

Kernels make strong impression in opener

Written by Jim Ecker
Thursday, 04 April 2013 23:07 -

The Cedar Rapids Kernels helped themselves to heaping plates of meatballs and spaghetti as the stereo blared in their victorious locker room Thursday night.

As far as first impressions go, they made a good one.

The Kernels belted two home runs in the first inning and their pitchers struck out 16 batters as they trimmed Beloit in the season opener, 9-7, before 1,943 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

The Kernels finished with a woeful 53-86 record in their final season as a member of the Los Angeles Angels organization last year, but this is a new year with a new bunch of players who hope to play in the Major Leagues with the Minnesota Twins some day.

"It was an exciting way to start, that's for sure," said Manager Jake Mauer. "We hit some big home runs.

"All in all it was a good win. We did some nice things."

Byron Buxton, the No.2 overall pick in the 2012 amateur draft, led off the bottom of the first inning for Cedar Rapids with a solid single to left-center. Jorge Polanco then blasted an 0-2 pitch over the right-field fence for a quick 2-0 lead.

Drew Leachman flied out to right, but D.J. Hicks belted a long home run to right field that traveled at least 420 feet to make it 3-0.

"I just put a good swing on it," he said. "Thankfully the wind was blowing out. That may have helped a little bit.

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"It's a great start for us as a team to get the first one out of the way."

Hicks made a favorable first impression on Cedar Rapids fans, and the environment made a strong first impression on Hicks.

"I thought I was in The Show, to be honest," he said, using a ballplayer's vernacular for the big leagues. "This is first-class."

Hicks hit a walk-off grand slam in the 12th inning to give Elizabethton the Appalachian League championship in Rookie League ball last year, then he socked another home run in his first at-bat in the Midwest League. The man has a flair for the dramatic.

Fifteen players who spent time in Elizabethton last year are in Cedar Rapids now. They brought a championship feeling with them.

"When you get that taste, you only want more," said Hicks. "It really helps us. This is what we expect out of ourselves."

Buxton, who signed with Minnesota for a franchise-record \$6 million bonus last year, went 2-for-5, scored two runs, drove in two runs and stole a base.

He's the No.1 prospect in town, but said he did not feel any pressure playing in a new city before new fans.

"Not really," he said after filling his plate with the post-game feast. "I was just going out and playing my game. No pressure at all."

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The Kernels built a 9-4 lead, then held on. They collected 12 hits, stole three bases and had to make a minimum of plays in the field, thanks to the 16 strikeouts by Taylor Rogers, Tyler Jones, Manuel Soliman and Chris Mazza.

Jones struck out six batters in 3 1/3 innings out of the bullpen and got the victory. He walked two batters but did not allow a hit.

"We played a pretty good game," said Buxton, a fleet center fielder. "Made good pitches and hit the ball real well. All in all, we played a very good game."

There were big smiles in the dugout after Polanco and Hicks belted their home runs in the first inning. "We were pumped," said Buxton. "We were ready to go."

The quick start got the fans pumped up as well.

"Very good atmosphere," said Buxton. "Great stadium, first class. A great place to be playing in."

By coincidence, the Beloit Snappers were affiliated with the Minnesota Twins last year (they're now with the Oakland A's). Fourteen players on the Cedar Rapids roster this year performed in Beloit last year, so they beat their old club Thursday night.

The same two teams will meet again Friday night in the second game of the four-game series at 6:35 p.m. The games Saturday and Sunday are scheduled for 2:05 p.m.

KERNELS 9, BELOIT 7

BELOIT (7): Shipman, cf, 3 1 1 1, Bostick, 2b, 5 1 2 1, Wooten, rf, 5 1 2 1, Olson, 1b, 4 1 1 0,

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Maxwell, c, 5 0 2 1, Nunez, 3b, 5 1 1 3, Tanis, dh, 5 0 1 0, Solano, ss, 5 1 1 0, Vertigan, lf, 3 1 0 0, Alcantara, p, 0 0 0 0, Vail, p, 0 0 0 0, Dull, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 40 7 11 7.

KERNELS (9): Buxton, cf, 5 2 2 2, Polanco, 2b, 5 1 3 3, Leachman, dh, 5 0 0 1, Hicks, 1b, 3 1 1 1, Walker, rf, 4 0 0 0, Harrison, 3b, 4 0 1 0, Goodrum, ss, 3 2 1, Rodriguez, c, 4 2 2 0, Williams, f, 3 1 2 1, Rogers, p, 0 0 0 0, T.Jones, p, 0 0 0 0, Soliman, p, 0 0 0 0, Mazza, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 36 9 12 8.

Beloit 004 000 021 - 7 11 1
Kernels 310 320 00x - 9 12 1

Alcantara, Vail (4), Dull (7) and Maxwell. Rogers, T.Jones (4), Soliman (8), Mazza (9) and Rodriguez. W - T.Jones (1-0). L - Alcantara (0-1). S - Mazza (1). 2B - Olson (1), Rodriguez (1). HR - Nunez (1), Polanco (1), Hicks (1). SB - Buxton (1), Goodrum (1), Leachman (1). E - Nunez, Goodrum, Polanco. A - 1,943.