by trading for quarter-

back Matt Hasselbeck and adding free agents John Randle, Chad Eaton, Levon Kirkland and Marcus Robertson. They drafted North Carolina State receiver Koren Robinson at No. 9 and Michigan guard Steve Hutchinson at No. 17. Robinson and Hutchinson were safe picks, a fact that some other teams should take to heart.

"I'm not a big gambler when it comes to the draft," Seattle coach Mike Holmgren said. "I hope to have solid drafts. They don't have to be spectacular for me. I want solid guys who can come in and play, and contribute as young players. That's how you build. I'm not going to jump out there. Is it a dead-bang sure thing? The draft is not that way. It's not. Are there certainties in this business? No. We can all point to "can't-miss" guys that didn't make it for whatever reasons."

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