

Patriots Oldtimers are happy to be back on the field

OLDTIMERS



Butch Schrampf is safe as third baseman Carlin Kercher waits for the throw in a recent game. (Keith Groller/The Morning Call)

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By Keith Groller

Noon was approaching and the temperature was nearing 90 degrees at Allentown's Patriots Park one day recently.

"Guys, we're just one out away from getting back to the air conditioning!" shouted one player on the team in the field and in the lead said.

The out was recorded and another Allentown Patriots Oldtimers softball doubleheader was completed.

Normally, the players would exchange handshakes and pats on the back.

Adhering to the coronavirus pandemic social distancing restrictions, players avoided the usual postgame physical contact, said their goodbyes, gathered their equipment and went on their way.

But even though they expected a few sore muscles the next day, the players, ranging in age from 62 to 85, will be back out the next time they have a chance to play.

“All winter long, this is what we look forward to,” said Mike Golden, a 14-year veteran. “Very few of the guys miss a day. It’s hot, we’re old and we’re tired but we show up for competitive games. There’s no arguing, no fighting, no disputes. We just love to play.”

The oldtimers program began in 1989 when a local firefighter visited St. Petersburg, Florida, in the winter and saw the Kids & Kubs play softball. The Kids & Kubs feature all players 75 and older, and became an attraction on Florida’s Gulf Coast.

Arrangements were made to have the Kids & Kubs play a doubleheader at Patriots Park with the first game against a team of Allentown Fire Department vets and another game against Patriot-City Oldtimers.

Eugene “Moon” Trexler, Richard “Louie” Krieg, Ed Roth and Robert Roth were among the original organizers.

“When the Kids & Kubs came up here, we had to put together a team to play them, because they didn’t want to play young guys,” Trexler said in a 1999 Morning Call story. “About seven of us had played together in the 1950s and ’60s and we were able to renew some friendships for those games against the Kids & Kubs. And we decided that we had so much fun, why not keep the team together longer?”

The organization has now been together for 30 years.

“The original concept was for players to show up at Pates Park, choose sides, play the game, have fun and enjoy the day with friends,” said Frank Nace, who has been playing for 17 years. “That’s what it’s all about.”

In addition to games within their own group, many charity games for the benefit of those fighting ALS were played over the years against a variety of teams including the Phillies Ballgirls, the IronPigs staff, and local media outlets.

The group also ran an annual season-ending bus trip organized by Ed Roth to places like Ocean City, Maryland, Niagara Falls, Canada, Boston, upstate New York, Washington, D.C., Charlestown, West Virginia, and Rehoboth Beach, Delaware.

The current oldtimers just enjoy playing two 7-inning doubleheaders twice a week with their spotlight game Aug. 15 against WFMZ-TV for the benefit of the

Alzheimer's Association.

Most of the time, they play in front of empty bleachers.

“We didn’t start getting together until we went to the yellow phase of the coronavirus reopening,” Jim Schantz said. “It’s just about getting off the chair, coming out and getting fresh air and exercise.”

Special rules are in place to minimize the chance of a collision. The pitchers throw underhand with an arc. There’s a run-limit until the seventh inning when teams can score as much as they are able.

Alan Ottinger, one of the younger players at age 64, is in his second season with the Oldtimers and said he’s looking for younger guys to get involved and keep the program going.

There’s a roster of more than 30 players and 24 were there on a recent morning.

“Some of the guys had some reservations about playing this year, but we addressed those concerns in a wise manner,” Ottinger said. “We try to keep our distance and we want guys who have any symptoms to stay home. You always lose guys as they get older, but we picked up 12 guys this year.”

Ottinger said the guys talk about the pandemic and understand the severity of the virus.

Ottinger said that guys travel from as far away as Carbon and Schuylkill counties to play softball on Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

“There’s not that many organizations like this where guys can play,” Ottinger said.

Most of the guys played competitive fastpitch when they were younger and still know how to hit, catch and throw a ball.

“I used to play in the Allentown Church League and it’s just a matter of getting some of those skills back,” Schantz said. “I am fortunate that I can still run around a little bit and that’s what we do. When I ask guys my age if they want to play, they can’t because they have a sore back, sore legs or whatever. So I am glad I am still physically able to play because I enjoy it.

“The best part is the camaraderie and just being around other people,” Golden said. “Mentally, you think you’re 18 and can still do it all. But I will be 74 in two weeks and age does catch up with you. When I get home, I’ll hit the recliner and grab a glass of scotch and an ice bag.”

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