

Kepler earns German feast with big hit

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 30 June 2013 18:45 -

Max Kepler can taste the sauerbraten with gravy and mushrooms now. "And sauerkraut on the side," he said, planning his order, "and of course potatoes."

Kepler, the German-born outfielder who plays for the Cedar Rapids Kernels, earned a free meal for himself and all the Kernels at the Ox Yoke restaurant in the Amana by delivering the game-winning hit in the bottom of the ninth inning Sunday for a 6-5 victory over Peoria at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

The victory was the Kernels' 10th straight, which according to tradition earns the entire club a free meal at the Ox Yoke, courtesy of team management.

"Free meal? That's awesome," said Kepler, who grew up in Berlin. "So schnitzel and bratwurst? Sauerbraten? I'm really excited. I haven't had German food in awhile, so I'm really excited for that."

Kepler, 20, could wash it all down with his favorite German beer if he were back home, where the legal drinking age is 16, but not in Iowa. "Not in this country," he knows.

The Ox Yoke features Old World German and traditional American recipes at its restaurants, so there should be something on the menu for all the Kernels to enjoy. It's a "family style" restaurant, which means they'll keep bringing the food to your table as long as somebody is still hungry.

We're talking about baseball players, so it could take awhile before everyone is sated.

"They pile it on," confirmed Cedar Rapids Manager Jake Mauer, who enjoyed a free meal at the Ox Yoke with the rest of the club when the Kernels got to town in April. Kepler was not with the team then, so this will be his first trip.

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Kepler got another taste of home after the game when a touring family from Berlin attended the game and got his autograph after his clutch hit. They spoke in German and Kepler posed for pictures.

He'll get another taste of home later this week when his parents arrive from Germany for a visit. He thinks they'll get here for Thursday night's game against Wisconsin on the Fourth of July. "I can't wait for my parents to come and see me play," he said.

The Kernels trailed, 5-4, entering the bottom of the ninth inning before 2,692 fans at the ballpark and the free meal appeared to be slipping away with Jeremias Pineda, a .173 hitter, scheduled to lead off for Cedar Rapids. That's when the baseball gods smiled on the Kernels again.

Peoria relief pitcher Robert Stock hit Pineda with a pitch to put the tying run on base with nobody out. Stock walked Jorge Polanco with one out, putting runners on first and second. Stock then hit Dalton Hicks, loading the bases.

Travis Harrison walked on a 3-2 pitch, forcing in Pineda and tying the game at 5-5. Kepler worked the count to 3-2 and lined a shot over the shortstop's head for the game-winning hit and the free meal. He was mobbed by his hungry teammates, who then hung around on the field to sign autographs for fans, a Sunday afternoon tradition.

"That was fun," said Mauer.

Mauer isn't sure when the club will dine at the Ox Yoke. He thinks they'll probably go for dinner in the Amanas following an afternoon game in the near future. "We'll find time for it, that's for sure," he said.

It was the Kernels' seventh walk-off victory of the season and the second in a row. The Kernels (50-28) and Peoria (42-35) will meet again Monday at 6:35 p.m. with Minnesota Twins right-hander Mike Pelfrey pitching for the Kernels on an injury rehab assignment.

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PEORIA (5): Valera, lf, 4 0 1 1, Vargas, ss, 2 0 0 1, Wilson, 2b, 5 0 0 1, Walton, 1b, 4 0 2 0, Wisdom, 3b, 5 0 0 0, Schaffer, dh, 4 2 2 0, Tilson, pr/dh, 1 1 0 0, Martini, cf, 4 1 3 2, Montero, c, 2 0 1 0, Parque, rf, 3 1 0 0. Totals 34 5 9 5.

KERNELS (6): Goodrum, 1b, 5 1 1 1, Polanco, ss, 4 2 2 0, Hicks, dh, 4 0 1 0, Harrison, 3b, 4 1 1 2, Kepler, cf, 4 0 1 1, Walker, rf, 3 0 1 1, Grimes, c, 2 1 1 0, Licon, 2b, 4 1 1 1, Pineda, lf, 3 0 0 0. Totals 33 6 9 6.

Peoria 030 010 100 - 5 9 0

Kernels 011 200 002 - 6 9 2

Garcia, Scanio (6), Donofrio (7), Stock (9) and Montero. Atherton, Merck (4), Muren (7), Jones (9) and Grimes. W - Jones (4-3). L - Stock (0-1). 2B - Schaffer (4), Martini (9), Harrison (24), Licon (1), Goodrum (17). E - Licon (3). T - 2:59. A - 2,692.