

Kernels aiming for back-to-back titles

Written by S.D. Buhr

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In baseball's postseason, "Every single pitch is so important. Every at-bat, no matter what inning."

That was Cedar Rapids Kernels third baseman Travis Harrison talking about the playoffs, which start Wednesday night in Davenport against the Quad Cities River Bandits.

Harrison knows what he's talking about. He was a member of the rookie-level Elizabethton Twins team that won the Appalachian League title a year ago.

Elizabethton won two "best-of-three games" series to claim the league crown, but Harrison and his teammates will need to equal that this year just to earn a berth in the Midwest League championship series as the representative of the league's Western Division.

If they can best the River Bandits in the first best-of-three series, they'll take on the survivor of a similar series between Clinton and Beloit in another best-of-three challenge. The championship series between the Eastern and Western Division finalists is a best-of-five series that will decide who wears the Midwest League crown for 2013.

Cedar Rapids has not worn that crown since 1994 and has not qualified for the league championship series since 1997.

The Kernels finished the 2013 season with an 88-50 record overall. They secured a playoff spot with a second-place finish in the first half of their season with a 40-28 record, then improved to a 48-22 record to finish first in the Western Division in the second half.

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Their 88 wins equals the most for a Cedar Rapids team since joining the Midwest League in 1962. To provide context, if applied to a Major League team's 162-game schedule, the Kernels' winning percentage would have them on pace to win 103 games.

This playoff thing may be relatively new to Kernels fans, who haven't seen their team play in the postseason since 2010, but almost half the Kernels' current players were with the Appalachian League Champions in Elizabethton a year ago.

In addition to Harrison, infielders Niko Goodrum and Jorge Polanco, outfielders Max Kepler and Adam Brett Walker, catcher Bo Altobelli and pitchers Brett Lee, Jose Berrios and Hudson Boyd all saw playoff action with Elizabethton. Mason Melotakis, Dallas Gallant and Michael Quesada were also members of that championship team during the 2012 season.

Melotakis made two postseason appearances with the Beloit Snappers' Midwest League playoff team at the end of 2012.

A number of other players who spent time with the Kernels this season, including Byron Buxton and Dalton Hicks, were also members of the champions from "E'town." Hicks hit a walk-off grand slam in the 12th inning of the deciding game of the championship series.

Walker believes the postseason experience he and his teammates are getting is part of their development.

"Going out there and having a series where everything's on the line, I think it's pretty important," he said. "It's an exciting feeling to be able to get that experience."

With a smile, Walker added, "I know if you get in the big leagues it's going to be a little bit different."

It has been a long season for the Kernels players, especially for guys like Harrison and Walker,

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who have been a part of the Kernels since Opening Day, 138 games ago.

That doesn't matter, according to Harrison. "The playoffs are totally different. You just have to grind it out. If you're sore, it just goes away. You've got so much adrenaline, you're just ready to go. It's a good time."

Quesada believes the Kernels are ready. "We've got all the confidence in the world, especially after last year. We've got the pitching, got the hitting. It's all ready to come together at one time."

Walker remembers that championship feeling and is ready for more. "We know what it feels like. It's a really great feeling to be able to go out there and win a championship."

Harrison perhaps summed up the feelings best. "First two years, two rings. That would be pretty cool."