

Kernels clinch 2nd half flag

Written by S.D. Buhr

Thursday, 29 August 2013 21:28 - Last Updated Friday, 30 August 2013 07:32



The Cedar Rapids Kernels bounced back from Wednesday night's 9-1 loss to Kane County by jumping on the Cougars for the first five runs of Thursday's game and holding on for a 5-2 win in front of 2,522 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

The win clinched the Midwest League Western Division second half title for the Kernels, who ran their record to 45-21 in the half with their 85th win of the season.

Cedar Rapids Manager Jake Mauer continued to improvise his lineup, inserting regular third baseman Travis Harrison into left field. Harrison was an outfielder in high school, but had not played the position in nearly two years with the Twins organization.

With Max Kepler temporarily on the shelf with a finger injury, the Kernels have had only three healthy outfielders this week and Mauer wants to make sure all of his players get a little time off as they prepare to start postseason play Wednesday, Sept. 4.

Coincidental or not, Harrison's initial reaction to the switch seemed positive.

Harrison notched the Kernels' first hit of the game with a looping line drive to left field in the bottom of the second inning. Bo Altobelli poked a hit-and-run ground ball to right field, moving Harrison to third.

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Joel Licon followed with a fly ball to center field deep enough to score Harrison from third base with the game's first run.

Tyler Grimes led off the home half of the fourth inning with a line drive single to center field. Grimes stole second base with one out and came around to score ahead of Mike Gonzales when the Kernels' designated hitter lifted a home run beyond the wall in left-center field.

Grimes also has adjusted well since being pressed into infield service about two weeks ago. Hitting .249, Grimes' pair of hits gives him 12 hits in 40 at-bats for a .300 average since moving out from behind the plate to second base.

First basemen Bo Altobelli, another catcher occasionally pressed into service in the Kernels' infield during the waning days of the regular season, joined Grimes as the only Kernels with two hits in the game.

Apparently those catchers are finding it easier to hit when they aren't having to put on all the heavy catcher's gear.

"Yeah, especially with the heat, it's been nice with this weather, not to be back there (catching)," Grimes said. "At the same time, I feel back at home in the infield."



Grimes and his teammates were glad to put Wednesday night's loss behind them.

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"Tonight we came back and swung the bats well and played really well defensively," said Grimes, "and everything worked out."

Kane County threatened to score in its half of the fifth inning when Marco Hernandez reached on an infield single, stole second base and advanced to third base on a ground out. But Kernels starting pitcher Brett Lee (8-4) struck out Trevor Gretzky and Gioskar Amaya to end the inning.

Lee looked ready for postseason work in his final regular season start for the Kernels, giving up just three hits and one walk in six innings of work. Lee struck out five Cougars batters.

The Twins organization has been limiting Lee's workload over the final several weeks of the regular season and Thursday was the first time Lee had pitched more than five innings since the second of his back-to-back nine-inning complete games on July 19.

Lee's two most recent appearances for the Kernels were one-inning relief appearances.

"It was a little more difficult going that long now," Lee admitted. "After going just one or two innings for the past couple of weeks. I definitely could feel it, especially with how hot it was. I had to come in here (to the clubhouse) between each inning. I would sit on the bench and I would literally be dripping."

As things stand, Lee is slated to start Game Two of the Kernels opening playoff series with Quad Cities. However, pitching coach Gary Lucas said he and Mauer plan to discuss their rotation options on Friday and would hold off on announcing any final decision until then.

Hudson Boyd added two shutout innings of relief work against the Cougars, giving up just one hit, one walk and striking out one.

Madison Boer pitched the ninth inning. Kane County touched Boer for four hits, including an

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RBI double by the Cougars' first baseman, Rock Shoulders, and an RBI single by Hernandez. But Boer struck out Gretzky looking at strike three with two runners on to end the game.

Infielder Jorge Polanco was not in the lineup, but Mauer said before the game that Polanco came through his first game back from the disabled list Wednesday night healthy and was just held out of Thursday's game for precautionary purposes.

Mauer also said he hopes to have Niko Goodrum activated from the disabled list in time to play before the team's final regular season game on Monday at Clinton.

Mauer also said Kepler's injured finger was feeling well enough that Kepler may have been available off the bench Thursday night and could possibly return to the starting lineup Friday.

The Kernels and Cougars wrap up their three-game series Friday night in the home finale of the Kernels' regular season. Game time is 6:35.

KANE COUNTY (2): Amaya, 2b, 4 0 1 0, Zapata, cf, 2 0 0 0, Candelario, 3b, 4 1 1 0, Contreras, c, 4 0 1 0, Shoulders, 1b, 3 1 1 1, Papaccio, ss, 4 0 1 0, Hernandez, dh, 4 0 2 1, Dore, rf, 4 0 0 0, Gretzky, lf, 4 0 1 0. Totals 33 2 8 2.

KERNELS (5): Murphy, cf, 4 0 1 1, Grimes, 2b, 4 1 2 0, AWalker, rf, 4 0 0 0, Gonzales, dh, 4 1 1 2, Harrison, lf, 3 1 1 0, Altobelli, 1b, 4 1 2 0, Licon, 3b, 2 0 0 1, Quesada, c, 2 1 1 1, RWalker, ss, 1 0 1 0. Totals 28 5 9 5.

Kane County 000 000 002 - 2 8 1

Kernels 010 200 20x - 5 9 1

Torrez, Smith (6), Iannazzo (8) and Contreras. Lee, Boyd (7), Boer (9) and Quesada. W-Lee (8-4). L-Torrez (0-1). 2B-Shoulders (26), Quesada (12). HR-Gonzales (4). SB-Hernandez (19), Grimes (3). S-Zapata, RWalker. SF-Licon. E-Dore (1), RWalker (4). T-2:20. A-2,522.