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Twins ask young arms to step up

Abel, Bradley, Woods Richardson will start 2026 in the big-league rotation before their 26th birthdays.

Story by BOBBY NIGHTENGALE • Photo by ANTHONY SOUFFLÉ
The Minnesota Star Tribune

Taj Bradley had a rough 2025 with both the Rays and the Twins, but the 25-year-old righthander says he is more at ease this year — and also more open to instruction.

FORT MYERS, FLA.

Twins officials have avoided calling the state of their current roster a "rebuild," but that will largely be decided by their young starting pitchers.

When the Twins traded their best relievers at last year's trade deadline, they prioritized upgrading their rotation. Mick Abel was part of the Jhoan Duran trade with Philadelphia. Taj Bradley came from Tampa Bay for Griffin Jax. There are other starters, like lefty Kendry Rojas from the Louie Varland trade, who are a little further away from the majors.

If Abel's dominant spring training translates into real results during the 2026 season, the Twins are a step closer to surprising people this year. If Bradley finds the consistency that eluded him with the Rays, the Twins believe he could be a force.

Simeon Woods Richardson and Zebby Matthews, the latter of whom will start the season with the Class AAA Saints, need to take strides forward if the Twins plan to skip a full post-trade deadline rebuild and zoom right into being a competitive team.

For a Twins team that lost staff ace Pablo López to a season-ending elbow injury during the first full-squad workout this spring, they remain bullish about their rotation's potential with Joe Ryan, Bailey Ober and the young guys.

"There is a lot of excitement about that group," Twins catcher Ryan Jeffers said. "I think there is a lot of talent. Then it's just seeing what product they can put on the field when it comes down to game time. We're going to learn a lot."

All the young starters expected to contribute early this season — Bradley, Abel, Woods Richardson and Matthews — were listed among Baseball America's top 100 prospects when they rose through the minor leagues. Now, the Twins need them to deliver on that hype.

Bradley, who turned 25 on March 20, has shown flashes throughout his big-league career. There were times with the Rays when he looked like their future ace, mixing an upper-90s mph fastball with a cutter, splitter and curveball that rack up whiffs.

SEE TWINS ON C2 »

With a reasonable level of expectations, these Twins could be fun to watch

JIM SOUHAN
Columnist

For the most part, sports, especially in Minnesota, are an exercise in false hope.

The 2026 Twins are doing us the favor of freeing us from the tyranny of high expectations.

That might sound cynical or sarcastic. It's also realistic.

The '26 Twins might be noncompetitive for the entire season. That doesn't mean they won't be intriguing, if you have an appreciation for the art and importance of player development.

I've been writing about sports in Minnesota for 36 years. I've covered a lot of bad teams. Not all of them were hopeless.

In fact, some of my favorite memories are from watching the Twins of 1999 and 2000 develop enough quality young players that the franchise would be in contention for a decade once they matured.

This might be the kind of season that separates fans of winning from fans of baseball.

If all you care about is championships, you should choose other entertainment options.

If you have the patience to put up with a productive form of losing, this season could be intriguing.

I grew up watching excellent baseball, first in Baltimore, with Earl Weaver's Orioles, then in St. Louis, with Whitey Herzog's Cardinals.

I didn't learn to appreciate bad baseball until I started my career in Texas, living in a cheap apartment within walking distance from old Arlington Stadium.

That was a terrible ballpark. The temperature sometimes didn't drop under

SEE SOUHAN ON C2 »

Mourning Wild aim to carry on Pierce's legacy 'with the smile'

PATRICK REUSSE
Columnist

There was a monumental event at the Tria Rink in St. Paul on the morning of Monday, March 23. It was a short practice for the Wild before departing for a road trip that takes them to Florida to play the Lightning and the Panthers, and then up the coast to play the Bruins in Boston.

The surprise was that all 26 players on the big-league roster were participants. That meant Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek, the best scorer and the best defender on the forward lines, were back from brief injury layoffs.

It also meant that forward Marcus Foligno was vowing to return from his injury to team with brother Nick (obtained March 6) for the first time in their long NHL careers.

Yet, with this buoyant on-ice situation, there was a cloud of somberness hanging over the squad – an absence so obvious that even Nick Foligno, the 38-year-old newcomer, took note that sportswriter Jessi Pierce was missing.

After the skating ended, Nick squeezed into the front of an elevator filled with media members. He looked at his fellow passengers, made mention of Pierce, the Wild beat writer for NHL.com, and said: "I only got here a few days ago, but she was great."

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RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII • The Minnesota Star Tribune
Mara Braun celebrates a play in the Gophers' NCAA tournament victory over Mississippi on Sunday, March 22, at Williams Arena.

Perseverance pays off with Sweet 16 trip for Gophers duo

CHIP SCOGGINS
Columnist

She has rehearsed that shot, that exact scenario, countless times since she first picked up a basketball as a kid. Time is running out, one shot to win, the ball in your hands.

Three seconds, two seconds, one second, swish.

The crowd goes crazy.

"It was real life today," Amaya Battle said.

Pinch yourself just to be sure. Yes, it's true. A shot that normally only happens in backyard dreams came true in the final home game of Battle's college career on the final shot she will ever take at the lovable ol' Barn.

"You can't make this stuff up," Gophers coach Dawn Plitzuweit said. "That's a movie."

A script this good deserves Hollywood direction.

Battle's baseline jumper with 0.8 seconds left on the clock caused an eruption of noise from a crowd of 10,763 that nearly blew the roof off 98-year-old Williams Arena. The final basket in a Barn brawl gave the Gophers a 65-63 victory over Mississippi that sent them into the Sweet 16 next weekend in Sacramento.

"This whole season is a perfect way to wrap up the four years here," Battle said.

The final quarter served as a testament to a group of players who came to the U with a mission, stayed when it would

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