

Murphy helps Kernels top Peoria in opener

Written by S.D. Buhr

Saturday, 12 September 2015 21:33 - Last Updated Saturday, 12 September 2015 21:50



PEORIA, Ill. - While playing baseball for the Bradley University Braves, Max Murphy called Dozer Park in Peoria his home field. On Saturday night, Murphy visited Dozer Park again and held his own personal homecoming celebration.

Murphy's two-run home run to deep left field in the seventh inning snapped a 1-1 tie and powered the Kernels to a 3-2 victory over the Peoria Chiefs before a crowd of 989 at the ballpark Murphy used to call home.

The win gave the Kernels a 1-0 lead in the best-of-3 Midwest League Western Division Championship Series. The Kernels can clinch the series Sunday at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Cedar Rapids at 4:05 p.m. A third game, if necessary, would be played in Cedar Rapids Monday night.

Murphy, the Kernels designated hitter, had been held hitless in the postseason going into the game, but his first playoff hit was a game-changer.

"It's nice to come back," said Murphy, who socked 27 homers in his college career. "I haven't really done very well here (as a pro), but that's all right."

Kernels Manager Jake Mauer is well aware of Murphy's history at this ballpark and was happy to benefit from the homecoming.

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"That home run was huge," Mauer said. "Both teams weren't really lighting up the scoreboard. This was his home park for three years. The guy threw him a change-up and thank God he hit it over the fence. We needed every run we could get."

Murphy generated the power when it was needed, but the star who shown brightest Saturday night was starting pitcher Keaton Steele.

After being staked to a 1-0 lead by his offense in the top of the first inning, Steele gave up the tying run on a sacrifice fly in the Peoria half of the first. After that, he was almost perfect.

Steele faced the minimum number of batters possible from the second inning through the eighth and retired the last 17 batters he faced. The only blemish after the first inning was a third-inning leadoff single that was quickly erased by a double play. He surrendered just two hits, walked none and struck out nine.

"That's about as solid as you can get, right there," Mauer said.

Steele was quick to give credit to catcher Brian Navarreto.

"That's got Brian written all over it," said the right-hander. "When the pitcher goes out and throws eight innings and doesn't shake (off a sign) once, that's your catcher. That's all him. How much confidence I have in him, he gives right back to me. It's unbelievable."

"They had a good game plan and they executed it," added Mauer. "They kept the ball down and moved it around. That's probably the best slider he's had all year. That was very, very impressive."

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The game didn't end without some ninth-inning drama, however.

Mauer pulled Steele after eight innings and brought in closer Nick Anderson. Anderson gave up a triple to the first batter he faced and an RBI single to the next batter to make it 3-2, bringing the potential winning run to the plate with no outs.

After that, Anderson slammed the door with three consecutive strikeouts.

The skipper said he did not consider leaving Steele in to finish what he started.

"He was about at 100 (pitches)," Mauer explained. "I wasn't going to send him back out there. Anderson's our closer and that was a pretty gutsy performance by him. Not having his best stuff, but striking out the side after they closed within one."

The Kernels mustered just five hits and LaMonte Wade was the sole Kernel with more than one.

Wade was 2-for-4 and his first inning ground-rule double drove in Rafael Valera with the Kernels' first run. TJ White, who was on first base when Wade bounced his double over the right-center field wall, would have scored easily had Wade's hit stayed in play. Instead, White had to stay at third base where he was stranded.

Randy Rosario will get the start for Cedar Rapids Sunday.

KERNELS (3): Valera, 2b, 3 1 0 0, Gordon, ss, 4 0 0 0, Corcino, rf, 4 0 1 0, White, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Wade, cf, 4 0 2 1, Paul, 1b, 3 1 0 0, Murphy, dh,

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4 1 1 2, Navarreto, c, 4 0 1 0, Diemer, lf, 4 0 0 0. Totals 33 3 5 3.

PEORIA (2): Seferina, 2b, 4 1 2 1, Mercado, ss, 3 0 0 0, DeJong, 3b, 4 0 0 0, Bader, cf, 3 0 0 1, De Leon, 1b, 3 0 0 0, O'Keefe, dh, 3 0 0 0, Thompson, rf, 3 0 0 0, Bean, c, 3 0 0 0, Peoples-Walls, lf, 3 1 2 0.

Kernels 100 000 200 - 3 5 0

Peoria 100 000 001 - 2 4 2

Steele, Anderson (9) and Navarreto. Pearce, Bray (7), Sabatino (8), Then (9) and Bean. W - Steele (1-0). L - Pearce (0-1). S - Anderson (3). 2B - Wade (1), Corcino (2), Navarreto (1). 3B - Peoples-Walls (1). HR - Murphy

(1). SB - Seferina (1). E - Seferina (1), Mercado (1). T - 2:16. A - 989.