

Chiefs 'slam' pennant door shut on Kernels

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 16 June 2013 18:43 - Last Updated Sunday, 16 June 2013 21:19



Un-freaking-believable.

The Cedar Rapids Kernels came so close to winning the pennant for the first half of the Midwest League season Sunday.

They could taste it.

The Kernels owned a 9-5 lead over the Peoria Chiefs with one out in the top of the ninth, thanks to a three-run homer and six RBIs by Dalton Hicks.

Meanwhile, the Beloit Snappers were losing their game to Clinton in the bottom of the eighth inning in Wisconsin.

If both games had ended there -- with Cedar Rapids winning and Beloit losing -- the Kernels would have claimed the Western Division pennant.

The Father's Day crowd of 3,302 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium was ready to celebrate. The television cameras were ready to capture the moment. And then disaster struck.

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Jeremy Schaffer, a .224 hitter, belted a grand slam for Peoria in the top of the ninth to tie the game, 9-9. The Chiefs got another man in scoring position and took a 10-9 lead on an RBI single by Patrick Wisdom.

The Kernels, in shock, struck out three straight times in the bottom of the ninth. Byron Buxton, the star of the team and fan favorite, whiffed on a slider to end the game on what may have been his last at-bat as a Kernel.

There's heavy speculation that he'll move to the Fort Myers Miracle in the Florida State after playing in the Midwest League All-Star Game in Dayton, Ohio, Tuesday, but Buxton and Cedar Rapids Manager Jake Mauer insisted nothing has been decided.

It was a surreal ending to the first half of the season. Cedar Rapids led the Western Division for eight straight weeks, but lost five of its last six games and finished two games behind Beloit in the standings.

The Kernels made the playoffs as the second-place team in the division, but they wanted that flag.



"It's a tough loss," said Hicks, the 6-foot-5, 252-pound first baseman who had an RBI single, three-run homer and two-run double. "It's easy to say it's the pitcher's fault, but it's a team loss at the end of the day. We have to do better as a team."

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The Kernels used three pitchers in the ninth inning. Tyler Jones walked two batters with one out. Josue Montanez replaced Jones and was immediately touched for a single, loading the bases, then was torched by Schaffer for the grand slam to left-center.

Montanez hit the next batter he faced and was yanked. Alex Muren threw a wild pitch, moving Jordan Walton to second base, and Wisdom delivered the game-winning RBI.

Jeremias Pineda and J.D. Williams struck out to begin the bottom of the ninth. Then mighty Byron struck out as well.

"We were feeling good. We were very confident," said Buxton. "I think the home run (the grand slam by Schaffer) just took it out of us. You could tell, once we got back to the plate, it really took a toll on us."

Niko Goodrum returned to the starting lineup after missing 12 days with a concussion and immediately sparked the club. He made several dazzling plays at shortstop and went 3-for-4, but it went for naught.

"Just disbelief," Goodrum said softly. "We win as a team, we lose as a team."

The Kernels blew several late-inning leads during the past two weeks and lost eight of their last 11 games. "We have to start finishing the games out and just keep playing hard to the end," said Buxton.

Peoria swept the three-game series from Cedar Rapids at Perfect Game Field to knock the Kernels out of first place.

"Just frustrating," said Mauer. "The baseball gods didn't want us to win it, for whatever reason."

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"We hit a tough stretch. Unfortunately, it was some of the biggest games of the year. It's just a shame that it came down to that."

Beloit ended up winning its game, 8-7, on a two-run walkoff homer in the bottom of the ninth, so the Snappers would have won the pennant anyway, even if the Kernels had held on and captured their game.

The Kernels had already lost their game when the Snappers won theirs.

PEORIA (10): Valera, ss, 4 1 1 1, Vargas, dh, 4 1 2 2, Schaffer, 1b, 5 1 1 4, Walton, lf, 4 2 1 0, Wisdom, 3b, 4 1 2 1, Martini, cf, 5 0 1 1, Montero, c, 3 1 1 0, Wiley, 2b, 3 1 0 0, Parque, rf, 2 2 1 0. Totals 34 10 10 9.

KERNELS (9): Buxton, cf, 6 1 2 1, Goodrum, ss, 4 3 3 1, Polanco, 2b, 4 1 2 1, Hicks, 1b, 4 1 3 6, Walker, rf, 5 0 1 0, Harrison, 3b, 3 1 1 0, Grimes, c, 4 0 0 0, Pineda, dh, 4 0 0 0, Williams, lf, 4 2 2 0. Totals 38 9 14 9.

Peoria 020 020 105 - 10 10 0

Kernels 100 204 020 - 9 14 0

Garcia, Aldrete (5), Stock (7), Donofrio (8), Llorens (9) and Montero. Melotakis, Jones (7), Montanez (9), Muren (9) and Grimes. W - Donofrio. L - Montanez (1-1). Sv - Llorens (5). 2B - Wisdom (14), Montero (3), Goodrum (13), Harrison (18), Hicks (21). HR - Schaffer (4), Hicks (12). T - 3:04. A - 3,302.