

Hu-dini helps Kernels win 7th straight

Written by S.D. Buhr

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The Cedar Rapids Kernels stretched their winning streak to a season-high seven games Monday night, defeating Quad Cities in the first game of a three-game series, 4-2.

The Kernels are proving they can beat you with the bats, as they did in Beloit a week ago when they scored 28 runs in their three-game series sweep of the Snappers. And they can beat you in an old-fashioned pitchers' duel, as they did to the River Bandits Monday in front of 1,394 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Kernels starting pitcher Chih-Wei Hu (6-1) struck out eight River Bandits in six innings while giving up just one unearned run on three hits.

The win was Hu's sixth in eight appearances for the Kernels. His lone loss came in his last start Aug. 6 against Wisconsin. That loss didn't sit well with the right-hander from Taiwan.

After that game, Hu said he asked pitching coach Ivan Arteaga, "Why was I so bad?"

He and Arteaga worked together after that start and they saw immediate results in Beloit, where Hu relieved Kohl Stewart in Stewart's first game back from the disabled list and earned a win with five innings out of the bullpen.

On Monday, Hu had command of nearly his full arsenal. "Today, breaking (ball) was very nice today. Two-seam, maybe next bullpen we'll fix something. Palm ball - very nice. Changeup - very nice. And slider - very nice."

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His coaches liked what they saw of Hu.

“Yeah, he was good,” a smiling Kernels Manager Jake Mauer said afterward. “Ivan calls him Hu-dini.

“He’s a pitcher, there’s no doubt about it.”

Meanwhile, Hu’s counterpart with the Bandits, Andrew Thurman, the Astros’ second-round draft pick in June of 2013, struck out seven Kernels, but gave up three runs in his six innings on the mound. Only one of those runs was earned.

Neither starting pitcher, nor any of their relief help, walked a batter in the game.

Brandon Bixler worked 1.1 innings in relief of Hu, giving up an unearned run in the seventh inning. Dallas Gallant earned his fifth save on the year with 1.2 innings with four strikeouts.

Logan Wade once again led the Kernels' hitting attack with two hits. The RBIs were spread among four Kernels with Wade, Mitch Garver, Chad Christensen and J.D. Williams.

Wade’s RBI double got the Kernels on the board in the second inning. He then scored, giving Cedar Rapids a 2-0 lead, when Williams followed with a triple into the left-field corner, the third triple in Williams’ last four games.

Williams, hitting just .230, has seen his bat come to life during the Kernels’ current winning streak, hitting .353 during the stretch.

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"Just shortening up, trying not to do too much. Taking a pitch at a time," Williams explained. "Just trying different things, seeing what works."

For one thing, Williams feels he's finally healthy. He's been hobbled by leg issues since spring training and is finally feeling good.

"I'm feeling pretty good now, so I'm running a lot better," said the outfielder. "Everything is good now, so it's starting to show a little bit."

Since returning to the lineup, Mauer sees a different Williams.

"Ever since, he's back to staying down and he's widened his stance out. He's getting to pitches he wasn't getting to and it could be his legs," said Mauer. "I think his legs are a lot fresher and he feels a lot better."

Both Wisconsin and Peoria lost Monday, moving the Kernels six games ahead of Wisconsin and eight games ahead of Peoria, in firm control for the No. 1 seed from the Western Division for the second half of the season. All three teams have just 14 games left on their regular-season schedule.

The Kernels host Quad Cities again Tuesday night at 6:35.