

Kernels eye first title since 1994

Written by S.D. Buhr

Sunday, 13 September 2015 18:48 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 September 2015 20:35



The Cedar Rapids Kernels reeled off three straight wins to start their 2015 playoff season by combining strong pitching with mistake-free defense.

One bad defensive play and some questionable base-running nearly ended that winning streak Sunday, but the Kernels clawed back from a 4-1 deficit to claim a 5-4 win over the Peoria Chiefs for the Midwest League Western Division title.

Cedar Rapids will be seeking its first Midwest League crown since 1994 when the final round begins Wednesday against Lansing or Western Michigan, which are battling for the Eastern Division title. The series between is tied, 1-1, with Game 3 Monday night.

The Eastern Division champ will host Games 1 and 2 Wednesday and Thursday, with Games 3, 4 and 5 at Veterans Memorial Stadium next Saturday, Sunday and Monday in the best-of-5 series.

Game 3 in the MWL finals will begin Saturday at 3:35 p.m. at the stadium.

The Kernels belted out 13 hits Sunday and all four of Peoria's runs were unearned.

"We didn't quit and that's the biggest thing. They scored four runs and we gifted them three of

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them,” Manager Jake Mauer said, then quickly corrected himself. “Four of them. But they didn’t stop.

“They continue to fight. We’ve had a lot of different names and a lot of different faces. They just keep putting their best foot forward and keep doing it.



"You can't really put your finger on it. It all starts with pitching and defense and then we keep finding ways to score some runs."

The Kernels struck first Sunday when Chris Paul led off the home half of the second inning with a double, advanced to third base on a Max Murphy fly to right field and scored on Austin Diemer's RBI single.

The 1,073 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium saw things begin to fall apart for the home team in the third inning.

Peoria loaded the bases off Kernels starter Randy Rosario with one out, but Rosario appeared poised to work out of the jam after striking out Chiefs third sacker Paul DeJong and drawing a ground ball to third base by Alex DeLeon.

Kernels third baseman T.J. White, however, bobbled the sharp grounder and threw wildly to first base, allowing two Chiefs runners to score and prolonging the inning long enough for two more Peoria runs to score on a Harrison Bader RBI single that followed.

The home team's comeback began in the fourth inning.

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Murphy led off with a single and Brian Navarreto followed with a double. Austin Diemer's single drove in Murphy, but Mauer waved Navarreto in as well and Navarreto was out easily at the plate for the first out of the inning, cutting short the Kernels rally.

Cedar Rapids pulled within 4-3 in the fifth inning on doubles by Edgar Corcino and LaMonte Wade, then tallied two more runs in the seventh inning to take the lead.

Gordon led off the seventh with his third hit of the game and was bunted to second by Corcino. White worked a walk and on the final pitch to White, Gordon stole third base, putting Kernels at the corners with one out.

Gordon scored the tying run on a passed ball.

Paul bounced a two-out single to left field and White scored from second base, sliding past the tag at the plate with the lead run.

"He threw some good pitches and finally I got one with two strikes and just put enough wood on it to get it through," Paul said. "It was awesome to get that run in."

Rosario worked six innings, striking out five and surrendering seven hits. He was charged with all four Peoria runs, though none of them were earned.

Michael Theofanopolous struck out a pair in the seventh inning and Yorman Landa slammed the door on Peoria's season with two shutout innings, striking out four before Gordon made his second outstanding defensive play of the game to begin a game-ending double play.

Gordon and Paul were among the team's heroes and both spoke confidently of their team's performance and chances in the MWL's championships series.

The Kernels have won all four of their playoff games, sweeping Quad Cities 2-0 and sweeping Peoria 2-0.

"We know if we give 110 percent it's going to be tough to beat us," said Gordon. "If a team does beat us that day, it's going to be tough to get us twice.

"We just come out and play some tough baseball and don't take anything for granted. When we're doing that, it's very tough to beat us.

"That's a great ballclub that we played against, Peoria. They always give us some trouble, but we came out and competed today."

Paul spoke about how he and his teammates refused to let mistakes keep them down.

"Physical errors happen, but we're all close, we're a tight-knit team," he said. "We pick each other up and that's what happened today.

"Everybody contributed in a different way, getting on base, hitting in the run. It was just an awesome overall performance, especially our pitching.

"Landa in the end, Theo, Randy, everyone threw well. It was a great team win today. I'm so proud of our guys and it was a lot of fun."

Paul was a late-season addition to the Kernels roster, but that's not stopping him from enjoying the postseason ride.

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"I'm glad I could come in here and help after they clinched in the first half and help them win the Western Division Championship," he said. "We're not done yet. We've still got a little bit to go."

Mauer reflected on his team's season, thinking back to when it all began in April.

"You start the year and you wonder how your team is going to be. We knew we were going to have pretty good starting pitching and thought our bullpen was going to be questionable," he recalled.

"We promoted two guys from our bullpen that have done really a good job. Another one of our closers got hurt. We find a way to replace them.

"Our defense has been good the whole year. Hopefully we continue to do that. We've got five games left, no matter what happens here, so these five are going to be pretty fun."

The extended season means that the planned addition of Mauer to the parent Minnesota Twins coaching staff will need to be delayed past the planned date of Sept. 17. He doesn't seem too broken up by that, however.

"That's fine with me," he said, smiling. "We'll get up there hopefully after we win this thing."

PEORIA (4): Seferina, 2b, 4 1 2 0, Mercado, ss, 3 1 0 0, DeJong, 3b, 4 0 1 0, DeLeon, 1b, 4 1 0 0, Bader, cf, 4 0 2 1, Thompson, rf, 4 0 0 0, O'Keefe, dh, 3 0 0 0, Gibson, pr-dh, 0 0 0 0, Bean c, 4 1 1 0, Peoples-Walls, lf, 3 0 2 0. Totals: 33 4 8 1.

KERNELS (5): Valera, 2b, 4 0 1 0, Gordon, ss, 5 1 3 0, Corcino, rf, 3 1 2 0, White, 3b, 2 1 0 0, Wade, cf, 4 0 1 1, Paul, 1b, 4 1 2 1, Murphy, dh, 4 1 1 0, Navarreto, c, 4 0 1 0, Diemer, lf, 4 0 2 2. Totals: 34 5 13 4.

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Peoria 004 000 000 - 4 8 0

Kernels 010 110 20x - 5 13 1

McKinney, Frey (4), Bray (6), Kuebel (7), Then (8) and Bean. Rosario, Theofanopoulos (7), Landa (8) and Navarreto. W - Theofanopoulos (1-0). L - Kuebel. Sv - Landa (1). 2B - Gordon 2 (2), Paul (1), Diemer (1), Navarreto (2), Corcino (3), Wade (2). SB - Gordon (1). E - White (1). T - 2:32. A - 1,073.