



## **SAN MARCOS: Park becoming regional draw for youth baseball!**



Batting practice at Mission Sports Park in San Marcos. North County Times file photo.

Nearly two years after it reopened with updated facilities and twice as many ball fields, Mission Sports Park has become a regional center for youth baseball, and is hosting PONY Baseball World Series competitions.

The renovation, completed in October 2010, added batting and pitching cages, electronic scoreboards, an enclosed playground, a restroom and storage structure, and doubled the number of ball fields from four to eight.

The improvements make the park among a few in San Diego County that can accommodate large tournaments across a wide age range, said Keith Spence, southwest region director for PONY Baseball.

"They're really unique," Spence said. "They're able to actually bring in a crowd and put in eight fields of baseball from the 5- and 6-year-olds to 14-year-olds."

Over the past month, the park has hosted 13 baseball tournaments, Spence said. Those include the Mustang Super Region tournament for 10-year-old players from counties throughout Southern California, and the Pinto Western World Series for 8-year-old players from Western states including Arizona, Nevada, California and Utah, said Renee Flores, president of San Marcos Youth Baseball. The park will also host a world series tournament for 10-year-old Shetland players next summer. The higher level of tournaments have set a higher bar for San Marcos players, Flores said. PONY teams typically enter those competitions by winning successive tournaments, Flores said, but host teams get to join the events regardless of where they take place.

"Since we host it here, our teams automatically get in," he said. "They don't have to win their way in. That has allowed them to play some very good competition, and has increased the level of their play."



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Page 2 of 2

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Players said the improved fields also boost team morale, and make their games safer and more enjoyable.

Now we have a turf infield, and we maintain it really well, so it's a lot of fun to play in," said Dante Gonzales, 15, who has played at Mission Sports Park since kindergarten, and is now a shortstop and catcher for the Tatergrip team.

Players said the well-maintained turf and level fields allow players to be more confident running the bases, sliding and fielding.

The fields are a lot better, said his teammate Hunter Flores, 14, who has played at the park for seven or eight years."Now it doesn't hurt when you slide or fall. Flores said families also appreciate the park's amenities, including the new bathrooms and enclosed playground, which allows siblings of players to entertain themselves during games.

All the guys like the fields," Flores said. The moms look at the other things, like how clean the bathrooms are, and how safe my child is in the play area.

League officials said the area's mild climate, and central location between Los Angeles, Orange County and San Diego, also make the site attractive to visiting players and families.

Steve Kildoo, interim CEO for the San Marcos Chamber of Commerce, said his organization has worked to tap the new market of youth sports visitors and to help make out-of-town families feel at home.

During the tournaments, the chamber distributed 750 packets offering promotional information with directions and discounts to local restaurants and hotels and shopping areas, he said.

We want to make sure that anytime we're bringing families and teams in from out of the area, we want them to know that the chamber's here, and where restaurants are, Kildoo said.

Players said that the new facilities are bringing regional recognition to the park.

"Now, since the fields are so nice, there is some pride in saying that you play at Mission Sports Park," he said.

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