

## Kernels enter final day in trouble

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 15 June 2013 21:41 - Last Updated Saturday, 15 June 2013 21:51

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Mason Melotakis planned to relax, get plenty of rest Saturday night and not worry about his big assignment as the starting pitcher for the Cedar Rapids Kernels on Sunday.

The Kernels face a "must-win" situation Sunday as they chase a first-half pennant in the Midwest League.

The Kernels must beat Peoria Sunday to retain any hope of winning the pennant, but that's not enough. The Beloit Snappers must lose to Clinton on Sunday as well for Cedar Rapids to finish in first place.

That's the predicament the fading Kernels face after losing to Peoria, 8-3, Saturday night before 4,373 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Cedar Rapids has fallen out of first place in the Western Division for the first time in eight weeks. The Kernels (40-27) trail Beloit (42-27) by one game with one game left in the first half of the campaign.

Beloit topped Clinton, 10-3, Saturday night to move into first.

If the Kernels win Sunday and Beloit loses, the Kernels finish with a winning percentage of

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.603, the Snappers finish with a winning mark of exactly .600 and the Kernels wave the flag.

There's no other combination that works for the Kernels now. They must win and Beloit must lose.

"It's just a shame," Cedar Rapids Manager Jake Mauer said Saturday night. "We controlled our own destiny; now we've got to scoreboard watch. And that sucks, to be honest with you."



Both games Sunday are scheduled to start at 2 p.m., with Cedar Rapids hosting Peoria and Beloit hosting Clinton.

Enter Melotakis, a 21-year-old righty from Dallas who is currently the ace of the Kernels pitching staff with a 6-2 record and 3.24 earned run average. He plans to be cool, calm and collected when he takes the mound Sunday.

"It's just another day," he maintained. "I don't think about anything else as far as that goes. Just go out and do your thing, give them a strong start and hopefully we'll get a win out of it."

Melotakis was selected by the Minnesota Twins in the second round of the 2012 draft and signed for \$750,000. Now it's time to earn some of those bucks in a big money-game for the Kernels.

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Melotakis plans to take a relaxed approach, but don't mistake that for not caring. He cares a lot, along with the rest of his teammates.

The Kernels do not want to finish in second place. They've already clinched a playoff berth, because the runnerup advances along with the champion, but they want that pennant and will be unhappy if they don't get it.

"It will be very disappointing," said Melotakis. "Obviously we're in the playoffs, but that's not our goal. Our goal is to finish first. We've been first, and we all know we deserve first."

Cedar Rapids posted an 18-5 record in April with a hot start, but the Kernels have been a .500 club since then with a 22-22 record. They sat in first place from April 20 through Saturday, when they lost and Beloit beat Clinton.

The Kernels led the Western Division by 4.5 games on June 5, but they've gone 3-and-7 in their last 10 games and have dropped four of their last five contests. Beloit got hot and passed them by.

Hudson Boyd (1-4) was roughed up for six runs in 3.2 innings Saturday, gave up two home runs and took the loss. Dalton Hicks and Travis Harrison hit their 11th homers for Cedar Rapids, but they were solo shots and did not carry enough clout.

Now it's a one-game race for the pennant and the Kernels need help.

"Those young men in there, they're pretty quiet," Mauer said in the Kernels clubhouse. "They're taking it pretty hard. They're disappointed. It's just unfortunate it's down to this."

"A lot happens with young teams. You got through ups and downs. We're no different."

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All is not lost, of course.

"When you look on the bright side, we're in the playoffs. Thank God," the skipper noted. "We'll see what tomorrow brings, I guess."

Mauer said shortstop Niko Goodrum, on the disabled list since June 3 with a concussion, will be activated for Sunday's game and will be in the starting lineup. Jorge Polanco, a versatile middle infielder, has played shortstop with Goodrum on the DL, but Mauer is looking forward to having Goodrum on the field again.

"I'm very excited. I can't wait," Mauer said. "Polanco is doing an excellent job at shortstop. (But) Niko is kind of the heart and soul of this team. We're going to get him going tomorrow and see how it goes."

PEORIA (8): Valera, dh, 5 0 1 0, Vargas, ss, 5 0 1 0, Schaffer, 1b, 4 0 1 0, Walton, lf, 5 1 1 0, Wisdom, 3b, 4 1 2 2, Martini, cf, 4 1 1 0, Montero, c, 2 3 1 1, Wiley, 2b, 3 1 1 1, Parque, rf, 4 1 3 3. Totals 36 8 12 7.

KERNELS (3): Buxton, cf, 3 0 1 1, Williams, lf, 3 0 0 0, Polanco, ss, 3 0 0 0, Hicks, 1b, 4 1 1 1, Walker, dh, 4 0 0 0, Harrison, 3b, 4 1 2 1, Quesada, c, 4 0 0 0, Pineda, rf, 4 0 1 0, Pimentel, 2b, 3 1 1 0. Totals 32 3 6 3.

Peoria 011 401 010 - 8 12 2

Kernels 000 100 200 - 3 6 1

Hernandez, Tuivailala (8), Lee (9) and Montero. Boyd, Brewer (4), Atherton (7) and Quesada. W - Hernandez (4-2). L - Boyd (1-4). 2B - Martini (6), Schaffer (1). 3B - Walton (3), Wiley (1), Pimentel (2). HR - Wisdom (11), Parque (1), Montero (2), Hicks (11), Harrison (11). SB - Pineda (6), Buxton (2). E - Wisdom (12), Vargas (5), Hicks (7). T - 2:35. A - 4,373.