

Atherton sharp in Kernels win

Written by S.D. Buhr

Wednesday, 14 August 2013 20:51 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 August 2013 22:24

For much of the first half of the season, it seemed like the Cedar Rapids Kernels were winning ballgames with dramatic ninth-inning heroics at least once a week. From that perspective, Wednesday night's walk-off 3-2 victory over the Beloit Snappers, thanks to a Tyler Grimes game-winning RBI single, looked very familiar to Kernels fans.

But what many of the 1,952 fans that attended the game at Veterans Memorial Stadium might not have found so familiar was how the Kernels got into position to win that game.

A few short weeks ago, Tim Atherton was a reliable member of the Kernels relief pitching corps and Mason Melotakis took the mound every sixth game as one of the teams' top starting pitchers. However, in the topsy-turvy world of minor league baseball, where parent organizations carefully monitor how many innings young pitching arms accumulate during a season, roles can change quickly.

That's how Atherton, the 6-foot-2 righthander from Australia, found himself throwing eight strong innings Wednesday night for the Kernels before turning the ball over to Melotakis, who struck out all three Beloit hitters he faced in the ninth inning before Grimes' hit gave the Kernels the win.

Kernels pitching coach Gary Lucas isn't surprised by Atherton's performance as a starting pitcher. "He's put relieving behind him and I think he was real good as a reliever and he's starting out well as a starter. The only thing I'm surprised about is how calm he's been about the transition."

Atherton struck out 11 Snappers and gave up just two hits and no earned runs, effectively mixing a fastball that he throws in the low 90s with several off-speed pitches, including a curveball that approached the hitter at about 66 mph.

"That 91 looks about 99 after you see that 66," Manager Jake Mauer observed after the game.

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Despite the outstanding performance, Atherton still left the game with the score tied 2-2 after the eighth inning and earning no decision for his efforts.

After two scoreless innings, Snappers catcher Ryan Delgado started the Beloit third inning by reaching base on an error by Kernels third baseman Travis Harrison. Delgado was bunted to second base and moved on to third base on a wild pitch. All that work proved unnecessary, however, when Daniel Robertson lined a breaking ball in to the picnic area beyond the left field wall for a two-out home run to give the Snappers a 2-0 lead.

The Kernels struck right back in their half of the third inning.

Cedar Rapids second baseman Joel Licon extended his hitting streak to 12 straight games by opening the third inning with a single to right-center field. Jeremias Pineda drove Licon home with an RBI double and Pineda, in turn, scored on a single by Jonathan Murphy, tying the game at 2-2 after three complete innings.

Neither team got another hit until the Kernels' half of the ninth inning.

After giving up the Robertson home run, Atherton retired the next 16 Beloit hitters in a row before turning the ball over to Melotakis, who likewise was perfect.

Snappers hurlers Dereck DeYoung and Nolan Sanburn were almost as prolific, allowing just a Niko Goodrum walk in the sixth inning to tarnish an otherwise perfect five innings after the Kernels scored their runs.

Trevor Bayless took the mound for Beloit in the ninth inning and that's when the Kernels' fortunes at the plate began to change.

Jorge Polanco led off the ninth for the Kernels by legging out an infield hit. Max Kepler had every intention of bunting Polanco to second base, but Bayless threw Kepler four straight balls

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and walked the Kernels' right fielder to put runners on first and second bases.

Travis Harrison laid down a perfect two-strike bunt that Bayless couldn't field cleanly, allowing Harrison to reach first base and load the bases for Grimes, the Kernels' designated hitter.

The Snappers brought their center fielder into the infield in an effort to prevent any ground ball from getting through, but Grimes went over the top with the first pitch he saw, lining the ball in to shallow center field and sending Polanco home with the game-winning run.

Mauer explained the call for the rare two-strike bunt by Harrison after the game. "All these guys have got to be able to bunt. Three or four hitters (in the batting order) here aren't three or four hitters there (in the Major Leagues). That's very rare. So you've got to be able to do it. Thank God he got it down. He wanted to swing, I'm sure he'd tell you that."

"I was happy to see Grimes go up there and be aggressive," added Mauer. "He was ready for it."

But the skipper knew who the night's hero was.

"Atherton was the story. He was outstanding. They shouldn't have had any runs (without the error)," Mauer observed. "He threw that big slow breaking ball and piled up the strikeouts."

Melotakis was the pitcher of record, notching his 11th win of the season for the Kernels, but even Melotakis was almost apologetic after the game. "It's too bad, Tim definitely deserved it. As a starter I feel the pain."

For his part, Atherton has embraced his new role as a member of the Kernels' starting rotation.

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"My first (start) was tough," Atherton said. "Since then I've just been working hard and I feel that I fit the role of a starter and I'm just comfortable where I am."

And what about that big, slow curveball that helped him rack up all those strikeouts?

"I do throw it as hard as I can," Atherton explained, laughing a bit. "It's the way I grip it, how my wrist position is. I have thrown it at a blistering pace of 72 before. I try and throw it hard and that's how it comes out."

The Kernels host Beloit again Thursday night at 6:35.

BELOIT (2): Shipman, rf, 4 0 0 0, Robertson, ss, 4 1 1 2, Nunez, 3b, 4 0 0 0, Bostick, 2b, 3 0 1 0, Mathews, lf, 2 0 0 0, Wooten, dh, 3 0 0 0, Olson, 1b, 3 0 0 0, Delgado, c, 3 1 0 0, Vertigan, cf, 2 0 0 0. Totals 28 2 2 2.

KERNELS (3): Murphy, cf, 4 0 1 1, Goodrum, 1b, 3 0 0 0, Polanco, ss, 4 1 1 0, Kepler, rf, 3 0 0 0, Harrison, 3b, 4 0 1 0, Grimes, dh, 4 0 1 1, Licon, 2b, 3 1 1 0, Quesada, c, 3 0 1 0, Pineda, lf, 2 1 1 1. Totals 30 3 7 3.

Beloit 002 000 000 - 2 2 0

Kernels 002 000 001 - 3 7 1

(None out when winning run scored)

DeYoung, Sanburn (7), Bayless (9) and Delgado. Atherton, Melotakis (9) and Quesada. W-Melotakis (11-4). L-Bayless (0-1). 2B-Pineda (6). HR-Robertson (7). SB-Bostick (23), Murphy (5). S-Mathews, Vertigan, Pineda. E-Harrison (23). T-2:13. A-1,952.