

## Murphy helps Kernels stay in 1st place

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 01 August 2014 09:36 - Last Updated Friday, 01 August 2014 10:30

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Max Murphy grew up rooting for the Minnesota Twins and won the Kirby Puckett Award during his collegiate career at Bradley University, so imagine his delight when his favorite team selected him in the ninth round of the draft this summer.

"It was cool getting drafted by them," said Murphy, who is from Robinsdale, Minn. "It was incredible. It was awesome."

Murphy used to drive through Cedar Rapids along I-380 on his trips from Minnesota to Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., but he never stopped in town. The outfielder is here now, however, as a Twins farm hand.

Murphy helped the Cedar Rapids Kernels top Burlington, 6-1, Thursday before 3,059 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium to stay in first place in the Western Division of the Midwest League.

Murphy went 2-for-3, slugged a 400-foot home run and gunned down a Burlington base runner who tried to stretch a single into a double.

Murphy has attended a few games at Target Field in Minneapolis to watch the Twins. It's just a short drive from his home.

"It's about 10 minutes," he said. "Right by it."

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The Kirby Puckett Award honors the top defensive outfielder on the Bradley baseball team. Puckett, a Minnesota Twins legend, attended Bradley for a year and Murphy was honored to win that award in college.

Murphy prides himself on defense.

"I've always thought it was something that was overlooked, especially as an outfielder," he said. "It was something I wanted to be really good at."

Murphy hit .371 with nine home runs and 25 RBIs in 34 games with Elizabethton this summer after being drafted as a junior. He was promoted to Cedar Rapids Monday and is hitting .250 so far.

Murphy landed in the thick of a pennant race when he joined the Kernels.

"That's cool," he said. "I went from one good team to another good team."

The Kernels finished July with a 19-9 record, by far their best month of the season. They got more excellent pitching Thursday and finished the month with a sparkling team ERA of 1.98 for those 28 games.

Chih-Wei Hu (4-0, 1.50 ERA) allowed one run in six innings Thursday. Brandon Bixler tossed two shutout innings and Jared Wilson pitched a 1-2-3 ninth inning.

Mitch Garver belted a two-run homer in the first inning for Cedar Rapids. It was his team-high 15th homer of the year.

Hu, from Taiwan, has been impressive since joining the club July 7.

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"Did I think he'd have a sub-1 ERA or wherever he's at? No, I don't think so," said Kernels Manager Jake Mauer. "He's been dominant every time he's gone out there.

"He doesn't have dominant stuff, but he challenges guys. He goes right at them. He pitches like he's a lot older than 20 years old."

Hu speaks a little English, but not much. That could change soon.

"We're going to put Mr. Hu into English classes with (Engelb) Vielma and (Josue) Montanez," said Mauer. "We'll see how that goes."

The classes are normally for Spanish-speaking players, but it's the best the Kernels can do for now.

The Kernels raised their overall record to 54-55 for the season. Of more importance, they swept the three-game series from Burlington and raised their record for the second half of the Midwest League campaign to 23-16.

Kane County lost Thursday night, so the Kernels own a one-game lead in the division with 31 games left to play. The Kernels and Kane County had been tied for the division lead.

"If we keep pitching like we have been, we're going to be in pretty good shape," said Mauer.

The Kernels lost another starting pitcher Thursday when Aaron Slegers (7-7) was promoted to Fort Myers. Matt Batts, who has pitched well at Elizabethton, will take his place on the roster and is scheduled to start Saturday.

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Kernels starter Kohl Stewart is currently on the 7-Day disabled list, but Stewart said an MRI taken in Minneapolis was encouraging and he expects to begin playing again soon.

The Kernels begin a three-game series at Beloit Friday and return home Monday night against Wisconsin.

BURLINGTON (1): Eaves, 2b, 4 0 2 1, Rosa, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Fish, cf, 4 0 1 0, Aguilera, dh, 4 0 0 0, McGee, c, 3 0 0 0, Dalton, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Gretzky, lf, 4 0 0 0, Mendoza, rf, 2 0 0 0, Salcedo, ss, 3 1 1 0. Totals 31 1 4 1.

KERNELS (6): Walker, 2b, 3 0 0 1, Wade, 3b, 4 1 2 0, Christensen, 1b, 3 1 0 0, Garver, dh, 3 2 1 2, Swim, rf, 4 0 1 0, M.Murphy, lf, 3 1 2 2, Quesada, c, 4 0 1 1, Vielma, ss, 4 1 1 0, J.Murphy, cf, 3 0 0 0. Totals 31 6 8 6.

Burlington 001 000 000 - 1 4 0  
Kernels 210 001 02x - 6 8 1

Alcantara, Swanson (6), Busenitz (8) and McGee. Hu, Bixler (7), Wilson (9) and Quesada. W - Hu (4-0). L - Alcantara (6-5). 2B - Eaves 2 (32). 3B - Vielma (4). HR - Garver (15), M.Murphy (1). SB - Wade (1). E - Wade (11). T - 2:49. A - 3,059.