

Seventh inning a nightmare for Things

By Chris Dugan, Sports Editor dugan@observer-reporter.com

For the Wild Things, momentum has been as elusive as trapping a mouse. Just when you think you have it cornered, it darts away in an instant. Such was the case Sunday night in the opening game of a series against the Lake Erie Crushers.

The Wild Things were coming off a three-game sweep of Rockford and appeared to be playing their best baseball of the season. They had a chance to move into fourth place in the Frontier League's East Division with a win over the Crushers and, for six innings, everything was going Washington's way.

The Wild Things led, 5-1, and its offense had produced six extra-base hits. The only worrisome moment came in the sixth inning, when starting pitcher Justin Edwards left the game with cramps in his calf. The injury appeared to be no problem for the Wild Things as reliever Ross Gusky - activated off the disabled list earlier in the day - replaced Edwards and immediately induced an inning-ending double play.

It was, however, all a tease.

In the seventh inning, everything that could go wrong for Washington did, and Lake Erie rallied for an unthinkable 15-5 victory.

How agonizing was the seventh inning for the Wild Things? Try these numbers:

- Lake Erie scored 11 runs on only three hits.
- Four Washington relief pitchers, which included infielder Drew Rossi for the final out, combined to issue eight walks, hit one batter and throw a wild pitch. The Wild Things also committed two errors.
- Lake Erie hit only two balls out of the infield the entire inning, and the Crushers sent 17 batters to the plate.

When the inning was over, Lake Erie had turned a 5-1 deficit into a 12-5 lead.

"For six innings, we were in control and command," Washington manager Darin Everson said. "Gusky comes in and gets a big double play. Then, ... I don't know. He had an uncontrollable fastball.

"It's 5-1 and we're playing like we had the entire second half. Then, how do you describe that (seventh inning)?"

Gusky walked the bases loaded on 14 pitches to start the seventh. Davis Billardello (1-1) replaced Gusky and retired the first batter he faced. But an error, two walks, an infield single and a hit batsman knocked Bilardello out of the game. Michael Cotter replaced Bilardello and got one out but also gave up two singles and three walks.

Rossi, a little-used backup infielder, became Washington's fourth pitcher

of the inning. He struck out the first batter he faced and finished the game.

"I've been on both ends of games like that," Lake Erie manager John Massarelli said. "That reminded me of a game when I was managing in the (Class A) Midwest League. We were leading 7-0, and a coach talked me into letting a guy pitch, just to get him some innings. We gave up 11 runs that inning because the kid couldn't throw strikes. It was the exact same thing tonight."

For the Wild Things, the only positive from their second bullpen meltdown in five days - they lost a seven-run lead and the game at Traverse City Wednesday - is that it's only one game.

"In baseball, it's always about the next day," said Washington catcher Blake Ochoa, who was 2-for-3 with a double and triple.

"We have to forget about what happened and try to win the series. You want to win every game, but for us it's about winning two out three in each series. Even if we had a good day, we'd have to forget about it and move on to the next game."

Washington took a 2-1 lead in the third on Luis Rivera's two-run double. The lead grew when Ochoa and Ryan Ditthardt doubled in the fourth to make it 3-1. Washington took advantage of a three-base throwing error by Lake Erie starter Paul Fagan in the fifth to forge a 5-1 advantage.

Extra bases

Kellen Kulbacki and Josh Taylor hit back-to-back home runs off Rossi in the ninth inning. ... Former California University standout Randy Sturgill will start tonight's game for Lake Erie. Sturgill has a 3-0 record. ...

Tuesday's series finale has an 11 a.m. starting time. ...

Two of the 2,127 in attendance were Jim and Andrea Siscel of Seattle, Wash. Consol Energy Park was the 257th ballpark the couple has visited since 2002. The Siscels document their travels on their website (www.baseballroadtrip.net).