

Polanco helps Kernels win 8th straight

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 29 April 2013 21:37 -

Some baseball players get a new glove or new bat for their 16th birthday.

Cedar Rapids Kernels infielder Jorge Polanco got a \$700,000 bonus from the Minnesota Twins when he turned 16 in 2009 and signed as a free agent from the Dominican Republic.

"Yeah, nice happy birthday. Nice present," he said Monday night with a smile.

He's paying dividends for the Kernels now with his lively bat and good glove in the Midwest League.

Polanco went 3-for-4 with a triple and three RBIs as the Kernels dumped the Lansing Lugnuts, 9-1, for their eighth straight victory before 1,467 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Polanco raised his batting average to a robust .353 in the No.3 spot in the lineup. He's driven in 19 runs in 22 games and did his work Monday as the designated hitter, although he's normally the starting second baseman.

Players from the Dominican Republic are allowed to sign contracts with Major League teams as soon as they are 16 years old. Polanco celebrated his 16th birthday on July 5, 2009 and signed with the Twins the next day.

Kernels Manager Jake Mauer saw Polanco as a 16-year-old kid and was impressed.

"I was very excited to see him," said Mauer. "He's starting to mature.

"He's been with us for three years, and I don't want to say he gets overlooked, but he's kind of

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mentioned in that second tier of guys. But he can play."

Polanco, now 19, has been a key man for the Kernels, who have the best record in the Midwest League at 17-5. He's a 5-foot-11, 192-pound switch-hitter who can play second base or shortstop.

The Kernels have numerous top prospects on their team and they made it look easy again Monday against the struggling Lugnuts, who lost their fourth straight game and fell to 7-14.

Cedar Rapids native Kellen Sweeney started at first base for the Lugnuts and went 0-for-3 with two strikeouts, dropping his average to .161 for the season.

Jose Berrios, an 18-year-old whip from Puerto Rico, had a strong outing for the Kernels and got his second win in two starts. Berrios pitched 6.2 innings and was touched for one run on four hits. He struck out eight batters, did not walk anyone and lowered his ERA to 2.31.

Berrios hit 95 mph on the Kernels radar gun and was equally effective with his sharp curveball and changeup.

"He's very professional," said Mauer. "He doesn't pitch like an 18-year-old."

Cedar Rapids collected five extra-base hits. Travis Harrison hit his third homer with a towering drive over the left-field wall. Polanco, Adam Brett Walker II and Byron Buxton had triples and Dalton Hicks chipped in with a two-run double.

Polanco was hit by a pitch, ripped a two-run triple to right-center, singled to right, had an RBI single to left and grounded out in his final at-bat.

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Mauer said Polanco is one of the hardest workers on the club.

"He's a real quiet person. He's a very smart young man," the skipper said. "He listens to everything you say. He tries everything you say.

"He's probably, other than Buxton, our most consistent hitter. When he comes up, there's a chance he's going to do something. He's going to give you a good at-bat, that's for sure. He's fun to watch when he comes to the plate."

Polanco hails from San Pedro de Macoris, which has produced a long list of Major League players. He said his favorite player is New York Yankees star Robinson Cano, a Dominican native.

Polanco understands and speaks a little bit of English. Mauer said he's a leader among the Latin players on the team, offering advice and explaining things to them.

Mauer said Polanco's father was a professional baseball player and thinks it rubbed off. "He was around the game as a young boy, and you can kind of tell, the way he goes about it," said Mauer.

"Getting him to talk a little bit is like pulling teeth, but you get him to smile once in awhile. He's a pleasure to have. He's tearing the cover off the ball right now."

Cedar Rapids and Lansing are scheduled to finish their three-game series Tuesday at 12:05 p.m. Matthew Tomshaw is scheduled to pitch for the Kernels.

Josh Burris pitched 2.1 strong innings in relief for the Kernels Monday with three strikeouts.

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LANSING (1): Pompey, cf, 4 1 1 0, Flores, ss, 4 0 0 0, Pierre, 3b, 4 0 0 0, Lopes, 2b, 4 0 1 1, Hawkins, dh, 4 0 1 0, Ramirez, rf, 4 0 1 0, Sweeney, 1b, 3 0 0 0, Conner, c, 2 0 1 0, Smith, lf, 3 0 0 0, Cole, p, 0 0 0 0, Murphy, p, 0 0 0 0, Ghysels, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 32 1 5 1.

KERNELS (9): Buxton, cf, 4 3 1 1, Goodrum, ss, 4 1 0 0, Polanco, dh, 4 1 3 3, Hicks, 1b, 4 1 1 2, Walker, rf, 4 1 1 1, Harrison, 3b, 4 1 1 2, Pimentel, 2b, 4 0 1 0, Arias, c, 4 0 0 0, Williams, lf, 2 1 0 0, Berrios, p, 0 0 0 0, Burris, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 34 9 8 9.

Lansing 000 100 000 - 1 5 3

Kernels 002 052 00x - 9 8 0

Cole, Murphy (6), Ghysels (8) and Conner. Berrios, Burris (7) and Arias. W - Berrios (2-0). L - Cole (1-2). 2B - Lopes (3), Hicks (8). 3B - Pompey (2), Polanco (2), Walker (2), Buxton (3). HR - Harrison (3). SB - Buxton (9). E - Pierre 2 (7), Conner (2). T - 2:21. A - 1,467.