

Hot Kernels clicking at right time

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 15 August 2014 21:41 -



The Cedar Rapids Kernels have used 51 different players this season, which is more than enough for two full teams.

There's been a lot of shuffling, but Manager Jake Mauer likes the 25 guys he has on the club right now as the Kernels make a strong push for the Midwest League playoffs.

The Kernels spanked Peoria, 11-0, Friday before 3,886 fans on Hawkeye Sports Night at Veterans Memorial Stadium for their fourth straight victory.

The Kernels have used a steady flow of players due to injuries, promotions, demotions and guys being outright released, but they've managed to piece it together and are playing some of their best baseball of the season right now.

Cedar Rapids has gone 26-9 in its last 35 games, raising its overall record to 63-60 and its second-half mark to 32-21. The Kernels were saddled with a 37-51 record on July 9, but they've completely turned things around.

"We're just having fun coming to the park," said Cedar Rapids native Chad Christensen, who went 3-for-5 and scored two more runs. "It's always a lot of fun when you're winning, so we'll keep rolling with it."

"We're getting great starts out of our pitchers and timely hits, so that's where we're at right now."

Stephen Gonsalves (2-2, 1.57 ERA) tossed seven shutout innings Friday night. He allowed only three hits, struck out five batters and did walk anyone.

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All nine Kernels in the starting lineup had at least one hit and the Kernels scored at least one run in each of the first six innings. That made life easy.

Jonatan Hinojosa, the Kernels' new third baseman, continued his hot hitting and went 2-for-5 with a double, triple and four RBIs in the leadoff spot, raising his average to .353 in four games.

Mauer likes the way his players battled through tough times and have come out smiling, giving the club a chance to finish with a good season.

"It's the guys," he said. "Guys who were here when we weren't doing so good, they never quit. They never stopped working, which would have been pretty easy to do.

"Every time a new guy comes in, they kind of shoot us with a little bit of energy. That's kind of what makes us go."

Mauer said it's unusual to use 51 players in one season.

"That's unheard of," he said. "It's been one of those years. Now we're kind of finding the right mix in terms of chemistry. It's a fun clubhouse to be in right now."

There are 17 games left in the regular season and the Kernels own a five-game lead over Peoria for the final playoff spot. The Kernels and Chiefs meet again Saturday night and Sunday afternoon at Perfect Game Field.

"We're playing to put ourselves in the playoffs and make a run at it," said Christensen. "We've been doing a good job lately and putting ourselves in a good position. Hopefully it all goes our way.

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"Jake said before we left spring training, it's a 140-game schedule. There are going to be a lot of good times and a lot of bad times, so you have to stay focused and do your job and things even out."

The Kernels wore special black-and-gold jerseys on Hawkeye Sports Night. That was OK with Christensen, who played his college baseball in different colors at the University of Nebraska, one of Iowa's chief rivals.

"I'm waiting for them to have Huskers Night, but that's probably not going to happen while I'm here," he joked. "I grew up a Hawkeye fan, so it's kind of fun.

"It's a lot better than Iowa State Night with my family, that's for sure."

Christensen has scored 80 runs this season, putting him second in the Midwest League.

PEORIA (0): Bryan, lf/cf, 4 0 1 0, McElroy, cf, 3 0 0 0, Pedroza, p, 1 0 0 0, Herrera, ss, 4 0 1 0, Ringo, 1b, 3 0 0 0, Kelly, c, 3 0 1 0, Castillo, dh/lf, 4 0 0 0, Wick, rf, 3 0 0 0, Medina, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Valera, 2b, 3 0 0 0. Totals 31 0 3 0.

KERNELS (11): Hinojosa, 3b, 5 1 2 4, Vielma, ss, 5 1 1 0, Christensen, 1b, 5 2 3 1, Garver, c, 5 0 1 0, Swim, rf, 5 1 2 2, Murphy, cf, 4 1 1 1, Williams, lf, 1 2 1 0, Vavra, dh, 3 1 1 2, Walker, 2b, 3 2 2 1. Totals 36 11 14 11.

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Peoria 000 000 000 - 0 3 1

Kernels 121 412 00x - 11 14 2

McKnight, Stock (4), Sabatino (6), Pedroza (7) and Kelly. Gonsalves, Wilson (8), Gallant (9) and Garver. W - Gonsalves (2-2). L - McKnight (5-10). 2B - Herrera (21), Garver (25), Hinojosa (1), Walker (7), Christensen (21), Murphy (5). 3B - Williams (2), Hinojosa (1). SB - Christensen (27). E - Herrera (26), Vielma (15), Hinojosa (2). T - 2:25. A - 3,886.