

## Kernels clinch No.1 seed with dramatic win

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 27 August 2014 21:56 -

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Those champagne-style bottles with the long necks had cider in them instead of the real stuff, but the Cedar Rapids Kernels were too happy to care about the contents as they celebrated in their locker room Wednesday night.

All they wanted to do was spray everyone in sight, smear thick icing on their teammates and enjoy the special moment.

The Kernels clipped Kane Country, 3-2, in 11 innings before 2,005 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium to claim a No.1 seed for the Midwest League playoffs that start next Wednesday night at home against Burlington.

Those playoff tickets are now on sale.

The cider in those long-necked bottles tasted very, very sweet. There was no alcohol to be found in the clubhouse.

"We're still a young club, so we don't have everybody that's 21 yet," explained Tanner Vavra, who scored the winning run with a terrific slide. "We have to play it safe."

The Kernels celebrated their dramatic victory on the field and carried the celebration into the clubhouse, with loud music and lots of laughter.

"They're having a good time in there," Manager Jake Mauer said while sitting in his office. "Those guys, that's what it's all about."

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Jonatan Hinojosa, who has sparked the Kernels since his arrival three weeks ago, delivered the game-winning hit with a sharp single to right field with two outs. He ended up with icing all over his body in the clubhouse.

"They throw me down!," he said with a happy smile.

The cake said "Congratulations ... Good Luck In The Playoffs."

Vavra scored the winning run from second base with some heads-up base-running. The throw from the Kane Country right fielder was high and up the third-base line, giving Vavra a chance to slide around the tag and scramble to the plate for the run.

"I saw him (the catcher) go up for the ball and was able to arc my slide enough to get around without him touching me," said Vavra. "When I saw him get up, I knew I had to get down a little bit earlier."



The Kernels actually clinched the No. 1 seed for the playoffs when Wisconsin lost Wednesday night, just a few minutes before the Kernels won their game, but the Cedar Rapids players were not aware of that at the time.

"We wanted to get that 'W' and we wanted to clinch that top spot on a win. That's the biggest thing," said Vavra. "We wanted to end it on a win and we wanted to do it at home. It's great."

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The outcome was especially sweet for Vavra, who was gunned down by the Kane County center fielder on a terrific play with the score tied in the bottom of the ninth. Kane County's Trey Martin made a sliding catcher of a sinking liner by Hinojosa, got up and threw a perfect two-hopper to the plate to nab Vavra, who tagged up from third on the play.

Vavra would have been a dead duck again in the bottom of the 11th if the right fielder had made a good throw, but with two outs Mauer wanted to force the action.

"I didn't want to get thrown out again," said Vavra. "Jake told me 'Got to go, Got to go, Got to go, Slide threw it."

Vavra began the winning rally in the bottom of the 11th with a line single to left, despite having an inch-long cut on his right hand, courtesy of being stepped on by the Kane County catcher on the play at the plate in the ninth inning.

Vavra, as tough as they come, gave no thought to leaving the game. "Thick-skinned," he said with a grin.

Hinojosa, hitting .328 in the leadoff spot, belted the first home run of his pro career in the first inning. He's been a clutch hitter for the Kernels and has injected new life into the club.

"I like it," he said with a big smile, wiping icing off his hands and neck. "I like to be here."

The Kernels were languishing with a 37-51 record about seven weeks ago, but they've raised their overall mark to 72-63 with a big surge for a No. 1 seed in the playoffs.

"That's something pretty special, from where we started and where we came from," said Mauer. "We had some long nights in May and June. It was fun to watch this club come together."

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Kernels shortstop Engelb Vielma had a terrific night on defense Wednesday. He made two sensational plays from deep shortstop and also made a diving stop of a line drive for a double play in the top of the 10th inning.

"He can play short," said Mauer. "He can play short with the best of them. He seemed to be everywhere tonight."

The Kernels and Kane County meet again Thursday night and Friday night at the stadium.

KANE COUNTY (2): Dunston, lf, 4 1 1 0, Zagunis, dh, 5 1 1 0, Candelario, 3b, 4 0 1 1, Rogers, 1b, 5 0 0 0, Baez, rf, 4 0 0 0, Young, 2b, 4 0 0 0, Lockhart, ss, 4 0 0 0, Caratini, c, 4 0 1 0, Penalver, pr, 0 0 0 0, Brockmeyer, c, 0 0 0 0, Martin, cf, 2 0 1 0. Totals 36 2 5 1.

KERNELS (3): Hinojosa, 3b, 6 1 2 2, Vielma, ss, 5 0 1 0, Christensen, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Garver, c, 2 0 0 0, Swim, rf, 5 1 1 0, Murphy, cf, 5 0 1 0, Vavra, dh, 4 1 1 0, Larson, lf, 3 0 1 0, Walker, 2b, 0 0 0 0, Wade, 2b, 3 0 0 0. Totals 37 3 7 2.

Kane County 100 001 000 00 - 2 5 3

Kernels 100 000 100 01 - 3 7 2

Tseng, Garner (7), Pugliese (7), Carrillo (10), Wagner (11) and Caratini, Brockmeyer. Eades, Bixler (7), Reed (9), Montanez (11) and Garver. W - Montanez (2-4). L - Wagner (3-3). 2B - Candelario (19), Martin (16), Zagunis (4), Caratini (3). HR - Hinojosa (1). SB - Martin (28), Christensen (30). E - Rogers (9), Lockhart 2 (9), Larson (2), Eades (2). T - 3:27. A - 2,005.