

Record crowd sees Kernels trim Beloit

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 16 August 2013 22:35 -

The Cedar Rapids Kernels and Iowa Hawkeyes turned out to be a winning combination at Veterans Memorial Stadium Friday night.

Toss in some post-game fireworks, always a popular attraction, and the result was the biggest crowd since the stadium opened in 2002.

The Kernels nipped the Beloit Snappers, 6-5, in front of 5,879 fans on Hawkeye Sports Sports Night (and Daddy-Daughter Date Night) at the ballpark.

The turnout snapped the previous record crowd of 5,861 set on July 7, 2002.

"What a night," said Kernels skipper Jake Mauer. "A lot of energy in the crowd."

The Kernels wore special University of Iowa jerseys to mark the occasion. That presented a minor problem for Mauer, who is from Minnesota.

"I wanted to put 'Gophers' across the front," he joked.

Actually, Mauer nearly wore the Black & Gold as a college baseball player. He committed to play baseball for Jack Dahm at Creighton University, but then Dahm became the head coach at Iowa and Mauer considered playing for the Hawkeyes.

"I almost went to Iowa," he said.

As it turned out, the Hawkeyes had committed all of their scholarship money at that point and Mauer ended up attending the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., where the school

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gave him a \$30,000 financial package that nearly paid the entire cost of \$35,000.

Things turned out well for Mauer at St. Thomas, and things turned out well for the Kernels Friday as they swept the three-game series from the Snappers, winning all three games by one run.

University of Iowa cheerleaders and the Hawkeye Pep Band performed during the game and Herky made an appearance. New Iowa baseball coach Rick Heller tossed out the first pitch, they showed UI football highlights from previous seasons on the big screen and there was plenty of Black & Gold in the festive crowd.

Max Kepler, a native of Germany, had good luck in his Black-&-Gold jersey. He belted a two-run homer in the fourth inning and slugged an RBI triple off the wall in right-center in the seventh for the Kernels.

Joel Licon, a sparkplug who can play just about anywhere, went 3-for-4 with two doubles and two RBIs. Licon began the game at second base, but moved to left field in an emergency after center fielder Jonathan Murphy was hit in the head by a pitch in the fourth inning.

The pitch broke Murphy's helmet, and the broken helmet created a gash on Murphy's face that sent him to the training room for butterfly stitches. Murphy spent a few moments on his knees after getting him by the inside fastball, but Mauer said he was OK and should be ready to play Saturday when the Kernels open a four-game series at Peoria.

Jeremias Pineda moved from left field to center field, Licon took Pineda's spot in left field, and catcher Tyler Grimes entered the game at second base. Grimes played the infield in the Minnesota Twins organization last year and knew what he was doing.

The makeshift lineup held its own and did not commit any errors as the Kernels raised their overall record to 75-46, the best mark in the Midwest League.

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Licon is riding a 14-game hitting streak, raising his batting average to a respectable .271. He has played second base, third base and now left field for the Kernels, but that's nothing new for the native Californian. He played second base, third base, shortstop, left field and right field in the Gulf Coast League last year.

"I love it. I love to do that," said Licon. "I'll play anywhere. Put me behind the plate. I'll play there, too."

The Kernels list Licon as being 5-foot-10, but he confessed that's a stretch. "I might be cheating a little," he said with a smile, admitting he's really 5-foot-8 1/2.

Licon has been a valuable addition to the club this season.

"You can put him anywhere," said Mauer. "He's going to have to do that, he's going to have to play a lot of spots."

The Kernels grabbed a 5-2 lead in the sixth inning, thanks in part to a two-run double by Licon that flew past the Beloit third baseman. The play originally was ruled an error, but was changed to a double after the game.

The Kernels took a 6-3 lead into the eighth inning, but the Snappers scored one run in the eighth and another run in the ninth to make it exciting. The Snappers hit the ball hard in the ninth and had the tying run on second base with one out, but Kernels relief pitcher Madison Boer got the final two outs on a liner to right field and a strikeout.

The Kernels have drawn 161,851 fans this season, topping last year's total home attendance of 160,064 with seven home games left in the regular season.

BELOIT (5): Shipman, rf, 4 1 0 0, Robertson, ss, 5 0 3 2, Nunez, 3b, 4 0 0 0, Bostick, 2b, 5 0 1 1, Mathews, dh, 5 1 2 0, Wooten, 1b, 4 1 3 2, Vertigan, cf, 5 0 1 0, Delgado, c, 5 1 1 0,

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Alexander, lf, 2 1 2 0. Totals 39 5 13 5.

KERNELS (6): Murphy, cf, 1 0 0 0, Grimes, pr/2b, 1 1 1 0, Goodrum, ss, 3 1 1 0, Kepler, 1b, 4 1 2 3, Walker, rf, 3 0 0 0, Gonzales, dh, 4 1 1 0, Harrison, 3b, 2 1 0 0, Licon, 2b/lf, 4 1 3 2, Quesada, c, 4 0 0 0, Pineda, lf/cf, 4 0 0 0. Totals 30 6 8 5.

Beloit 001 010 111 - 5 13 1

Kernels 000 203 10x - 6 8 0

Bacus, Vairo (6), Lamb (8) and Delgado. Lee, Gallant (5), Muren (7), Boer (8) and Quesada. W - Gallant (1-0). L - Bacus (9-5). S - Boer (5). 2B - Wooten 2 (18), Gonzales (3), Licon 2 (13). 3B - Mathews (2), Kepler (3). HR - Wooten (17), Kepleer (7). E - Bostick (21). T - 3:13. A - 5,879.