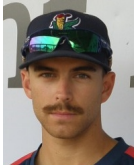


## Fort Myers wins Florida State League title

Written by milb.com

Tuesday, 09 September 2014 11:44 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 September 2014 18:06

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In his first playoff game, Twins prospect Jason Kanzler delivered a game-tying grand slam for Fort Myers. In his last, he managed to deliver an even bigger blow.

The 24-year-old outfielder drove a go-ahead home run in the top of the 11th inning and Fort Myers held on to beat Daytona, 4-2, in Game 4 to win the Florida State League championship.

"It's surreal," said Kanzler, one of many former Cedar Rapids Kernels on the club. "Winning a championship is amazing. It's an amazing feeling. Everyone on this team is all fired up. It's indescribable."

The title is the first for Fort Myers in its 22-year history, and also the first for second-year manager Doug Mientkiewicz. The 12-year Major Leaguer made the final out when the Miracle lost to the Cubs in the 1995 Florida State League Championship Series, Mientkiewicz's first season as a pro player.

"I lingered on that for a long time," Mientkiewicz said. "To get my first Minor League championship means the world."

After the Miracle jumped out to a 2-0 lead on Travis Harrison's sacrifice fly in the first and Tyler Grimes' RBI double in the fourth, Daytona responded with unearned runs in the fourth and sixth. The score was knotted, 2-2, until the 11th.

Twins' No. 13 prospect Adam Brett Walker led off the frame with a double to snap an 0-for-12 streak. With one out, Kanzler delivered the decisive blow, lifting a hanging slider over the

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center-field fence.

"I knew I hit it real hard," the Penfield, N.Y., native said. "I guess I turned the spin back around and it carried out. I just ran my [butt] off. I was just a bit fired up."

Last week, Kanzler helped Fort Myers erase a 7-0 deficit against Brevard County with a game-tying grand slam on a six-RBI night in the Miracle's Game 1 victory in the Florida State League semifinals.

Monday's homer supplanted that grand slam as the biggest moment in his career. "I guess I sandwiched my playoffs with a couple good swings," he said.

Kanzler had a long road to pro ball. The outfielder initially attended Northeastern University, but was cut during his freshman year. He headed to the University of Buffalo as a sophomore, won a Rawlings Gold Glove as a junior and was drafted in the 20th round following his senior year in 2013.

"You can't control, can't change what's happened in the past," he said. "I guess I play with a little chip on my shoulder. It feels amazing to help a team win, be a part of an awesome thing like this."

Kanzler, who was hitting ninth for Fort Myers, wasn't the only down-the-order player to come through. No. 8 hitter Tyler Grimes collected two hits in his fourth straight multi-hit game. He went 9-for-21 in six postseason games, including 8-for-15 in the Finals.

The Wichita State product contemplated retirement at the start of the season, but at Mientkiewicz's pleading he stuck with the Miracle and proved an invaluable piece thanks to his versatility. As Fort Myers dealt with a rash of injuries, the 24-year-old put in time at catcher, second base, third base and all three outfield spots.

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"He's a gamer," Mientkiewicz said. "At the beginning of the year, he wasn't sure if he wanted to keep playing. I fought tooth and nail for him, kept telling him to bear with me, that his time was coming.

"When Tyler was in there, the whole demeanor of our club changed. He's a little grinder, got big hit after big hit. He played great at center, third, second, behind the plate.

"Anywhere we put him, we could trust him. I truly believe that kid has a lot more baseball in him. He's a kid I'll pull for no matter what he does."

Minnesota's 2014 second-rounder Nick Burdi entered in the eighth and tossed two perfect innings. The right-hander struck out four, including three in the ninth.

Since being called up to Fort Myers in early August, the Twins' No. 12 prospect threw 12 2/3 scoreless innings with 20 strikeouts and three walks.

"His fastball is 95 to 100 [mph]," Mientkiewicz said. "The command of his slider, though, he can throw it for strikes, throw it as a put-away pitch. I just love this kid's demeanor. He can harness that fastball.

"He's not just going to rear back and throw it by a guy. He can pitch with 95 to 100, he can spot a slider, and at the end of the day, I trust the kid knows how to handle the situation."

For Mientkiewicz, who won a World Series with the Red Sox in 2004, getting his first title as a manager is among his top achievements in uniform.

"It's harder to watch than it is to play," he said. "You're fighting a ton of emotions, being a manager and a leader. You have to have a calming influence on them when things go bad, have to stay under control.

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"This ranks up there. I'm like a proud dad to watch these kids grow. To sit back and watch them celebrate tonight was great."