

Baker takes step toward Chicago Cubs

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 28 August 2013 22:49 - Last Updated Wednesday, 28 August 2013 22:57



The Chicago Cubs are paying Scott Baker a cool \$5.5 million this year, but so far all he's done is pitch in the minor leagues on rehabilitation assignments.

That could change soon.

Baker took a big step toward Chicago Wednesday night when he tossed five sharp innings for Kane County in a 9-1 victory over Cedar Rapids before 1,711 fans in a Midwest League game at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Baker, 31, allowed only one hit (a scratch infield single), struck out two batters and did not walk anyone. It was much better than his four previous rehab starts for the Cougars and an encouraging sign for the veteran right-hander.

"I felt pretty good," he said. "I made some pitches when I needed to. They hit a lot of balls right at guys, which you appreciate as a pitcher.

"It's getting better. It's not quite where I'd like it to be, but I feel like I'm competitive right now."

Baker's fastball was clocked in the mid-80's Wednesday. He pitched in the 90 to 92 mph range during seven successful years with the Minnesota Twins, but he had Tommy John surgery last year, missed the entire 2012 campaign and suffered another arm injury this spring after signing with the Cubs as a free agent.

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Baker compiled a 63-48 record and 4.15 ERA with the Twins and pitched for several playoff teams, but he has not appeared in a Major League game in two years.

"It can be tough, and it can wear on you," he said. "But I think I'm starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel, if there is such a thing."

Baker was encouraged by Wednesday's performance. "Sure," he said. "Of course I'd like to throw five innings at the big league level right now, but it is what it is."



Baker and Kernels Manager Jake Mauer played together in the minor leagues for two years in the Twins organization and are good friends. They roomed together one year and their wives are close, but Mauer claimed he was more interested in winning a ballgame than helping his buddy.

"I wish we would have knocked him out in the first inning," he said, mostly in jest.

Baker and Mauer had a chance to visit before the game.

"He's just starting to come back, trying to build up stamina," said Mauer. "He doesn't pitch like that at 83-84 (mph). He's trying to get it back up there. He pitched at 90, 91, 92. He's starting to build it back up."

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"The guy has pitched in the big leagues for a long time. He knows how to pitch. Move the ball around. Our guys tried to do a little too much, tried to pull him out of the park and all that.

"Believe me, Scott knew which way the wind was blowing. He's a good starter when he's healthy, a good big-league starter.

"We want to see Scott healthy and get back to the big leagues," said Mauer. "He deserves that. He's one of the hardest workers I've been around. A super nice guy and a good family man. Hopefully he'll get back up there and help the Cubbies."

Baker thinks he'll make one more start for Kane County this season. The team is located in the Chicago suburbs, so it's convenient for him to work out with the Cubs and pitch for the Cougars.

Baker signed a one-year deal with Chicago this year, so he'll be a free agent again following the season. He'd love to make a couple of appearances for the Cubs before this year ends.

"It sounds good to me," he said. "They want me to throw just as much as I want to throw. So I really hope it works out. I know we're kind of running out of time. I think tonight was a good step."

As a pending free agent, Baker wants to prove he's still a Major League pitcher so he can sign another contract. That's why appearing in a big league game in September is important.

"Not only for the Chicago Cubs to see, but for everyone to see. Even for myself," he said.

Baker said he's not obsessed with velocity right now. It's more about making pitches and getting stronger.

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"It's getting better," he maintained. "Is it perfect? No. Is it where I want it ultimately to be? No. But everything is a little sharper, and that's a good thing."

Baker looked sharp for Kane County, but Jose Berrios struggled for the Kernels in what was supposed to be a tuneup for the Midwest League playoffs that start next Wednesday in Davenport. The Kernels were considering Berrios as their Game 1 starter against the Quad Cities River Bandits, but that may have changed.

Berrios (7-7, 3.99 ERA) was tagged for two home runs and gave up five runs in five innings. He allowed five hits and walked three batters, putting his spot in the playoff rotation in jeopardy.

"We were hoping Berrios would be a little sharper tonight, and he wasn't," said Mauer. "So we're going to have to take a look at it again (the playoff rotation) and try to come up with something here."

"He just doesn't look like the same animal we saw a couple of weeks ago. I don't know if he's going to give us the best chance right now. We may have to go in another direction."

Cedar Rapids (84-49) and Kane County (53-77) will meet again Thursday night and Friday night at the stadium.

The Kernels raised their season attendance to 174,880, the best since 2006.

KANE COUNTY (9): Amaya, 2b, 3 2 1 0, Zapenas, ss, 4 1 1 0, Candelario, 3b, 4 3 2 3, Shoulders, dh, 4 0 1 1, Contreras, 1b, 4 0 1 1, Dore, cf, 3 1 1 1, Escobar, c, 5 1 1 2, Golden, rf, 3 0 0 0, Gretzky, lf, 4 1 1 0. Totals 34 9 9 8.

KERNELS (1): Murphy, cf, 2 1 0 0, Grimes, 2b, 3 0 0 0, Polanco, ss, 4 0 1 0, Gonzales, 1b, 2 0 0 0, Quesada, 1b, 1 0 0 1, A.Walker, rf, 3 0 1 0, Harrison, dh, 4 0 0 0, Altobelli, c, 4 0 1 0, Licon, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Pineda, lf, 4 0 1 0. Totals 30 1 4 1.

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Kane County 003 200 202 - 9 9 0

Kernels 000 000 010 - 1 4 1

Baker, Arias (6), Perakslis (8) and Escobar. Berrios, Bixler (6), Muren (8) and Altobelli. W - Baker (1-2). L - Berrios (7-7). 2B - Candelario (35). HR - Candelario (11), Escobar (4). E - Polanco. T - 3:03. A - 1,711.