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Manchin praises Epling Stadium

By Mannix Porterfield
Register-Herald Reporter

No one believed Joe Manchin was only 12 when he appeared on a Little League diamond some years ago.

His mother always had to accompany her taller-than-the-others son with a birth certificate to prove his age so he could get a uniform.

Manchin found something hard to believe when his helicopter circled Linda K. Epling Stadium, home of the West Virginia Miners, now a member in good standing of the Prospect League, only a step from professional baseball.

In fact, he asked the pilot to take a few spins around the freshly minted ball park so his photographer could get a few extra pictures.

"This is the real 'Power Park,'" the governor quipped as he stepped onto the artificial turf and met the club's owner, Doug Epling, and general manager Mike Gilligan in a taxing sun at home plate.

"They're all elite players," Gilligan told the governor.

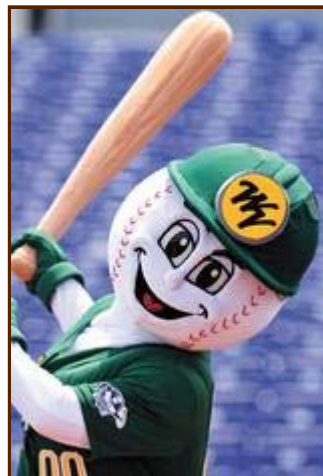
"Most of these boys will be playing single-A, double-A or triple-A baseball after they're done here."

The Miners hit the road to open the season tonight at Slippery Rock, Pa., then come home Saturday for the home opener.

As a youngster, Manchin got his time in on the baseball field from Little League right up through high school, pitching until he almost threw his arm away, but handling shortstop and outfield as well.



Gov. Joe Manchin throws the first pitch at Lind K. Epling Stadium during a ceremony on Wednesday. Because of a nephew's wedding, Manchin is unable to attend opening day on Saturday. Christopher J. Jackson/The Register-Herald



The West Virginia Miners' mascot, "Miner Mike," swings the bat at Linda K. Epling Stadium. The Miners hit the road to open the season tonight at Slippery Rock, Pa., then come back Saturday for their home opener. Christopher J. Jackson/The Register-Herald

Manchin wouldn't reveal his batting average, but merely said, "I was pretty good."

"My mother used to have to take my birth certificate to let me play," he recalled in his boyhood.

"I was about as big as I am right now."

Epling expanded the infield at WVU Tech and constructed the new field at Woodrow Wilson High School. While he never played the game, he managed American Legion teams 11 years, learning all the ropes.

Epling took the advice of his wife, Linda, and agreed to build a stadium in Beckley. This one bears her name and she will deliver the opening pitch when the Miners engage the Sliders of Slippery Rock on Saturday night.

The Miners are members of the Prospect League, a summer combine of top college players.

"I feel really good about playing here," third baseman Victor Ramos said after some infield practice.

Ramos hails from Miami, where it's a mite hotter, so toasty, in fact, he says you can't get in some fielding tune-ups without wringing out a jersey afterward.

Ramos is the third sacker at Marshall University with a goal of reaching the majors.

"I know there are going to be a lot of eyes on us," he said. "So this will be a big opportunity for us. I'm excited because the whole town is excited. Everyone is buzzing about the Miners. I'm really excited to be a part of the Miners here."

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