

A History of Niwot Youth Sports, by Biff Warren

What is now Niwot Youth Sports began as sandlot softball at the old Niwot School in the late 1960's. Players were organized by Dick Hicks, Mike Holubec and Howard Conilogue of the Left Hand Men's Club into a youth baseball team, with help from the Niwot Lion's Club and the Kiwanis Club. Games with Hygiene and Lyons were played at the school, which was located where the southbound lane of the Diagonal Highway now lies.

Within a few years, the program had expanded to 16 teams. In 1972, the same year that Niwot High School opened, Gunbarrel Lefthand Valley Boys Baseball, Inc., was incorporated as a non-profit organization by John A. Dageenakis, the late Jima Lea Folker, and the late Dennis L. Roth. The program began play at the old Niwot School and on adjacent land owned by the Knaus family, with occasional use of the original Niwot High ballfield south of the school, now a parking lot. When the old school was demolished in 1974 in anticipation of the Diagonal Highway, the field and the Knaus property were no longer available. As the high school student population grew, a summer legion program took over use of the Niwot High field.

In 1974, Niwot native Royce Johnson made land at the southwest corner of Neva Road and 83rd Street available to the program as a site for "temporary" ballfields. The "temporary" Johnson Fields were used continuously until homes were built on Christopher Court in the Johnson Valley Subdivision in 1994. Volunteers first built backstops out of chicken wire and discarded oil well pipes, with snow fencing in the outfield. Three dirt fields were constructed, but even those fields were not enough to handle the number of ballplayers. Also in 1974, a field site in Gunbarrel at the northwest corner of 71st Street and Lookout Road, was made available by Ball Brothers, as Ball Corporation was then known. Again volunteers built temporary backstops and acquired more snow fence to make the dirt fields playable.

Older players began using a field in the middle of Gunbarrel Estates in 1974, where the park was later built. In the meantime, Heatherwood Elementary School was built, and fields suitable for T Ball became available in 1975. By 1974, it became acceptable for girls to play baseball. The number of girls in the baseball program increased, and by 1978, there was enough interest to add Girls Softball as a sport. The name of the organization was officially changed to Gunbarrel Lefthand Valley Recreation Association, Inc., or "GLVRA" for short.

Also in 1978, GLVRA added a basketball program, which was co-ed at first. The program grew out of a Saturday morning clinic run by Bill Berringer at Niwot Elementary School. That program has now grown to provide both recreational and competitive programs, with separate leagues for boys and girls from Kindergarten through 8th grade.

Ballfield space was at a premium, with seven softball teams entering the new program. In 1979, the GLVRA softball teams began play in the newly formed Boulder Valley Girls Softball Association, and traveled to Boulder for half of their games. GLVRA also began an association with baseball teams from the Hygiene Recreation Commission in 1978, which lasted over ten years. This eased the field crunch somewhat as "away" games were played at Hygiene Elementary School.

1978 also saw the loss of the Gunbarrel Estates field when residents there formed a park and recreation district to develop the park, eliminating the baseball field in the process. The older players were able to use the Niwot High field for practice, but began playing games in the Boulder Pony Optimist League.

By 1979, the Ball Brothers Fields were lost to development and a new field location was sought. Although Niwot Elementary School was built in the mid-1960's, the playground did not include a backstop or ball field. The grassed area had been used for practices, but games were played elsewhere until 1979 when T-Ball teams began using an old portable backstop at the school.

By 1984 the temporary backstop at Niwot Elementary was falling apart, but the school district had no plans for a permanent one. GLVRA agreed to donate a backstop to the school. GLVRA Volunteers erected a backstop at the southeast corner of the playfield, and added benches and fencing. Several years later a second backstop was built on the west side of the Niwot Elementary School playground, with Gregg Hangge and a group of dedicated volunteers providing all the labor. With the growth of youth soccer, the Niwot Elementary School ballfields are no longer used by NYS.

In 1984, what was believed to be the impending loss of the Johnson Farm fields made finding a permanent field site imperative. Ben House, who owned 160 acres west of 79th Street, between Highway 52 and Monarch Road, approached Boulder County with a proposal to develop his property, which included an offer to build two ball fields on an 8-acre site to be donated to Boulder County and leased to GLVRA. Boulder County approved the offer, and the ballfield site was acquired.

The growing program needed more than the two fields to be built by the developer, however. GLVRA directors approved an arrangement whereby the developer would grade the entire ball field site and purchase the materials for four backstops, while GLVRA would construct the four backstops. Memorial funds which had been donated to GLVRA by the families of Jim Canar and Jim Comer were used to partially fund the project. Canar was a GLVRA coach who died in an auto accident in 1979. Comer was a coach for GLVRA who died of a heart attack in 1984. Comer's son Monte Comer had been a GLVRA player in 1976 when he died of illness. Canar Field and Comer Field at Monarch Park were dedicated in their honor.

Volunteers got together in 1985 to build the backstops and fencing. The fields were gradually improved with dugouts and bleachers, but remained all dirt until December 1993, when a water tap was donated by Left Hand Water District and an irrigation system and sod were added to three of the four fields.

In 1984, one of the borrowed Johnson Farm Fields was lost as the developer needed to construct a detention pond around second base. As a result, GLVRA board members approached Boulder County and the community with a request that a permanent field be approved for Left Hand Valley Grange Park, on land donated to the county by Royce Johnson. The county approved the request and work began on Left Hand Valley Grange Field at the northwest corner of 83rd Street and Niwot Road. Again, volunteers built the backstop. Sod and an irrigation system were later added, partially funded by the Left Hand Grange Park Fund.

In 1987, GLVRA became affiliated with Little League Baseball, and entered the district Little League tournament. Daily newspapers covering GLVRA's district title weren't exactly sure what to call the GLVRA team, since virtually no one knew what the acronym stood for. Eventually the team was referred to simply as Niwot, and by 1991, the board made the decision to change the name of the organization to Niwot Youth Sports, Inc. Several years later, when the demand for competition outside of Little League increased, the Little League affiliation was dropped to allow participation in AABC and Triple Crown programs.

When NYS was faced with the loss of the two remaining fields at Johnson Fields in 1993, Left Hand Water District saved the day by making a pasture near the district offices at Left Hand Creek off Nimbus Road available for three ballfields. Once more, volunteers came forward to build backstops and fencing but the fields were all dirt for several years, until the Colorado Rockies came through with an offer to construct a field as part of the Youth Fields program. In 1997, Rockies pitcher Kevin Ritz and the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation donated \$50,000 to install sod, irrigation, permanent fencing and a scoreboard at one of the Nimbus Road Fields. Kevin Ritz Field became the crown jewel of the NYS program.

With the help of memorial funds from the family of Greg Hagen, NYS volunteers were also able to install irrigation and sod on a second field, dedicated to Greg Hagen. Hagen, a NYS volunteer had worked on the original construction of Nimbus Fields and died in an auto accident in 1993.

In 1999, an anonymous donor approached the NYS board with an offer to fund the completion of the third field at Nimbus Fields. Following installation of sod, sprinklers and fencing, the third field was dedicated as Columbine Field. In 2000, the same donor provided the funds needed to sod the infield of Hagen Field, the largest NYS field. Work was completed in March of 2001. Rock Creek Landscape, Inc., owned by Rick and Steve Kurcab, has been involved in the construction of every NYS field, often obtaining parts and labor at little or no cost from suppliers. In 1995, the Eddie Kurcab Memorial Flagpole was erected at Monarch Fields in memory of their father. In 2003, the name of the fields at Nimbus Road was changed to the Biff Warren Baseball Complex by the NYS board of directors.

Following the failure of a recreation district proposal at the polls in 2000, the "Dream of Fields" campaign was organized in 2001, an effort which raised \$40,000 to complete the ball fields at Monarch Park. In 1994, as part of the Boulder Tech Center replat, two additional ball field site easements had been granted to Niwot Youth Sports, Inc. In 2002, Niwot Youth Sports sought and obtained Special Use approval from Boulder County to complete the fields. The two new fields were graded and backstops were erected in 2003 to accommodate both baseball and softball for younger players when use of the Niwot Elementary School fields was suspended due to the drought.

The two new fields are adjacent to the existing fields on the west side. Construction began in 1999 with removal of old fencing and installation of irrigation pipe in the ditch which divides the fields. An irrigation pond was built east of the existing Monarch Fields in 2002 to allow use of ditch water for all ball fields at Monarch Park, and to allow grass to be added to the remaining dirt field as well as the new fields. A cooperative effort with Boulder County and Shepherd Valley Waldorf School led to the efficient use of irrigation water for the Monarch Fields in 2009.

An anonymous donation in 2009 allowed grass and sprinklers to be added to the fourth field at Monarch, with additional improvements to the parking area and irrigation system. Funds were also used for an equipment shed at the Warren Complex and improvements at all of the NYS fields, including windscreens, safety caps on fences, and infield dirt replacement.

All of the permanent facilities used by the program are now located in or near Niwot. NYS programs continue to serve youth in the Gunbarrel, Niwot and south Longmont areas, with over 450 boys and girls in the baseball and softball programs, as well as another 200 in the basketball programs. Once the two T-Ball fields at Monarch Park are complete, the program should be set for years to come, with some of the finest facilities in the area.