

Sluggish Kernels get lecture from Mauer

Written by Jim Ecker

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CLINTON - The Cedar Rapids Kernels clinched the best record in the Midwest League several days ago and are comfortably headed to the playoffs, but Manager Jake Mauer doesn't like to see any lolly-gagging among his players.

He closed the clubhouse door for about 10 minutes Sunday to let his players know he wasn't happy after they lost to the Clinton LumberKings, 3-1, on a warm afternoon before 885 fans at Ashford University Field.

It was Game 137 in a long, hot, five-month campaign and it didn't really matter who won or lost, except to the skipper of the losing squad.

Tim Atherton, scheduled to pitch Game 3 in the playoffs Friday, tossed six strong innings, marred only by a solo home run, but the Kernels collected only five hits and botched a pair of ground balls to allow an unearned run.

"I feel bad for Atherton," said Mauer. "He worked his ass off today, but we weren't quite into it mentally. That's what I told them. We're going to be prepared tomorrow, I'll tell you that."

The Kernels struck out 15 times in the first seven innings, which means 15 of the first 21 outs were strikeouts. Every starter in the lineup whiffed at least once, and third baseman Joel Licon was ejected for disagreeing with the home-plate umpire on one of the K's.

"We didn't play until the fifth or sixth inning, then we decided, 'They've got a lead now, we've got to start playing,'" said Mauer. "That's part of not being a professional player. We weren't very sharp, and that's what we don't like to see going into the playoffs."

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As far as Mauer is concerned, there's no such thing as a meaningless game.

"Anytime you put a uniform on, in the grand scheme of things, it's never really meaningless because you can always make an impression on somebody," he said. "That's what these guys should realize.

"You can use all the excuses: A 2 o'clock game after a night game, you've got to ride the bus for an hour and 40 minutes. That's all correct, but it doesn't matter. You've got to go out and play. You're getting paid to play baseball. That's not bad."

The Kernels will face Clinton in the final regular-season game of the season Monday afternoon. They'll be idle Tuesday and open the Midwest League playoffs Wednesday night at the Quad Cities River Bandits. The best-of-3 playoff series will shift to Cedar Rapids Thursday and Friday (if necessary).

Mauer said left-hander Brett Lee will pitch Game 1 of the playoffs, followed by Tim Shibuya in Game 2 and Atherton in Game 3 (if necessary).

"We had a lot of options," said Mauer. "To be honest with you, it's just the hot hand right now. All three of them."

Mauer has used a lot of different lineups the past few weeks when Niko Goodrum, Jorge Polanco and Max Kepler needed time to nurse injuries. Everybody is healthy and rested now, and Mauer plans to pick nine guys for Wednesday's playoff opener and put them on the field Monday to get ready.

"As of right now, everybody is good," he said. "We'll roll these guys out there tomorrow as kind of a tuneup with everybody in there. At least that's the game plan."

KERNELS (1): Murphy, cf, 3 1 1 0, Goodrum, ss, 4 0 1 0, Grimes, 2b, 3 0 1 1, Walker, rf, 4 0 0

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0, Gonzales, dh, 4 0 1 0, Altobelli, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Licon, 3b, 2 0 0 0, Harrison, 3b, 2 0 0 0, Quesada, c, 1 0 0 0, Pineda, lf, 4 0 1 0. Totals 31 1 5 1.

CLINTON (3): Hebert, ss, 4 0 1 0, Littlewood, c, 4 0 0 0, Pizzano, lf, 4 1 1 0, Marlette, dh, 4 1 1 1, Zorilla, cf, 4 0 1 0, Guerrero, rf, 4 1 1 1, Shank, 3b, 3 0 1 0, McGruder, 2b, 2 0 0 0, Caballero, 1b, 3 0 1 0. Totals 32 3 7 2.

Kernels 000 000 010 - 1 5 2

Clinton 010 100 01x - 3 7 0

Atherton, Muren (7), Boer (8) and Quesada. Holovach, Bordonaro (4), Garcia (8) and Littlewood. W - Bordonaro (3-4). L - Atherton (8-5). S - Garcia (2). 2B - Grimes (10), Murphy (7). Pizzano (40). HR - Guerrero (3). SB - Walker (10), Hebert (15). Ejected - Licon. T - 2:30. A - 885.