

Steam Split with Stark County as First-Inning Runs Keep Coming

Sand pitches his way to ninth consecutive win behind offense that has now scored 12 first-inning runs over the last two days.

July 24, 2010

NORTH CANTON, Ohio—

Game One (7 innings)

Nine wins, zero losses. So stands the career record for Brian Sand (Cincinnati) as a member of the Steam after the hurler tossed 6.0 innings and induced out after out with runners on base to preserve Cincinnati's 4-3, game-one victory over the Stark County Terriers at Walsh University on Saturday afternoon. Each team scored three times in the first inning, but after that Sand shut down Stark County batters when it mattered most, as the Terriers went 0-for-7 with runners in scoring position against Sand the rest of the way. A Brad Gschwind (Miami) RBI double in the third proved to be the difference for the Steam, who won their sixth straight over Stark County.

With the score tied at three in the second inning, the Terriers loaded the bases with one out, but Sand (2-0) got Mark Lapikas (Toledo) to ground into a force out at the plate and Jason Bagoly (Kent State) to fly out to end the threat. Then in the fifth, Lapikas walked to lead off the frame and scampered to second on a wild pitch, but he stayed right there as Sand—Cincinnati's all-time leader in wins, winning percentage, games started, and innings pitched—retired the next three batters in order. Stark County missed its final chance to score against Sand as well, stranding a pair of runners in the sixth before Sam Dawes (Miami) notched his second save with a seven-pitch seventh inning.

Sand yielded six hits and four walks with four strikeouts in his 14th career start with the Steam, leaving eight Terriers runners on base. He has recorded at least as many strikeouts as walks in each of his 13 outings over the last two summers; Sand has punched out 72—second in club history behind current southpaw Mike Jefferson (Louisiana Tech)—to just 25 walks in 90.1 career innings with the Steam.

Cincinnati made it 10 runs in the first inning over its last two games with a three-spot on Saturday on the strength of five consecutive one-out singles. Hits by Jordan Keur (Michigan State) and Gschwind put runners on first and third for Ben Thomas (Xavier), whose base hit to right brought home Keur. Jake Proctor (Cincinnati) then singled to load the bases for Tim Issler (Ball State), who picked up yet another opposite-field knock to drive in two runs. Of Issler's 19 hits this season, eight have been to right field; all told, 22 of the 49 balls Issler has put in play this season have been to the right side of the diamond. Unfortunately for the Steam, both Issler and Keur later had to leave the game with injuries, and neither played in game two; Issler fouled a ball off of his knee, while Keur was hit by a pitch and was replaced by Bryan Rose (Northern Kentucky).

Stark County equaled the score in the bottom half, loading the bases with one out before Grant McCoury (Elon) brought home a run with a grounder to third (McCoury reached when Issler committed an error on the play) and Dominic Spadafora (Wabash C.C.) doubled home a pair of scores.

Though it forced the outfielder to eventually leave the game, the HBP for Keur to lead off the third was a record-breaking one (the 46th for the Steam on the season, a new franchise record) and led to what turned out to be the game's winning run, as he scored from first on Gschwind's double to right-center. The Steam would get just two baserunners the rest of the game, but both times it was catcher J.R. Reynolds (Ohio), who singled in the fourth to snap an 0-for-18 slide and then walked in the seventh off of new pitcher Casey Wilson (Kent State).

Cody Apthrope (Bowling Green) struck out six in 6.0 innings but took the loss, his first decision after no-decisions in his first five starts of the summer.

Game Two (9 innings)

The first-inning success for the Steam (14-14) continued in game two, but the Terriers broke open a close game with a six-spot in the seventh inning and went on to down Cincinnati 10-5 in the nightcap. The Steam have now split five of their seven doubleheaders on the season.

Cincinnati plated two runs in the first inning on RBI by Rose and Thomas, who combined to go 4-for-7 with three doubles and four RBI in the game. Michael Morris (Tennessee Tech) reached on an error to begin the game, moved to second on a hit by Gschwind, his third in four at bats, and came home on the first of Rose's two doubles in the game. Gschwind then came home on a Thomas ground out to put the Steam up 2-0.

With the lead and a red-hot Jefferson on the mound—the lefty now has a 1.56 ERA over his last five outings, in none of which has he allowed more than a single earned run—Cincinnati looked to be in good shape, but Stark County (17-14) caught a break when Jefferson suffered an injury and had to be replaced after just 1.2 innings of work. His successor, Ryan Martin (Michigan State), began well and helped the Steam to hold a 2-1 lead after four, but then Bagoly smacked a two-out, two-run homer in the fifth to put the Terriers up 3-2.

Martin was quickly off the hook when the Steam tied the game in the next half inning, with Rose and Thomas again doing the damage (and all after two were out). Thomas singled home Rose after Rose's two-bagger, and Cincinnati nearly took the lead when Proctor followed with a double of his own, but Thomas was thrown out at the plate on the play.

With four RBI on the day, Thomas matched his 2009 RBI total of 23, a figure that ranks fifth in Steam single-season history; Thomas' 46 career RBI now sits fourth in team history (Brandon Besl of Ohio holds both the single-season and career Steam RBI marks—30 and 60, respectively). Rose, meanwhile, has now reached base safely 30 times in his last 14 games.

But back on the hook went Martin (3-2) in the sixth when his fourth and final walk of the night proved costly, allowing the Terriers to retake the lead at 4-3 (recall that Martin had a streak of 13.1 consecutive innings without a walk earlier this year). Spadafora walked to lead off the inning and came around to score on a Jason Leblebajian (Bradley) double, ending Martin's night.

After the rough first, Terriers starter Steve Weber (Eastern Michigan) settled down quickly, retiring 17 Steam batters in a row before Cincinnati's two-out rally in the sixth. Weber (1-2) fanned seven without a walk, including the side in the fourth on just 11 pitches.

After Martin left the game, Mark Lincoln (Sonoma State) and Andrew Brown (Marietta) each struggled to get hitters out in the seventh, as a Bagoly two-run double and a Spadafora three-run jack highlighted a six-run frame for Stark County, who then led 10-3. The Steam managed a pair of runs in the eighth, but would get no closer despite getting eight baserunners against reliever Justin Gill (Kent State) in his 3.0 innings; two double plays and a caught stealing contributed to the Steam's zeroes in those frames.

Dawes worked another short inning to close out the game, needing just nine pitches this time around. College teammate Gschwind went 2-for-5 with two runs scored, giving him seven hits in his last 17 at bats (.412 average); he has also now gone six games and 28 plate appearances since he last struck out.

The Steam wrap up the road trip with a single contest at Lima on Sunday (6:00 p.m. first pitch). Cincinnati has dropped five of the last six meetings at Simmons Field, but wins over the Locos in the teams' final two matchups of 2010 would give Cincinnati a season series victory over Lima for the fourth time in the Steam's five-year existence.