

# MACK on the ATTACK

By Carter Bainbridge

When professional baseball scouts trek up to Buffalo, New York, they usually have a good reason.

After all, Western New York isn't a baseball hotbed like the Sun Belt or California. Punishing winters bring enormous blankets of snow that make swings sting in the biting cold and cancel large chunks of games. The city's most prestigious collegiate athletics destination - the University at Buffalo - shuttered its baseball program nearly a decade ago.

However, scouts flocked to Williamsville East High School in East Amherst in 2021 to watch one player swing, catch, and impress: then-senior Joe Mack, whose star has reached a recent pinnacle as the 2024 Pensacola Blue Wahoos' do-it-all backstop. In 2021, Mack's skills dazzled enough to spark chatter that he could be a first-round draft choice - the Buffalo area's first since 1978.

"Look," said one Major League scout to The Athletic after watching Mack in 2021. "It doesn't take an expert to see how good this guy is."

As the 2021 New York Section VI Baseball Player of the Year, Mack followed in the footsteps of his brother Charlie - a 6th-round selection of the Minnesota Twins in 2018 - and signed with the Miami Marlins, who picked him at No. 31 in the 2021 draft's competitive balance Round A.

Blue Wahoos fans have gotten to know Mack well since he became a regular in the Pensacola lineup beginning in late April. Darting throws to gun down opposing baserunners and a slew of home runs paced the 21-year-old's volcanic month of June, but Mack's path from high school standout to Double-A starting catcher wasn't straightforward.

After a short stint with the Marlins' rookie affiliate in 2021, Mack suffered a hamstring injury in early 2022 that shortened an otherwise difficult season. In 2023, a promotion to High-A at 20 years old wasn't conducive to quick success.

"I remember everything, and I got my butt handed to me," Mack said. "I just struggled throughout the entire season, and looking back I'm actually grateful for it. I was able to use it as motivation and not as, 'Oh, I stink, I'm done.' Instead, it was 'I stink, so what am I going to do about it?' That pushed me to be the person I am today."

When the dust settled, Mack's 120 games with the High-A Beloit Sky Carp culminated with a .218 batting average and a .582 OPS, well below average



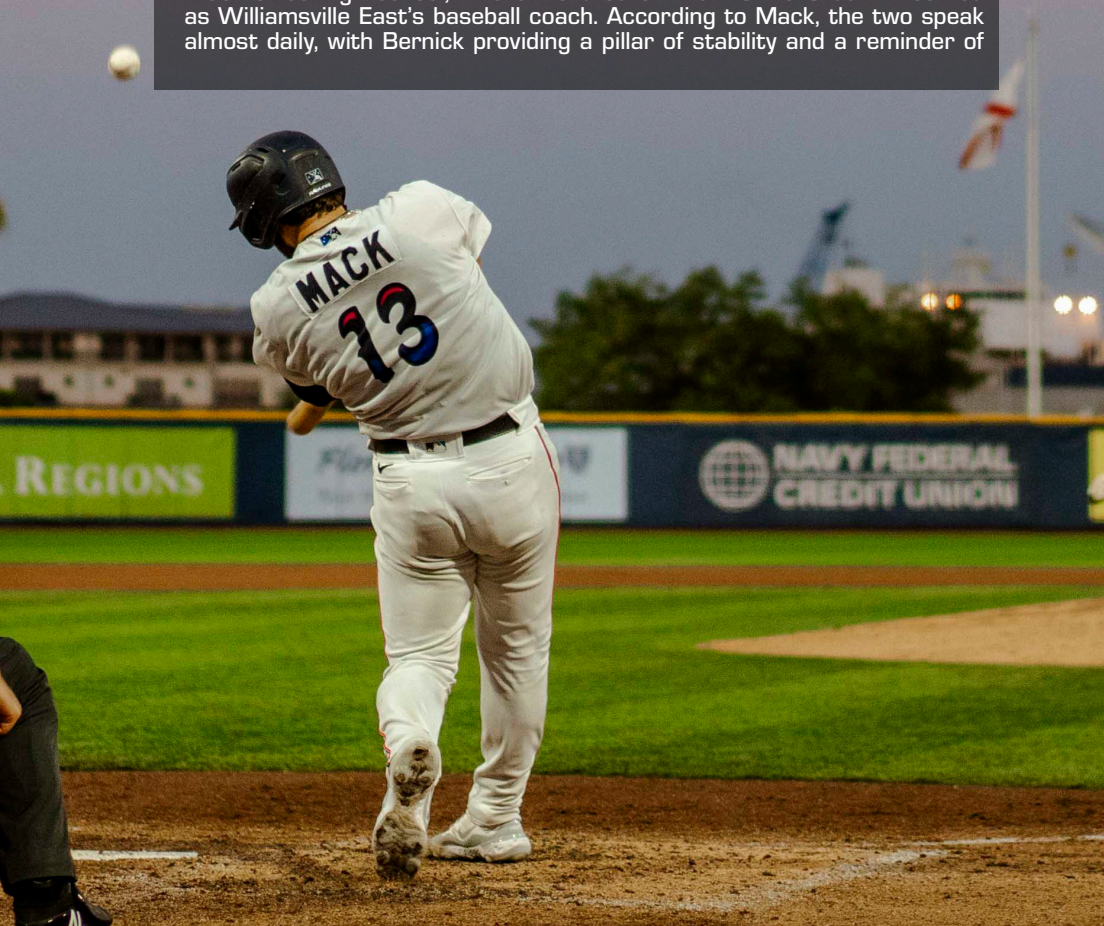
offensive figures in the Midwest League. MLB Pipeline, an industry-standard prospect ranking site that rated Mack as the Marlins' sixth-best prospect entering the year, dropped him down to 26th following the season. Despite the struggle, Mack zeroed in on his process and ignored the arbitrary rating.

"I don't really look at that stuff, but it's great to know the organization values you," Mack said of his Top 30 prospect ranking. "Just being able to do that and get an opportunity that I have is huge."

Mack attributes his faith in God to his success and perseverance, but tangible adjustments through longtime connections aided his resurgence. Despite a quiet year offensively with Beloit in 2023, all six of Mack's home runs came in the season's final seven weeks. The New York native attributes the late surge to a relationship he made back home with a high school mentor.

"I went back home and sat down with my hitting coach Ronnie Bernick," Mack said. "Not too much physical or mental stuff, but just talked and came up with short-term fixes...it worked for the rest of the season...we knew [those adjustments] weren't going to be the final product. Even this year isn't the final product. I'm always learning, always adapting, and always trying to be better."

Bernick, who owns a training facility in Lancaster, New York, has known Mack since high school, where his brother-in-law Chris Gruarnin served as Williamsville East's baseball coach. According to Mack, the two speak almost daily, with Bernick providing a pillar of stability and a reminder of



home. The support has helped Mack weather 4-for-24 and 3-for-19 stretches at the plate that characterize a hitter's first adjustment to Double-A competition.

Following work with Bernick and mental performance coach Alan Jaeger, a rejuvenated Mack ambushed High-A pitching to begin 2024. A promotion to Double-A Pensacola quickly followed, and Mack has since entrenched himself as a potent bat and defensive threat for the Blue Wahoos.

Mack's faith in his developmental process culminated in a torrid stretch from June 4-9. In six games against the Mississippi Braves, Mack collected ten hits, swatted home runs in four consecutive games, caught three quality starts behind the plate, and threw out two would-be base stealers. Even after dominant performances, Mack was quick to dish credit to his teammates.

"This team is awesome," Mack said in a postgame interview after a 4-3 victory on June 6. "We've got a bunch of great guys, and we're not quitters. If we lose one game or two games, it doesn't matter, we're gonna come back and compete and find a way to win the next game."

The self-effacing Mack consistently strikes the same chord when speaking about his performances - statistically impressive or not. For one of the Blue Wahoos' brightest stars, patience and trust in improvement reigns most important, and that philosophy has guided Mack to excel at his highest level yet.

