



December 8, 2009

Prospect League baseball coming to Beckley

West Virginia Miners to begin play in June

By Gary Fauber

The Epling family didn't build a new baseball stadium just to have it sit there.

A press conference will be held today to formally announce that the Prospect League will expand to Beckley this summer. The West Virginia Miners will begin their inaugural season in June at the new Linda K. Epling Stadium on Ragland Road. The playing field is complete, and the stadium itself is expected to be ready by Feb. 15.

Prospect League commissioner Bryan Wickline will be at today's press conference to officially welcome the Miners into the fold.

Mike Gilligan, a former director of operations for the Professional Golfers Association of America, will also be introduced as the team's general manager.

"We felt that the Miners nickname represents the rich tradition and great heritage that mining has provided to our region," Gilligan said, "as well as a reminder to the importance of mining to this community and to our country in the near future."

The Beckley franchise gives the league 12 teams, although there could be further expansion into Tennessee and Wisconsin. Other states currently represented in the league are Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Ohio.

The Miners are owned by Doug Epling, who is constructing the new field. Tim Epling, former head coach at Liberty High and WVU Tech, will be the team's manager. He also owns Upper Deck Training Center.

Last year was the first for the Prospect League under that moniker, but its tradition is deep-rooted. The former Central Illinois Collegiate League, which had existed since 1963 and had six teams, elected last winter to merge with five other teams to form the current Prospect League.

The league is a member of the National Alliance of College Summer Baseball, a group of 10 wooden bat summer collegiate teams. The NCAA ended its certified summer program in 1995, but leagues continue to play within NCAA rules and guidelines so players' amateur status can be maintained.

Prospect League players must have completed one year of college and have college

eligibility remaining.

Several former CIGL/Prospect Leaguers have gone on to Major League Baseball, including Philadelphia Phillies first baseman Ryan Howard, Boston Red Sox closer Jonathan Papelbon and New York Yankees manager and former catcher Joe Girardi.

Beckleyans will have a chance to get to know potential future stars, both directly and indirectly. The Miners are looking for host families to provide homes for the players during their two-month stay.

A limited number of families within the Greater Beckley/Raleigh County area who would be interested in hosting 1-2 collegiate athletes for the summer are being sought. These "Miner Families" must provide a bed, as well as a packed lunch for most days. The League will take care of all transportation and dinner costs.

Gilligan worked with the PGA from 1991 to 2000. He designed and implemented the tournament operations program for the PGA Championship, Ryder Cup matches and Senior PGA Championship. In addition to developing marketing plans, strategies and pricing for each event, Gilligan also directed overall site production and construction as well as the tournament operations manual which the PGA of America uses today to operate their major championships.

"His recognized ability to successfully develop and manage large volume events across the U.S., coupled with his keen expertise at forecasting areas of future growth within the sports marketing and special event industry, has led to his general manager position with our ball club," Tim Epling said.

Gilligan's duties with the PGA required nearly year-round travel. He's happy to be settling down in Beckley.

"I finally get to establish a permanent residency and be part of the fabric of this community," said Gilligan, who also previously served as general manager of the Wheaton Sport Center in Illinois.

He is excited about the role Epling Stadium will have in the Raleigh County area.

"It's about more than just a baseball team," he said. "Whether it is a concert or other sports, there is a litany of things we can do just because of the sheer nature of the surface we have there."

The entire field, from the pitcher's mound to the warning track, is made of artificial turf.

"We believe it's going to be one of the nicest fields in the eastern United States," Doug Epling said.

The 2010 schedule should be ready soon, possibly as early as today.

— On the Internet: www.prospectleague.com

The Register-Herald, Beckley, West Virginia 801 N. Kanawha St., P.O. Box 2398, Beckley,
WV, 25802