

Grizzlies' 9th-inning rally falls 1 hit short

The situation was set up perfectly for the team's first walk-off hit of the season. Trailing by one run, 7-6, entering the bottom of the ninth, Laramie's closer Justin Kanas walked three consecutive batters to load the bases with one out and Cheyenne's cleanup hitter, K.C. Judge coming to the plate.

"We put ourselves in position to win the game," head coach Aaron Holley said. "It's exactly what we wanted—we have our No. 4 hitter up with the bases loaded and one out. You can't ask for anything else."

But Judge connected on the first pitch he saw from Kanas, hitting it directly back up the middle where shortstop Robert Lawrence fielded it, tossed it to second for the first out, and fired it to first for the game-ending, rally-killing double play.

The final out looked as if first baseman Cody Voelker may have come off the bag trying to field the low throw, or even dropped the ball. Holley argued the call, his third time of the night, but the call stood and the Colts hung on for the win.

"You couldn't ask for anything more than a hit there to win the game," Holley said. "Hats off to them (Laramie). They've improved a lot and it's going to be a battle. I'm glad that now they're competing. We've got us and Fort Collins competing, I think Greeley's going to start competing, it's going to be a fun season."

Earlier in the game, the Grizzlies had to rally to even get in position to win it in the ninth, trailing 7-1 halfway through the fifth inning.

Despite letting up a first-inning home run to Laramie's Nate Smith, Cheyenne's starting pitcher Joe Luft looked strong through four innings, allowing two runs, one earned, and two hits.

The fifth inning is when he started to get into trouble, however, allowing six singles and five runs.

"I got guys 0-2 but you just have to learn how to finish your pitches," Luft said about the fifth inning. "I'll learn to be smarter with my pitches in order to put hitters away."

After allowing a single to open the frame, Colts' third baseman Alex Marse reached base on a Judge throwing error after fielding what would have been a sacrifice bunt. Due to the error, only one of the runs in the fifth inning was charged to Luft.

He allowed two earned runs on eight hits and two walks over five innings on the night, striking out four.

"The one big inning we had two errors," Holley said. "When you're playing defense like that it's hard to win. I don't think we pitched bad, and really, other than the defense, we played well."

The Grizzlies were able to chip away, though, getting three back in the bottom of the fifth and a pair in the sixth.

Right fielder Rory Kolo, who had two hits, two runs, an RBI and a stolen base, led off the fifth with a single to left field, followed by second baseman Mike Wido being hit by a pitch and center fielder Kyle Dodge reaching on a fielder's choice when Marse tried to tag out Kolo at third. With the bases loaded, Colts' starter Andres Wiltz threw two wild pitches, resulting in two runs, and designated hitter Mike Domenick was able to bring in a third run on a groundout.

"Guys were doing the right thing to put us in position to chip away and come back," Kolo said. "I was just looking for a good pitch to hit and got enough wood on it to bloop it into the outfield."

In the sixth, third baseman Ryan Javech reached on an error. Javech then stole second and was moved to third on an Andy Athans sacrifice bunt before scoring on Kolo's double to right-center. Wido then brought around Kolo on a hard single to left field before being thrown out trying to steal second.

It was one of three times that the Grizzlies were thrown out on the bases, killing potential chances to score.

In the second inning, Javech, who reached base on a single, was thrown out at the plate trying to score on Jefre Johnson's double to deep left-center.

In the seventh inning, Jose Jauregiu reached base on a fielding error but was picked off at first base. The next two batters singled.

"We preach aggressiveness on the bases," Holley said. "We've probably stolen more bases and taken more extra bases than we have gotten thrown out so I'm going to take it. If they're going hard, doing the right things and being smart about it, sometimes you get thrown out, that's just the way it is. We have good team speed so we're going to try to take advantage of that."

All season, preventing runs in the late innings has been a struggle for relievers. Thirty-six of the 47 runs (77 percent) allowed this season coming into Friday have come after the fifth inning.

But Friday, reliever Howard Heinrich did all he was called upon to do.

"I knew I could bring him in and he was going to throw strikes and keep us in the game," Holley said. "Once he started rolling I let him keep going."

Heinrich threw three innings, striking out two and allowing just one base runner, which came on a walk.

Jack Winters came in to throw the ninth, allowing a bunt single and hitting a batter before escaping the jam.

"From the sixth inning on, we held them and shut them out, which is exactly what we need and talk about," Holley said.

The loss is the team's first since June 9, and, although the Grizzlies couldn't complete the rally, it gives them confidence.

"We did everything we could we were just one play short," Kolo said. "We can look back on this and know we were one hit away and we can do it."

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