

Kernels clinch playoff spot, but want more

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 12 June 2013 22:09 - Last Updated Thursday, 13 June 2013 16:59



DAVENPORT - The Cedar Rapids Kernels clinched a spot in the Midwest League playoffs Wednesday night, but there was no champagne in the visitor's clubhouse at Modern Woodmen Park in Davenport.

First of all, many of the Kernels are too young to drink (legally) in Iowa. Secondly, they want more.

Cedar Rapids dumped the Quad Cities River Bandits, 12-4, Wednesday before 3,636 fans to clinch at least a wild-card spot in the playoffs, but the Kernels won't be satisfied until they cinch first place in the Western Division for the first half of the campaign.

The Kernels (40-24) have a half-game lead over Beloit (40-25) with four days left in the race. And make no mistake, the Kernels want that flag.

"We still have our goal ahead of us," said catcher Tyler Grimes, who collected the game-winning hit in the eighth inning when the Kernels erupted for eight fat runs. "We've been in first place for about three months now. That's our main focus. We want to be in the top spot.

"That's what we expect of ourselves and as a ballclub."

Quad Cities had its playoff hopes all but dashed Wednesday. Cedar Rapids will make the playoffs and Beloit's magic number to clinch the other playoff berth was reduced to one. And now there's a four-day sprint to see who wins the pennant and who gets the wild card.

Beloit was rained out Wednesday and will play a doubleheader on Thursday, giving the Snappers five games in four days to finish the first half of the campaign. Cedar Rapids has a single game in Davenport Thursday night, then will come home to host Peoria for a three-game series.

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The race ends Sunday.

If Cedar Rapids and Beloit finish in a virtual tie for first place, the Kernels will be crowned the first-half champion because they'd finish with a higher winning percentage. If the Kernels go 44-24 and the Snappers finish 45-25, for instance, the Kernels will win the pennant.

Cedar Rapids had two games canceled during the first half of the season, whereas Beloit is scheduled to play all 70 of its games.

The Kernels went through their normal handshake line Wednesday, but nobody got a pie in the face and there was no wild celebration in the clubhouse. It looked like any other victory.

They knew what they'd just accomplished, but kind of shrugged it off.

"We want to win. We want to get first," said third baseman Travis Harrison, who belted his 10th homer of the season. "I think that's on everyone's mind, just to win out and take the whole thing. That's what we want to do, but it's nice to get in the playoffs, for sure.

"The goal has always been to win the first half," he said. "That's still our goal."

Jose Berrios gave the Kernels a quality start, pitching six innings and allowing only two unearned runs. He left with a 4-2 lead, but the River Bandits tied the game 4-4 in the seventh when Jesse Wierzbicki hit a two-run homer against Steve Gruver.

Instead of sulking, the Kernels came right back and put an eight-spot on the board in the top of the eighth. Grimes gave Cedar Rapids a 5-4 lead with an RBI double inside the third-base bag, Candido Pimentel served a soft single to left for a 6-4 edge and Byron Buxton socked a two-run double off the wall in left-center to make it 8-4.

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The hits kept coming after that. The Kernels sent 13 batters to the plate in the eighth inning and scored their eight runs on nine hits, some soft and some hard.

"That's one thing with this team," said Manager Jake Mauer. "They get a whiff of it, it can happen real quick, we can have that big inning. That eight-run inning took the air right out of them."

Berrios walked the first two batters he faced in the first inning, but found his rhythm and allowed only four hits. He struck out six batters and lowered his earned run average to 3.17 for the season.

Berrios escaped a bases-loaded jam in the sixth inning before calling it a night, his jersey soaked with perspiration on a hot, humid night in the Quad Cities.

"Jose did a fantastic job after the first inning," said Mauer.

Mauer has never talked to his players about clinching a playoff spot. Like the rest of the Kernels, he'll be shooting for the top prize in the next few days as the race comes down to the wire.

"It's nice to know that you're in," he said, "but we want to win this division. That's our goal."

Jorge Polanco went 4-for-6 for Cedar Rapids with two doubles and two RBIs. Buxton was 3-for-6. J.D. Williams, Dalton Hicks, Adam Brett Walker and Harrison all had two hits in a 17-hit attack. Hicks drove in three runs and Grimes had two RBIs.

KERNELS (12): Buxton, cf, 6 2 3 2, Williams, dh, 6 2 2 0, Polanco, ss, 6 1 4 2, Hicks, 1b, 4 1 2 3, Walker, rf, 6 1 2 1, Harrison, 3b, 3 2 2 1, Grimes, c, 5 1 1 2, Pimentel, 2b, 4 1 1 1, Pineda, lf,

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4 1 0 0. Totals 44 12 17 12.

QUAD CITIES (4): Hernandez, cf, 4 0 1 1, Correa, ss, 3 2 0 0, Wierzbicki, 1b, 3 1 2 2, Ruiz, 3b, 4 0 1 0, Pena, c, 4 0 0 0, Elkins, 2b, 4 0 0 0, Ovando, rf, 3 0 0 0, Scott, dh, 4 1 1 0, Sosa, lf, 4 0 1 0. Totals 33 4 6 3.

Kernels 101 110 080 - 12 17 2

Quad Cities 110 000 200 - 4 6 3

Berrios, Gruver (7) and Grimes. Cain, Hauschild (5), Sanchez (8), Rodriguez (8) and Pena. W - Gruver (4-1). L - Hauschild (4-1). 2B - Polanco 2 (19), Grimes (6), Buxton (15). HR - Harrison (10), Wierzbicki (5). SB - Pimentel (11). E - Polanco (7), Hicks (6), Hernandez (5), Elkins (5), Correa (9). T - 2:50. A - 3,636.