



# PRESS RELEASE

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS NATURALS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## NATURALS 2022 FIELD STAFF ANNOUNCED

*Baseball America's 2021 Minor League Manager of the Year Chris Widger will lead the Naturals in 2022*

**SPRINGDALE, Ark.** – The Kansas City Royals have announced the 2022 field staffs for their minor league affiliates today – Friday, January 14<sup>th</sup> – and the big-league club has tabbed **Chris Widger** to be the field manager of the Northwest Arkansas Naturals. Widger, who led the High-A Quad Cities River Bandits to the High-A Central Championship in 2021, will become the sixth manager in franchise history.

**Widger**, 50, is entering his fourth managerial season within the Kansas City Royals organization. He guided Kansas City's High-A affiliate to a 77-41 record in 2021, the highest winning percentage among non-Tampa Bay affiliates. He was recognized both as the High-A Central Manager of the Year and *Baseball America's* 2021 Minor League Manager of the Year, the second Royals' minor league manager to receive the *Baseball America* Honor.

The former catcher began his managerial career with Rookie-level Burlington in 2019 and led the B-Royals to a deciding Game 3 in the Appalachian League Championship Series after serving as bench coach for the Wilmington Blue Rocks from 2016 to 2018. Before joining the Royals' organization, Widger managed the independent league Camden Riversharks (Atlantic League) in 2015 and was their pitching coach from 2012 to 2014.

Prior to managing, he played in the Major Leagues for parts of 12 seasons and won the 2005 World Series as a member of the Chicago White Sox. Widger was drafted in the third round of the 1992 Major League Draft by the Seattle Mariners and played for the Mariners (1995-1996, 2000), Montreal Expos (1997-2000), New York Yankees (2002), St. Louis Cardinals (2003), White Sox (2005-2006) and Baltimore Orioles (2006). Widger and his wife Whitney reside in Pennsville, New Jersey with their children: C.J., Ashlynn and Skylar.

Joining Widger in Northwest Arkansas is pitching coach **Derrick Lewis**, hitting coach **Abraham Núñez**, assistant hitting coach **Christian Colón** and bench coach **Mike Jirschele**, while certified athletic trainer **Danny Accola** and strength and conditioning coach **CJ Mikkelsen** will round out the Naturals' field staff. **Danny Helmer** will once again serve as the coordinator of clubhouse operations.

**Derrick Lewis** returns for his second season as the Naturals' pitching coach after leading a staff that saw three players make their Major League debuts by the end of 2021. He joined the Royals' organization prior to the 2020 season after spending the previous 16 seasons with the Atlanta Braves' organization, including his final two seasons as the pitching coordinator. He played seven seasons in the Braves' organization from 1997-2003 after being selected in the 20<sup>th</sup> round of the 1997 draft. Lewis and his wife Roslyn, reside in Charlotte, North Carolina with their daughter Skye, and son, Luke.

**Abraham Núñez** will return as the Naturals' hitting coach for a fourth straight season after serving in the same capacity in Wilmington (2015-2018), Lexington (2014), Burlington (2013), and with the Dominican Royals (2012). In 2021, Núñez oversaw the development of top position-player prospects including Bobby Witt Jr. and an overall Naturals offense that led the league in batting average, runs scored, runs batted in, home runs, steals, sacrifice flies, on-base percentage, slugging percentage and OPS. The switch hitter played for parts of 12 seasons in the Major Leagues with the Pirates (1997-2004), Cardinals (2005), Phillies (2006-2007), and Mets (2008) with his best season coming in 2005 when he hit .285 for St. Louis. Born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, he now resides in Garfield, New Jersey.

**Christian Colón** rejoins the Royals organization as Northwest Arkansas' assistant hitting coach, after a 12-year playing career. The 32-year-old was the Royals' first-round pick in the 2010 MLB Draft, played 202 games for the Naturals between 2011, 2012 and 2014, and had the game-winning hit in the title clinching Game 5 of the 2015 World Series against the Mets. The former infielder spent parts of six seasons in the Major Leagues, including 2014-2017 with Kansas City, as well as stints with Miami and Cincinnati.

**Mike Jirschele**, in his 31st season with the Royals, will join Northwest Arkansas as the bench coach, after serving in the same role last season on Widger's staff in the Quad Cities. Jirschele served on the Royals' coaching staff as Kansas City's third base coach from 2014-2019 and managed the Triple-A Omaha Storm Chasers for 11 seasons (2003 to 2013), including two Pacific Coast League titles (2011 and 2013) and the Triple-A Championship in 2013. He previously served as the Royals' minor league infield coordinator and held managerial positions with the Gulf Coast League Royals (1992), Rockford (1993), Wilmington (1994) and Omaha (1995-1997). Originally a fifth-round draft pick of the Texas Rangers in the 1997 MLB Draft and played 13-plus seasons in the Rangers and Royals systems. Mike and his wife, Sheri, reside in Clintonville, Wisconsin during the offseason and have three children: Jeremy, Jennifer, and Justin.

**Danny Accola** is entering his seventh season with the organization and first as the certified athletic trainer with Northwest Arkansas, after serving in the same role with the Quad Cities in 2021. He was previously slated to serve in that role with Wilmington in 2020 and filled the position with Lexington (2019), Burlington (2017-2018) and Surprise (2016). He graduated from the University of Central Missouri in 2014 and held an athletic training internship with the Denver Broncos in 2013.

**CJ Mikkelsen** will serve as the Naturals' strength and conditioning coach for the second consecutive season. Mikkelsen received his master's degree in sports physiology from Texas A&M in December of 2019 after earning his bachelor's degree in exercise and wellness from Arizona State in 2016. Before joining Northwest Arkansas, he was previously scheduled to work in the same role in Idaho Falls during the 2020 season and currently resides in Desert Hills, Arizona.

**Danny Helmer** is the coordinator of clubhouse operations for the Naturals. He is entering his 24<sup>th</sup> season in various roles with the organization, first for the Wichita Wranglers (nine years) and then as the home clubhouse attendant in Northwest Arkansas (13 years) prior to being promoted to the coordinator of clubhouse operations last season. A three-time recipient of the Texas League Visiting Clubhouse Award (2008, 2014, 2018), Helmer was the organization's co-recipient of the Matt Minker Award in 2019 from the Royals, an honor recognizing an outstanding minor league affiliate employee. He resides in Bentonville, Arkansas with his wife Morgan, and three children, including sons Maddox and Mason, and daughter Maier.

-Naturals Baseball-