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Miners ready to play ball

Ackerman honored to start in opener at Slippery Rock today

By Gary Fauber

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It finally gets started today, and Hunter Ackerman is honored to play such a huge part.

Ackerman will be the West Virginia Miners' starting pitcher when they play their first-ever game at Slippery Rock, Pa. First pitch in the Prospect League game is set for 7:05 p.m.

Ackerman, a left-hander from Richmond, Va., is thrilled to toss the first pitch for the Miners, who are playing their inaugural season this summer.

"It means a lot," Ackerman said. "Opening-day starter pretty much means you're the top pitcher. It feels great to try to help us get a win on opening day."

West Virginia manager Tim Epling and pitching coach Jeff Wallace had a number of choices, but based on Ackerman's numbers, it looks as if they made the right call.

Pitching for Louisburg College, a JUCO in North Carolina, Ackerman compiled an 8-1 record and 1.40 earned run average. He had 92 strikeouts and 22 walks in 57 2/3 innings, while holding opponents to a meager .191 average.

"In the fall, I kind of struggled, but I just worked really hard to get my pitches and everything all together," said Ackerman, who will move on East Carolina after one more season at Louisburg. "During the spring, I put it all together and just came out with a great season."

Ackerman, who played for Richmond Post 137 in the American Legion World Series when it was hosted by Morgantown in 2008, said he relies on his changeup.

"I mainly do command with my fastball, but my out pitch is the changeup," he said. "I try to work the changeup mainly because it's my best pitch. But I'll throw a curveball in there to keep them off balance."

The Miners practiced at Independence High School Wednesday morning to get reacquainted with a grass field. They took batting practice at Linda K. Epling Stadium



West Virginia Miners second baseman Travis Issak, right, throws to first baseman Blake Roberts during practice Wednesday at Linda K. Epling Stadium in Beckley. The Miners play their first-ever game today at Slippery Rock, Pa. Christopher J. Jackson

yesterday afternoon, and were scheduled to bus out at 7 a.m. today.

Between those sessions, Gov. Joe Manchin was on hand to dedicate Epling Stadium because he will be unable to attend Saturday's 7:05 p.m. home opener, also against Slippery Rock. He met with players and coaches to wish them well and good luck.

Players began arriving in Beckley last week to begin their preparation for the summer season. Some still have not reported because their college teams are still alive in the postseason.

The ones who are here just want to play some ball.

"They are really jacked up," Epling said. "They can't wait to get out there and compete. They know that one day a lot of these players, we're going to see, are going to sign pro contracts. You're going to see them play in the College World Series. You're going to see a lot of really neat things that these kids are going to be able to accomplish over the next couple of years."

The Miners go to Butler, Pa., on Friday to take on the Blue Sox. First pitch is set for 6:35 p.m.

All Miners games will be broadcast on Groovy 94.1 FM.

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