

Franzenburg still going strong at 36

Written by Mike Condon

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WATKINS - Luke Franzenburg planned on calling it quits after last season.

A player with Watkins in the Iowa Valley League since 2000, Franzenburg had been player/manager for the Mud Hens the past three seasons.

"I was managing the last three years and it was getting to be too much of a time commitment away from family and away from work," he said.

When Franzenburg and his wife Steph told their three children, Avery, Finley and Tade of his decision there were plenty of tears.

"They were pretty bummed when we told them," Franzenburg said. "I talked to the team and they said they would find somebody to manage if I would just keep coming out and throwing for them."

Needless to say, a manager was found and the children were happy to see dad back on the mound.

The 36-year-old left-hander came on in relief in the opener of the annual holiday doubleheader contests against Norway with the Mud Hens holding a 3-1 lead. He struck out four and allowed just two hits in picking up the save as Watkins won, 5-2, at Gabe Kuester Memorial Ball Park.

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The visiting Bandits came back to gain a split winning the nightcap, 6-0, behind a three-hit, 12-strikeout performance from lefty Brady Corson.

Franzenburg has been a mainstay on the mound for almost two decades in Watkins. He played in college at Mount Mercy and was signed as a free agent by the Atlanta Braves organization, where he pitched in 15 games before being released.

He joined the Mud Hens at the end of his high school career at Benton Community and, except for his brief stint in professional baseball, has been with them ever since.

So what keeps him going at 36, now pitching against some players half his age?

"I have a great support system at home," he said. "My wife and kids love coming out here, and my parents (Dean and Tracy) have been to darn near every game I've ever played. They make it a lot easier on me and if I didn't have their support there is no way I would be able to do this."

There is also a burning desire to compete along with a desire to help younger players learn the game. On Saturday, Franzenburg came in to replace Kyle Shimp, who pitches for the University of Iowa. Shimp allowed just one hit, but struggled with his control, walking six in four innings.

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Helping young players, such as Shimp, make adjustments is important to Franzenburg.

"You just try to teach them what you can," he said. "They have a great attitude when they come to the park and most of them are willing to learn. You try to help them along where you can, not only about baseball, but also in being good human beings."

Franzenburg continues to be an effective pitcher in the league and it is his plan to continue next season.

"As long as I am still getting outs, I plan on coming back," he said. "It will stop being fun real quick if I can't get outs anymore. As long as I am having success and the support of my family, I will probably keep going."

Jonny Frese had a pair of hits in the Game 1 win for Watkins. Shimp and Franzenburg held Norway to just three hits.

Game 2 was all Corson. For the second straight week, Corson pitched a strong game. He finished strong, striking out the final five hitters he faced. Frese had two of the three hits allowed by Corson.

Norway's offense was paced by University of Iowa outfielder Kace Massner, who had a pair of hits and two runs batted in. Christian Stekl and Travis Mueller also had a pair of hits as the Bandits had 12 as a team.

Both teams return to action next Sunday. Watkins (6-8) will host Red Top in a 4 p.m. twinbill while Norway (7-7) returns home for a 5 p.m. doubleheader with Walford.