

HAMILTON SOCCER

Backus beats the odds

After emergency brain surgery, Hamilton grad is getting back on track to attend college

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Nick Backus had done it hundreds of times in the past.

Ten minutes into the second half of club soccer match in Naperville, Ill. on Sunday, April 16, the U18B Elmbrook United defender did it again, heading away a corner kick before pursuing the play upfield.

But in that moment, Backus' life forever changed.

"I just started getting profusely a really bad headache," Backus said. "I was playing right back on defense so I was right next to the sideline with all the parents. I turned to my dad and said, 'My head's going to explode. My head's going to explode.'"

Senior year was winding down for Backus at Hamilton, and it had already been a successful final year of high school. In the fall, he was chosen by his peers as one of two captains and voted a second-team all-conference defender for the Chargers, helping them reach the WIAA State Boys Soccer Tournament for the second time in program history. He was also a member of the homecoming court, and in the spring, he was a sprinter for the track and field team, balancing that commitment with club soccer.

With less than two months until graduation, Backus was enjoying Senior Ball with his classmates before heading home the night of Saturday, April 15.

"I had to leave early to go to Chicago so I went home to get a good night's sleep," Backus said. "I woke up feeling totally fine. It was lousy weather so I was kind of not



Contributed photo

Nick Backus stands in the middle of his front yard on Sunday, May 7 amongst the decor welcoming him home from a three-week stay at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago following emergency brain surgery.



Contributed photo

Nick Backus holds his detached external ventricular drain (EVD), which was removed before he was discharged from Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago on Saturday, May 6.

excited to play. But I got to the game and felt great."

His Elmbrook United teammates did as well, taking a 1-0 lead into halftime.

"In the second half I had no symptoms of a bad headache or anything," Backus said.

That would tragically change moments later following the header.

Per the advice of his father, John, he went down to a knee and then waited for the referee to whistle play dead so he could be substituted out of the match.

"He tried to get off the field but he couldn't quite make it off," said Nick's mother, Christina Backus.

As Backus tried to get back up, his legs folded out from under him, and chaos ensued.

"I was on the ground and all the parents and refs ran over to me

screaming at me to stay awake," Nick said. "That was a really scary moment because I didn't know what was going on."

"I thought it was just a concussion. I could barely talk or move, so they called an ambulance."

Soon, Backus would find out it was much worse than a concussion.

He was in and out of consciousness and vomiting in the ambulance as his head pounded during the seven-minute ride to Edward Hospital in Naperville. Following one CT scan, doctors determined there wasn't a full brain bleed, so they took a second computed tomography angiography.

"I was waiting in the hospital room waiting to hear that I have a really bad concussion," Nick said.

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Associated Press

Nick Backus, second from right, is greeted upon his return home from Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago by his friends Izzy, Max and Ella on Sunday, May 7.

Will special teams actually be special?

Reischel looks at whether Packers' unit will finally take a step forward



ROB REISCHEL

No one at 1265 Lombardi Ave. saw this coming.

Not Matt LaFleur, whose knowledge of special teams is pedestrian.

Not Rich Bisaccia, who has a Ph. D. in special teams.

And not even Keisean Nixon, a player packed with as much confidence as speed and elusiveness.

Nixon entered the 2022 campaign with six career kickoff returns and zero punt attempts. He finished the season as arguably the most dangerous return man in football.

Nixon's emergence was the biggest reason Green Bay jumped from No. 32 to 22 in Rick Gosselin's annual special teams rankings.

"He's got a very aggressive mindset which, for the most part, is really, really good," LaFleur said of Nixon. "And there are some times where you kind of hold your breath. But he's got a great mentality and I love how he competes and he's a guy who really goes for it and he's got no fear of failure, which I totally respect and I think it's done well for us."

"Well" is the understatement of the LaFleur-era.

The Packers had been operating with Yugos and Pintos in the return game for years. Then midway through last season, LaFleur and Bisaccia realized



Associated Press

Green Bay Packers cornerback Keisean Nixon runs back a kickoff for a touchdown during a game against the Minnesota Vikings on Jan. 1 in Green Bay.

they had an Aston-Martin sitting in the garage.

Nixon wasn't given the kickoff return job until Week 8. And he wasn't made the primary punt returner until Week 11 after Amari Rodgers fumbled his way out of town.

Nixon proceeded to have a Desmond Howard-like impact on special teams over the final two months of the season. Among Nixon's remarkable achievements were:

- He led the NFL with 1,009 yards on kickoff returns. The only other Packers in team history to achieve that were Al Carmichael (1956 and 1957) and Dave Hampton (1971).

- Nixon ranked No. 2 in the NFL with an average of 28.83 yards per kickoff return, the best single-season mark in franchise history among players with 30-plus kickoff returns.

- He ranked No. 1 in the NFL in kickoff returns of 50-plus

yards with five. No other player in the NFL had more than two.

- Nixon also led the league in kick returns of at least 30 yards with 11. That was the most by a Packer since Allen Rossum in 2000.

- Nixon has a league-high six games with 100-plus yards on kickoff returns, tying Hampton (1971) for the most in a season by a Packer since 1950.

- He became the fourth player since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger to post 1,000-plus yards on 35 or fewer kickoff returns. The others were Cordarrelle Patterson (2015, 2020), Joe McKnight (2011) and Alvin Haymond (1970).

- Nixon returned a kickoff 105 yards for a touchdown against Minnesota in Week 17, marking the first time since 2011 (Randall Cobb) the Packers had a kickoff return for a TD.

- He returned 11 punts for 140 yards (12.7).

- And Nixon became the first

Packer kick returner to be named first-team All-Pro by the Associated Press since it added that position in 1976.

"Man, he does a great job," Packers nose tackle Kenny Clark said of Nixon. "Every time he's got the ball in his hands, I'm standing up trying to see what he's going to do with the ball. Kei has been huge for our team."

In hindsight, it seems almost criminal Nixon sat behind Rodgers for half of the 2022 campaign. Then again, there was nothing from Nixon's past to suggest he could be this type of return man.

Nixon had a pair of kickoff return touchdowns while playing junior college football at Arizona Western Community College. But despite his 4.42 speed in the 40-yard dash, Nixon didn't do any returning his final

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REDS 4, BREWERS 3

Reds stop Brewers' rally cold

Yelich hits three-run homer in ninth inning

By Steve Megargee
AP Sports Writer

MILWAUKEE — Andrew Abbott pitched six scoreless innings, Will Benson hit a two-run homer and the Cincinnati Reds withstood a frantic ninth-inning comeback attempt to edge the Milwaukee Brewers 4-3 on Tuesday night.

Cincinnati reduced the Brewers' NL Central lead over the Reds to a half-game. The Brewers and Reds will have their final regular-season meeting Wednesday afternoon in the rubber match of this three-game series.

The Brewers trailed 4-0 before nearly coming all the way back in the ninth.

One night after hitting a walk-off single to give the Brewers a 3-2 victory over the Reds, Christian Yelich ripped a three-run homer off reliever Daniel Duarte with two outs in the ninth inning. William Contreras then greeted Alexis Diaz with an infield single, though he initially was called out before replays showed he had beaten the throw from third baseman Elly De La Cruz.

After Tyrone Taylor pinch-ran for Contreras and stole second, a 3-2 pitch from Diaz hit Willy Adames. Diaz finally sealed Cincinnati's victory and earned his 30th save in 31 opportunities by retiring Andrew Monasterio on a fly to center.

Cincinnati's biggest obstacle in its quest for the NL Central lead thus far has been its struggles against the Brewers. Since May 25, the Reds have gone 3-9 against the Brewers and 32-9 against everyone else.

The Reds finally got the better of the Brewers on Tuesday thanks

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Backus

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“Then three nurses came in and said, ‘You need to be transferred right now ... you have to go into brain surgery in less than three hours because you have a burst aneurysm and you could die.’ ‘That’s when it hit me this could be life or death.’”

With no neurological team at Edward, Backus had to be taken to Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, as he was still 17 years old and could be offered pediatric. But because of the weather, flight for life wasn’t possible, so Backus had to wait for an ambulance with a neurosurgeon on hand to arrive before suffering through a 75-minute ride to Lurie.

“I got pushed into a room with around 45-50 doctors and nurses screaming, ‘We need to get him undressed and get him ready for surgery. We have to get him in surgery in under 30 minutes,’” Nick said.

Backus would have an external ventricular drain (EVD) inserted, which helps remove cerebrospinal fluid out of compartments of the brain through a thin tube. He had no recollection of how long the surgery lasted, waking up Monday morning still in a great deal of pain since the aneurysm had yet to be clipped.

“Then Monday the whole team got together,” Christina said. “He had an angiogram to determine if they could go through his groin or his wrist (for surgery). But they didn’t think he was a good candidate for that, so they decided to do open skull surgery.”

Sitting in his hospital bed for two days in the lead-up to Wednesday’s craniotomy, fear and depression began to set in for Backus.

“I was always asking myself, ‘Why me? What did I do to deserve this?’” Backus said.

Tuesday, April 18 was the toughest day. He was prepped by doctors for the surgery and the possible repercussions.

“If you come out with not your brain capacity, you could have a 7-year-old’s brain. I have a chance of life and death in this hospital,” Backus said. “So that freaked me out.”

Backus couldn’t hold back the tears of fear as early Wednesday morning arrived and he was wheeled into surgery, which lasted roughly eight hours. His parents, the only visitors allowed at the time, were ushered out of the room 90 minutes beforehand.

“It was a very long day,” Christina said.

It wasn’t until Thursday afternoon when Backus came to, and the fearful moments only continued.

“I could barely talk. I could not move. I couldn’t make sentences or even words out of my mouth for Thursday, Friday and Saturday,” Nick said. “I was snapping at my dad to get me stuff, and then I was just super delirious because during the night I was woken up every (hour for neurological tests). I couldn’t tell day or night.”

Those were difficult moments for Backus’ parents to watch.

“When the delirium got so bad, they put medicine into a drain that went directly into his head just to make sure nothing was going on that they were missing and attributing to hospital delirium,” Christina said.

“Being in another city was extremely stressful. I never went home.”

But slowly but surely, things would get better.

Backus had been using his phone to listen to music, but by Sunday he was coherent enough to check out his notifications. What he saw blew him away.

“The support that I saw from everyone in the community was insane,” Nick said. “It kept me going for sure, because I did go through a dark hole in there. I think that’s what kept me alive the most.”

That support went beyond texts and DMs. Even knowing they wouldn’t be able to see him at the hospital, friends and family members stationed themselves in the lobby during his stay, from which they would FaceTime Backus. Visitors included his twin sisters, Sam and Meghan, who were attending the University of Minnesota, as well as a cousin that was at Nebraska. Eventually, the mask mandate was lifted and more than two visitors were allowed in Backus’ room.

“My best friends like Max, Cam, Collin, Gilly, Ella, Izzy, Alexis and Syd, Jacob Unger; they couldn’t even see me, so that just meant so much,” Nick said. “The support was unreal.”

The neurology checks gradually became every two hours, then three hours, and then four hours apart.

“Then he started looking a lot better when he was able to get some sleep,” Christina said.

There were neurology, ICU and neurosurgery teams all assigned to Backus, to go along with physical, occupational and speech therapy. The window was 21 days from his first day at Lurie’s to being discharged, and on Day 19, he was sent from the pediatric ICU to the neuro floor.

“I got the drain taken out of my head and they said you could stay here 24 hours and then leave,” Nick said. “They just had to make sure I would adapt to the drain being out of my head.”

The excitement was palpable, but Backus wasn’t going to count his chickens before



Contributed photo

Nick Backus sleeps during his recovery from brain surgery at Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago. Backus, then a senior at Hamilton, suffered a brain bleed and aneurysm from a header during a club soccer match with Elmbook United on Sunday, April 16.

they hatched. Finally, once he cleared all the necessary hurdles, he got the news he was looking for on Sunday, May 7.

“The neurosurgeon came in and said I can leave in two hours,” Nick said. “I was like, this is crazy. I get to go home and see everyone.”

Around 2 p.m., Backus was home in Menomonee Falls. Waiting for him were his friends Max, Izzy and Ella.

“I cannot tell you the joy that brought me just seeing other people since I couldn’t see anyone in the hospital except my parents,” Nick said.

But soccer was still on his mind.

“That day my team had a soccer game and my teammates were the last people I saw before going to the hospital, so I wanted to go surprise them,” Nick said. “It was super cool to see my coach and teammates and watch them play a game.”

One of Backus’ teammates, Unger, scored a goal before running over to the bench to embrace Backus in an emotional moment. He then returned home at halftime to order pizza and hang out with friends — of which Backus has many.

“The outpouring of support was astounding,” Christina said. “We cannot even to begin to thank every-

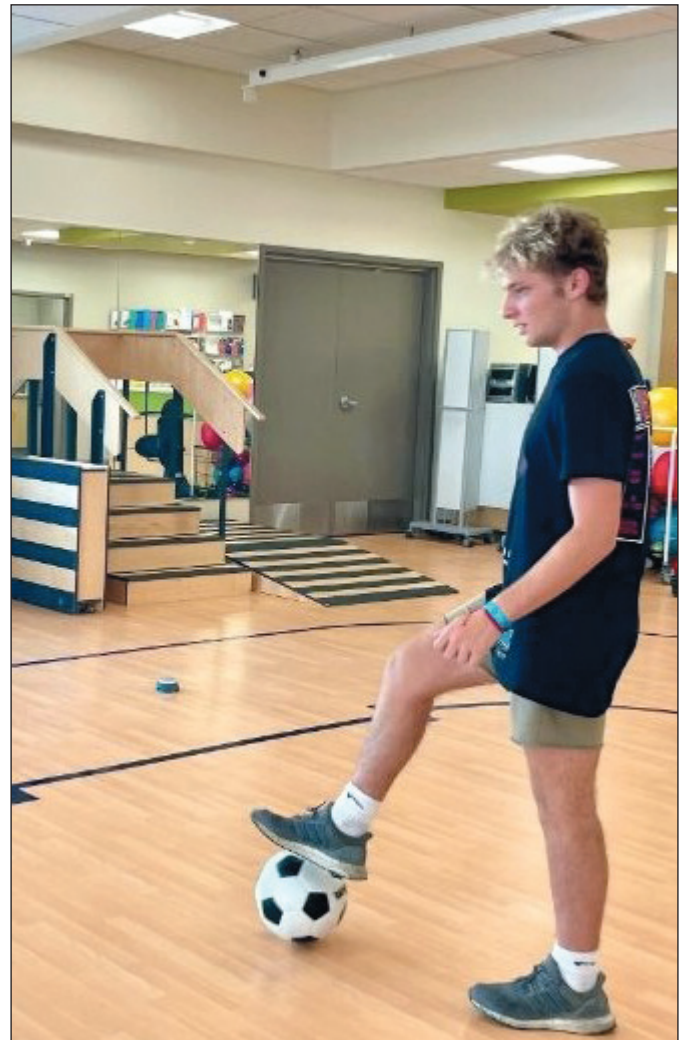
one—friends, family the community, the soccer community is another story in itself. The team we were playing in Illinois was reaching out, old teachers from school that he had, the whole Sussex Hamilton district ...

“His coach from EBU, Logan Fye, was also amazing in keeping the EBU team supported and on track after witnessing such a traumatic injury. In addition to his friends and family, Logan was a very big support to Nick going through this.

“Out of all my kids, he’s definitely my most social kid and everybody knows him. I would attribute that to the amount of support we had.”

And that support went beyond anything the Backus family could have ever imagined.

Christina Backus started a journal on caringbridge.org a few days after the incident to provide updates on her son’s recovery, and words of encouragement poured in. Within days, friends sent over a video with words of support. The Ronald McDonald House provided services while Nick was in Chicago. There was a T-shirt drive that sold over 500 shirts. Classmate Alexis Holz also began a fundraiser on gofundme.com to help the Backus family with medical expenses. It raised north of \$40,000 from over 700 donors.



Contributed photo

Hamilton graduate Nick Backus takes part in physical therapy as part of the Brain Injury Outpatient Program at Froedtert & Medical College of Wisconsin on Thursday, June 1.

“I hadn’t even known that had happened until a week in,” Christina said.

“You never think this can happen to a healthy, athletic 17-year-old kid and then it changes his life.”

The path ahead has been a challenge, but one Backus has taken head-on.

He’s had several appointments at the Brain Injury Outpatient Program at Froedtert, completing occupational therapy in late May while also taking part in physical and speech therapy. In the process, Backus got his driver’s license back and had several medical appointments to go along with his therapy sessions, with hopes of a full recovery.

“They’re looking at his genetics to see why this happened,” Christina said. “He’s progressing. He’s doing well. If you just saw him, you wouldn’t even know. A lot of it is more speech, cognition, comprehension, recall, memory — stuff you need to go to college. But he’s bound and determined to go to Oshkosh in the fall.”

While his neurosurgery team pondered having Backus take a year off from school, the plan is for him to attend UW Oshkosh on a part-time basis. He’ll be rooming with fellow Hamilton graduate, Max Prell, at UW O and

was able to walk across the stage at graduation on June 9 after returning to school for two hours at a time on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“He had an English class and actually wrote a paper about his perspective about being in the hospital,” Christina said. “At his graduation party I had a printed copy and it was the hot topic at the party.”

Backus said this is his final week of therapy at Froedtert. Otherwise, he’s been trying to enjoy his summer to the best of his ability.

“I’ve been hanging out with all my friends and golfing a lot because that’s the only thing I can do right now,” Nick said. “But recovery’s been going really well. I’m with friends mostly every day. They kept me going through the whole situation.”

August 30 is the move-in date for Backus at UW Oshkosh, where he’ll have several accommodations due to the uncertainty of how he’ll adapt to schooling.

“I’m only taking 10 credits,” Backus said. “I get a personal note-taker in school. I get to take tests in a quiet environment. I get extra tutoring ... It’s going to be tough, but I think it’s going to be good.”

“Good” is a far cry from where Backus was over three months ago.

“I’m doing really well right now,” Backus said.

Reischel

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two collegiate seasons at South Carolina.

Nixon returned six kicks during his first two years with the Raiders, but averaged just 14.0 yards per return.

When Green Bay hired Bisaccia as its special teams coordinator in Feb. 2022, he lobbied to add Nixon to the roster — but that was largely to help improve Green Bay’s coverage units. Nixon did that, then took over both return jobs after Rodgers fumbled five times as a returner and was released on Nov. 15.

Nixon signed a one-year, \$4 million contract this offseason that could pay him up to \$6 million based on playing time incentives. Now, Nixon is excited to try living up to that contract by strutting his stuff for an entire season.

“I’m comfortable now, you know what I’m saying?” Nixon said. “When I first got here, it was like I’m kinda like trying to understand what’s going on, how the building works and stuff like that. Now it’s like, I’ve been here. It’s not a new transition for me. It’s comfortable, playing good.”

Green Bay has built a solid nucleus of special teams players around Nixon that includes Dallin Leavitt, Rudy Ford, Isaiah McDuffie, Tariq Carpenter, Eric Wilson and Patrick Taylor. While Nixon has a rare combination of speed and vision, the blocking was sublime last year on several of his returns.

If the entire unit can perform to that standard again, Nixon could put up some eye-popping numbers over a full season.

“I’ve got my own standards as a person for myself and my own expectations,” Nixon said.

“I always want to prove it to myself that I am who I say I am and that’s the biggest thing is coming to work every day and showing who I am. The coaches know who I am and trust in my commitment to this team and to my career.”

Green Bay’s biggest question on special teams comes at kick-off, where rookie sixth round draft pick Anders Carlson is trying to replace veteran Mason Crosby.

Crosby, a sixth round pick himself in 2007, obliterated the franchise’s all-time scoring record with 1,918 points. He made 81.4% of his field goals while in Green Bay, including an 86.2% clip last season (25-of-29).

“I learned a lot from Mason,” Bisaccia said. “I learned a lot about tempo. I learned a lot about rhythm. I think he ... had a heck of a year last year.”

The Packers opted to move on from the 38-year-old Crosby this offseason, though, and made Carlson the third kicker selected in April’s draft. San Francisco’s Jake Moody (Round 3) and New England’s Chad Ryland (Round 4) both had stronger college careers than Carlson, but Green Bay believes its new kicker is ready.

“He’s a talented guy and we’re excited,” LaFleur said of Carlson. “He’s got a big leg and certainly he’s by far from a finished product. But we’re just excited about the talent there.”

There’s undoubtedly a lot of talent, as Carlson had one of the strongest legs in the draft. But his production at Auburn was certainly spotty.

Carlson, who’s already 25, spent six seasons at Auburn where he made 71.8% of his field goals (79 of 110). Carlson suffered a torn ACL late in the 2021 campaign, returned in 2022, then had his final season cut short by a shoulder injury.

Carlson was terrific from 40 yards and in, making 49 of 54 field goals (90.7%) during his

time with the Tigers. Outside of 40, though, he was dreadful, making just 30-of-56 overall (53.6%).

Carlson was 25-of-39 between 40 and 49 yards (64.1%) and 5-of-17 beyond 50 yards (29.4%).

“Well, he’s had the ups and downs a little bit through college, but he’s been there six years, he stayed when he could’ve tried to come out,” Bisaccia said. “He’s had an ACL injury, he’s had a shoulder injury. I know a lot of people just look at stats, 71 percent coming out, but I look at really the makeup of the person.

“I think he’s a strong mental makeup person, I think he’s been his best regardless of the circumstance. He’s been in a lot of big games, he’s kicked in a lot of different situations in the SEC. He’s kicked in many bowl games. I love his body structure, the power that he has, the ability to get stronger and the ability to self-correct. I think it’s a little bit of a family trait right now that we’re seeing from him. So we’re excited about where he’s going to go forward.”

Carlson’s older brother, Daniel, was a fifth round draft pick by Minnesota in 2018, but was released that same season. Daniel Carlson rebounded, though, and has made 107 of 115 field goals the last three years with Las Vegas (93.0%).

Bisaccia spent four years with Daniel Carlson in Oakland/Las Vegas and believes the younger Carlson has a chance to be a good one himself.

“Daniel and I at times would take some of Auburn’s tape and watch Anders when he was playing,” Bisaccia said. “We talked to him about some of the drills that we did, some of those things, so we’re familiar with Anders as well as the whole family, and we’re excited about working with him right now.”

Green Bay gave Matt Orzech

a \$300,000 signing bonus this offseason to replace Jack Coco as the long snapper. Orzech, who went undrafted, was Jacksonville’s long snapper in 2019 and snapped for the Los Angeles Rams the last two years.

“We’re excited about going and getting Matt,” Bisaccia said. “He’s played a lot of football. He’s a 6-4 body who can really move his feet. He’s athletic.”

Veteran punter Pat O’Donnell returns despite the fact Green Bay ranked 31st in yards per punt and 30th in net yards per punt.

With Bisaccia in charge, Green Bay’s ranking of No. 22 in overall special teams was its highest since 2017 (16th). But there are a lot of strides yet to be made.

The Packers allowed four blocked kicks in 2022, the most in the NFL. Rodgers’ five fumbles were an atrocious number. And Green Bay ranked 26th in opponent starting field position after a kickoff return.

Still, Green Bay ranked 26th, 29th and 32nd on special teams in LaFleur’s first three seasons. So, the Packers are moving in the right direction — one Nixon and Bisaccia hope to keep taking them in 2023.

“I think absolutely it’s going the right way,” LaFleur said after the 2022 campaign. “I think you look at our kickoff coverage units, our punt coverage unit, the way these guys run, certainly we saw the effects on kickoff return. But the way these guys compete for that one play, I love the effort, I love the energy.”

“(Bisaccia) is extremely sound and detailed in what we are trying to get done. I thought you saw improvement. You saw a lot of young players improve throughout the course of the season. I think as a team we’re definitely in terms of that phase of the game. We are definitely trending in the right direction.”

Brewers

From Page 1B

largely to Abbott, a rookie right-hander who already has grown accustomed to pitching against them.

Abbott (6-2) has faced the Brewers in four of his 10 career starts. He allowed six runs over 4 1/3 innings in a 7-3 loss at Milwaukee on July 7, but he has given up just two runs over 18 innings the other three times.

He struck out nine and scattered seven hits and one walk Tuesday to improve his ERA to 1.90 and outduel Corbin Burnes (9-6).

Burnes entered Tuesday’s game having thrown 15 straight scoreless innings. He extended that streak to 18 before running into trouble in the fourth.

Burnes hit TJ Friedl with a pitch and walked Matt McLain to start the inning. After Jake Fraley struck out, Jonathan India hit a bouncer up the line that went off third baseman Monasterio’s glove for an RBI single. Joey Votto then snapped an 0-for-19 slump with a single up the middle that brought home McLain.

Benson made it 4-0 in the top of the ninth with his 418-foot shot to left-center off Bryse Wilson.

The Brewers squandered a couple of early scoring opportunities against Abbott. Milwaukee had runners on first and third with one out in the second but failed to score. Monasterio got thrown out attempting to score from first on Victor Caratini’s two-out double to right in the fourth.

TRAINER’S ROOM

Reds: RHP Vladimir Gutierrez continued his recovery from Tommy John surgery by pitching a simulated game. “He’s getting toward the end of this whole process, so hopefully we’ll be seeing him definitely before the end of the year,” manager David Bell said. “Hopefully everything stays on track because he’s doing great.” ... RHP Tejay Antone, also recovering from Tommy John surgery, has been sent to the Reds’ Arizona Complex League affiliate to begin a rehabilitation assignment.

Brewers: LHP Wade Miley (elbow) threw a bullpen session Monday and is expected to have another one on Thursday. Manager Craig Counsell said Miley likely won’t need a rehabilitation appearance. ... 1B Rowdy Tellez is expected to begin taking swings Wednesday after having 17 stitches removed from his left ring finger.

UP NEXT

RHP Ben Lively (4-5, 3.89 ERA) starts for the Reds and RHP Freddy Peralta (6-8, 4.72) pitches for the Brewers.