

Twins pitcher helps Kernels win 11th in row

Written by Jim Ecker
Monday, 01 July 2013 21:45 -

Minnesota Twins pitcher Mike Pelfrey had two important goals Monday night when he made his rehabilitation start with the Cedar Rapids Kernels at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Number 1, he wanted to prove to the Twins and himself that he's recovered from back spasms and that he's ready to pitch for Minnesota again Saturday against the Toronto Blue Jays.

And Number 2, he didn't want to mess things up for the red-hot Kernels.

He succeeded on both counts.

Pelfrey allowed two runs in six innings and got the victory as Cedar Rapids clipped Peoria, 6-3, for their 11th straight victory before 2,246 fans in a snappy Midwest League game.

Pelfrey is good friends with Kernels catcher Tyler Grimes and knew when he arrived in Cedar Rapids that the Kernels had not lost a ballgame in two weeks.

"He texted me and said, 'Hey, we're on a 10-game winning streak,'" Pelfrey told reporters in the clubhouse. "I said, 'Hey, I don't need any extra pressure.'

"Obviously, whether they're on a 10-game winning streak or a 10-game losing streak, you want to go out there and put up as many zeroes as you can. Now that they're on a 10-game winning streak, you didn't want to be the guy to end it."

Pelfrey threw mostly 91 mph fastballs in the first few innings as he tried to regain his touch and his timing. Peoria second baseman Jacob Wilson timed one of those fastballs and hit a home run in the first inning, but Pelfrey retired the next 13 batters he faced.

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Peoria center fielder Charlie Tilson hooked a curveball from Pelfrey down the first-base line for a triple as the leadoff batter in the sixth inning and scored on a ground ball to pull the Chiefs within 4-2. Pelfrey called it a night after the sixth inning, having thrown 70 pitches (54 of them for strikes).

Pelfrey was happy with his outing and felt pain-free.

"It felt good," he said. "The first time seeing hitters in 10 or 12 days, it was a little different, a little weird at first ... At the end of the day, I walked off feeling good."

Pelfrey allowed two hits, struck out six batters, did not walk anyone and hit one guy.

Pelfrey shook hands with all the Kernels in the dugout after leaving the game and thanked them for playing a good game in the field behind him. Niko Goodrum, playing second base, made a spectacular diving stop of a hard-hit ground ball to get an out and the Kernels did not make any errors in the ballgame.

Kernels catcher Michael Quesada enjoyed working with a big league pitcher.

"It was a great experience to see how he works and what goes through his head between innings and ask him a lot of questions and get a feel for what he wants to do," said Quesada. "He let me take a little bit of control and it was a great time."

"He made pretty much just one mistake the whole game. He's a big leaguer. He's going to put his fastball where he wants," said Quesada. "We were just happy to have him here."

Mason Melotakis, the scheduled starting pitcher for the Kernels, stepped aside and worked out of the bullpen instead Monday night. Melotakis pitched three innings and got the save.

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Before the game, Melotakis and several other Cedar Rapids pitchers watched Pelfrey warm up in the bullpen to see if they could learn a thing or two.

"Just see how he carries himself," Melotakis explained. "Kind of how he warms up, what his routine is. We're wanting to get there (the major leagues). I just wanted to see what he does, how he prepares himself for a start.

"It was good," said Melotakis. "The team got the win, so I couldn't ask for anything better."

Melotakis joked with Pelfrey before going in to pitch the seventh inning. "I told him I'd get him a minor league win," Melotakis said with a smile.

Kernels pitching coach Gary Lucas, who enjoyed a long career in the Major Leagues, enjoyed watching Pelfrey do his job.

"It was fun to watch him. Man, what a pro. What a good pro he is," said Lucas. "To see how he handled himself and how he interacted with the guys on the bench. Pretty cool."

Cedar Rapids Manager Jake Mauer thought the whole night went well. "The main thing is, he's healthy and headed back up," said Mauer, whose brother, Joe, is the star catcher for the Twins.

Pelfrey, in his first year with the Twins, has a modest 3-6 record and 6.11 ERA this season. He said he was starting to pitch better before suffering back spasms two weeks ago and is looking forward to pitching Saturday in Toronto.

He threw strikes all night, but said his command in the strike improved as the game went along.

"The second time through the lineup I started throwing a couple more curveballs and sliders and

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mixed it up a little better," he said. "Overall it was a good day, a productive day. I'll get ready for the next one.

"The Kernels are pretty good," the 6-foot-7 righthander remarked. "They played good defense behind me and they swung the bats. Hopefully they'll continue to play well. It was a good experience."

Pelfrey drove to Cedar Rapids with his wife, Angela, and their two children. He was happy to make the rehab assignment in Iowa, rather than Florida or somewhere further away.

"This is a nice facility," he said. "I'm pretty sure that the Twins are happy to be here. It's a short little commute.

"They told me four hours, but I don't think they factored in two little kids. It ended up being roughly over five (hours)."

The Kernels (51-28) staked Pelfrey to a 3-1 lead in the bottom of the first inning. Goodrum led off with a triple to get it started. Travis Harrison collected an RBI single and Adam Brett Walker hit a sacrifice fly.

Max Kepler smashed a monster 450-foot home run to right field in the fourth inning for a 4-1 lead. Peoria (42-36) made it 4-2 in the sixth, but the Kernels scored twice in the bottom of the eighth for a 6-2 advantage.

Kepler had an RBI triple in the eighth inning and Walker followed with an RBI single.

Cedar Rapids will play a brief two-game series at Beloit Tuesday and Wednesday before returning home for a 4th of July ballgame Thursday against Wisconsin at 5:05 p.m.

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PEORIA (3): McElroy, lf, 4 0 0 1, Martini, rf, 4 1 1 0, Wilson, 2b, 4 1 1 1, Walton, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Wisdom, 3b, 4 0 2 1, Schaffer, dh, 4 0 0 0, Vargas, ss, 3 0 1 0, Tilson, cf, 2 1 1 0, Montero, c, 2 0 0 0. Totals 31 3 6 3.

KERNELS (6): Goodrum, 2b, 4 1 1 0, Polanco, ss, 4 1 0 0, Hicks, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Harrison, 3b, 3 2 2 1, Kepler, cf, 4 2 2 2, Walker, rf, 3 0 1 2, Grimes, dh, 4 0 0 0, Quesada, c, 3 0 1 0, Murphy, lf, 2 0 0 0. Totals 31 6 7 5.

Peoria 100 001 001 - 3 6 2

Kernels 300 100 02x - 6 7 0

Watson, Aldrete (6), Lee (7), Tuivailala (8) and Montero. Pelfrey, Melotakis (7) and Quesada. W - Pelfrey (1-0). L - Watson (0-2). S - Melotakis (1). 2B - Quesada (6). 3B - Tilson (2), Goodrum (4), Kepler (1). HR - Wilson (12), Kepler (3). E - Watson (1), Wilson (6). T - 2:03. A - 2,246.