

## A Brief History on the Formation of the WSSA

by  
Bill Walsh & Richie Price

All credit for the creation of the Wilmington Senior Softball Association goes to Phil Rose, and deservedly so. But the contribution of Nancy Middlesworth should not be discounted.

A bureaucrat with the Wilmington Parks and Recreation Department, Middlesworth and her husband coordinated the original 1995 program that brought together 11 senior softball players – among them Ken Denne, Richie Price, Bob Foster, Jack Schwarze, John Keene, Frank Clemons, Hank Bredeck and Ben Starinsky -- to toss a ball around and take batting practice on Wednesday and Friday mornings at Empie Park.

Today, that modest start has grown into 12 teams in three age divisions – and has become a recreational league and a Tuesday/Thursday ritual that plays a significant role in the lives of about 175 southeastern North Carolina seniors.

A retired New York Police Detective and a one-time minor league ballplayer with the Pittsburgh Pirates organization, Rose moved to Wilmington in July, and joined the Empie group late that year and offered to help Nancy organize the workouts and recruit new players.

His favorite Phil Rose story, Hall of Famer Harry Rowe said, came right after he moved to Wilmington in August 1995, just a month or so after Rose arrived here. “We were renting a house in the area where Phil had his house,” Rowe remembered. “I took the dog out for a walk one morning, and this guy is walking in the opposite direction toward me. He puts his hand out. ‘I’m Phil Rose; do you want to play softball?’”

The following year, Rose put up fliers “in every grocery store, all over the Azalea Festival booth on Water St., for every event of Octoberfest,” Ritchie Price recalled. “He pushed it, he really did; there is no doubt about it. He did a good job, and he deserves all the credit.”

Rose’s first recruit was Ed Maracek, and when spring returned the following year, most of the original 11 turned out for spring training,

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as did George Scelzi, Harry Rowe, Lou Cardemone, Ron Sullivan, Doug Patterson, Bob Faehner, Bob Perry and Marty Plage and others.

“It was (Rose) and another guy who really started this league – Rose and Ed Maracek,” said Hall of Famer Gerry Dowling. “Ed was a little quieter, a little more laid back than Phil. They both put a lot of work into the league. I loved Phil, and I am grateful for everything he did for this league; he put a lot of effort into it. But any time he found a good player,” Dowling said with a laugh about a story that gets a lot of circulation among those who were there at or near the beginning, “he would scheme every which way to get him on his team. That’s just the way Phil was; we all knew it” – and loved and admired him just the same.

“Ritchie (Price) and I have been around the longest – we started in ’95,” said Ken Denne, who resides in two Halls of Fame – the WSSA’s and his college alma mater in Pennsylvania, for basketball.

The 1996 group had enough players to field two teams, one managed by Rose, the other by his first recruit, and they played each other and – pretty unsuccessfully at first – a more established team from Brunswick County.

“The only competition we had back in those early days was Brunswick County,” Rowe recalled. “They used to beat us pretty terribly. There was also a team on the other side, in Jacksonville, and we used to go up there occasionally to play. Then we started to grow and became the epicenter of senior softball.”

He has no solid proof, Mike Abernathy said, but his firm belief is that the WSSA was the first senior slow-pitch softball league in North Carolina. “There were teams, for sure,” Rowe said. “Leagues? I’m not sure. Mike may be right.”

The next year, “Phil got in the newspaper and advertised, and we started getting some players and really got started and, and he contacted Brunswick County, and we’d go over there and play; they

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beat the hell out of us,” Denne explained. “The following year, we had two teams and Brunswick had one, and in about two or three years, we had enough to have four teams and have a league. It was all Phil Rose.”

“It can be said that 1997 saw the real beginning of the Wilmington Senior Softball Association,” Price agreed. “Three teams participated in the league, two teams from Wilmington – Legends and Silver Streaks -- and one from Brunswick County, the Brunswick Slammers. That was also the first year a Wilmington traveling team was formed and competed once a month in games in Shallotte, Jacksonville, Raleigh, Myrtle Beach and Darlington.”

That growth and development was notable, but things really took off for the WSSA the following spring, when enough players turned out to fill four teams – Legends, Silver Streaks, Carpeteers and Roosters – and, for the first time, the league secured sponsors, uniforms and paid umpires.

A year later marked “the first year All-Star teams were selected to play in the North Carolina State Senior games in Raleigh,” Price recalls. “Teams in the 55-60 and 65-70 age groups were formed. Both teams won in Raleigh and qualified for the 1999 National games that were to be played in the Walt Disney Complex in Orlando,” where, sadly, they were crushed.

“I think we finished eighth out of eight, but we saw the competition we would be up against,” Hall of Famer Abernathy said. “Everyone was 6’5”, 250 and played 90 games a year.” And, added fellow Hall of Famer Rowe, who joined the league in year two and played until 2017, “they were all-stars, selected from teams across the state while our team was...our team.”

In subsequent years, WSSA has won a treasure chest full of medals in state senior games and has won two national senior game titles. “I think, last year, going to Albuquerque and playing in the National Senior Games and coming home with a gold medal was the thing I remember best about playing softball in the WSSA,” said Dowling,

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who, as another member of the WSSA Hall of Fame has a lot of softball memories. “But, really, just being able to play is a highlight, being around so many different personalities. The comradery and friendships that have developed, those are the real highlights.”

Dowling gets no argument on that score. “To me, in the 25 years that I’ve been playing, it’s all about the comradery,” Price mused. “I’ve played on some super good teams; I’ve played on some teams that needed improvement. But most of the time, in 90 percent of those teams, the comradery was great.

“I think the best comradery I had was with the Osteos and Carrabbas when it was the Cardinals and Eddie Healey was the manager and then when Gerry Dowling was the manager,” he added. “Those are what I remember. I played with a ton of guys, probably more than 100, and out of those 100, I don’t know that there are any that I wouldn’t choose to play with again. We had some very good softball players. And we had some guys who didn’t play so good. It didn’t matter.”

“The league gave me an opportunity to socialize, really,” Denne said. “I befriended so many people, and we still communicate and we still socialize – Ritchie Price, George Scelzi, Mike Abernathy. That has been the main thing I liked about playing.”

“This has meant a lot to me, because I have done more than just play,” said Rowe, an observation that is also true of just about everyone else who has been in the league past a rookie year. “I’ve coached, I was president of the league, I was treasurer. It was a great experience.”

Rowe, too, moved to Wilmington “not knowing a soul,” he said. Playing, coaching, administering the league opened a lot of friendship doors, he recognizes.

This important aspect of the WSSA is not limited to those who have enjoyed the companionship for years. “I really enjoyed playing in 2019 in WSSA,” said Bruce Nobles, a 2019 rookie shortstop for

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French Dentistry that year. “My girlfriend of eight years died in September 2019, and the good experience of playing in the WSSA helped me get through it,” said the Duke Energy retiree. “Now I look forward to every Tuesday and Thursday, even if it is a two-hour ride from New Bern,” from where he, perhaps, drives the farthest distance to play.

With the addition of the Eagles in 2000, the WSSA expanded to five teams. With a roster that included Phil Kaufman, Joe Seme, Stan Sholar, Morgan Medlin, Ed Healey and Bob Sipple, the Eagles won the playoffs in their first year.

The league opened another chapter in 2003 with the inception of the Coastal Division for players just a step slower than their Atlantic Division peers. There were now enough players to field four teams in each division at the beginning, and Coastal has at times grown to six or seven teams. Another dozen or so years would pass before a third division was carved out of Coastal. Legacy started unofficially in 2015 with just two teams and was officially recognized when enough players gathered to form three teams a year later.

“There are four or five of us in our 80’s with the Legacy League who were there at the beginning or pretty close,” Denne said – “me, Dwight Crainshaw, Ritchie Price, Bob Faehner, who recently moved to Hilton Head.”

“The league has evolved,” Rowe mused. “I know what we started with, and I know where we are now. I’m not sure what I’d change today, if anything,” given the chance he said of the question. “A little rule here, a little rule there. But by and large, we have accommodated what we needed to accommodate.”

As a “history” of the league’s first 25 years, this report comes up woefully short: There are no records of who won what, who achieved what with bat or glove. Perhaps this is the start of that sort of record keeping.

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But heretofore, at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the league, Price said, is all about “managing a team, making it competitive, and, most important of all, playing everybody. That is basically my sense of playing softball with the WSSA. It has been a lot of fun for me, and I have met a lot of wonderful people. It has been good to me.”

The future, these players agree, looks bright. “The cooperation with the board and the managers here lately is fantastic,” Abernathy said. “People are stepping forward and taking these positions. That was not always the case.”

“Who won the championship two years ago?” he wondered recently. “No one knows, no one remembers, and, to me, that’s the way it should be: We are not out there for championships, we’re out there to have fun. It’s a recreational league. Have fun, stay in shape, and grow old playing ball.”