

Coaching staff feels at home in playoffs

Written by S.D. Buhr

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COMSTOCK PARK, Mich. - The Cedar Rapids Kernels have not appeared in a championship series since they claimed the Midwest League title in 1994, but the men leading the Kernels against West Michigan this week are no strangers to the championship series environment.

Manager Jake Mauer, hitting coach Tommy Watkins and pitching coach Henry Bonilla all have competed for minor league titles as players and/or coaches.

Watkins was part of the Appalachian League championship team at Elizabethton in 2000 as a player. A year later, Mauer's Rookie team at Elizabethton fell in the championship series when he was a player as well.

"We lost on a balk," Mauer said Wednesday. "Unfortunate it ended that way."

Watkins and Bonilla played for the Rochester Red Wings when they fell in the finals of the Triple-A championship series in 2006.

Bonilla has the most experience in championship series.

"I've been to about five of them," he said. "I've won two and lost three. I won two in Venezuela and lost one in Venezuela. Lost one with the Angels and lost the one in Rochester."

The Kernels' staff were teammates at Class High-A Fort Myers in 2003 and at AA New Britain in 2004. Now they've joined forces to guide the Kernels to their first Midwest League Championship Series appearance in 21 years.

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The Kernels beat West Michigan in the series opener Wednesday night, 5-0.

The manager and his coaches are not putting much emphasis on their own championship experiences, however.

"It's no different than opening day," Mauer said before Wednesday night's game at West Michigan. "If you treat it different, you're going to play different. If you play different, you're in trouble. You can't go out there with any different expectations and expect to do anything different. It's just another baseball game."

Bonilla concurred with his friend and manager.

"We got here for a certain reason," he said. "They should enjoy it a little more. The last game of the series will be the last game of the year. That's a little different than most series. Once this series is over, it's over."

"I think it's the ultimate platform to compete. We're not worrying about first-pitch strikes, we're not worried about velos (velocities). We're not worried about what this guy hits. It's about, 'We've got to win this game today.'"

In the Kernels' first two playoff rounds, they were facing opponents they knew very well. They had faced Quad Cities and Peoria at least 15 times each throughout the season. However, in the MWL teams play only one series each summer against each team in the opposite division.

Cedar Rapids traveled to West Michigan the first week of June and dropped two out of three games. There has been considerable roster turnover, however, for both teams since that series, so this series involves two opponents who don't know much about one another.

That isn't phasing the Kernels manager, however.

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"Yeah, we get little things (about the opposing players)," Mauer acknowledged. "Again, you're talking about playoffs, it's different. You don't necessarily want to worry about playing their team, you want to worry about playing your game."

"It doesn't matter if it's Babe Ruth or Joe DiMaggio, the rules don't change, the game doesn't change. You've still got to work within the framework of it."

"Now, would it be nice to know something about them a little bit? Well, sure. Their tendencies and everything. But if you know your strengths and you're able to play to your strengths, you'll be in good shape."

Fifth Third Ballpark, just north of Grand Rapids, Mich., has outfield dimensions slightly shorter than the Kernels' home at Veterans Memorial Stadium, but has developed a reputation as being "pitcher friendly," in part due to a significant amount of foul territory in front of each side's dugout.

However, Kernels' coaches are not giving the ballpark much thought.

"It's played more to pitching," Bonilla acknowledged. "The power numbers are going to be down a little bit, but I think the foul territory is more for the on-field stuff they do. For us, in a short series like this, we don't tend to put that into consideration."

Mauer is adamant that focusing on the past, whether the June series against this opponent or even the recent series sweeps of Quad Cities and Peoria, would be a mistake as his team tries to win the title.

"I tend not to dwell too much on what happened and kind of look forward to what you have in front of you," the skipper explained. "That's what we're hoping these guys are thinking about."

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"Whatever happened in Quad Cities and whatever happened in Peoria and whatever happened at home is all done and now we've got an opportunity to make something happen here.

"The biggest thing is just to go out and do what you're accustomed to doing. This is our 145th game now. So we've played a lot of them. Probably close to 160, including spring training.

"Again, the way I look at it is, if we worry about what we do and how we go out there, we're going to be in good shape."