

Kernels sting Bees, brace for Cougars

Written by S.D. Buhr

Friday, 05 September 2014 22:40 - Last Updated Friday, 05 September 2014 23:11



BURLINGTON - The Cedar Rapids Kernels came to Burlington Thursday night needing two straight wins over the Bees to advance to the second round of the Midwest League playoffs and that's exactly what they accomplished.

The Kernels sent the Bees home for the season after topping them, 4-2, before 406 fans on a wet night at Community Field in Burlington.

Kernels won the best-of-3 series, 2-1, after losing the first game at home Wednesday.

The victory moves the Kernels into the semifinals of the Midwest League playoffs Saturday night at 6:35 against Kane County at Veterans Memorial Stadium in the Western Division finals in another best-of-3 engagement.

The second and third games (if necessary) are scheduled for Kane County Sunday and Monday.

Stephen Gonsalves had never pitched in a game of this magnitude – a deciding game of a professional playoff series – but there was one aspect he has become very familiar with this season.

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"I think it was like my 10th start in the rain this year," the tall lefty said, "but it wasn't too bad. I had a lot of fun tonight. It was a great time."

Gonsalves worked the first five innings for the Kernels, giving up both Burlington runs on six hits and a walk. He struck out six.

On the offensive side, Cedar Rapids native Chad Christensen had a big night at the plate for Cedar Rapids. Christensen's solo home run in the third inning gave the Kernels a 2-0 lead and an RBI single in the eighth moved the Kernels into a 3-2 lead they would not relinquish.

Ryan Walker led off the Kernels' third with a triple and scored on Logan Wade's RBI groundout, setting the stage for Christensen's round-tripper.

"He left a fastball out over the plate and I got into one," Christensen said.

The Kernels did not record another hit off Burlington pitching until the eighth inning. Burlington starter Harrison Cooney struck out nine batters in six innings.

With the score tied at 2-2 and one out in the eighth, four straight Cedar Rapids batters laced hits off Burlington relief pitcher Brian Loconsole, topped by Christensen's RBI single and an RBI double by Max Murphy.

Outside of the third inning, where eight Burlington batters came to the plate en route to a pair of runs that knotted the game at 2-2, Gonsalves was firmly in control. Five of his six strikeouts were on breaking balls.

"I spun that well today," Gonsalves said. "It's something I've been working on with Ivan (Arteaga, the Kernels pitching coach) a whole lot."

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Righthander Jared Wilson (1-0) relieved Gonsalves to begin the sixth inning and gave the Kernels two perfect innings, striking out a pair of Bees.

Dallas Gallant took the hill for Cedar Rapids in the eighth and for a moment it appeared the Bees had a comeback in them. After Kody Eaves reached on an error and Gallant struck out Brandon Bayardi, Eric Aguilera launched a deep line drive to center field that died just short of the wall for the second out. Gallant then got his second strikeout of the inning, whiffing Zach Houchins to end the stanza.

Jake Reed worked a 1-2-3 ninth inning, recording his second save in as many nights in Burlington. And when centerfielder Murphy recorded the final out on a fly ball, the Kernels were officially moving on to round two of the MWL playoffs.

All three games with the Bees were nailbiters and that didn't surprise Kernels manager Jake Mauer in the least.

"Obviously we pitched really well. Really all three games. Just kept battling, kept battling, kept battling," Mauer said. "You know when you get to playoff baseball, you're going to see everybody's best. Their best pitcher, their best lineup, their best everything. Every run's very important."

It was Christensen, however, who perhaps summarized the situation best after the game.

"Another great pitching outing by Steve, giving us a chance, and the guys out of the pen as well," he said. "So we'll get home and get ready for Kane County."

Mauer indicated that Ryan Eades would get the start for Cedar Rapids against the Cougars on Saturday.

Twins minor league director Brad Steil told media in the clubhouse after the game that pitcher

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John Curtiss and outfielder Tanner English would be joining the Kernels in time for the game with the Cougars.

Mitch Garver (concussion) and Lewis Thorpe (elbow) will likely go on the disabled list to make room for the newcomers.