

"Hellerball" alive and well in IVL

Written by Mike Condon

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WALFORD - Just two short weeks ago, the University of Iowa baseball team came within an eyelash of hosting an NCAA Super Regional.

Many of the Hawkeyes on the field during that memorable weekend of baseball in Houston were back at it again Sunday as members of the Red Top and Walford teams in the Iowa Valley League.

And, as fate would have it, two Hawkeye hurlers went against each other in the opening game of a doubleheader. Red Top's Cole McDonald and Walford's Elijah Wood both showed that Iowa fans should feel good about the future of the pitching staff for Coach Rick Heller.

In the end, it was McDonald who prevailed, with a huge assist from reliever Jack Greene in the bottom of the seventh as Red Top held on for a 4-3 win. Coach Adam Sadler's team completed the sweep, taking the nightcap, 6-3, behind a complete game effort from Anthony Gagliardi.

The win was also sweet for McDonald as he got the win in front of his father, Cory, who, along with the rest of the McDonald family, made a surprise trip to watch his son pitch on Father's Day.

"I knew my grandpa would be here," McDonald said. "I didn't know my family was going to come and watch. It was nice that they took the time to drive down."

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McDonald's father is more than the average baseball fan. He is the head coach at New Hampton High School, located about two hours north of Iowa City, and has been a high school coach for more than 20 years. Following the game, father and son spent a few minutes talking about Cole's performance.

The younger McDonald worked six innings and two batters into the seventh. He walked the bases loaded in the first inning before striking out a pair to get out of the jam.

"I think my parents missed the first inning and didn't get here until the second," McDonald said with a laugh. "My main focus coming out here is working on things I need to do to get better for next season that I talked about with Coach Heller in my postseason meeting with him."



McDonald had a solid freshman campaign, pitching exclusively in mid-week, non-conference games. He went 4-1 with a 3.33 earned run average in 10 games. He had what he considered to be an advantage on Sunday, pitching against 2017 Hawkeye teammates Corbin Woods, Mitchell Boe and Matt Hoeg, who all started for Walford.

"I know exactly what to throw them to try and get them out," he said. "Going against guys you don't know, you stick to more of your basic stuff and trust that it will work."

McDonald was staked to a 1-0 lead on an RBI single in the first by current Kirkwood player Spencer Wiskus. He lost the lead in the third when a pair of RBI ground-outs gave the Hogs (1-7) a 2-1 lead. Nick Day, a former Iowa standout, gave Red Top a 4-2 lead when his two-run homer capped a three-run fifth inning.

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Walford got one back in the bottom of the inning, then appeared poised to win it in the seventh. McDonald walked the first two hitters and gave way to Greene, who walked the first batter he faced, loading the bases. Greene then fanned Hoeg and got Boe to hit a grounder to third for a force-out at home.

Greene went to a 3-2 count on Grant Walker before fanning the Walford catcher to close out the game.

"He did a great job of saving the game for us," McDonald said of Greene's effort.

In the nightcap, Red Top (5-3) broke open a tight game with a four-run sixth inning, capped off by Corbin Day's three-run homer to left. Another current Hawkeye, outfielder Ben Norman, gave Red Top a 2-1 lead in the fifth, doubling home Billy Kass and then scoring the go-ahead run on a Reid Bonner single to center.

Gagliardi was strong through six, allowing just two hits and one run until Walford took advantage of an error and an infield hit to plate a pair in the seventh.

Both teams are on the road next Sunday. Red Top plays a 1 p.m. doubleheader at Williamsburg while Walford has a 4 p.m. twinbill at Watkins.