



## **A History of Sun Lakes Softball**

### **From a Dream to a “Field of Dreams”**

**By Michael H. Core**

The Sun Lakes Senior Softball Association has been in existence for more than 20 years and throughout that time hundreds of men and women have enjoyed the camaraderie and friendships developed during friendly competition on the ball diamond. But how did this organization come to be? How did a dream become a “Field of Dreams?”

The spark for a Sun Lakes Senior Softball organization came from a veteran organizer who enjoyed playing semi-pro Sunday baseball in the Bay area

“I’m an organizer. It’s what I did for a living in working with non-profit volunteer organizations such as the United Way and Hospice,” says Jack

Lander, a resident of Sun Lakes since late 1984. “As a kid I really enjoyed watching baseball in San Francisco at the old Seals Stadium.”

The spark came from Lander who started the softball rolling in the mid-1980s. After moving into Sun Lakes, he decided to see if he could get some Sun Lakes residents interested in playing softball. As Jack remembers, “In September of 1985 I wrote a little note for the *Sun Lakes Splash*. I always wanted to play ball. It was not that I was a great player, but I liked baseball and wanted to play slow pitch,” he said.

In his *Splash* notice he called for those interested to gather in a Cottonwood meeting room. “We held that meeting and someone brought a “Chicago ball.” It was softer and bigger than a regular softball and no gloves were used to field the ball. This was a game played in Chicago, but I told them we are not going to use that kind of a ball here,” Lander explained. Jack also found help inside the Robson organization. “The first practice was in Oakwood. Don Drake, who was Ed Robson’s executive vice-president, was our original softball friend. He was our inside man. Don was the one who really pushed what we wanted to do. He was a big softball fan and player and he encouraged us from the beginning. He had Ed Robson’s ear.”

According to Lander the first “ball field” was at the intersection of Minnesota and EJ Robson Blvd. in Cottonwood, with Riggs Road as a boundary to the north side of the field. “That’s where we played the first game,” he said. “Don Drake gave us three used softballs, two bats, flat rubber bases, a rubber plate and a rubber pitcher’s mound. The grass was too high at times and we had trouble seeing the bases and pitcher’s rubber.” Lander explained that the turnout was small at first. “It was hard to play a real game at first. There were 12 to 14 guys showing up, but some were not very skilled in the game. One good player was Big Joe Brodie from Phase One. There were others and some of them have since passed on. Joe had played a lot of ball. The original field had no fence and if you hit a ball on to Robson Blvd., it was a home run.”

Lander said the group decided it needed to play other teams in real games. “I called some other teams such as those in Apache Junction. We scheduled a game and they came to Sun Lakes with new uniforms, hats and shoes. We were in jeans and t-shirts. They wondered where the field was. The grass was high and it was hard to see the bases and we didn’t have a backstop.” He added, “This was in 1986 and they beat us about 100 to nothing.”

However, the group was undeterred and focused on working to get better. Lander said, “The word got out and more guys began showing up. It was still a mixture of guys as to their respective levels of ability. Later Don Drake wanted to bring in outsiders to improve the quality, but we did not want to do this.”

Growth continued and a couple of years later in 1988 the group moved to a new the field on Riggs Road where the Baptist Church is now located and played there just one year. Lander said the organization was taking a foothold, “We had dues to raise some money and bought a used backstop and put it up ourselves.” But it turned out that the field was only temporary as the next year the group moved to another location on Riggs Road next to the Methodist Church where the E.J. Robson Branch Library now is located. Lander added, “Don Drake agreed that we needed new fences but we brought our old backstop to the new field. We also built a scorer’s booth. Rudy Lindquist was our lead maintenance volunteer and he was assisted by Milo Cillo. Ken Nelson was my right hand guy as well.”

A dedication was set for the new field. “Bill Denny was a sports announcer at one of the local radio stations and he came to dedicate the new field and brought an old timer’s team to play us, including former New York Met Duffy Dyer.”

According to Lander, activities expanded even though at times participation lagged. “In 1989 we started the 60+ and 70+ travel teams, but struggled keeping enough guys. In 1990 we started the Tuesday-Thursday league. We originally had four teams, but struggled to fill those four teams.”

Lander said the early travel teams were called the Sun Lakes Blues. Their uniform color was a powder blue and they also had matching jackets and caps. Lander went on to cite the hard work performed by early volunteers. “We had some guys that did a lot for softball. Jerry Carlson became the 50s team manager in the early 1990s. He had to use some 60-year-olds to fill out that team. We did tournaments early on if we had 12 guys together. Lee Rouse and Jim Kilmartin were early players and volunteer helpers. Bobby Thompson and Bill Serdar also played major roles in the early going. Some of these guys are still playing or volunteering and I’m sure I haven’t remembered everybody who should be mentioned.”

Lander explained that some guys couldn't play on Tuesdays and Thursdays. "We later started the more informal Monday program. The Tuesday-Thursday games were very competitive. So we started the Monday sessions in 2002 for guys who wanted to play but might not be able to play at that competitive level or might not be able to play twice a week. I ran the Monday program until 2007 and then Red Waterfield took over. I had stopped coordinating the whole softball organization in 1989 when we got the new field." Other early league presidents were Wayne Fontaine and Earl Fitzpatrick."

"With the advent of today's Price Road 'Field of Dreams' the organizational structure was modified and new leaders emerged to fill the gap as many of us got older," said Lander.

Lander felt his contribution was in organizing the initial efforts and getting others involved. "I worked for years in managing the work in voluntary organizations. I was used to organizing volunteers, so right from the beginning we had an informal structure then moved into the formal group that is there now. Ed Robson was with us from the beginning. He deserves recognition for helping us. He was a very generous person."

A name for the new field was needed. Lander explained, "We had been searching for a name for the new field. My wife Patti and I had seen the baseball movie "Field of Dreams." On the way home from the movie Patti said you need to name your field "The Field of Dreams." I went to Ed Robson with Patti's idea and he liked the idea. He kidded me that it was better than what he was considering which was Jack Lander Field and then he laughed.

In 2002 the "Field of Dreams" was moved to its current location on Price Road. The move was necessary so the new branch library could be built. Mr. Robson paid for a lot of the expenses associated with the relocation of the field.

"Over the years, we've had many people step up and become volunteers. I was just the organizer," said Lander. The success of the softball association is due to a lot of people that did the real work. The softball association is all about the exercise, some friendly competition and the friendships and fellowship."

What started out as a dream with little formal structure to play senior softball is today is a strong organization with a six-team league, various age-group travel teams participating in tournaments around Arizona and in other states and a ladies' program. The approximately 120 women and men participating in the Sun Lakes Senior Softball Association today are able to do so due to those early pioneers who came together under a veteran organizer and fulfilled a dream begun more than 20 years ago.