

Ice in the Veins: Isler Clinches Playoff Spot for Cincinnati

Bearcat rightly tosses monumental two-hit shutout over Stark County, facing just one over the minimum and retiring 17 straight to end the game and send the Steam back to the playoffs.

August 1, 2010

WESTERN HILLS, Ohio—

Game One (7 innings)

What would the GLSCL playoffs be without the Cincinnati Steam?

We may never know, as the Cincinnati franchise made it 5-for-5 in playoff berths after Zach Isler (Cincinnati) tossed what may go down as the best pitching effort in Steam history, hurling a two-hit, complete-game shutout in a crucial game as the Steam blanked the Stark County Terriers 2-0 in the first game of a doubleheader Sunday afternoon at Western Hills High School. After Terrier singles in each of the first two innings, Isler was untouchable the remainder of the contest, setting down the final 17 batters he faced to win his fourth consecutive start (no Cincinnati pitcher has won four straight starts since at least the 2008 season).

The Steam entered Sunday with a variety of situations that would leave them in the playoffs come the end of the day: Cincinnati needed either two wins, one win and at least one Grand Lake loss, or no wins plus two Grand Lake losses and a Lima defeat to advance to the postseason. And in literally seconds, everything fell into place:

4:22 p.m.

Licking County, who had trailed Grand Lake 2-0 early in the game, finds itself knocking on the door in the bottom of the eighth in a 2-2 game against the Mariners. After a Wes Meadows (Otterbein) leadoff single, league MVP candidate John McCambridge (Xavier) attempts to sacrifice Meadows to second, but an error by second baseman Cale Marker (Lake Erie) allows McCambridge to reach safely, putting two on with nobody out. Another error by Marker loads the bases for Adam Walker (Jacksonville), who takes ball four from Ross Gerdeman (Bowling Green) to force in the winning run. One Grand Lake loss is in the books.

4:23 p.m.

Mere seconds later, with two outs in the top of the seventh inning, Isler fields Grant McCoury's (Elon) ground ball, fires to first for the 21st out, and in the process—whether anyone knew it at that point or not—clinches a playoff spot for the Steam.

Cincinnati—the #6 seed—will open the 2010 playoffs against #3 Southern Ohio at Ohio University on Tuesday night (7:30 p.m. first pitch). The winner of that contest will host #2 Hamilton on Wednesday (first game of a best-of-three series) before traveling to Hamilton for game two on Thursday and, if necessary, game three on Friday.

Isler (4-0) got all the support he needed in the first inning on Sunday, as Nick Priessman (Eastern Illinois) singled to open the first, stole second with two outs, and then scored when Ben Thomas (Xavier) jacked a home run over the right-field monster to put the Steam up 2-0. The long ball extended Thomas' hitting streak to nine games and gave him 29 RBI on the season, just one shy of the Steam single-season record (Thomas did not register an RBI in game two, in large part to Stark County pitchers walking him four times). Thomas ends the regular-season portion of his Steam career as the club's all-time leader in batting average (.338), on-base percentage (.441), and intentional walks (3) and the franchise's single-season chart-topper in times hit by pitch (9), intentional walks (2), sacrifice flies (3), fielding chances (288), putouts (270), and fielding double plays (22).



SP Zach Isler

The Steam mounted a few more scoring chances against Scott Foster (Akron), leaving two on in the fourth and failing to score after a Thomas double and a Bryan Rose (Northern Kentucky) walk—which added to his Steam single-season walks record, which ended the day at 26—started the sixth, but this was Isler’s ballgame from the get-go. Down 2-0, all the Terriers needed to do to get the tying run to the plate was get somebody—anybody—on base, but they could not do that in any of the final five innings against Isler, who did not walk a batter in throwing the fourth shutout in Cincinnati history (Matt Marksby tossed one in 2006, Charlie Leesman one in 2007, and Ian Kadish one last summer). Isler is also now the fourth Steam pitcher to record four or more wins in a season without a loss, joining Pat Berndsen (5-0 in 2007), Joey O’Gara (5-0 in 2008), and Brian Sand (4-0 in 2008).

Foster (1-2) also went the distance for Stark County’s first complete game of the year, allowing seven hits with six strikeouts and two walks.

Isler got some major help in the game from the slick-fielding Brad Gschwind (Miami) at shortstop, who recorded 10 assists in the game, including six in the first three innings alone. In the second, Gschwind—the club’s career (263) and season (95) leader in assists—forced Dominic Spadafora (Wabash C.C.) at second for the first out before starting a 6-4-3 double play to end the inning. He then tossed out Kenny Socorro (Marshall) and Josh Haley (UNC Pembroke) in the third before corraling three ground balls for three outs in the fifth. Isler induced a total of 13 ground ball outs in the game.

Jordan Keur (Michigan State) joined Thomas with a two-hit game while also collecting his seventh steal, while Priessman extended his hit streak to six (he would stretch it to seven in game two) and J.R. Reynolds (Ohio) continued his recent upsurge with another base knock.

At one hour and 20 minutes, the contest was the second-quickest in Steam regular-season history; the only shorter game was just the second in Cincinnati history, a 2-0 loss to the Granville (now Licking County) Settlers on June 10, 2006 in an hour and 15 minutes.

Game Two (9 innings)

The Steam had a chance, with win in game two, to finish in a three-way tie at even .500 with Delaware and Stark County, a situation which would have given Cincinnati the #4 seed (based on a better winning percentage in head-to-head matchups than the other two squads) and a home game in the first round of the playoffs, but a costly error led to five unearned runs in the sixth inning and a Jason Leblebajian (Bradley) go-ahead home run—the Terriers’ second home run in two innings—in the seventh proved to be the difference as Stark County (21-19) made out with an 8-7 win in the regular-season finale.

Stark County touched up Markus Kuykendoll (Xavier) for a pair of runs in the second to take a 2-0 lead, but the Steam (17-19) got the runs right back in the bottom half. Thomas and Rose walked to start the inning—two of nine walks for Cincinnati hitters in the game—before Ryan Bellamy (Xavier) moved both runners up a base with a sacrifice bunt. Noah Zipko (Campbell) went down on strikes for the second out, but after a walk to Michael Basil (Indiana), Reynolds collected another RBI hit, doubling down the right-field line to tie the game. The RBIs were the fifth and sixth for Reynolds in his last six games; he now has hits in six of his last eight games after recording just two hits in his first 12 appearances this season.

The runs would be all the Terriers would get off of Kuykendoll, who exited after 4.0 innings, in which he allowed four hits with three punchouts and two walks. And thanks to Bellamy, the right-hander left with a 6-2 lead after the catcher put a hurting on Stark County in the bottom of the third. A Keur triple followed by a Gschwind walk signaled the end of the night for starter Andrew MacDonald (UNC Pembroke), who walked four in his 2.0+ innings of work. After a passed ball on an offering from new pitcher Cody Umbright (Toledo) allowed Gschwind to advance to second, the Terriers elected to intentionally walk Thomas to load the bases. Rose popped out, but Bellamy stepped up and delivered a clutch hit once again, clearing the bases with a double to put the Steam up 5-2. Bellamy advanced to third on the throw home on the play and ended up scoring on an Umbright balk to make it 6-2. Bellamy finished the 2010 season with a .344 average with runners in scoring position; in 32 such at bats, he struck out just twice, and Bellamy did not strike out a single time in 17 at bats with runners in scoring position and two out. He finishes in seventh place with 37 career RBI with the Steam, while his 17 RBI this summer was the third-highest total for any catcher in the league.

Nathan Mutsch (Xavier) got two quick strikeouts in the sixth, but not much good ensued after that, as two singles sandwiched around a walk loaded the bases before an error by Zipko allowed two runs to cross, making the score 6-4 in favor of Cincinnati. Jason Bagoly (Kent State) then made Cincinnati pay big time, smacking a three-run homer to right-center to give the Terriers a 7-6 lead. All five runs in the inning were unearned.

The Steam would tie the game at seven in the next half-inning when lightning struck twice; Bellamy led off with a double and stood at third with two outs when Umbright balked him home for the second time. But the lead would again go the Terriers' way in the seventh, as Leblebician's leadoff homer off of Brent Wagner (Northern Kentucky) put Stark County ahead to stay and made a winner out of Umbright (2-0), who allowed three earned runs in his 4.0 innings.

Wagner (0-2) was the hard-luck loser, as the lefty has allowed just four runs all season but two have saddled him with losses. Opponents finished the season hitting just .113 against Wagner, who allowed only seven hits in 19.2 innings.

Cincinnati had a golden opportunity to tie the game once more in the bottom half of the seventh against Ben Danziger (Akron), as Priessman led off with a double and went to third on a sacrifice by Keur, but Gschwind grounded out and after another Thomas walk and a Rose hit-by-pitch loaded the bases, Justin Gill (Kent State) came on to retire Bellamy for the final out of the inning. Gill then retired the Steam in order in the eighth and worked around a pair of walks in the ninth, getting Rose looking to wrap up the game and secure his third save.

Ryan Martin (Michigan State) worked a pair of scoreless frames to close out the contest, retiring all six batters he faced after being roughed up for a loss (3.2 innings, four earned runs) in his previous outing against the Terriers on July 24.

Cincinnati's title defense begins on Tuesday with a rematch of the 2009 GLSCL championship game, as the Copperheads will look for some revenge. The teams met just twice this season due to rain, with each team winning by a 3-1 count in the June 26 doubleheader. The Steam's all-time playoff record stands at 8-6, including 7-2 over the last two trophy-hoisting campaigns.