

Steam Fall to Locos on Late Wild Pitch, 5-4

Lincoln's deep fly ball with two on in the ninth falls a few feet short of being the game-winner.

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WESTERN HILLS, Ohio—What a story it would have been.

Injuries to several position players forced the Steam to use pitchers in the designated hitter slot against Lima on Friday night, so with two on and two out and Cincinnati down 5-4 in the bottom of the ninth inning, it was pitcher Mark Lincoln (Sonoma State) stepping to the plate with a chance to be the hero. And for that moment it looked like he would be just that, as he cranked a towering fly ball to deep center field off of Locos closer J.T. Odom (Mercer), but Tyler Mills (Michigan) sprinted back and made a running catch to end the ballgame.

Lima (15-19-1) had taken the lead in the top of the inning on a two-out wild pitch by Ryan Martin (Michigan State), who eventually struck the batter out to end the inning. Martin came on to replace Brent Wagner (Northern Kentucky), who was lifted after Kevin Gifford (Alabama) singled with two out over a leaping Bryan Rose (Northern Kentucky) in right to put runners on the corners.

The hit by Gifford was just the second by opponents in their last 25 at bats against Wagner (0-1), who saw his scoreless streak of 11.2 innings end with Martin's wild one. He was hurt by three walks in his 3.2 innings, the last of which came around to score the go-ahead run.

The game looked like it would end with a higher run count than the 5-4 final, as runs came across in five of the first six half-innings. In the first, a single by Gifford, a double by Justin Kopale (Wright State), and a Tom Richardson (Chattahoochee Valley C.C.) walk loaded the bases with no outs against starter Paul Uhl (Thomas More). Uhl made a superb bounce-back, striking out both Cam Luther (Michigan) and Mills and getting ahead 0-2 against William Arnold (Central Michigan), but he then threw three straight pitches out of the zone and Arnold smacked the next into right-center for a bases-clearing double and a 3-0 Lima lead.

Cincinnati got one right back in the bottom half, as Ben Thomas (Xavier) drove in a run with a groundout after a Brad Gschwind (Miami) single and a Rose double. The RBI gave Thomas 26 for the summer, four shy of the Steam (16-16) single-season record (set by Brandon Besl and Zach Hurley in 2008).

After Lima strung together three straight two-out singles to take a 4-1 lead in the second, the Steam came right back with a run to cut the deficit to two. Michael Basil (Indiana) sat on first with one out in the second, and when he saw Ajay Meyer's (Ashland) pitch head for the dirt, he took off for second, and catcher Dane Derstine's (Lynn) throw sailed into center to allow Basil to reach third. J.R. Reynolds (Ohio) then brought Basil home with an infield single, giving the catcher RBI hits in each of the last three games. Reynolds also picked off a runner in the game, nabbing Luther at first with the score tied in the eighth.

When Uhl came out to the mound for the third, he looked like a different pitcher than the one who threw 51 pitches in the first two innings, as the lefty needed just 30 pitches to get through the third, fourth, and fifth innings, facing the minimum over that stretch. Uhl allowed four earned runs on six hits in his 5.0 innings while striking out four and walking a pair.

Rose got the Steam within a run in the third by achieving the nearly-impossible, belting a line-drive homer over the 30-foot right-field fence for his second long ball of the season. Thomas then drove a ball in the gap in left-center for a triple, his second of the summer (only one Steam player—Ryan Strausborger (5) last year—has ever collected more than two triples in a season), to put the tying run 90 feet away with still nobody out. Unfortunately for the Steam, Thomas stayed right there, as Ryan Bellamy (Xavier) and Noah Zipko (Campbell) grounded out and Basil struck out to end the threat. Bellamy had been successful in bringing a run home all six previous times he had stepped to the plate with a runner on third and less than two out this season.

Wagner got some help from Basil in the sixth, his first inning of work, to escape unharmed, as the shortstop made a strong throw from deep in the hole to get Geoff Bowers (Olney Central C.C.) to end the inning and strand a pair of Lima runners.

The Steam would tie the game in the seventh, chasing Meyer from the game after 6.1 innings and 111 pitches (the righty fanned eight Steam hitters and walked one). Gschwind doubled over the head of Kevin Putkonen (Chattahoochee Valley C.C.) in left on the first Meyer offering of the frame, Rose was hit by a pitch, and after Thomas struck out, Bellamy singled in the hole on the right side to load the bases. Matt Miller (Eastern Illinois) came on to pitch and shattered Zipko's bat in getting the second baseman to pop up for the second out, but then the Steam did what they do best—get hit by the pitch—to tie the game, as Basil wore the first ball he saw from Miller to force in the tying run. The Steam's fourth HBP of the game in the ninth gave them 53 for the season, six of which have forced in runs; in the past five seasons, only Lima in 2009 (57) has had a higher hit-by-pitch total than the Steam this season. Cincinnati hitters have now been plunked three or more times in a game seven times this year.

The DH spot was first occupied by pitcher Andrew Brown (Marietta), who took some good cuts but struck out three times (on 11 pitches) in three at bats before Lincoln pinch-hit for him in the eighth (neither Brown nor Lincoln had ever hit in college—spring or summer—before tonight). Lincoln hit a medium fly ball to left to begin that inning and was followed by Nick Priessman (Eastern Illinois), who floated a single to left but was then picked off of first by Miller when he tried to return to the bag on his feet. Gschwind followed with his second double of the night and Rose walked (his 21st this season, two shy of the Steam record), but Thomas flied out to end the inning. Gschwind finished with his second three-hit game in his last three; he and Thomas share team-high honors with three three-hit games this summer. Gschwind has 10 hits (.385 average) and has scored eight times in his last six games.

Bellamy flied out on the first pitch of the ninth but Odom then seemed to lose control a bit, understandable for a guy who had already thrown 3.0 innings on the day (in Lima's noon game with Xenia earlier on Friday). He hit Zipko on a full-count pitch and then walked Basil on five pitches, but then rebounded to get Reynolds swinging before Lincoln's deep fly ball. Odom lowered his ERA to 0.90 with 4.0 shutout innings on the day, notching a win in the first game and his fourth save against the Steam.

Hunter Daniel (Tennessee) picked up the win (1-0) despite getting just one out, Thomas' fly ball in the eighth.

Priessman and Rose each picked up two-hit games for the Steam, who fall to 4-8 in one-run games with the loss. 11 of Cincinnati's 16 losses have come by two runs or less.

Cincinnati will go for the season sweep of the Grand Lake Mariners on Friday night, as the two teams tangle at 7:05 p.m. at Western Hills High School. The Steam are 16-5 all-time versus Grand Lake, Cincinnati's best record (in terms of winning percentage) against any GLSCL team.