

C8 • SPORTS • STAR TRIBUNE • SATURDAY, APRIL 3, 2010 • ***

twins target field exhibition opener

Rauch gets call to close

• Manager Ron Gardenhire said he likes that plan because it keeps the relievers in familiar roles.

By JOE CHRISTENSEN
jchristense@startribune.com

The committee was disbanded before it ever held a meeting. Twins manager Ron Gardenhire named righthander Jon Rauch the closer Friday, less than a week after saying he would use a closer-by-committee approach.

With four-time All-Star Joe Nathan out of the season because of an elbow injury, Gardenhire picked the only other pitcher on his staff with big-league closing experience. Rauch converted 17 of 22 save opportunities for Washington in 2008. No one else on the staff has more than four major league saves.

The move keeps Matt Guerrier, Jesse Crain and lefthander Jose Mijares in their setup roles. With one designated closer, all the relievers will have a better idea when they might be asked to pitch.

"We always had a good setup where everybody knows their roles, and we have tried to do that when we can," Gardenhire said.

"We have gotten a little screwed up with that when guys weren't throwing the ball well, and it had become kind of a mess," Gardenhire said.

Gardenhire asked Rauch to be the closer on Thursday's plane ride home from Fort Myers, Fla.

"I thought it was an April Fools' joke," Rauch said. "It's an honor that they have the confidence in me to do that, and it has become kind of a move."

"A lot of teams know our situation right now, and they want your whole organization, and it's not going to happen," Gardenhire said Thursday.

The prospect entering other teams most is Class AAA catcher Wilson Ramos, and though he is stuck behind Joe Mauer, there are indications the Twins would not move him for any closer, not even Padres All-Star Heath Bell.

Earlier this month, Gardenhire checked with Francisco Lirio about converting from starter to closer. Lirio opted to stick with starting.

Rauch stands 6-11 and is wrapped in tattoos, giving him a menacing look, but he doesn't have Nathan's overpowering stuff. Since joining the Twins in 2004, Nathan has held opponents to a .382 batting average.

The first Twins game played in Met Stadium was the home opener on April 21, 2010. We had a fondness for our Erector Set on the Bloomington prairie, but it was being in the big leagues that had everyone's heart pumping.



Maybe he was distracted by the Minneapolis skyline towering in the background. Jacques Jones fouled off a ball on his way to a strikeout in the eighth inning Friday night.

GETTING USED TO NEW IS TASK

• TWINS FROM CI

lookout for any glitches before the season begins, the players are wrapping their brains around the concept that this is their home.

An announced crowd of 32,995 — not including the 6,500 seats given to construction crew members and planning committee — didn't make it seem like a spring training game.

"I was distracted every pitch," Twins outfielder Michael Cuddyer said. "I was in awe looking around, looking at the fans. Looking around right field at the Metrodome you don't really get to see many people's faces and, here, I went for a foul ball down the line, said hello to people in the front row. You don't get that at the Dome."

"My head was on a swivel since the first time I drove into the ballpark."

The reviews on the playability of the field were strong. The infield was smooth, and it's not going to happen," Gardenhire said Thursday.

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• ST. LOUIS 8, TWINS 4

ST. LOUIS (AP) — St. Louis Cardinals slugger Albert Pujols singled in the fourth, he and Twins counterpart Justin Morneau talked about shoes — which spikes make it easier on the back.

"Everything is good," Pujols said. "They did a good job with the design. I care about the playing field, and the playing field was excellent."

Such as waiting out pregame showers, canceling batting practice — and watching Pujols' drive to right-center in the first inning get held up by the wind enough for Span to race over for the catch.

By the end of the first half-inning of Major League Baseball at Target Field, fans had a fill of things that would not have happened if the game had been played at the Dome.

Twins starter Carl Pavano thought Pujols' drive was gone when it left the bat, but the flags were stiff from a wind blowing in from right.

"You look at the flags going one way and the current whipping around," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "You can see the pitchers on the mound getting blown all over the place, but the ball seemed to be true."

Steve Singleton, Brian Dinkelman and Brock Peterson will head to the minors after the two games, but their families traveled to the Twin Cities to take in the exhibitions. Singleton is from California, Dinkelman is from Illinois, and Peterson is from Washington.

"Have you looked around?" Singleton said. "This isn't Double-A."

• FANS FROM CI

glanced. This included down, where the grass was already as green as Augusta National's fairways, thanks to the underground heating system.

Carew played his 12 seasons for the Twins at the Met. He was reminded of those early April games when the grounds crew occasionally broke out the green paint to make the infield grass more attractive to the audience.

"I don't think the pitchers here will have any of those green baseballs to throw like we saw a few times at the Met," Carew said.

You figured that Target Field, with all it had to offer, would be home to more socializing than serious baseball watching. It didn't take long for that to come true.

There were fans in the small bleachers down the right-field line trying to start a wave by the third inning. They failed, thankfully.

By midgame, the top deck in left field was nearly too upset, guessing part of the problem was the excitement of Neshek being home after recovering from Tommy John surgery in 2008.

"When I went to the mound, he said, 'I don't think I had anything,'" Gardenhire said. "I kind of agreed with him and went from there. The slider wasn't sinking and the slider wasn't sliding."

A standing O for Double J Jacques Jones received a standing ovation when he hit in the eighth inning. Jones, a Twins outfielder from 1999 to 2005 back with the team this spring, stepped out of the batter's box for a minute and nodded in appreciation.

Table with 10 columns: Player, IP, H, R, ER, BB, SO, etc. for St. Louis Cardinals vs Twins game.

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Fans can be proud of ballpark

• REUSSE FROM CI

Exhibition or not, these folks would have been in celebration mode if the Twins' first planned contest in Target Field was wiped out by rain.

Don't despair, critics. You'll get your rainout — even a snow-out — and maybe as soon as the official home opener on April 12.

And Minnesota's baseball fans will remain grateful for what has been provided with their third major league park.

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The first Twins game played in the Metrodome was an exhibition against Philadelphia on April 3, 1982. We appreciated the roof that night, since it was snowing, and also appreciated a thunderous Dome's contribution to a pair of World Series championships.

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Span is the man in Target Field debut: triple, homer, great catch

• SPAN FROM CI

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