

Young players can't wait to use new ballpark in 6th Ward

"I'd like to play for the Yankees," says Josh Ortiz, 13, as officials from the city and Reading Phillies gather on opening day at Gordon Hoodak Stadium.

By **Holly Herman**
Reading Eagle

It's not the famous Green Monster in Boston's Fenway Park.

But the young baseball players looked in awe Saturday at the blue wall surrounding the new Gordon Hoodak Stadium in Reading's 6th Ward.

"This field is great," Josh Ortiz, 13, a seventh-grader at Southwest Middle School, said at the official opening of the \$850,000 stadium sponsored by the Reading Phillies' Baseball-town Charities. "I've been waiting to play on this field for a long time."

"I've been playing baseball since I was 9 years old. I like to play pitcher and catcher. I'd like to play for the Yankees."

Ortiz is one of about 50 children in the Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities program in the Olivet Boys' and Girls' Clubs who were anxiously waiting to play baseball on the new field, which is designed to look like an old-time ballpark.

Unfortunately, the games scheduled on opening day were canceled because of wet conditions.

Nevertheless, the spirit of baseball was alive at the field, located at Lauer's Park Elementary School, Second and Walnut streets.

Destiny Ramos, 11, a Southern Middle School sixth-grader, was more than ready to play.

"I love to play baseball," she said.

Jeffrey Palmer, director of



Reading Eagle: Krissy Kruppenacker

Gordon G. Hoodak, principal of Lauer's Park Elementary School, welcomes guests Saturday on opening day at the new baseball stadium named after him.

Olivet Boys' and Girls' Clubs, said the new field will help generate interest in baseball among city youth under age 12.

"Baseball for inner-city youth is fading, and we hope to regain interest in it," Palmer said.

The original Olivet Boys' and Girls' Club opened at the same site in 1898.

In the early 1900s, a baseball field was built there. For many years it was used by professional players, including the legendary Babe Ruth.

Reading's own Charlie Wagner played there before going on to play for the Boston Red Sox.

"Back then I played as a gofer," Wagner joked while joining in the festivities. "Go for this and go for that. I grew up here."

But baseball isn't the only thing children can learn at the stadium.

A total of 30 students from Lauer's Park will help manage the facility as members of the Reading Phillies' Squires Club.

Alex Ortiz, 11, a fourth-grader who was providing tours of the stadium, was quite enthusiastic about the facility. Alex and Josh are not related.

"It's greater than great," he

said. "I am just so excited about showing people around."

Kenda Ramos 9, a third-grader, said the Squires program is excellent.

"This is teaching us what it's

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like to have a job," she said.

Opening day included a ceremony in which officials from the Reading Phillies and the government spoke about how proud they are to open the stadium.

Lynn Bopp, a representative with the Cal Ripken Foundation, Aberdeen, Md., presented a \$20,873 check for the stadium.

Cal Ripken Jr., who retired in 2001 from the Baltimore Orioles, helps youth baseball organizations through his foundation.

The stadium is named after Lauer's Park's principal, Gordon G. Hoodak, who said the school aims to provide an atmosphere where children discover dreams and ways to achieve them.

"Thanks for coming to what has turned into our field of dreams," he said.

Hoodak said his friends Dick and Nancy Crother of Oley Township came up with the concept of building the stadium.

Crother said he told Hoodak about a similar youth ballpark in Arlington, Texas.

The Crothers and Hoodak shared ideas with Lee C. Olsen, president of Olsen deTurck Architects Inc., Bern Township, who designed the stadium.

"It was a labor of love," Olsen said. "It's a dream come true for all of us. This really captures what a ballpark looks like. Our green monster is the blue wall."

■ Contact reporter **Holly Herman** at 610-478-6291 or hherman@readingeagle.com.

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