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TOP STORY

MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Morrison relishes homecoming

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Burlington Bees pitcher Ben Morrison Tuesday, May 7, 2019, at Bowling Green Ballpark. (Bac

There was a little more interest in the crowd at Bowling Green Ballpark in the sixth inning of Wednesday's game between the Bowling Green Hot Rods and Burlington Bees when the Bees made a pitching change.

As Bowling Green High School and Western Kentucky alum Ben Morrison emerged from the bullpen, a small contingent in the crowd was there to cheer the hometown hurler – family, friends, former coaches and co-workers.

Morrison gave them plenty to cheer about with two scoreless innings of work. The right-hander allowed one hit and struck out one and was efficient with a 25-pitch outing – 19 for strikes.

It was exactly the kind of homecoming Morrison envisioned when he spoke to the Daily News following Monday's series opener.

"It's really special," Morrison said. "When I first made this team back in the spring I looked at the schedule and I saw Bowling Green was an away series I was like, 'This could be a crazy opportunity if it works out.' Here I am and I am really excited."

While Morrison only pitched once in the series out of the pen, he had support the entire three-game series. Morrison's mom and dad attended all three games. His sisters were proudly walking the concourse with Burlington Bees attire Tuesday and his grandparents were there for Wednesday's outing.

There was also a group of offseason co-workers from KORT Physical Therapy who put a best wishes message on the jumbotron.

"It's a great opportunity and it's perfect because a lot of people haven't seen me play or they saw me play when I was in Little League," Morrison said. "Now that they get to see me play professionally at this awesome park, it's a cool experience."

Since being drafted by the Los Angeles Angels in the 10th round last season, Morrison has seen his momentum from his senior season at WKU carry over to his second season of professional baseball.

Last season Morrison was 1-1 with a 5.26 ERA in 20 games, 25 2/3 innings, with Orem (Utah) in the rookie Pioneer League.

This year Morrison has been nearly perfect. Following Wednesday's outing, he has allowing one run and five hits in 15 1/3 innings – posting a stellar 0.59 ERA with 17 strikeouts in 10 outings.

Much like at Western, where Morrison bounced back from a labrum injury that caused him to miss a full season only to emerge as the Hilltoppers' closer and a second team All-Conference USA selection as a senior, the right-hander has found a home in the bullpen with the Bees.

"The bullpen is a perfect place for me because I can stay focused for short periods of time, just kind of get my work in and get out," Morrison said. "You are not playing every day either, which is nice for me. I'm kind of an older guy so I like to get my work in, get in and get out."

Morrison said the transition from WKU to professional baseball was made easier because the Hilltoppers and Angels have a lot of the same pitching philosophies. It also helped to have a WKU alum who had experience in the Angels system to be able to talk to – Franklin-Simpson graduate Matt Wilhite, who made it all the way to Triple A with the Angels. Morrison already knew Wilhite from his time on the coaching staff for WKU softball where he coached Morrison's girlfriend Jordan Thomas.

"He just wanted me to enjoy the moment, especially (last season) out in Utah," Morrison said. "He played in Salt Lake City and I was in Orem last summer and he was talking about how much he loved that area. I loved it too. It was a cool experience."

Morrison said his adversity in college with the injury has helped as well, to just push ahead and not let the bad days get him down.

“The biggest thing for me was confidence,” Morrison said. “I had some tough games at Western where I got to experience some adversity and overcome that. That is what it is at the pro level – it’s just going out there every single day and even when you have tough outings, just pitching the next day and competing.”

While Morrison already has plans beyond professional baseball – he was recently accepted to medical school – he is still enjoying his time with the Bees and is just excited to see how long he can continue his baseball career.

He said his immediate goals for this season are simple – have fun and compete.

“I just want to be consistent and compete every single time I go out there,” Morrison said. “I don’t really have a lot of expectations for myself. I don’t know if that is a bad thing or good thing, but so far I am doing well with that mentality. I’m gonna stay with that mindset and go out there and compete and try my best every outing and let the results take care of itself.”

Hot Rods take rubber match from Bees

For the second straight game, Bowling Green used an eighth-inning rally to down Burlington with the Hot Rods scoring four runs in the eighth in a 5-3 win over the Bees.

Kaleo Johnson had a two-run single to break a 1-all tie and Tony Pena added a two-run double as Bowling Green (19-14) built a 5-1 lead and held off a ninth-inning rally from Burlington.

“I think the last three games have been the same, not much going on early in the game but then late in the games the runs keep coming,” BG manager Reinaldo Ruiz said. “It was good that we take advantage of their mistakes and get in the runs when we needed them.”

Johnson and Pena paced the offense with two hits each, while Ford Proctor scored two runs.

Shane Baz, making his BG Hot Rods debut, allowed one run and three hits with seven strikeouts in five innings of work.

Bowling Green returns to action at 6:35 p.m. Thursday, opening a three-game series with Clinton (Iowa).

Micheal Compton

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