



Austin Griffin's third grand slam of the season leads UCF past Cornell

Austin Griffin continues his grand season with his third slam of the year against Cornell on Saturday.

By **Timothy Briggs** - March 26, 2016

Before coming to UCF this season, Austin Griffin was playing baseball at Northeast Texas Community College in Mount Pleasant, TX.

In two seasons at the school, Griffin says that he hit one grand slam.

At Jay Bergman Field on Saturday afternoon against the Cornell Big Red, Griffin hit his third grand slam for UCF this season in just his 25th game, leading the Knights to an 8-3 victory.

For Griffin, the numbers speak for themselves. Saturday afternoon's tilt was Griffin's seventh multiple-RBI game of the season. With a slash line of .290/.396/.624, he has brought the power for UCF when they have needed it most.

"He's been doing that for quite a while," head coach Terry Rooney said. "Most of our crooked numbers this year have come from home runs and I think today we had an air of confidence, a

swagger, if you will.”

Griffin led the Knights today as he has done all season long offensively, going 1-for-5 with four RBIs. With eight home runs and 32 RBIs on the season, Griffin is eighth in the nation in both categories.

His secret?

“I couldn’t tell you,” Griffin said. “It’s just my teammates putting me in that spot and I’m just coming through.”

Aside from Griffin, UCF had a balanced offensive afternoon from multiple contributors. Centerfielder Luke Hamblin went 2-for-3 with two walks, reaching base four times and supplying two RBIs. Ryan Crile and Kam Gellinger each picked up two hits and every Knight starter aside from Jake Corso got a base hit.

Even junior starting pitcher Robby Howell was excited about Griffin’s production, particularly after his fifth-inning grand slam.

“I was pumped, I was one of the first guys out of that dugout,” Howell said. “That’s huge, for a guy like that to step up and take the power role and he’s had it all year. He’s just a good hitter.”

Howell did not let himself be outdone and had a good afternoon despite a rough first inning.

An 11 a.m. start time may have contributed to Howell’s morning struggles as he allowed three earned runs on three hits in the first inning. But he settled down nicely once the afternoon began and found a very good rhythm, going 7 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, giving up just the three runs on five Cornell hits and adding six strikeouts.

The Knights gathered themselves and put together the hits and the subsequent runs to push for the lead and extend it to secure at least two wins this weekend.

“I think he just slowed the game down after being frustrated early,” Rooney said. “The biggest difference between Robby this year and last year is him pitching down in the zone. He settled

in and really made some nice pitches.”

Howell was making his sixth start of the season and he has been immaculate so far this season.

Coming into Saturday, his ERA on the season was a sparking 0.79. With today’s outing, his ERA rises to 1.29, but Howell moves to 5-0 on the year, proving himself one start at a time as a force to be reckoned with along with usual Friday starter Cre Finfrock, who seven innings of one-run ball in the Knights’ 4-3 win Friday for his second win of the year, in the Knights pitching staff.

“I stayed with a two-seam a little bit, stayed down in the zone and tried to go deep in the game,” Howell said. “It’s easy to go deep in the game with great defense behind you with the three double plays.”

And those double plays proved vital for UCF as the American’s leading defense (.976 fielding percentage) helped Howell navigate the difficult first inning and cruise to victory.

For UCF, the season is a grind. There have been a smattering of injuries for the Knights during the first 25 games of the year.

Starting players Matt Diorio, Matthew Mika and Brennan Bozeman are all currently out. Nick McCoy, the team’s planned third starter coming into the season has only thrown 2/3 of an inning this season.

But for the Knights, the plan does not change. The games keep coming and the Knights have had to piece things together both in their lineup and in their bullpen to produce.

“We don’t quit,” Griffin said. “We have a lot of guys who like to battle and grind it out. A couple hits in that first, but we don’t quit. We’re going to grind everything out. Our motto this season has kind of been everybody has to be ready to step in whenever and when they get it, we have to capitalize on it.”

UCF’s record stands at 14-11 after today’s win, but more than anything else, these Knights are learning how to play together, and they are doing it with confidence.

These are not easy games to scratch out, particularly after two frustrating mid-week losses to Florida State on the road.

“Today, we had a little bit of something to us,” Rooney said. “I felt like for the first time in a few games that we had an air of confidence, or a swagger, if you want to call it that.”

UCF will play another 11 a.m. game Sunday against Cornell trying to build on that confidence.

With just two games to go until American Conference play begins, UCF still has objectives on its checklist to cross off, such as finding a reliable third starter and getting some more offensive production consistently across the board.

Sunday has been a struggle to finish. On Saturday though, the Knights held up their mantra to finish games strong. They got stronger as this one went on.

It takes a team to set up grand slams. And it takes a strong finish to bring them all home in one fell swoop as Griffin has so far this year.

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