

Kernels win with dramatic 9th inning

Written by S.D. Buhr

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For eight innings on Saturday, Game 3 of the Midwest League's Championship Series was another pitchers duel as the Cedar Rapids Kernels and West Michigan Whitecaps had battled to a 1-1 tie headed to the final stanza. Then the offenses came alive.

When it was over, 1,707 fans at Veterans Memorial Stadium, including Minnesota Twins General Manager Terry Ryan, had witnessed a dramatic 3-2 walk-off Cedar Rapids win that gave the Kernels a 2-1 lead in the best-of-five series.

West Michigan used a walk, a sacrifice bunt and a single to manufacture the lead run, taking a 2-1 advantage in the ninth inning and giving the Kernels just one more chance to avoid having to win the final two games of the series to claim a championship.

The top three bats in the Cedar Rapids order were a combined 0-for-10 in the game before No. 3 hitter Edgar Corcino led off with a double to left field.

T.J. White followed by lining a double off the notch that juts out on the edge of the Plumbers & Pipefitters Pavilion in left field that was nearly caught by Whitecaps left fielder Christin Stewart.

Corcino, who was tagging at second base in case the ball was caught, was able to advance only to third base on White's double, leaving the Kernels still

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one run down with runners on second and third.

After a LaMonte Wade walk to load the bases and a Chris Paul strikeout, Max Murphy lined a deep sacrifice fly to right field, scoring Corcino for the tying run and advancing White to third base, representing the potential game-winning run.

With two outs, Brian Navarreto came to the plate trying to improve on an 0-for-3 night.

With two strikes, the Kernels' catcher chopped a ground ball toward third base and sprinted toward first. By the time the ball was fielded by West Michigan third baseman Francisco Contreras, his throw to first base had no chance to beat Navarreto. White crossed home with the game-winning run and the Kernels dashed on to the field to celebrate.

"On the first pitch, I was looking for a fastball, looking for the base hit," Navarreto said after getting a towel full of shaving cream from his teammates in the clubhouse. "Then when it came to the third strike, all right I got to put the ball in play, so that's what I did right there. I'd been having, I'd say, bad at-bats, so I was just nice and easy, relax and let it happen.

"I just saw the chopper and ran down the line as fast as I can and I did it. We did it. We win."

"Navi just battled his tail off," Kernels manager Jake Mauer said of his heroic catcher. "Probably not having the best day offensively, but it doesn't matter.

"Once the pitcher wasn't going to get it, I thought he had a good chance (to beat the throw to first). I didn't think it was going to be a great chance, but that's probably the fastest he's ever ran, so thank God."

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White had thought, briefly, that he had the game-winner on his double, which nearly left the ballpark for a two-runner home run.

“For a little bit, yeah,” White said. “Then when I looked up, I saw him kind of camped and I was like, ‘Do not catch it, do not catch it.’”

The Kernels’ pitching staff carried an impressive 1.15 earned-run average into the game and starting pitcher Keaton Steele made sure he wouldn’t be responsible for tarnishing that mark, tossing seven innings of four-hit baseball at the Whitecaps. He struck out five and walked just one.

It was reliever Luke Bard (1-0), however, who collected the win, after giving up one run on just one hit in two innings of relief work.

Steele, who was the winner in Game 1 of the Division Championship Series against Peoria, said his approach Saturday was no different than what had worked for him in his last start.

“Pretty much about the same game plan,” Steele said. “My mentality is just attack, attack, attack. If that means I give up 20 hits a game, that’s what it is. I don’t want to be out there walking guys, keeping the defense out there a long time.

“Quick innings is what I really want and today, honestly, it was probably more just wanting to get guys out. That team, the lineup from 1 to 9 is really tough.”

The Kernels got the scoring started in the third inning. After Murphy led off with a triple to the gap in right-center field, Rafael Valera drove him home with a one-out sacrifice fly to left.

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West Michigan answered in the top of the fourth with A.J.Simcox's lead-off double and an RBI single from Kade Scivicque.

From there, the pitching on both sides took over until the climactic ninth inning.

The Kernels have a chance to claim the organization's first Midwest League title in 21 years with a win in Game 4 at 2:05 p.m. Sunday at Veterans Memorial Stadium. If a Game 5 is necessary, it would at 6:35 p.m. Monday in Cedar Rapids.

WEST MICHIGAN (2): Kivett, cf, 4 0 1 0, Simcox, ss, 4 1 1 0, Gerber, rf, 3 0 0 0, Scivicque, c, 3 0 1 1, Stewart, lf, 4 0 2 1, Pankake dh, 3 0 0 0, Kengor, 1b, 4 0 0 0, Contreras, 3b, 3 0 0 0, Gonzalez, 2b, 2 0 0 0. Totals 29 2 5 2.

KERNELS (3): Valera, 2b, 3 0 0 1, Gordon, ss, 4 0 0 0, Corcino, rf, 4 1 1 0, White, 3b, 4 1 2 0, Paul, 1b, 4 0 1 0, Murphy, dh, 3 1 1 1, Navarreto, c, 4 0 1 1, Diemer, lf, 2 0 1 0. Totals 30 3 7 3.

West Michigan 000 100 001 – 2 5 1

Cedar Rapids 001 00 002 – 3 7 1

Lewicki, Moreno (8), Jimenez (9) and Scivicque; Steele, Bard (8) and Navarreto. W – Bard (1-0), L – Moreno (1-1). 2B – Kivett (3), Stewart (3), Simcox (1), Diemer (2), Corcino (5), White (1). 3B – Murphy (2). SB – Pankake (1), Diemer (1). T – 2:24. A – 1,707.