

Chiefs LHP Kirk throws 8th no-hitter in franchise history

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PEORIA — The Founding Fathers wrote their names and the date of July 4, 1776 into American history books. Austin Kirk etched his name and the date of July 4, 2011 into the Peoria Chiefs' history book.

Kirk pitched the eighth no-hitter in franchise history to beat the Clinton LumberKings 2-0 in front of 6,621 at O'Brien Field.

"I don't know what to think," the left-hander said. "I'm pretty stoked. I can't believe this actually happened."

Kirk walked only two batters and faced just one above the minimum while striking out a career high 10.

The first of the two walks started the game when Mike McGee drew a pass on five pitches.

"The way things have been going the last couple of weeks, the thought's always in your head that it might be a battle," Chiefs manager Casey Kopitzke said. "Instead, he just cruised."

After Mickey Wiswall grounded into an inning-ending double play, the hunch of Chiefs catcher Sergio Burrel wound up being proven right.

"In the bullpen, I felt like it was going to be a great game for him," Burrel said. "He threw everything for a strike. I was enjoying every single pitch he threw."

The last Chiefs no-hitter was Nick Struck's rain-shortened five-inning no-no on April 30, 2010 against Clinton. Mike Aspray threw the Chiefs' last complete-game no-hitter on August 9, 1988 against Waterloo.

Kirk pitched to contact for the first five innings, spotting his fastball and throwing his curve effectively, something he had been unable to do of late. The Midwest League mid-season All-Star had lost his last three starts before Monday's no-hitter.

"I was able to throw the curve ball for a strike tonight and I was able to throw my fastball in and out real well," Kirk said. "Between that and Sergio's game calling, we put together a pretty good game."

The only hit with any potential of breaking up the no-hitter came on the first batter of the third inning. Chiefs left fielder Greg Rohan made a diving catch on Jetsy Extrano's line drive to preserve the no-hitter.

"It was curving off the bat pretty hard," Rohan said. "I tried to get a good jump on it and get there as quick as I could to try and make the catch."

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At the time there was little thought as to how big that play would be.

"It was early in the game, so I just thought, 'Yes, great play. Now focus on the next pitch,'" Kirk said.

In the top of the sixth, Extrano led off with a walk, but again Kirk escaped.

The Chiefs scored the game's only runs in the bottom of the inning. Richard Jones hit a bases-loaded sacrifice fly and Ryan Cuneo singled in the other run.

In contrast to the rest of the game, the Chiefs' sixth seemed to last an eternity. Peoria got two hits and two walks, chasing Clinton starter Jandy Sena.

It was after that inning Kirk finally noticed the masterpiece he was creating.

"I never thought about it until the seventh and I looked up and saw they didn't have any hits," Kirk said. "I thought maybe if I kept my pitch count down I could finish this."

Kirk wasn't the only one in the Chiefs dugout with that thought. After the seventh inning Kirk had thrown 79 pitches, which is starting to get close to the limit.

"We talked about it in the dugout," Kopitzke said. "We were going to give him every chance to finish that one."

In the eighth and ninth innings, Kirk used some of the more recent lessons from pitching coach Jeff Fassero. Although no

Chiefs pitcher has thrown a complete game since July 27, 2009 — when Austin Bibens-Dirk beat Wisconsin — the subject came up.

“Jeff was just talking to us the other day that if you ever go a complete game you have to get that mentality of a closer for that eighth and ninth,” Kirk said. “I just went out there to throw strikes.”

And, of course, on the Fourth, the rest was history.

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