

**Willoughby  
Baseball  
League**

**1951-2016**

**The Willoughby Baseball League history is a result of research into microfilm of the local newspapers, as well as the programs the League issued for 36 seasons, from 1973-2008. In the 50's and 60's, the coverage of local youth sporting events, in both the Willoughby News-Herald and Painesville Telegraph, was much more extensive than what you see today. Every day, a reporter or two, was at a local Lake or Geauga County field, often with a photographer. As that coverage waned, the league itself was issuing yearly programs, which helped date when we added lights and fields. There are still holes in the history. If you believe you have something worth adding or, for that matter, disagree with anything, and please get in touch. However, be prepared to verify why something should be added or deleted.**

**Hopefully, as you read the history, you will smile, recall a childhood memory, have a pleasant thought. Mission accomplished. Enjoy!**

**Kelly**

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## **Willoughby Baseball League 1951 - 2016**

- **June 19, 1951 - Youth baseball coming to Willoughby! Harry Winters, recreation director of the city, announces that "Little League" baseball is coming in the near future. Stay tuned.**
- **June 21, 1951 - That was quick! Harry announces that June 26 will be the first tryouts at Todd Field.**
- **June 26, 1951 - Willoughby Baseball is born! 27 turn out for the first tryouts of what will be known as the "Small Fry League," with hopes of becoming part of sanctioned "Little League®" next year.**
- **July 10, 1951 - First games played in what we now know as the Willoughby Baseball League! Hot-Shots defeat the Lemons, 4-2. Games were played during the day.**
- **July 11, 1951 - Public opening of the Small Fry League to take place at Daniels 1. It's slated to be the first game of a double header with an adult softball game as the night cap. Sadly, the league suffers its first rainout. Rescheduled for July 18, the following Wednesday.**
- **July 18, 1951 - Hot-Shots defeat Avilas, 11-6, in public inaugural of Small Fry League. Bruce Roniger hits what is most likely the first home run in league history, a three run shot in the fifth to cap a come from behind win.**
- **August 9, 1951 - (They're playing in August?) First season comes to end as Hot-Shots win title, 4-3, on a bases loaded walk in the bottom of the sixth! Ouch! Dan Derrick is winning pitcher.**
- **In 1952, the Small Fry League becomes, "Willoughby Kiwanis Little League," sanctioned from the national headquarters in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.**

- **To secure sanctioning, we needed to have four sponsors, for four teams of 15 to 18 players. The first four sponsors in the Willoughby Kiwanis Little League are the Willoughby Lions Club, First Federal Savings & Loan, Laird Lumber, and Hogan Packard. They each paid \$250 to back their team. Kiwanis had paid \$350 for top billing and to get the ball rolling.**
- **Wally Rogers is our first president. Wally is known locally as being the owner/operator of "Rogers Bi-Rite Supermarkets, with stores in Kirtland and Eastlake.**
- **Frank Gibson as vice president, Frank Sacher, secretary, Bob Disbro, treasurer, and Harry Winters as player agent, round out our first executive board.**
- **Harold Parsons, principal of Browning School, and league publicity director, receives letters from Hank Greenberg, general manager of the Cleveland Indians, and Al Lopez, manager of the Tribe, endorsing the Little League® program, and congratulating Willoughby on becoming part of the organization. Could those letters still exist?**
- **Class F baseball program begins for 13 and 14 year olds. This predated "pony leagues," and was played at major league and Class E dimensions, 60' - 90'.**
- **Games were to be played this year at a new, little league sized field at Daniels Park. It didn't happen. The field, no longer there, was on the pavilion and dam side of Daniels. It wouldn't be finished 'til '53. Harry Winters was not happy! An omen of things to come, games were switched to Todd 1, which was the only field at Todd at that time. Halfway through season, to relieve overscheduling, games were rescheduled to the newly donated ORCO (Ohio Rubber) Field. Also, no longer there. Field was compromised with the building of the route 2 freeway, though the Stevens Blvd. neighborhood kids enjoyed its use for years.**
- **Laird Lumber, managed by Tom Pope, after a slow start, comes on strong, winning title in first year of Little League action.**

- **July 27, 1952 - Willoughby Little League loses 10-1, to Euclid Little League, at Euclid, in their first appearance in a Little League® tournament.**
- **Frank Gibson takes over as president for 1953.**
- **New field at Daniels is completed on the dam side, and the first games are June 1. The intent is to play all Little League games here, leaving ORCO Field, and also leaving the larger, grass infield, of Todd, for the older boys.**
- **Mayor Jack Easton throws out the first pitch, a ball, low and outside.**
- **July 27, Willoughby defeats Painesville National Little League, 3-1, at Daniels, to record their first ever win in a Little League tourny. July 28, we lose to Ashtabula, 5-1, ending our all star competition.**
- **Ralph "Rip" Ellsworth assumes role as president in 1954. He would also be named district playoff director for the Little League tournament.**
- **Tryouts for '54 are held at Lincoln on May 1. First known use of Lincoln by the league.**
- **185 boys are split amongst eight teams, 4 major, 4 minor, with the remainder being on "farm teams."**
- **Willoughby defeats Collinwood, 4-2, in first round of Little League tourny, before being ousted by Medina the next day, 6-2.**
- **Wally Rogers returns as president in 1955.**
- **As a result of the growth of the league, Eastlake, which previously was included in the Willoughby organization, branches out, and becomes Eastlake Little League, with games at their junior high school.**
- **For third year in row, Willoughby wins first game of Little League tourny, only to be beaten in game two. Beat Eastlake 3-0, then lose to Akron, in Akron, 2-0.**

- **Andy Morse takes over as president for 1956.**
- **July 11, 1956 - Who is this guy? Dick Nicholl delivers a two run double in the sixth, securing a 7-2, Eagles over Lions victory.**
- **Willoughby again wins game one of LL tourney, 11-2, over Eastlake, only to lose game two to Painesville Nationals, 5-4.**
- **Bob Graf, president for 1957.**
- **July 29, 1957 - Meeting held at Osborne field, where group of girls have been meeting to play softball, to look into the possibility of forming a league in '58.**
- **Eagles win championship second year in row, defeat Glasscock Indians, 4-1, behind Gary Bixel's 2-hitter.**
- **The construction of Todd 2 occurs in 1958, with an eye on even more fields over time. Where are they going to put them? Todd has been home base ever since.**
- **The city scrapes and fences the field as over two dozen league and Kiwanis Club volunteers build and paint the wooden dugouts and backstop on "Little League Labor Day," May 24, 1958. Fences at that time were 4' high, with an outfield depth of 175' to 180'. For comparison, they are now 6' high with a depth of 200'.**
- **The league now consists of 6 major teams, 8 minor and the nine year olds. The sponsors at this time are; Willoughby Lions, Willoughby Kiwanis, Willoughby Eagles, First Federal Savings & Loan, joined this year by the Willoughby Elks and Fire Department #1.**
- **June 2, 1958 - First game on Todd 2! Mayor Gar Pierce throws out the first pitch, a strike right down the middle! Not everything is hunky dorey, as the game between Eagles and Kiwanis is protested over confusion on how many outs there were. Eagles win game, 4-3, and win the protest, also.**

- Eastlake beats Willoughby, 4-1, in first game of tourney. It is the first time we would lose to our neighbor, and the rivalry between our two cities and schools continues to this day.
- Eagles, managed by John Ellsworth win third straight championship.
- Ed Plunkard takes over presidency in 1959.
- The league expands to six major and ten minor teams, as well as a group of nine year olds. In these early years Willoughby Little League is a nine to twelve year old league. The older, and supposedly better players, are the majors. The rest of the ten to twelve year olds are minors. The nines play amongst themselves.
- The season at this time, is strictly during June, July and August, when school is out.
- The '59 season ends August 21 with First Federal defeating the Eagles.
- Ed Plunkard returns as president in 1960, the first one to do so in back to back years.
- 18 teams, 312 boys playing this year. The baby boomers are here!
- First concession stand built.
- April 17, 1960 - The Cleveland Indians trade Rocky Colavito to Detroit!  
Aaughhh!!!
- Mike Kerkel sets Willoughby Little League record with his 10th home run of season in First Federal win over Lions.
- First Federal wins championship with 2-1 victory over Fire Department to sweep series.
- Ernie Spaeth takes over as president in 1961.

- **Harry Winters, recreation director of Willoughby, sets signups for girls, 9-16 years old, May 23rd, at Browning and McKinley schools. Willoughby Softball gets its start! The cost is \$1. Looking for volunteers to help get the league off the ground. More than 200 sign up. It's deja vu all over again!**
- **June 1, 1961 - Opening Day! Rained Out! Nuts!**
- **First pigtail division and their managers:**
  - **Ryan's Rascals - Maude Hunscher**
  - **Willoughby Lake - Mrs. Lacey**
  - **Grace Green Realty - Mrs. Willett**
  - **Knudsen's Ridgerunners - Robert Auer**
  - **Dan Hart Insurance - Mrs. Slike**
  - **D'Arco Insurance - Mary D'Arco**
- **First ponytail division and their managers:**
  - **Franklin Insurance - Edward Harrison**
  - **Roberts Robots - Mrs. Gliebe**
  - **Triangle Answering Service - Mrs. Elvey**
  - **Lake County Glass - Robert Keough**
- **Ryan's Rascals win first pigtail championship with a 9-1 record.**
- **Franklin Insurance, win first ponytail championship with a 10-2 record.**
- **Ken Stafford would become our president in 1962. Ken would go on to a long and distinguished career in the Willoughby Fire Department, serving as its chief from 1971-1990.**
- **'62 was the first year of expansion for the league, as it would now encompass the 13 through 15 year olds, in what would be known as the senior division. It replaced class F in Willoughby, and was played at the 60' - 90' dimensions.**
- **The fee for the pigtail and ponytail divisions of the Willoughby Softball League doubles to \$2.**

- **Bob Feller helps kick off Opening Day on May 28, 1962. He would throw out the second pitch of the day, after mayor Gar Pierce threw out the first. Bob wasn't happy at being a reliever. Says, "I'm a starting pitcher... how would he like it if I ran for mayor?"**
- **In 1963, the league would experiment with a 9 year old t-ball league. It didn't last.**
- **The pigtail division would grow to 9 teams and the ponytail now have 7, in '63.**
- **Miles Detling would become president in 1964.**
- **New opening day pitcher, mayor Harold E. "Bud" Brichford throws strike to what we now know, is future mayor, Bill Ryan.**
- **After the politicians are done, Kelly Pope twirls an opening day two hitter as the Eagles romp, 16-1.**
- **Willoughby Little League's misfortune in the tournaments continues in 1965, as they lose to Painesville east, 9-3, and Painesville national, 7-3.**
- **Bill Lee is president in what would turn out to be our last year as sanctioned Little League in 1966.**
- **At this time, there are 8 minor teams, 12 major teams, and 8 senior division teams.**
- **Dave Dodge throws three no hitters for Coleman Young Motors.**
- **Lose to Painesville national, 8-0, in what is our last Little League game.**
- **It's 1967, and the Willoughby Little League's evolution continues as it becomes the Willoughby Baseball League.**
- **Ralph Pettifer takes over as president.**

- **Dave Dodge follows up his remarkable 3 no hitters in '66, with 3 more in '67! Very Nolan Ryan like, thing is, we don't know who Nolan Ryan is yet.**
- **'67 would mark the beginning of tournament baseball in Willoughby, as the News-Herald and Willoughby Baseball would team up to bring us the first annual tournament. \$5 entry fee. It continues to this day, 2016 marking the 50th annual.**
- **Jim Bell would become our president in 1968, and bring the pony division along with him. In its first year, the pony division is a 13 year old only league, and in '69 would become 13 and 14 year olds. It is the first time this age group would play at the "in between" dimensions of 54' - 80'.**
- **Pat Totedo assumes the reins as president of the league in 1969. After a rough couple years upon leaving Little League, Pat brings organizational skills to the league that are still being followed today. He'll be president through 1974 and be responsible for the merging of boys baseball and girls softball under one league umbrella, as well as the first lights at Todd, and a new field at Osborne.**
- **Until 1973, the girls and softball were relegated to secondary status. If they were at Todd, it was to see their brother play. All their games were at the elementary schools, Browning, Lincoln, Grant, Edison, and the old field at Osborne. With the passage of Title IX in 1972, times were changing. In '73, the Willoughby Softball League, under the guidance of director, Betty Ruth Turkall, and Pat Totedo, president of WBL, finally convince their memberships, that our ball playing youth would be better served as one organization. To this day, it is unusual for baseball and softball leagues to coexist as one league. Softball agreed to go under the Willoughby Baseball League banner, and the rest is history. Slo pitch pigtail and ponytail come aboard.**
- **New field built at Osborne, the one by the Boulevard we enjoy today.**

- **Would you have guessed that Todd 4 was the first field to have lights at Todd? That's what happens in 1973. Among the first "little league" sized fields to have night games in Lake County. We now enjoy seven fields for night games.**
- **1974 would be the first year the league would open up to 7 and 8 year olds as the "Little Indians" division starts play. It is now known as mitey-mites.**
- **American Legion baseball would briefly become part of the WBL, playing at South High and Lakeland in '74 and '75.**
- **'74 was the sixth and last year with Pat Totedo as our president. Our loss was the Willoughby South High Athletic Boosters gain. He would go on to make them the model for high school booster clubs, serving as their president for an amazing 34 years. He was also president of the Class A baseball league in Lake County for 10 years.**
- **1975 would be the first of three years with Ray Dipre as president. Through his association with the VFW, the league receives a flag that flew over the U.S. Capitol on March 20, 1975. Where's it flying today?**
- **After the success of 7-8 year old boys league last year, 1975 brings about the pixie division for softball.**
- **Todd 5 is built in 1976. Oddly, it was built backwards from the way it is now situated. Home plate was centerfield, centerfield was home plate. Really.**
- **Dick Yerse, equipment manager and treasurer for eight years, takes his turn as president in '78 and '79.**
- **Todd 6 finally maxes out Todd Field, in 1978. In '58 we asked where they were going to expand. Now we know.**
- **In 1978, Elm Street Welding, now Elm Street Garage, but in actuality, Elm Street Automotive, begins its long association with the league, sponsoring many teams over the years.**

- **Drennen Stickle would become president in 1980, and would remain through 1987.**
- **Lights come to Todd 2 in 1980. It would be seventeen years before we finally get 1 and 3 lit.**
- **We're going to get to know this guy well, in 1981 Dick Nicholl makes his first appearance on the board as ponytail commissioner and vice president of girls softball. 2015 will be his 35th season on the board, this being his 28th as president. Wow!**
- **The Mickey Mantle team in Willoughby would enjoy a three year association as part of our league in '84, '85 and '86. A travel team of a sort, before there were travel teams, for the older boys.**
- **5 and 6 year olds join the league with the advent of co ed t-ball in 1985.**
- **In 1987 the league would back its first travel team, the Willo-Ettes in the ponytail division.**
- **Here we go. Dick Nicholl assumes the presidency in 1988. Not immediately a popular choice among the boys baseball division, as he was the first president from the "girls" side of the league. He would remain president through 2015, 28 years! Thank you, Dick!**
- **1988 also marks the beginning of a true jewel in the league, the Individual Assistance Program, I.A.P., starts play. The time put in by the Dudash family and Steve Jenkins over the years is inspiring.**
- **The ponytail division would become ponytail junior and ponytail senior in '88.**
- **Opening Day 1991, fireworks at Todd Field! Harry Winters, the founder and father of our league(s), helps us celebrate our 40th anniversary. A real life "Norman Rockwell" moment.**
- **More lights! Osborne welcomes night baseball in 1991.**

- **Willo-Ettes now travel at 14U and 16U.**
- **The senior division for 15-18 year olds, will be known as the colts, starting in '92.**
- **Travel baseball gets it start in 1993, when the pony's, managed by Ken Colburn, are the first boys division to give it a try.**
- **We get the use of a new field in 1994, as the city puts in Daniels 3, a welcome addition.**
- **The 28th annual boys tournament in 1994, after being delayed for an entire week because of a "once in a century" flood, that seems to happen every ten years or so, goes on with the largest field in years. 28 minor, 32 major, 32 pony, and 24 colt, for a 116 team, eleven day baseball extravaganza!**
- **Todd 2 and Todd 4 fences are deepened by an average 20', to approximately 200', while being raised from 4' to 6' in '95.**
- **Softball adds their third travel team, an 18U entrant in '95.**
- **In 1995 and 1996, our Willoughby South High, girls slo pitch team, wins the Ohio High School state championship! Many of our Willo-Ettes represent us proudly.**
- **1997 - Ta-Da! Lights finally come to Todd 1 and Todd 3! Fast pitch softball comes to the WBL with a 14U team. Next year they would add a 17U team.**
- **It's 1998, and the Western Lake County Chamber of Commerce awards the Willoughby Baseball League as its Distinguished Civic Organization for the year.**
- **In 1999 the boys would start expanding their travel presence with a 12U team.**
- **2001 - 50th anniversary!**

- **2005 is the last year for ponytail slo pitch, as the move to fast pitch is complete.**
- **The Starzz are what our girls fast pitch travel teams would become known as, starting in '06.**
- **At this time, the Starzz, our fast pitch travel, and the Wildcats, our hardball travel, offer teams at every age category.**
- **2011 - 60th anniversary**
- **No other organization offers both softball and hardball, in rec and travel divisions, an instructional division, an I.A.P. division, 7 lit fields, 3 concession stands, 4 quality tournaments, the cooperation we enjoy with the city, and then you add the picturesque setting and ambience of Todd Field... We stand alone!**
- **2015, the 65th season of the league, will be remembered, in particular, for three things:**
  - **Rain, rain, and more rain! We've certainly had wet seasons in the past, at times the Chagrin overflowing, the concession stands flooded, losing weeks at a time, but never have we had over 230 games rained out in a season! The amazing thing, all but a handful of those games were rescheduled and played.**
  - **The complete digitization of the League. Though having a website for years, this year we embraced league registrations, communiques, and all those rescheduled games by computer. Dave Hahner, Administrative Vice President, was the lead man flipping those switches, and it led to a very smooth transition.**
  - **2015 would mark the end of the amazing 28 year run of Dick Nicholl as President! Impressive! Thank you, Dick! He has vowed, however, that he's not going anywhere. You will continue to see him, active as President Emeritus, volunteering at the fieldhouse, popstands, and ballfields. When you see Dick, please let him know you appreciate his**

service to the league for going on 40 years! Interesting note; After Dick's lengthy presidency, we now have four Presidents Emeritus, including Ken Stafford, Dick Yerse, and Drennen Stickle. Dick Yerse still makes it to the fields a few times a year, as he has grandchildren playing. As we begin preparations for the 2016 season, Eugene Lucci assumes the role of president. Eugene is a familiar face around the league, having served as vice president boys, umpire in chief, commissioner, and coaching in recent years. Please show your support and cooperation as we enter a new era going into our 66th season.

- As we ready for our 66th season in 2016 on the banks of the Chagrin, you will notice Eugene, as he now looks over the entire league, as he has umpires and tournaments in the past. You will see Rob and Diane, as they make sure the concession stands are operating smoothly. There's also Mark and John running our legendary fastpitch tournaments. As you wander out to the far reaches of Todd, it's there you'll see Dave, Judean, and Matt working with our newest coaches, thus assuring our future. As our stroll brings us back toward the pavilion, you have Dan, Amanda, and Vic working with our 10U, 12U, and minors as they move through the divisions. Closer to the pop stand you'll observe Jim working with our pony managers, and Mike doing a super job on Todd 1 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Chris is manning the "umpire stand" and handling the boys tournaments, the rec tourney celebrating its 50th annual this year. What you may not notice, is Michelle, in her 13th year as treasurer, or Dick as president emeritus, he likes to keep a low profile, as they go about their tasks of keeping the monies and league in order. As you observe all this, take a moment, thank them, pat them on the back, let them know how much you appreciate their part in the ongoing quality and history of the Willoughby Baseball League.

# **PLAY BALL!**