

Westphal hopes to keep beating the odds

Written by Jim Ecker
Friday, 26 June 2015 22:10 -



Cedar Rapids Kernels pitcher Luke Westphal has already beaten the odds by getting this far in his pro baseball career.

Not many guys get a shot at pro ball after playing in college at the NCAA Division III level, and not many guys get a shot at organized pro ball after spending two years in an Independent League.

Westphal has been there and done that. Now the 26-year-old lefty is hoping to beat the odds again by having a successful career in the Minnesota Twins organization after a late start.

He made his first appearance for the Kernels Friday night during what turned out to be a 4-3 loss in 10 innings to Quad Cities before 4,031 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Westphal pitched one inning in relief and allowed one run, but anticipates moving into the starting rotation next week.

There are not a lot of 26-year-old Division III Independent League grads in pro ball, but Westphal plans to follow his dream as far as he can.

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"I'm just very happy for the opportunity," he said Friday night. "I'm happy the Twins gave me a chance and I'm glad to be here. I'm just going to keep throwing and do the best I can."

Westphal, who is from Clintonville, Wis., pitched at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, where he was a second team All-American. He spent two years with the Gateway Grizzlies in the Independent Frontier League, where a typical salary is \$600 per month, and pitched for the Doncaster Dragons in the Australian League this winter.

Luckily for Westphal, the Minnesota Twins have a scout in Australia and Westphal ended up signing with the Twins as a free agent in January. He began the 2015 minor league season with the Fort Myers Twins in the High A Florida State League, compiling a 3-3 record and 3.82 ERA before being assigned to Cedar Rapids this week.

Westphal was mainly a relief pitcher in Fort Myers and does not view his visit to Cedar Rapids as a demotion.

"Actually I was pretty excited to come here," he said. "I'll have an opportunity to start here and get more innings and stuff. That will be good."

Westphal's first start for the Kernels could come during their three-game series at Wisconsin next Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday in Appleton, Wis., which is only 45 minutes from his home town and would give family and friends a chance to see him.

"That's the plan," Kernels Manager Jake Mauer confirmed. "We're going to try and start him, get him some innings. He throws it over (the plate), spins it a little bit, slows it down a little bit. He'll get outs."

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"It's obvious the man wants to play," said Mauer. "He's gone all over the world playing. He wants it. So it's a nice story and hopefully he'll be able to go out there and do some things for us."

Westphal is the oldest player on the team, but young at heart.

"He's got a chance, and that's the thing," said Mauer. "Some of the other guys I hope get a chance to talk to him. He shows his love for the game and the passion he has for the game."

"There's only a short window you can do this, so why not? You don't want to be 40 years old and say, 'I regret I didn't do this or that.' At least he's giving himself a chance."

Westphal comes from an athletic family. One of his brothers is playing in the Arena Football League and another brother is an offensive lineman at Upper Iowa University.

Westphal surrendered a triple to the first batter he saw Friday night, but retired the next three batters he faced. One of those batters was Alex Bregman, the No. 2 pick in the Major League draft this month who got \$5.9 million from the Houston Astros to sign his first pro contract. Westphal retired Bregman on a line drive to the shortstop for the third out in the seventh inning.

The Kernels had a 3-1 lead, but the River Bandits tied the game in the eighth and won the game in the 10th with a fluke run. Cedar Rapids right fielder Max Murphy slipped on a routine single to right field, allowing Ramon Leareano to reach third base with a triple. Kristian Trompiz followed with a sacrifice fly to left field to give the Bandits a 4-3 lead.

Kernels relief pitcher Randy LeBlanc (5-1) was the hard-luck loser as his string of 26

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consecutive scoreless innings came to an end. Kernels starter Ethan Mildren tossed six scoreless innings.

Cedar Rapids and Quad Cities meet again Saturday night at the stadium at 6:35 on fireworks night.

QUAD CITIES (4): Ritchie, 1b, 3 0 1 1, Bregman, dh, 5 0 1 0, Nottingham, c, 5 0 1 0, Tanielu, 3b, 5 1 2 0, Martin, lf, 5 1 3 0, Laureano, rf, 5 1 2 0, Trompiz, ss, 4 0 1 1, Boyd, cf, 5 1 2 2, Hernandez, 2b, 4 0 0 0. Totals 41 4 13 4.

KERNELS (3): Corcino, cf, 2 1 0 0, Gordon, ss, 3 1 0 0, Larson, lf, 4 0 1 0, Real, dh, 4 0 2 1, Murphy, rf, 4 0 0 0, White, 3b, 4 1 2 1, Fernandez, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Navarreto, c, 4 0 0 1, Kelly, 2b, 3 0 0 0. Totals 32 3 5 3.

Quad Cities 000 000 120 1 - 4 13 1
Kernels 200 000 100 0 - 3 5 1

James, Freeman (6), Peterson (8), Heredia (10) and Nottingham. Mildren, Westphal (6), Hildenberger (8), LeBlanc (10) and Navarreto. W - Peterson.
L - LeBlanc (5-1). S - Heredia (2). 2B - White (8). 3B - Boyd (3), Laureano (3). E - Hernandez (6), Corcino (2). T - 2:37. A - 4,031.