

Garver belts 3 HRs, ties Kernels mark

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 21 July 2014 15:52 - Last Updated Monday, 21 July 2014 17:40



Mitch Garver got to rub elbows with Johnny Bench when he was a two-time finalist for the Bench Award as the top collegiate catcher in the country during his last two years at the University of New Mexico.

Garver did a good imitation of the Hall of Fame catcher during Monday afternoon's Midwest League game at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Garver tied the club record with three home runs and caught a three-hitter as the Cedar Rapids Kernels crumpled the Fort Wayne Tin Caps, 8-1, before 4,008 fans at Perfect Game Field.

Garver belted a two-run homer in the first inning, socked another two-run blast in the third inning and capped his historic day with a mammoth solo shot onto 8th Avenue SW in the eighth inning.

They've been playing minor league ball in Cedar Rapids since 1890 and during all that time nobody has ever hit four home runs in a game, according to Kernels communications manager Andy Pantini.

The last Cedar Rapids player to hit three home runs in one game was Jordan Renz against Clinton in 2006, according to Pantini.

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Garver went 0-for-4 with a strikeout Sunday in a 2-0 loss to Fort Wayne and decided to change his approach to Monday's contest.

"I decided to keep it simple after yesterday. It was trying to do too much," he said. "I didn't take BP (batting practice).

"I just went out there with an open mind. I took good swings against good pitches."

Garver hit his home runs against three different pitchers. He hit a fastball each time, belting his first two homers to left-center and his third homer to dead left field.

Garver, 23, is hitting .303 with 12 homers and 61 RBIs after his big day. He leads the Kernels in RBIs and is tied for the most home runs with Bryan Haar.

Garver was one of three finalists for the Johnny Bench Award in 2012 and 2013. He finished second both times and got to spend a considerable amount of time with the Major League legend at the awards ceremony in Wichita.

"I had a lot of fun meeting Johnny Bench. He's a great guy," Garver said. "We talked to him a lot. We had dinner with him two nights and we got to hang out with him one day at the baseball field.



"He's got a lot of information, a lot of cool stories."

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The Minnesota Twins selected Garver in the ninth round of the 2013 draft after his senior year at New Mexico. He hit only .243 with two homers in 56 games at Elizabethton in the Rookie Appalachian League last year after catching a full season in college, but he's enjoying a highly productive season in the Midwest League.

"This year I came in fresh, I came in healthy, stronger than I ever have been," he said. "I came in with confidence.

"I had something to prove. I'm here working with a great team and we're having some fun."

Kernels Manager Jake Mauer said Garver has improved tremendously this season as a hitter and catcher.

"The home runs obviously are what's going to be talked about," Mauer said after Garver hit three of them, "but he did an outstanding job behind the plate today.

"That's probably what I'm most proud of. Obviously you hit three homers, that's great, it doesn't happen a lot. Drove in five runs. That's all great.

"The offense is a given," said Mauer. "He's got offensive ability. Now if we can get his defensive ability on a par with his offense, he could play for a really long time.

"He's everything we thought he was going to be offensively. Now he's starting to take that next step catching-wise. That's huge, because that's the whole reason he's here, to learn how to catch."

Chih-Wei Hu (2-0) pitched the first six innings Monday and allowed only two hits and one unearned run with six strikeouts. Brandon Bixler tossed two perfect innings in relief with four strikeouts and Dallas Gallant pitched the ninth inning with two strikeouts.

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The Kernels pitchers struck out 12 batters and walked only two (both by Hu).

The Kernels (47-53) have played 100 games now. Garver has started 42 of those games behind the plate and feels like he's made good strides with his defense in terms of calling a game and working with his pitchers.

He understands what Mauer is saying about "defense first" for a catcher.

"I'm starting to see it that way," he said. "Today was a good example.

"I think that's the biggest part of my game I need to improve on, is being a defense-first type catcher. We've worked on that since I got here Day 1."

The offense was pretty good Monday, too.

"I've never hit three homers in a game," he said. "I've hit two in a few games, but it's never been three. It feels good."

Garver grounded out to second base in his third at-bat Monday.

Third baseman Haar went 3-for-4 for the Kernels. First baseman Chad Christensen collected his team-high 100th hit in the Kernels' 100th game of the year. Left fielder J.D. Williams had two hits.

Cedar Rapids is idle Tuesday and opens a three-game series at Bowling Green Wednesday night.

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FORT WAYNE (1): Turner, ss, 3 1 0 0, Perez, 3b, 3 0 1 0, Reyes, rf, 4 0 0 0, Bauers, 1b, 4 0 1 0, Reina, dh, 3 0 0 0, Miller, c, 4 0 1 0, Tejada, lf, 4 0 0 0, Charles, cf, 3 0 0 0, VanMeter, 2b, 3 0 0 0. Totals 31 1 3 0.

KERNELS (8): Walker, dh, 5 0 0 0, Wade, 2b, 4 1 0 0, Christensen, 1b, 4 1 1 0, Garver, c, 4 3 3 5, Haar, 3b, 4 1 3 0, Swim, rf, 4 0 0 0, Kanzler, cf, 4 1 1 0, Williams, lf, 4 1 2 1, Vielma, ss, 4 0 1 1. Totals 37 8 11 7.

Fort Wayne 000 001 000 - 1 3 2

Kernels 202 100 03x - 8 11 1

Fried, Herrera (3), Richardson (7), Baskette (8) and Miller. Hu, Bixler (7), Gallant (9) and Garver. W - Hu (2-0). L - Fried (0-1). 2B - Williams (11), Kanzler (8), Bauers (13). HR - Garver 3 (12). SB - Christensen (23). E - Bauers (9), Perez (17), Wade (10). T - 2:28. A - 4,008.