

VMSSA League History

October 15, 2023

As VMSSA (Vancouver Metro Senior Softball Association) league approaches 30 years since inception, those that have and continue to participate as well as future players owe a great deal of gratitude to the many people who paved the way through their dedication, vision, talent, passion for the game, and time invested towards the benefit of and success of the league. Under the leadership and direction of the following league presidents, VMSSA has evolved into a mainstay for senior men and women softball players 60 years old and above:

- Richard Berry (founder) - 1994 to 1995
- Gary Waite - 1996
- Lyle Hubbard - 1998
- Mort Winkel - 1999
- Arnie Storhaug - 2000
- Joe Raabe 2000 - 2003
- Dick Graham - 2004 to 2005
- John Aarhus - 2006 to 2017
- Dave Keim - 2018 to 2020
- Roy Lawson - 2021 to 2023
- David Plunkett - Present

With each change in administration there has always been continuity because a member of the board of director's has always stepped up to replace a departing president. Whenever possible, the departing president acts in an advisory capacity on behalf of the board of directors. The tribal knowledge of each president and board member is invaluable as the league progresses onward. Being president and serving on the board is far from a figurehead position. These proactive volunteers work and meet behind the scenes during the season and offseason to make sure the experience of playing in the league is a favorable one. The mindset has always been continuous improvement in making the experience special and safe including field playing conditions, supplying new softballs for every game, team jerseys, providing and updating rules of play, arranging for indoor hitting practice, purchasing liability insurance, and providing a VMSSA website. The league invested in an AED (Automated External Defibrillator) and offers annual AED and CPR training to all participants. During the Covid pandemic, the league implemented social distancing, sanitization, and safety protocols that players were required to follow. The president chairs and schedules off-season and in-season board meetings to resolve issues and to pursue objectives for improvements moving forward. For fun, the league traditionally sponsors a season's end 2-Pitch tournament and BBQ, where the top 4 teams in the standings play each other and the bottom 4 teams play each other. The games go for 6 innings and the winner is determined by the total run differential. Player's families and friends are always invited. There are also many other key contributors, not part of the administration, who contribute toward the league's success. Sadly many of those that paved the way are no longer with us, or are no longer able to play, and others have moved away. We should never forget the legacy they helped create in making VMSSA the success today's players enjoy and future players can look forward to.

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VMSSA was founded in 1994 when a group of senior softball players from the legendary "Vancouver Senior 60's" tournament team, lead by Richard Berry, were playing in the Portland Summer league, primarily at Westmorland Park, and decided it was a good time to start a league in Vancouver. During the Christmas season of that year, initial bylaws and rules-of-play were drafted by Richard Berry and Walt Seiler. At the beginning of 1995 an ad was placed in the Columbian newspaper by Richard Berry, soliciting male and female players 60 and above to join the league. The initial response attracted 60 players, which was enough for 4 teams, 15 per team. The fee was \$35 for the season. An unnamed female player even signed up with the goal of finding a spouse and succeeded. Skill levels varied from very active tournament players to those that hadn't played in years. The original concept was to have picnic style games where it was just for fun, recreation, and relaxation and not intended to be a competitive league. Runs were not tracked, scorebooks not kept, and batting orders were generally based on the defensive position of a player. The catcher was assigned to be the umpire, which eventually was changed to managers umpiring until 2011 when umpires were added under the leadership of Larry Flindt. Players were assigned to teams by a small committee with the intention of having balanced teams to prevent any team from being overly dominant. The games were played depending on field availability at schoolyards, the field behind the Fort Vancouver library, or at David-Douglas ball fields. Doubleheader games were played weekly for 6 weeks, with a short 12 game season for the first year.

In 1996, primarily through word of mouth, interest immediately grew to 120 players, enough for 8 teams. Thanks to Chris Demos and Maury Wilson, who had established an influential Clark College contact, they were successful in arranging for games to be played at the college with the understanding that VMSSA would be required to maintain the field. Clark College turned out to be home base for VMSSA from approximately 1996 to 2013, until the arrangement was terminated by the college in order to transition to Title 9, intended to promote more women's sports programs including softball. Women's fast pitch softball however had different field dimensional requirements than senior softball so the field required modifications.

During the period from 1996 to 2013 interest in the league sustained. Players from Salem Oregon to Onalaska Washington signed up to play in Vancouver. The league's popularity attracted players ranging from 60 to 90 years old registering to play with enough new players to offset annual attrition, averaging approximately 20% per year. The number of participants grew some years to accommodate as many as 10 teams. Players were assigned to teams based on their player rating to maintain parity, but in 2011 the board of directors with input from players voted to hold a draft with the realization that this would result in a more competitive league. To try and maintain team parity, a semi formal ABCD player rating system was developed to evaluate a player's ability to hit, field, throw and run. New players were invited to player evaluations prior to the season so that team managers could assess talent and provide preliminary player ratings. The goal was for each team to have a comparable number of "A, B, C, and D players". The player rating of each manager and co-manager decided the draft pick order, and draft positions were then drawn from a hat. Team managers

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are volunteers willing to take on the duties of drafting players, making sure they could field a team for each game, creating a line-up, and assigning defensive positions. Initially, the league even used a generic website LeagueLineUp.com/VMSSA to record game results, standings, team rosters, schedules, league rules, and photos.

When Clark College announced termination of the agreement with VMSSA in 2012 with notification that 2013 would be the final year for VMSSA, league president John Aarhus and the board of directors, scrambled to find a field to hold games, which turned out to be Bagley Field where games were played from approximately 2014 to 2016. Although field conditions were sub par at best, Bagley Field was the best option at the time. During that period, what was initially a dream to have a dedicated VMSSA field became a necessity in order for the league to continue to prosper. John Aarhus and board members decided it was time to seriously pursue getting a dedicated field, which to date, has been the most significant and ambitious undertaking by VMSSA.

At a subsequent VMSSA Board Meeting, Maury Wilson was assigned to write to Clark County Director Bill Barron. In March 2012, Mr. Barron helped set up a meeting with Pete Capell, Eric Christianson, and Pete Mayer (City of Vancouver Project Manager). A week later, Pete Mayer sent a letter listing ten potential sites. During June 2012 a draft of an agreement was created. After many discussions and revisions, VMSSA and the County Board of Commissioners signed off on the agreement that

- 1) Gave VMSSA the right to build a softball field
- 2) Gave VMSSA a long-term lease without a fee
- 3) Stipulated that it is a community ball field for youth baseball and youth softball in addition to the VMSSA senior softball league
- 4) Required that VMSSA build 71 additional parking spaces to expand the existing parking lot

But the agreement was just the beginning. Some county officials doubted that VMSSA would be able to carry the project to completion. They underestimated the vigor and commitment of the leaders and players of VMSSA. Upon signing the agreement, retired OHSU Professor Emeritus of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Leon Speroff, and a fund raising super committee was assembled and began working to raise money to construct the field. At the same time, VMSSA hired Chris Robertson of Robertson Engineering to develop plans for the ball field. The board of directors and the super committee came up with a plan that included identifying potential field construction sites, establishing budgetary cost estimates for construction of such a field, and a fund raising plan. At the time, it seemed like a monumental and daunting task to pursue, but all involved were determined to come up with a viable plan that would be supported by players, former players, and donors for the league. The super committee formed was comprised of members with business acumen and the determination to work diligently with the mindset that failure to secure a site was not an option.

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Negotiations were initiated with Clark County. As many as 10 potential sites were identified, but the most promising site meeting most of the criteria was Pacific Community Park, today's location. In order to proceed, a minimum of \$250,000 needed to be raised to break ground. Requests for government grants were written by Leon Speroff. Businesses were solicited by Dave Keim, Bob Riehm, Ron Barr, Craig Thompson, and Leon Speroff; selling field fence signage was pursued by Bert Adams; specific tasks were assigned to Dan Billedeaux, Paul Ehrlich, Bernie Storm, Mike Weber, Ivan Kafoury; legal matters were attended to by David West including documentation; Joe Raabe and Maury Wilson managed strategies and updates to the plan; solicitations were sent to potential sponsors including current and former players, family members, and other potential donors. The twins, John and Jim Aarhus, with their construction expertise, strategized on how to creatively attain equipment, specialty trades and materials needed for the construction of the field including grass seed, dirt, irrigation, fences, bleachers, covered dugouts, electronic scoreboard and assembling a crew of volunteers to work on the field. On the website's photo gallery you can see many of the volunteers who put sweat equity into the construction of the field including John Aarhus, Jim Aarhus, Dave Keim, Bob Riehm, Roman Wasilewski, Bert Adams, Jim McAbee, Marty Harvey, Wayne Bennett, Robbie Roberts, Leon Speroff, Craig Thompson, Doug Irons, Tom Dalrymple, Clare Ueltschi, Rich Marquez, Daryl Williams, Dave Moriguchi, Barry Cassel, Jim Bates, Paul Deblock. Earl Small, Dan Billedeaux, Bob Kennedy, Mike Smith, Rick Kangas, Dan Brasher, Ron Browne, Frosty Comer, Dave Trimble, Tom Mulder, Bill Tidd, Roger Privett and others.

Players began sending contributions. Solicitations went out to non-profits and businesses. Within a year, Sunlight Supply (now defunct) committed a substantial donation that gave them naming rights to the field for five years. A few other players and former players committed substantial contributions inspiring others to donate more.

Near the entrance to the field, the board invested in a monument with the names engraved of those individuals that donated significant amounts towards the initial development and construction of the field. The Hall Of Fame (\$10K+) donors included Asghar Sadri, Leon Speroff, Darrell Williams, and George Pekeema. The MVP (\$5K+) donors included Rod Both, Joe Raabe, Roman Wasillewski, and Bob Riehm commemorating Rich Voss. The Grand Slam Donors (\$2.5K+) were Dave Keim, Bert Adams, Ron Niedner, Marty Harvey, Maury Wilson, and John Aarhus. Other donors are also named on both sides of the monument.

On September 2, 2014 the dream was coming to fruition as an agreement was signed for development and right-of-use with Clark County. In May of 2015 drawings were submitted to the Clark County Parks Department and in October to the Permit Center. The final review was completed October 26, 2015, but signature approvals were still required from multiple Clark County departments taking an additional 3 months to obtain. Finally in February 2016 the permit was granted to proceed with construction. Grading and fencing began in the spring of 2016, and in the fall of 2016 the lush green grass in the outfield was taking hold. The plan included a paved parking lot to

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accommodate at least 71 vehicles. (Photos of the construction site can be viewed in the VMSSA website's Photo Gallery.)

There were many who doubted that raising the quarter million dollars required to break ground for this project was doable. The super committee began organizing its fund-raising campaign in late 2013. Fueled by optimism, urgency, and a dream, the committee met at least monthly, establishing a fund raising drive with 3 arms; 1) individual donors, 2) corporate donors, and 3) grants. With the exception of Sunlight Supply, the corporate campaign quickly fizzled out. Grants were equally disappointing; 37 letters of inquiry and 18 formal grant applications were prepared without a single positive response. There was very little interest in donating to a softball field for seniors. However, the response from fellow ballplayers was outstanding. By May 2015 the committee had raised \$171,000, and by October 2015, \$187,000. The goal of \$275,000 was reached during winter of 2016. Remarkably, 75% of this money came from individual donors, mostly active and former ballplayers, and another 7% from friends and family members. The rest included major contributions from Riverview Bank, and T.O.D.A.Y. (The Organization Dedicated to Youth and Athletics), plus advertising purchases and in-kind donations by other businesses. Confidence and momentum grew so there was never a point in time when the project was threatened by a shortage of funds.

Finally opening day arrived on Saturday June 17, 2017 when VMSSA celebrated the completion and formal opening of Sunlight Supply Field at Pacific Community Park. More than 100 people (including families and friends of VMSSA) listened to speeches from Clark County officials and VMSSA members and watched a short exhibition game played on the new field. You could sense the gratification of those directly involved with the construction of the field by the gleam in their eyes and pride on their faces. Joe Raabe and Maury Wilson formed two teams mostly from those who worked on the field to play an exhibition game during the opening. In honor of his leadership, commitment, tireless involvement, financial support, and respect from all the players, Leon Speroff was designated to be the honorary first batter. To seize the moment and in in true form, Leon hit a beauty of a line drive to right center field, fittingly marking the first hit ever on the new field and fittingly scoring the very first run which couldn't have been better scripted. In recognition, the game ball that Leon hit was awarded to him. All the hard work undertaken by many had finally materialized, and Leon's hit was symbolic of the success of the huge undertaking.

Over the next couple of years continuous improvement was the focus while interest in the league continued to attract new players. VMSSA provided jerseys and also attracted sponsors for other jerseys. Even with a 20% attrition rate it became a routine occurrence to attract enough players to field 8 to 10 teams including a waiting list. In 2020 during the start of the Covid pandemic, the player draft was held, but the government shutdown resulted in play being suspended. Under the leadership of Dave Keim and the board of directors, focus continued on field improvements while constant communications with Clark County officials on the status of resumption of play was happening in parallel. Clark County was obliged to follow Washington state's criteria related to the Covid infection rates before allowing games to be played, however they authorized use of the field for batting practice as long as social distancing criteria was observed. Covid related rules and guidance protocols

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were developed while Dave Keim continually provided status updates to all players regarding resumption of play. Clark County left the door open to possibly resuming play based on the Covid rate of infection, but by June it became apparent that there would be no league games in 2020.

All were disappointed and many were growing antsy feeling deprived of playing. As it turns out, the city of Vancouver did not tightly enforce the same restrictions on playing as Clark County. That made it possible to play games at David Douglas, a Vancouver city park. A long time team manager and player, Guy Williams, took it upon himself to arrange for non-sanctioned VMSSA pick-up games. Guy developed a makeshift website to announce games and for player sign-ups. On a first-come basis, he was able to establish games at David Douglas at no charge. He and others would get to David-Douglas early in the morning to claim the best field. This league was an enormous success with people coming from all over the Portland-Vancouver Metro area and as far south as Salem and far north as Longview. Most of the games were held on Saturday mornings and some during the week. Everyone got to play and it was not uncommon to have as many as 30+ players show up for games. Players contributed money for balls and bases. Long time league player Tom Dalrymple dragged the infield to improve playing conditions using his pick up truck. Teams were evenly assigned and everyone played recreational softball, which was the original concept planned for VMSSA. Reflecting on what the founders of the league originally intended, the scores didn't matter, and stats were not kept. It was not uncommon to have 15+ players on the field at a time during those games, and people just enjoying themselves once again because they had a place to play softball. A 2-Pitch Tournament and BBQ was even organized to replicate the VMSSA established tradition. The spirit was strong as was evident by the response to this makeshift league. In addition, batting practices were being held during the week at Sunlight Supply Field and Luke-Jensen, organized by Dennis York, Flor Fernandez and Steve Sheerin. All this activity salvaged the 2020 season for many. But sadly, during the 2020-2022 seasons, several players were lost due to the Covid pandemic.

As play resumed in 2021 the enthusiasm for resumption of play was high. All leagues in the Portland-Vancouver metro area were once again allowed softball to be played. Many new players registered to play in all leagues. The season concluded successfully along with implementation of a new custom website playvmssa.com developed by a league player Eric Johnson, transitioning from the generic LeagueLineUp.com. On the website you'll find league information, team information, schedules, team standings, photo gallery, league rules, and miscellaneous information about the league. VMSSA also introduced and implemented a new player rating system designed to help managers be more thorough and objective with player ratings. A team comprised of Roy Lawson, Tim Heisler, Mike Roskam, and Flor Fernandez developed the system.

During the 2022 season there were unfortunate occurrences that happened. The league experienced its first casualty during a game. Dale Tucker, after running around the bases, suffered cardiac arrest and could not be revived. Dale passed away at the field in front of many family members. This tragic occurrence was a reminder to all of how precious our time is and how vulnerable all participants are, especially as seniors. Also during 2022 marked the first time a team dropped out prior to completion of the season, depriving its players to complete the season. Also during 2022 a significant number of volunteer

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umpires dropped out during the season because of the disrespect they encountered by a few players, managers, and spectators. Participants may at times need to be reminded what this recreational league is about as framed by the founders. The board responded by updating the code of ethics rules. The 2022 season was impacted by weather with a wet spring causing a delay in the start of the season, and sweltering heat during the summer resulting in game cancellations. And finally, the caterer selected for the 2-Pitch BBQ Tournament went out of business just prior to the scheduled event. Members of the board led by Roy Lawson were proactive in making sure the event happened as scheduled and with much help from spouses were able to successfully salvage the event.

During the 2023 season, VMSSA's board of directors voted to give players 80+ years old free registration, although many chose to pay anyway. In addition the league had its largest number of female players (9) registered. The board also voted to allow teams to have 4 reserve players (including managers), up from 2. This was done to allow close friends to play on the same team and to promote more parity amongst the teams.