

Kepler's home run lifts Kernels by Bees

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 25 June 2013 16:53 - Last Updated Tuesday, 25 June 2013 17:32



Both of Max Kepler's parents were professional ballet dancers who performed on international stages, but Kepler prefers a baseball and a bat to ballet slippers.

The Minnesota Twins and Cedar Rapids Kernels are glad about that.

Kepler played his first game in Cedar Rapids Tuesday and lofted a game-winning, two-run homer to help the Kernels trim the Burlington Bees, 6-4, before 3,459 fans in a steamy day game at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Kepler ran nimbly around the bases on his home run, but he's never danced on his toes in his life. He admires his parents for what they accomplished in a difficult profession, but ballet was not for him.

"That's not my cup of tea," said Kepler, who grew up in Germany. "They tried to get me into it when I was a young age. I like ball sports, roughing around on the fields.

"My sister didn't do ballet either. They didn't force us to do it."

Kepler joined the Kernels on June 19 from extended spring training in Florida, where he was nursing an elbow injury. He played a few games with the Kernels this past weekend when Byron Buxton was still with the team, but Buxton was promoted to the Fort Myers Miracle Sunday night and Kepler took his spot in center field Tuesday.

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Kepler is not trying to be the "next Buxton" in Cedar Rapids, knowing how difficult that would be, trying to replace a fan favorite and All-Star center fielder. He was just wants to be himself.

"No pressure at all," said Kepler, who hit his first homer with the Kernels. "He's a great guy, great player. I hope the best for him.



"I'm just here to play center field and do my job. I love playing center, I love playing the outfield. Wherever they put me, I'll just play my best. I hope the best for him and I'll do my best here."

Kepler went 2-for-4 with a double and homer. His two-run shot in the bottom of the eighth inning snapped a 4-4 tie and gave the Kernels a 5-0 record for the second half of the Midwest League campaign.

"Kepler's a good player," said Cedar Rapids Manager Jake Mauer. "For him to come in after Buxton, there are always going to be comparisons, but Kepler is going to be a pretty nice player himself.

"He came up in a big situation, not afraid. He didn't try to do too much with it. He used that porch (in left field)."

Kepler, a left-handed batter, lofted an outside fastball onto the porch with Travis Harrison on first base with a walk. "I lifted it high enough and I got it into that jet stream and it went out," he said, taking advantage of the warm breeze.

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Mauer would have loved to see Buxton stay in Cedar Rapids all summer, but knew it was time for the top Twins prospect to face his next challenge in the Florida State League.

"That's part of the minor leagues," he said. "Buxton, obviously, is a really good player. That might be an understatement. He's got tools through the roof.

"We're going to miss him without a doubt, but that's just how it is. Somebody else has to step up."

Niko Goodrum moved into the leadoff spot in the Kernels batting order in place of Buxton Tuesday and the next three batters all moved up a notch with Jorge Polanco in the No.2 spot, Dalton Hicks in the No.3 spot and Harrison in the cleanup spot. Kepler hit fifth, followed by Adam Brett Walker.

Kepler has decent speed, but does not run as fast as Buxton. Few people do. Mauer said he'll also use J.D. Williams and Jeremias Pineda in center field at times. Kepler, a versatile player, can play first base and the corner outfield spots.

The Kernels trailed, 4-0, before battling back. Kepler led off the seventh inning with a double to left field, advanced on a grounder and scored on a two-out infield single by Michael Quesada.

Burlington pitcher Austin Adams walked Williams and Goodrum, loading the bases. Joseph Krehbiel replaced Adams on the mound and tried to sneak a first-pitch fastball by Polanco, but Polanco was waiting and ripped a three-run triple to the base of the wall in right-center to tie the game 4-4.

Kaleb Merck pitched 2 1/3 innings of spotless relief for the Kernels to get his first victory. He relieved Tim Atherton, who left in the seventh inning with a stiff back.

"Merck pushed the strike zone. Threw his slider and changeup. He looked good today," said

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Mauer. "That was a nice win."

The Kernels have drawn 1,998,036 fans to Veterans Memorial Stadium since the ballpark opened in 2002. They need 1,964 more fans to reach the 2 million mark.

It could happen when the Kernels host Burlington Wednesday at 6:35 p.m. The 2 millionth fan will receive a prize package worth \$3,000, including \$1,500 in cash.

BURLINGTON (4): K.Johnson, cf, 2 1 0 0, Ross, 3b, 3 1 1 0, Ray, lf, 4 1 2 3, Hinkle, 1b, 4 0 1 0, Bolaski, dh, 4 1 0 0, Bemboom, c, 2 0 0 0, Moesquit, 2b, 3 0 1 1, Clarke, rf, 4 0 0 0, Soto, ss, 3 0 0 0. Totals 30 4 5 4.

KERNELS (6): Goodrum, ss, 3 1 0 0, Polanco, 2b, 4 0 1 3, Hicks, 1b, 4 0 1 0, Harrison, 3b, 2 1 0 0, Kepler, cf, 4 2 2 2, Walker, rf, 4 0 0 0, Grimes, dh, 3 0 0 0, Quesada, c, 4 1 1 1, Williams, lf, 2 1 1 0. Totals 30 6 6 6.

Burlington 002 200 000 - 4 5 0
Kernels 000 000 42x - 6 6 1

Scoggins, Love (2), Adams (7), Krehbiel (7) and Bemboom. Melotakis, Atherton (7), Merck (7) and Quesada. W - Merck (1-0). L - Krehbiel (2-4). 2B - Hicks (23), Kepler (4). 3B - Ray (1), Polanco (9). HR - Kepler (1). E - Melotakis (1). T - 2:35. A - 3,459.