

Masterful Melotakis spins Kernels to win

Written by Mike Koolbeck

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Mason Melotakis was in command from start to nearly finish and the Cedar Rapids Kernels continued their home-field hex over the Clinton LumberKings.

Melotakis scattered five hits over eight innings to notch his ninth win and the Kernels beat Clinton, 3-1, in a Midwest League baseball game played before a crowd of 2,676 at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

The Kernels (24-11) ran their record at Perfect Game Field to 5-0 against the LumberKings (16-19). The Kernels play Clinton for the final time on home sod Monday night at 6:35.

Jeremias Pineda's two-out, two-run double in the bottom of the sixth inning broke a 1-1 tie and lifted the Kernels to the win.

Melotakis (9-3) was a relief pitcher before this season, but now finds himself tied for third in wins in the Midwest League.

Kernels Manager Jake Mauer said Melotakis has met the expectations the club had for him.

"He's a guy, with his build and his ability to slow the ball down, it was just a matter of him being able to command his fastball and you saw that today," Mauer said of Melotakis, a 6-foot-3 southpaw.

Melotakis threw 95 pitches and 66 were strikes. He struck out seven batters, retired the side in order in five of the eight innings he worked, and retired 13 straight batters at one point in the game.

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His fastball topped out at 91 mph, but he kept batters off-balance with a 79 mph curve.

"Whenever you're converting a bullpen guy into a starter, he has to understand that he has to really try to command three pitches," Mauer said. "But it all goes off of his fastball.

"Melo's last four or five starts have all been really good. He's throwing strike one, he's got movement on it, he keeps it down and puts the hitter in a defensive position. Then he's able to use his breaking ball against some of those guys that are aggressive and get in good counts."

He struck out Clinton's Gaby Guerrero, the free-swinging nephew of former major league star Vladimir Guerrero, all three times he faced him.

Mauer said there was some consideration to letting Melotakis finish the game, but Madison Boer had not pitched in five games and needed some work. Boer came in and gave up a one-out single before ending the game with a double-play grounder for his second save.

"(Melotakis) was getting close to over 100 pitches," Mauer said. "He did his job. We could get him out of there on a good note and get Madison Boer in a situation to try to get a save."

Pineda, the Kernels' No.9 hitter in the batting order, saved the game an inning after the club failed to convert a bases-loaded situation into runs.

With runners at first and second base, Pineda swatted a twisting drive the opposite way into the left-center field gap for a double.

The Kernels took a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the first on Max Kepler's two-out RBI single.

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Clinton scored an unearned run in the second when Taylor Ard's grounder rolled under the glove of Kernels shortstop Niko Goodrum for a run-scoring error.

Ard broke Melotakis' string of 13 straight retired batters with a leadoff single in the eighth. The string started when Taylor Marlette grounded into a double play to end the Clinton third.

Kepler lined a single off the shin of Clinton starter Victor Sanchez (2-5) leading off the Kernels' sixth inning. The ball ricocheted to first baseman Ard, but Kepler beat him to the bag with a head-first dive into the bag. Sanchez stayed in the game and finished the inning. He was replaced the following inning by David Holman.

CLINTON (1): Marte, 2b, 4 0 1 0, Morales, lf, 4 0 1 0, Marlette, c, 4 0 1 0, Peterson, dh, 4 0 0 0, Lara, 3b, 3 1 1 0, Guerrero, rf, 3 0 0 0, Ard, 1b, 3 0 1 0, Zorrilla, cf, 3 0 1 0, Peguero, ss, 3 0 0 0. Totals 31 1 6 0.

KERNELS (3): Murphy, cf, 4 0 2 0, Goodrum, ss, 3 1 0 0, Gonzales, dh, 2 0 0 0, Walker, rf, 4 0 0 0, Kepler, 1b, 4 0 2 1, Harrison, 3b, 4 1 1 0, Licon, 2b, 4 0 0 0, Quesada, c, 4 1 1 0, Pineda, lf, 2 0 1 2. Totals 31 3 7 3.

Clinton 010 000 000 - 1 6 0

Kernels 100 002 00x - 3 7 1

Sanchez, Holman (7) and Marlette. Melotakis, Boer (9) and Quesada. W-Melotakis (9-3). L-Sanchez (2-5). Sv-Boer (2). 2B-Lara (22), Pineda (4). SB-Murphy (3). E-Goodrum (21). T-2:10. A-2,676.