

Kernels come home with 12-5 record

Written by S.D. Buhr

Wednesday, 24 April 2013 22:31 -

There is no shortage of great story lines through the first three weeks of the Cedar Rapids Kernels' inaugural season as the Minnesota Twins Class A affiliate in the Midwest League.

To begin with, the Kernels (12-5) sit atop the MWL Western Division standings, with a one-game lead over the Quad City River Bandits (Astros). Cedar Rapids has had success both at home (5-2) and on the road (7-3).

The Kernels open a six-game homestand Thursday night at 6:35 p.m. against Great Lakes.

The biggest story of the first three weeks of the MWL season has undoubtedly been the weather. The Kernels have played only 17 games at this point, and that's more than 10 of the other 15 MWL teams have played.

Wednesday was supposed to have been the first scheduled off-day of the Kernels' season, but with all of the weather-related postponements and cancellations it was the seventh day Kernels players did not have a game since Opening Day.

Understandably, the early attention on the field has been focused on center fielder Byron Buxton, the Twins' No.1 draft pick a year ago. Buxton got off to an amazing start with the bat, but it was inevitable that he would cool off.

He has just three hits in his last 15 at-bats over the Kernels' most recent four games. That's dropped his batting average down to .404. He's reached base at a .514 rate and has two doubles, two triples and two home runs to assemble a 1.128 On-Base Plus Slugging Percentage (OPS). He also has seven stolen bases.

If this is the worst "slump" Buxton has to go through, he's going to have a fun season.

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But Buxton isn't the only Kernels hitter putting up impressive numbers. First baseman Dalton Hicks has put together a good start of his own, as well. His .310 batting average is backed up by seven doubles and a team-leading three home runs.

Drew Leachman went hitless in five at-bats on Opening Night and spent the next couple of weeks on the Disabled List after hurting his shoulder in that first game. Leachman has nine hits in 21 at-bats for a .429 average since being reactivated, with a double, a triple and four RBIs in five games.

In addition to Buxton, Hicks and Leachman, there are five additional Kernels hitting .270 or better

Niko Goodrum is hitting at a .288 clip with five doubles and a .383 On-Base Percentage (OBP).

Jorge Polanco has four doubles and a home run, along with 11 RBIs, to go with his .281 batting average.

Adam Walker also has a .281 average and 11 RBIs to go with his two doubles, one triple and two home runs.

Travis Harrison shares the team lead in doubles with Hicks at seven and has a pair of home runs as well. He's hitting .271.

J.D. Williams is hitting .270, but he's parlayed three doubles and a pair of home runs, along with 11 walks, into a .429 OBP and an OPS of .942. That's good work, especially coming from the guy who's held down the No.9 spot in the batting order most of the young season.

The biggest Kernels news this week was the debut of Jose Berrios, one of the top starting pitching prospects in the Twins organization. Berrios threw five innings Monday night against the Burlington Bees. He struck out five hitters, but also gave up seven hits and walked a pair.

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If Berrios, who will be just 18 years old for another month, was a bit over-excited for his first start, it would be understandable. He had trouble getting his fastball down in the strike zone the first two innings, but finished strong enough to be credited with the win in the Kernels' 8-4 victory.

Berrios' fastball reportedly hit 96 mph early in the game, but one scout's radar gun consistently recorded it at 91-93 mph during his last two innings of work. However, it's possible that his breaking ball was more impressive. It had a late, sharp break that buckled more than one set of Bees' knees.

In the end, Berrios may turn out to be the biggest pitching story this season for the Kernels, but a number of his fellow pitchers are setting a pretty high standard for him to meet.

Tyler Duffey hasn't been able to repeat the seven perfect-innings performance of his first start of the season, but he's continued to pitch well. Through 19.2 innings covering three starts, he's put up a 2.29 ERA, striking out 17 while walking only three hitters. He's also put up a 0.661 WHIP (Walks + Hits per Inning Pitched).

Mason Melotakis has a 2.84 ERA in his three starts, racking up 11 strikeouts in just 12.2 innings. Hudson Boyd, while struggling with control at times, also has managed to miss bats. Boyd has struck out a dozen hitters in 14 innings during his three starts.

David Hurlbut appears to be the pitcher bumped from the rotation to the bullpen to make room for Berrios (though that could change with the promotion of Taylor Rogers to Fort Myers this week). Hurlbut has a 3.00 ERA and a 0.933 WHIP in 15 innings during four appearances (two of them starts).

The weather situation has left Brett Lee, who started the season penciled in as the Kernels' sixth starting pitcher in a six-man rotation, with just one start in the first three weeks of the season. He's made two other appearances in relief roles.

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Regardless of how he's entered the game, however, Lee has kept his opponents from scoring. He's sporting a perfect 0.00 ERA over eight innings, while striking out seven hitters without surrendering a walk.

Steven Gruver has posted a 0.64 ERA in his four appearances, three of which came out of the bullpen, while the other came as an emergency starter. That start was necessitated by weather that forced the Kernels to play seven games in a period of just four days.

Gruver has struck out 16 hitters and walked just two in 14 innings.

Gruver, along with Tyler Jones, Tim Atherton, Manuel Solimon and Chris Mazza, have anchored an effective Kernels bullpen. Gruver, Jones, Atherton and Mazza have all struck out more than one hitter per inning of work.

Manager Jake Mauer's group of Kernels is off to a good start, made even more impressive by the conditions in which they've had to play and the effect the weather has had on their schedule. It should be interesting to see how things come together when the weather turns warm and the fans start to fill up the ballpark.