

Kernels pitchers shine in opener

Written by S.D. Buhr

Wednesday, 16 September 2015 20:26 - Last Updated Wednesday, 16 September 2015 20:58



COMSTOCK PARK, Mich. - Anyone expecting anything but another pitcher's duel when the Cedar Rapids Kernels lined up to face West Michigan in the first game of the Midwest League Championship Series Wednesday night has not been paying attention.

The Kernels swept their way into the finals on the strength of their starting pitching and had arguably their hottest pitcher, Felix Jorge, lined up to start Game 1 against Spencer Turnbull, the pitcher that MLB.com has ranked as the No. 5 prospect in the Detroit Tigers organization.

Turnbull, the Tigers' second-round pick in the 2014 draft, struck out five of the first 10 Kernels he faced, but Cedar Rapids touched the hard-throwing right-hander for three runs in the fifth inning and that was enough to claim the opener.

Jorge and two Kernels relievers shut down West Michigan, 5-0, before 2,802 fans at Fifth Third Ballpark.

Game 2 in the best-of-5 series is scheduled for Thursday night in Michigan, with Games 3, 4 and 5 scheduled for Cedar Rapids this Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

The Whitecaps showed they can generate offense by scoring 14 runs on 22 hits in their Division Series-clinching win over Lansing on Monday, but they managed just five hits off Cedar Rapids pitching Wednesday.

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Jorge surrendered four of those hits in six efficient innings. He struck out four Whitecaps.

Luke Bard relieved Jorge in the seventh and used a fastball consistently touching 98 mph in striking out four straight and five of the six batters he faced in two innings. Randy LeBlanc nailed down the win with a scoreless ninth inning.

Catcher Brian Navarreto was effusive in his praise of his pitchers.

"That was perfect. All the pitchers did an awesome job," he said. "I can call the game, but if they don't throw a strike, I'm nobody. They had a really good game.

"(Jorge) was unbelievable. He's on fire. He had the cutter and a good fastball in. He controlled the fastball in and out. That was good for him, that'll work."

Navarreto was shaking his catching hand a little bit when the questions turned to Bard.

"He's got a really good fastball. It was hard," Navarreto said. "I was feeling my hand and like, 'Oh my God, that's unbelievable.' It was hard."

Manager Jake Mauer was equally happy with the effort from his squad.

"Can't do much better than that," the manager said. "Bard was outstanding. He was unhittable tonight, overpowering.

"Jorge found a way. His stuff wasn't as good as it was the other night (against Quad Cities). Wasn't quite as sharp, but he will make pitches and six scoreless is pretty impressive."

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Cedar Rapids hitters were patient at the plate against Turnbull, forcing him deep into counts as his pitch count mounted until he tired in the fifth inning and Kernels hitters capitalized.

“That’s professional hitting,” Mauer said of his lineup. “That’s how you should do it. If the guy’s not throwing it over, you don’t swing. Stuff that we’ve talked about with those guys for six months.

“He burned through a lot of them (pitches) fast and kind of ran out of gas a bit. They brought their bullpen in and we were fortunate enough to barrel up a few.”

Every Kernels batter had at least one of Cedar Rapids’ 11 hits, but Edgar Corcino had the big hit in the fifth inning.

Max Murphy got the Kernels on the board first, walking to lead off the fifth inning and scoring on an Austin Diemer single. Diemer was thrown out trying to advance to second on the play for the second out of the inning.

Rafael Valera followed with a single, sending Turnbull to the showers. Nick Gordon greeted reliever Trey Teakell with a single, then Corcino stroked a two-out double to deep left field, driving in both runners to put the Kernels up 3-0. Corcino’s double was the only extra-base hit on the night for either team.

Cedar Rapids added a pair of insurance runs off Spenser Watkins in the eighth inning on singles by T.J. White and LaMonte Wade, followed by a two-RBI single by Murphy.

The two teams will play game 2 of the best-of-five series at 5:35 Thursday. The teams will take Friday off to travel and resume the series at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Cedar Rapids Saturday afternoon at 3:35. Games 4 and 5, if necessary, will also be played in Cedar Rapids on Sunday and Monday.

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The Kernels have won all five of their playoff games in pursuit of their first Midwest League title since 1994.

CEDAR RAPIDS (5): Valera, 2b, 5 1 2 0, Gordon, ss, 5 1 2 0, Corcino, rf, 3 0 1 2, White, 3b, 4 1 1 0, Wade, cf, 4 1 1 0, Paul 1b, 4 0 1 0, Murphy, dh, 3 1 1 2, Navarreto, c, 4 0 1 0, Diemer, lf, 4 0 1 1. Totals 36 5 11 5.

WEST MICHIGAN (0): Kivett, cf, 4 0 0 0, Simcox, ss, 4 0 2 0, Gerber, rf, 4 0 0 0, Scivicque, c, 4 0 1 0, Stewart, lf, 3 0 2 0, Pankake, dh, 3 0 0 0, Kengor, 1b, 3 0 0 0, Contreras, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Gonzalez, 2b, 3 0 0 0. Totals 31 0 5 0.

Kernels 0 0 0 0 0 0 **000 030 020 - 5 11 0**

West Michigan 000 000 000 - **0 5 1**

Jorge, Bard (7), LeBlanc (9) and Navarreto. Turnbull, Teakell (5), Watkins (8) and Scivicque. W - Jorge (2-0). L - Turnbull (1-1). 2B - Corcino (4). SB - Gordon (2), Wade (1).E - Kengor (1). T - 2:36. A - 2,802.