

Surging Kernels are in playoff hunt

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 19 July 2014 20:41 - Last Updated Sunday, 20 July 2014 20:43



It's okay to start using the "P" word around the Cedar Rapids Kernels.

Playoffs.

The Kernels are still six games under .500 with a 46-52 overall record, but the Midwest League believes in second chances and the home team is hot and playing good baseball.

Cedar Rapids won for the ninth time in its last 10 games Saturday night with a 4-3 victory over Fort Wayne before 5,090 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

The victory lifted the Kernels to 15-13 for the second half of the Midwest League campaign, putting them in the thick of playoff contention.

Their 31-39 record for the first half of the season doesn't matter any more. Neither does their 46-52 overall mark.

The only thing that matters now is their 15-13 record for the second half. If the season ended right now, the Kernels would be in the playoffs.

There are 42 games left, however, and Kernels skipper Jake Mauer thinks it's too early to talk

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about the postseason.

"A lot of things can happen," he cautioned Saturday. "Hopefully we don't get bit again by that injury bug.

"That's the thing about baseball. You never know what can happen."

But make no mistake, Mauer likes the way his club has been playing.

"We're doing a little bit of everything," he said. "Usually we'd pitch and don't hit, or hit and don't pitch. Now we're doing a little bit of everything."

Cedar Rapids starter Lewis Thorpe allowed two runs in 4.1 innings before reaching his pitch limit for the day. Chris Mazza (2-2) got the win with 2.1 innings of relief, Hudson Boyd got a "hold" and flamethrower Nick Burdi collected his second save with a 1-2-3 ninth inning with two strikeouts.

Burdi reached 101 on the radar gun and got both of his strikeouts with a nasty slider.

"Obviously his stuff is closing stuff. There's no doubt about it," said Mauer. "When he's throwing that slider up there at 89-90 mph, that's like a Nintendo slider."

The Kernels grabbed a 4-2 lead by scoring three runs in the sixth inning with three hits, a walk, a good sacrifice bunt and a big throwing error by the Fort Wayne pitcher.

It wasn't a big explosion or anything, but they got a break on the throwing error and made it work.

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"It feels like right now we're starting to get some of the breaks," said Boyd. "I'd guess that would be the biggest difference."

Boyd knows there's a long way to go, but he thinks the playoffs are within reach.

"Coming into the season, you obviously want to make the playoffs," he remarked. "I'd say after the first half ended, it's a clean slate, so ever since the second half started we've been trying to make the playoffs. We're trying to make that push."

"I think us staying even-keeled the whole year is starting to pay off."

Mauer said Burdi and Jake Reed have helped solidify the bullpen since joining the team recently. He also said Logan Wade, healthy again, and newcomer Alex Swim have given the offense a boost.

Mauer likes his team's chances.

"We'd never really given up on our guys," he said. "We've always stayed with it, stayed in it. It was frustrating early, without a doubt. May and June, guys got down."

Now things are looking better. "That's a testament to those boys in there," he said, referring to his players in the clubhouse.

"It's definitely happier," he said. "Any time you're winning, everybody is in a pretty good mood."

"When you're losing, you kind of find out who you are as a person. They very easily could have

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mailed it in right now and gone through the motions.

"Things are breaking for us now where they weren't two or three weeks ago. We're starting to learn how to win a little bit. We're winning close games like that, instead of something negative happening."

The Kernels got only five hits Saturday, but found a way to prevail. Shortstop Engelb Vielma went 2-for-4. Catcher Mitch Garver drove in two runs. Chad Christensen got his sixth triple of the year.

Swim had his 14-game hitting streak come to an end, but he drew a walk and reached base for the 19th straight game.

The Kernels and Fort Wayne (40-57) meet again Sunday at 2:05 p.m. and Monday at 12:05 p.m.

FORT WAYNE (3): Turner, dh, 3 0 1 1, Peterson, 3b, 4 0 0 0, Bauers, 1b, 4 1 1 1, Reyes, rf, 4 0 0 0, Miller, c, 4 0 1 0, Richardson, cf, 4 0 1 0, Schulz, lf, 4 1 1 1, Bruguera, 2b, 4 1 1 0, VanMeter, ss, 4 0 2 0. Totals 35 3 8 3.

KERNELS (4): Vielma, ss, 4 1 2 0, Wade, 2b, 3 1 0 0, Christensen, 1b, 4 1 1 0, Garver, c, 4 0 1 2, Haar, 3b, 3 0 1 1, Swim, rf, 2 0 0 0, Kanzler, cf, 3 0 0 0, Williams, lf, 3 0 0 0, Vavra, dh, 0 1 0 0. Totals 26 4 5 3.

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Fort Wayne 000 110 100 - 3 8 1

Kernels 000 103 00x - 4 5 1

Lloyd, Guzman (6) and Miller. Thorpe, Mazza (5), Boyd (7), Burdi (9) and Garver. W - Mazza (2-2). L - Lloyd (3-4). S - Burdi (2). 2B - VanMeter (19). 3B - Christensen (6). HR - Bauers (7), Schulz (1). E - Lloyd (1), Garver (7). T - 2:41. A - 5,090.