

Sweeney enjoys home cooking in return to C.R.

Written by Jim Ecker
Sunday, 28 April 2013 17:07 -

All Kellen Sweeney needed was a few hugs and the prospect of a home-cooked meal to snap out of a nasty batting slump in the Midwest League.

Sweeney returned to Cedar Rapids Sunday with the Lansing Lugnuts and went 2-for-3 with a double and 400-foot home run in a 4-3 loss to the Kernels before a season-high crowd of 2,552 fans on a sunny afternoon at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Sweeney, 21, had been mired in an 0-for-23 skid in Lansing's last seven games, but he delighted his family and friends with a breakout game in his home town.

"It felt good," said Sweeney, standing in a hallway outside the visitor's locker room. "I've been comfortable at the plate the past week or so and all that stuff, but nothing was falling. That's just baseball.

"To come home and have a good day the first time here and have my family rooting me on was an awesome experience."

Sweeney was hitting .242 a week ago, but his average fell all the way to an embarrassing .143 with his 0-and-23 slide. His 2-for-3 performance Sunday raised his average to .169, which is still extremely low but possibly headed in the right direction.

"Today was a really good day for him," said Lansing Manager John Tamargo Jr. "He's swinging the bat okay, he just hasn't had the results that he's wanted.

"It's a long season, a very long season," said Tamargo. "I expect things to turn around, and hopefully today will be the first day of the turnaround."

Sweeney was a star shortstop at Cedar Rapids Jefferson and was a second-round pick by the

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Toronto Blue Jays in 2010. He's spent most of his time in the minor leagues at third base, but the Lugnuts have used him at third base, second base, first base and designated hitter this year.

Sweeney played first base Sunday and did a good job with a borrowed mitt. He snared a line drive and doubled a runner off second base, made all of his fielding plays and gunned down a Kernels runner at the plate when J.D. Williams tried to score from third base on a pickoff move to first.

Sweeney said playing first base is a little like playing third base.

"It's just a different angle," he said. "Every position is a different angle on the field, and when you're playing a lot of them you have to get used to them every once in awhile. You have to catch the ball and touch the bag a lot more. That's about it."

Tamargo likes Sweeney's versatility on defense.

"We're trying to get him at-bats, any position we can," he said. "Some of the other guys don't play other positions, and he has the skill set where he can play multiple positions, so we're going to utilize that."

"He played a real nice first base, hit a big home run, big double. Did an outstanding job," said Tamargo. "Hopefully it gets him going."

The Kernels had a 3-1 lead when Sweeney came to bat with one out in the fifth inning. He drilled a 1-2 fastball to deep center field and began running as Kernels center fielder Byron Buxton raced back to the wall.

"I didn't know it was a homer," said Sweeney. "I thought he caught it and I was like, 'Aw, just my luck. This guy robbed me.'"

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"After I knew it was out it was a good experience. Everyone was cheering and stuff like that."

It was Sweeney's first home run of the season.

Sweeney's fan club sat about behind the visitor's dugout on the third-base side at Perfect Game Field. All visiting players are entitled to two free tickets, but Sweeney scrounged around and collected about 16 tickets for his parents, his girlfriend, her parents and a few of her friends.

Other members of the cheering section purchased their own tickets and they celebrated his home run to straightaway center field.

Sweeney roped a double into the right-field corner with one out in the seventh inning of a 3-3 game, but was stranded at second base.

The Kernels (16-5) took a 4-3 lead in the eighth inning on a two-out RBI single to right field by Dalton Hicks. He knocked in Niko Goodrum with the decisive run as the streaking Kernels won their seventh game in a row.

Tyler Duffey (3-1) allowed three runs in eight innings for the victory. Tyler Jones pitched a 1-2-3 ninth inning with two strikeouts for his third save.

Sweeney was in the on-deck circle when the game ended.

The Kernels have raised their record from 9-5 to 16-5 with their winning streak the past week.

"These streaks are nice when they come around in this league," said Cedar Rapids skipper

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Jake Mauer. "It's good. Everybody pitches in. Things are going OK for us right now. Knock on wood."

The Lugnuts (7-13) played in Davenport Saturday night. Sweeney drove back to Cedar Rapids with his girlfriend after the game and spent the day in Cedar Rapids, visiting with family and friends and playing with his dog.

"I went home and relaxed all day," he said.

There was a family dinner at his parents' house Sunday night.

"I think we're having lasagna, which is fine with me," he said. "I'm not really a picky eater."

Sweeney said he's been able to keep plugging away, despite not having much success in the minor leagues so far.

"My family does a great job of calming me down when I get frustrated and stuff like that," he said. "It's baseball. Everyone is going to go through these slumps and all of that.

"You just have to pick yourself up and get out of it."

Lansing and Cedar Rapids are scheduled to play the second game of their three-game series Monday at 6:35 p.m. Jose Berrios, an 18-year-old right-hander from Puerto Rico, is scheduled to make his second start for the Kernels.

LANSING (3): Pompey, cf, 4 0 2 2, Flores, ss, 4 0 0 0, Hawkins, rf, 4 0 1 0, Lopes, 2b, 4 0 0 0, Pierre, 3b, 4 0 0 0, Opitz, dh, 4 0 0 0, Conner, c, 4 1 1 0, Sweeney, 1b, 3 1 2 1, Smith, lf, 3 1 1 0, Gonzalez, p, 0 0 0 0, Browning, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 34 3 7 3.

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KERNELS (4): Buxton, cf, 3 1 1 0, Goodrum, ss, 3 1 1 0, Polanco, dh, 4 0 3 1, Hicks, 1b, 4 0 1 1, Walker, rf, 3 1 0 0, Harrison, 3b, 3 1 2 1, Pimentel, 2b, 3 0 1 0, Grimes, c, 1 0 0 1, Williams, lf, 3 0 0 0, Duffey, p, 0 0 0 0, Jones, p, 0 0 0 0. Totals 27 4 9 4.

Lansing 001 020 000 - 3 7 0
Kernels 021 000 01x - 4 9 1

Gonzalez, Browning (7) and Conner. Duffey, Jones (9) and Grimes. W - Duffey (3-1). L - Browning (1-3). S - Jones (3). 2B - Pompey (5), Sweeney (2), Harrison (9). 3B - Pompey (1). HR - Sweeney (1). E - Harrison (6). T - 2:07. A - 2,552.