

From the Sidelines



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Ripken Experience includes quality fields

MY FIRST “RIPKEN EXPERIENCE” was at STMA’s infamous San Antonio “Ice” Conference in 2007 when severe ice storms affected a large swath of North America and resulted in at least 85 deaths and caused hundreds of thousands of people to lose power. I had set up an interview with Cal Ripken, Jr., before his appearance at the Jacobsen booth on the trade show floor, and because of flight cancellations arrived in Texas with just enough time to get to his hotel suite after a mad dash through the airport.

I ended up doing the interview in the back of a Lincoln Town Car, sitting in between the former Baltimore Oriole “Iron Man” and the Jake PR woman, as we drove from his hotel to the convention center. My first question was, “Who will introduce you when you are inducted into the Hall of Fame this summer?” When he replied, “The Pro Football Hall of Fame does that,” I could feel the PR woman beside me begin to squirm. But I was at my self-deprecating best and recovered, and Ripken continued to be gracious as we walked through a back entrance and onto the show floor, feeling everyone’s eyes on the 6’4” icon and yes, me, to whom he was giving the time of day.

My second “Ripken Experience” was last month when my 13-year-old son, Max, played in the Armed Forces Day tournament at the Ripken Baseball complex in Aberdeen, MD. The Ripken Experience, its formal name, is home to youth camps and tournaments and consists of a youth-sized version of Oriole Park at Camden Yards and youth-sized replicas of Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, Citizens Bank Park, Nationals Stadium, and the old Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, which is 35 miles south of Aberdeen.

While there I met up with Patrick Coakley, CSFM, the facility’s sports turf superintendent, who took a few minutes out of his busy Saturday to meet us. Coakley, known as “Irish” to many STMA members, said his nickname is so prevalent that some fellow employees at Ripken don’t know his real name. During the 15 minutes or so we chatted, Coakley’s walkie-talkie squawked five or six times with questions and updates from his mostly student crew. When we parted I watched him jog away and realized that the time he’d given me was time he really should have been doing something else!

▼ **PATRICK “IRISH” COAKLEY, CSFM**, left, and Max Schroder. Irish asked that we report the 13-year-old is not taller than him but rather was posing uphill.



Coakley said currently he is working on determining the budget numbers of what it will cost to get to, and maintain, the natural turf fields at the complex at a “professional level,” which is his goal as well as that of his boss—Cal Ripken, Jr. Irish said he works directly and regularly with Ripken on field maintenance issues and that the former infielder understands well what it takes to get a field into professional condition.

Max and his teammates had heard that their Hall of Fame host regularly shows up at tournaments and practice sessions; I was skeptical, knowing what a busy schedule he must have, but we learned Saturday night that we had just missed a visit by the big man by a few minutes that day. ■

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