

## Coal Culture

### **RECREATION IN THE COAL FIELDS: THE CASE OF BASEBALL**

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Before there was television, baseball dominated the recreational scene of mining communities throughout Pennsylvania. From the 1920s to the late 1950s, teams in the Cambria County Industrial League (CCIL) played three games a week, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. These affairs were so popular that the major streets and highways leading to the ball fields were often clogged with parked cars and pedestrians all vying for a prized bleacher seat or a good vantage point along the foul lines or close to the outfield wall. The crowds also reflected the ethnic composition of the community as fans often cheered on their team or favorite player in their native languages. It has been reported that some towns practically closed down on Sundays with nearly every resident attending the local game..

This event forged an interesting relationship between the coal operators and the miners. The operators paid for uniforms, equipment, ball field maintenance, and travel expenses. With the approval of the UMWA, the workers allowed operators to deduct a nominal fee to assist in defraying some of the costs. The game helped boost the morale of all community residents. It also provided the miners with a haven from the daily grind of their stressful and dangerous jobs. A crucial victory or team championship could give an operator bragging rights over his coal company rivals.

Recognizing their important social value, the companies made special efforts for recruiting the best players they could find from the region. To lure a high quality prospect, they gave athletes an easier and safer job normally outside of the mine at a higher wage. Many experts rank the value of the CCIL as equal to today's Single A minor league ball. But some used the opportunity as a stepping stone to the major leagues.

Nanty Glo's James "Ripper" Collins spent nine seasons in the majors, playing with the St. Louis Cardinals (the Gas House Gang), Chicago Cubs and Pittsburgh Pirates. He went on to lead the National League in home runs (35) in 1934. In addition, Charlie Metro played for the Detroit Tigers and Philadelphia Athletics from 1943 to 1945. He also managed in the minor leagues and for the Chicago Cubs in 1962 and the Kansas City Royals in 1970. Still others, like Nanty Glo's homerun legend Glen Hawkins, turned down pro-contracts opting to remain in the area with family and friends.

Currently baseball is still being played on the original ball field site in Nanty Glo. The old Memorial Field, now named "McMullen Field" after a former field care taker, serves as a venue for T-ball, Little League, and the American Legion. Girls have become involved in both T-ball

and Little League with nearly every team having one or two on their squads. In addition, Blacklick Valley High School has developed a successful girl's softball program that won numerous league titles. Some of their players have gone on to receive athletic scholarships at local universities including Saint Francis and IUP.

Related sources:

- [Baseball in Pennsylvania](#)
- Landon, Dale and George Wiley, "The Last Hurrah," Indiana County Heritage. Spring 1978, vol.6, no.1
- *Glory days [videorecording] : the Industrial Baseball League of Cambria County, Pennsylvania*. Production coordinator, Gary Yusko; directed by Rob Ruck; written by Brent Conrad, Gary Yusko. Portage Area Historical Society .
- [Remembering the Coal Leagues](#)