

Kernels brace for decisive Game 5

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 20 September 2015 17:31 - Last Updated Sunday, 20 September 2015 17:42



You wouldn't think 1,863 baseball fans could make so much noise at a ballpark, but the enthusiastic crowd at Veterans Memorial Stadium tried to will the Cedar Rapids Kernels to the Midwest League championship in the bottom of the ninth inning Sunday afternoon with their lungs and hearts.

Unfortunately for the Kernels, beat-up catcher Brian Navarreto struck out with the bases loaded and now Cedar Rapids will face West Michigan in the fifth and final game of the Midwest League finals at the stadium Monday night at 6:35.

The Whitecaps escaped Sunday, 2-1, after the Kernels wasted a prime opportunity to win their first league title since 1994.

The Kernels wore somber but determined expressions as they filed into the clubhouse after the game.

"Keep your heads up, boys. Keep your heads up," Manager Jake Mauer told them, trying to maintain their focus and enthusiasm for one more ballgame. "This is why we're here. Nine more innings tomorrow. Up, Up, Up!"

Navarreto, the hero of the Kernels' Game 4 victory Saturday, sat quietly in the corner of the locker room Sunday, his head down while he studied his cell phone. Navarreto got walloped by a pair of foul tips in the top of the eighth inning, once off his head and once off his shoulder, yet stayed in the game.

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"I got a little dizzy in the moment," he said. "Breathe hard and stay in the game. I got it pretty good, but I stay in game."

As luck would have it, Navarreto strode to the plate with the sacks full and two outs in the bottom of the ninth following a walk by Edgar Corcino, a line single by LaMonte Wade and a two-out walk by Max Murphy on a 3-2 pitch.

West Michigan Manager Andrew Graham made a pitching change at that point, yanking Johan Belisario and putting Joe Jimenez on the mound to face Navarreto. Jimenez and Navarreto are lifelong friends from Puerto Rico, but now they were standing 60 feet apart with the season hanging in the balance for both clubs.

Navarreto got the best of his buddy with a game-winning RBI on an infield single in the bottom of the ninth Saturday to give the Kernels a 2-1 edge in the best-of-five series, but this time Jimenez got the best of Navarreto on a sweeping slider on an 0-2 pitch that Navarreto chased out of the strike zone.

Their personal battle is deadlocked heading into Monday night, when they could meet again in another big situation. "Yeah, it's 1-1," said Navarreto. "So we'll see tomorrow."

The Whitecaps will have a little momentum on their side as the Game 4 winner to square the series 2-2, but the Kernels vowed to return Monday in fighting trim.

"We're going to get them," said Navarreto. "We're going to win tomorrow. It's going to be a good night."

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Corcino agreed with Navarreto in the quiet Kernels clubhouse.

"We've got nine innings to go, you know?," said Corcino. "We can make it happen. It will be good fun. The guys are positive. We know we'll get it done."

The Kernels have played 148 games to reach this point, 140 during the regular season and eight in the playoffs. The 149th game will determine the Midwest League champion for 2015.

"It will be fun. Tomorrow will be fun," said Mauer. "It comes down to nine innings. Six months comes down to nine innings, so it will be fun."



Mauer declined to reveal who will start on the mound for Cedar Rapids. It could be Kernels ace Felix Jorge on slightly short rest, No. 5 starter Randy LeBlanc or just about anybody.

Mauer has made a decision, but wanted to keep it quiet for strategic reasons because the Whitecaps were a little slow in announcing their starter for Sunday's game.

"We're not telling them (the Whitecaps) until they tell us," Mauer said playfully. "We're going to play that game, I guess. We're not going to say anything until they tell us what they're going to do, so keep it top-secret."

The Kernels squandered chances to score runs early in the game in the first, second and fifth innings. They scored once in the third inning on an RBI single by T.J. White, but that was it. And then they wasted their big opportunity in the ninth with the fans standing and cheering.

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"It got exciting there for awhile," Mauer said about the final inning. "It was kind of like our day. Runners in scoring position, can't get a hit. We don't put a ball in play in the ninth. Three strikeouts. It's tough to win games that way."

Austin Diemer hit a triple in the fifth inning with one out, but was gunned down at the plate on an infield grounder. The Kernels had runners at first and third and nobody out in the first inning, but Corcino's line drive was nabbed by the shortstop and turned into a double play when Nick Gordon strayed too far from first base.

The Kernels had runners at the corners in the second inning with one out, but the next two batters struck out. The Kernels were 1-for-9 with runners in scoring position.

The Whitecaps scored both of their runs in the fifth inning against Randy Rosario with the help of two infield singles.

WEST MICHIGAN (2): Kivelt, cf, 4 1 1 0, Simcox, ss, 5 0 1 1, Gerber, rf, 4 0 3 1, Scivicque, c, 4 0 0 0, Stewart, lf, 4 0 2 0, Pankake dh, 4 0 2 0, Kengor, 1b, 4 0 1 0, Contreras, 3b, 4 0 1 0, Gonzalez, 2b, 3 1 1 0. Totals 36 2 12 2.

KERNELS (3): Valera, 2b, 3 0 0 0, Gordon, ss, 4 1 2 0, Corcino, rf, 3 0 1 0, White, 3b, 4 0 1 1, Wade, cf, 4 0 2 0, Paul, 1b, 3 0 0 0, Murphy, dh, 3 0 1 0, Navarreto, c, 4 0 0 0, Diemer, lf, 3 0 1 0. Totals 31 1 8 1.

West Michigan 000 020 000 – 2 12 0
Cedar Rapids 001 000 000 – 1 8 0

Thompspn, Teakell (6), Belisario (9), Jimenez (9) and Scivicque. Rosario, Theofanopoulos (7), Curtiss (9) and Navarreto. WP - Thompson (1-1), LP - Rosario (0-1). Sv - Jimenez (3). 2B – Pankake (3), Gordon (3). 3B – Diemer (1). SB – Gonzalez (1), Kivett (2). T – 2:38. A – 1,863.