

BASEBALL DIGEST



ALL STAR EDITION



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By Abe J. Shear
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Chastain Park is a beautiful part of north Atlanta. The park, opened in the mid 1940's, has golf, tennis, horseback riding, walking, a large amphitheater and youth sports. I vividly remember seeing Three Dog Night perform in 1970 and now I walk around the park a couple of times each month.

Ensclosed in the middle of the park is the home of Northside Youth Organization ("NYO"), an Atlanta youth sports tradition, one which currently serves almost 5,000 children annually. And for well over 35 years, the organization has been privileged to have Jane Wilkins as its executive director.

With a permanent smile and a memory of most every child, Jane has unflappably managed the unmanageable, difficult coaches and parents, bruised children, scheduling issues, registration problems, complications with schools and their schedules, churches and neighborhoods – all while watching the organization and its facilities grow from just one league on one field.

Never looking for credit, Jane has had an important and everlasting impact on thousands and thousands of children and their parents – and she stepped down in May of this year. All of us who know Jane are truly lucky that she crossed our path and that our children were able to benefit from her cheer and her ability to manage an organization which is such a positive part of growing up in North Atlanta.

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JANE WILKINS "Her Amazing Impact"

Shear: I've been looking forward to this discussion. I'm here at Northside Youth Organization in Chastain Park in Atlanta with my good friend Jane Wilkins, who I figure I've known for about 30 years, and Jane has been with the league as the Executive Director for a while, for about 35 or more years and you were a team mother before that. You are going on to new opportunities at the end of the season. How did all this happen?

Wilkins: Of course, I started in it as a parent who didn't even know about Northside Youth Organization. My husband and I were members of

program, who was the president of the ladies auxiliary, Alison Delaney. Her husband drafted Scott and she told me I had to get involved, so I was going to be the team mother. I said I have no idea about things like that. And she said, you come to the meeting and it was such a small program, it was almost like we were sitting in a circle. So she pulled me into it and history goes on from there.

Coach Blackwell founded this program 67 years ago with 12 little boys and he was very dependent on the women to actually run this. What the men did was coach and the women did all the busy work. Alison brought me

"We were the only little league place in Atlanta that had a Pepsi board."

Peachtree Presbyterian, and in our Sunday School class someone came up and said "Gosh, Scott's seven years old, isn't he going to play football at NYO?" Well, we said, what's an NYO and that was in 1970 or 1971. She said, oh no, you have to get down and register. So we came down and they had a little tent out here in the front yard from the Sandy Springs Funeral Home and they had a little table and a little scale over here, and there was one little field and we thought oh gosh this isn't very big or exciting but they all told us this is the place to be. We registered Scott and I had a very good friend who was in the

in here, there was no office. We went into the little press box which was the lean to over on the field. It was not named Blackwell Field at the time, and we met Coach Blackwell and he was the impetus of everything of course. And I know now that's he's sitting up in heaven looking down and saying wow, because he's the reason we're all here. He ran a tight ship, he was an athlete himself, he owned Blackwell Stone and used a lot of his own money to make this place. So we had this little field out here, no stands, no nothing and that was the beginning of it.

And when you started, was it just

football?

Just football, yes.

And when did baseball come in?

Baseball came in about 10 years later. Coach Blackwell was on the board at St. John United Methodist Church and they had a little piece of property in the backyard. And he talked them into building a little field over there for us. And at the time, we didn't even have a score board, but the gentleman that was president of Pepsi in Atlanta was also on the church board and he said he thought they could put a little board up for us, which they did. We were the only little league place in Atlanta that had a Pepsi board, which did not sit well with Coke. Coke came in after about 5 years – that was our only field and said what will it take to take that score board down and put their scoreboard up? And, by the way we'll put another up over at Chastain. But, what is it going to take and Bob said well, the gentleman (from Pepsi) had passed away otherwise he would have never done this, but he said we could be bought. They gave us \$50,000 to put the lights on this field and the score board.

Who built the field over here that's the Field of Dreams?

Mike Espenlaub. Mike was the five time president here.

That was originally a football field?

It was a practice football field. [Note: the Field of Dreams on Lake Forrest Drive is certainly one of the prettiest fields one will ever see.]

Oh, I see.

the south.

How many baseball fields and softball fields does NYO have now?

Well, we have nine here. We have become partners with many of the schools and churches for gyms and we do partnerships where we keep them up and do things for them – fencing, dugouts, such as that. They let us use their facilities. Pace has been wonderful, Lovett, Northwest Presbyterian, Ridgeview, Riverwood, Galloway and others.

How many children play in the leagues?

In the leagues, about 5,000 children. Cliff will tell you it's a smidgeon under 5,000.

And, the leagues now play football and . . .

Baseball, basketball, girls basketball, and cheerleading.

And challenger baseball.

Of course, the Christopher league.

So, it's gotten a whole lot bigger in the 40 plus years that you've been around and taken care of all of these people.

Where did you grow up Jane?

I'm from Decatur, Georgia.

It was not part of Atlanta back then.

No, although at one point it was the city council for Atlanta. But, when I went to the University of Georgia, people thought we were just hicks. Decatur! They were like what? It's a wonder I got into a sorority.

When you were a little girl, did you play sports?

No, I was a dancer. My mother thought

out here at through high school.

So, your parents would come out and see all the kids playing out here on the fields all the time.

They just loved it. I can remember leaving here, whichever one would be playing at St. John, they would already be there sitting there.

And, as I walked in this morning, I had to smile. There's a field out here that's called the "Miss Jane Wilkins Field." I'll bet that would make your parents pretty happy.

They would have loved that. They certainly would have. They loved this place, but what's not to love?

And, your children played here?

All three played here. My oldest had rheumatic fever. He had heart damage so he actually didn't play but one year of baseball. He played golf. Bo and Scott played everything. And, of course played all through high school. Bo went to college to play football at Hampden Sydney and ended up being president of the student body and getting into the politics more than football. So, he only played two years there. And, in fact, I would have to say, after my divorce – my oldest was only 13 at the time, these men that were their coaches were their mentors and I'm indebted to so many of these gentlemen who . . . In fact, when Bo married, one of his wedding lists, the longest list he had, were his coaches. Because they were his role models.

Well, I can imagine and they're sort of like your brothers and children now. I heard you haven't been to a wedding since last weekend.

Last Saturday.

So, you must go to more weddings and Bar Mitzvahs than probably anybody in the City of Atlanta, I would imagine.

But, how wonderful is that! I mean we have been so blessed. I'm seeing three generations here now. A young man came in -- you may even remember him, Mark Martin – he was Jack Martin's son. Jack was an attorney for Coke. And, Jack passed away about five years ago and this child went to Woodward, went to Pepperdine, and then went to the University of Chicago to get his MBA. He came in here last week when he was here to see his mother. He came in and said do you know who I am? Well, you're 6'2". I can kind of tell. You're

“I was a dancer. My mother thought I was going to be on Broadway.”

You know Coach Blackwell had it done for the little kids. The 7 year olds played down there. And, you took life into your hands getting down in there because if it rained, you would just slip and slide. There were no steps even. So, we were big time at that point – with lights, can you imagine. Coach Blackwell's Red Devils team became nationally known. And they won national championships. We were off and running. Now, we are the oldest and largest youth program in

I was going to be on Broadway. They spent all their money giving me dance lessons, so I could go and be on Broadway.

Now, were your siblings or your family interested in sports?

My daddy went to Tech High and then he went to Georgia Tech. It was just my sister and myself. My daddy was a huge fan, never missed anything Decatur High School did. And then when my boys came along, they never missed anything

going to have to help me. Now he put me on the spot, keep that in mind. He told me who he was and he was riding by and he couldn't believe it and he came in, he sat down and we shared such

which you won't even believe it's a 4 year old program that Cliff started. And, now he has two in small ball, because Cliff let the other one play at 3 last year. He was a four year quarterback at and

“It goes from picking the best player to picking a team mother for the team.”

wonderful stories. That's the best of the best. He's one of many, not to come see me, but to come back and relive their time here. That's where the memories are and he has a son that's a year old. They live in California and I said well as gorgeous as you are you must be a movie star. He said, no, an investment banker, and he said if he ever moves back here he wanted his child to have what he had. And, I said, well you move back here and it will happen for you.

You've likely registered 50,000 children.

Yes. I just love it. A young man once came by, he's a minister now and he came by to see me about 3 years ago, and said he knew that I remembered his mother. And, I said I certainly did, she was very active here. He said he wasn't any good and he knew he was the last pick always, but what happened to him here had served him well throughout his life and he now tells stories from the pulpit – he's in a small church in south Georgia – about his various escapades. Now when he's counseling people, he tells them that he wasn't any good and that he was probably even laughed at a little bit. I said John, if you were laughed at, I want to know who did that. He was just a now precious adult who wanted to share his life and he said he wasn't really great in sports but his parents made him play. He didn't want to because he knew he wasn't any good, but he said he is so thankful that he did.

You have got probably dozens of kids out there that played here that are now coaching here.

Coaching here or playing at a high level. **So, you've got lots of kids out there coaching that played here?**

You know, we have three generations now. So, absolutely, a young man, has two little children – one in small ball,

now a daddy and he's now back here. He used to play at Lovett, playing with these little children about this big. And, such a thrill. We have many non-daddies that are coaching here that played. In fact in our Majors, Bronco and the two Pony programs, they are all non-dads, with the exception of some dads helping them, but the managers are all non-dads and what a thrill that is. They want to come back here and pay back – that's it.

You know, one of the things that always makes me laugh, we don't ever talk about it very much but you probably look forward to it was the player drafts that they had. What's it like to sit through one draft after another and listening to these crazy coaches?

Well, of course, it's social time for them and it goes from picking the best player to picking a team mother for the team, to let's get the most beautiful mother on the team. Let's get the daddy that will come out and shag balls and it's not all about the just the best player they're building a family as they draft. Of course with the little ones, I have to get everybody in the neighborhood. Winning isn't important, thanks goodness at that age.

You saved me. I had this question about team mothers and team parties. My wife, Linda, told me maybe I shouldn't ask the question, but you already answered it.

I can remember you rolling your eyes once when children were drafted because of the mothers. Of course, all the coaches had the exact same ideas.

Yes, that person just beat them to it.

I once saw you umpire Jane. You once umpired one of the Challenger League teams, it's now called the Christopher League, a league for children who are either mentally or physically challenged. What was it like to be

the umpire out there? That's the only time I can ever remember you umpiring.

It was. I always said in my second life I wanted to come back as an umpire or a third base coach, one or the other. And, luckily I got to be the umpire. Of course in the Challenger program, you don't keep score and everyone wins because it's a tie and no one strikes out so you're not really being a full-fledged umpire, but that's what's so much fun about it.

Well, the Challenger program has been a great part of this league for over twenty years now and so many young children who otherwise wouldn't have gotten to play and so many of the NYO players have participated.

The buddies.

The buddies are the children that assist the other players in the league.

Well, you know Abe the greatest thing about it to me is our children learning to be with these children that at first they were a little standoffish, didn't know how to handle them exactly. Now, those children that have been there forever, they kid with them. You're not any good, you're not going to hit that ball and then they end up hugging them.

They become part of their little lives and it's the best thing for all of our children. Because a child that is in our program, let's say a super star, can get down on this level and be this child's buddy and as Frank Sinatra says, "if you don't like this, you don't like blackeyed peas."

Well, that's the way I feel about that. It's the best.

So, over 35 or 40 years do you ever hear really funny stories you want to share? Touching moments?

Oh my goodness. So many great memories. You know the night they named the field for me was certainly the biggest surprise. They told me they were going to have a little thing for my father because he had just died and they were going to name a seat for him. And, that's how they got a list of my friends to come and I thought oh that's so sweet. So some of my sorority sisters came and close friends here and at that point the sign wasn't the one out there, it was just a Coke sign. And, Cliff Barshay did the honors and they pulled the thing down and that was just it. We had just

come off of raising all this money and we didn't sell that sign. We sold all the others and I kept saying well, why can't we sell that sign. We need to. That's big money. So, I felt like I needed to go around with a tin cup after that and collect the money for the difference.

Well, it seems to me that there's a balance to it all. I mean that sign is in the middle of the park in the middle of all the fields and everything just swirls around you. It's always about you being in the middle. So, when you walk around the field everybody comes to you and then that's sort of the pied piper part of the field. So, what are your next adventures, Jane? When you're all done with this?

Well, they are talking to me about staying part-time in a transitional setting and that'll be fine. It won't be just like walking out that door. That's what I keep telling everybody. The ladies are saying we're going to do this, we're going to do that. I said I don't want anybody here that last day. I'm going to do it slowly. But, they're giving me the time to come back and help Tony and we are already having meetings with him now in a transitional form and he's going to be great. He's young, he's enthusiastic and I think it'll be a different look. That's good. So moving on for me is keeping my little estate sale business going, and maybe ramping it up some, and I have three girls that work

with me now and of course it's totally different from this, but I can be with my grandchildren more and I'm not going to sit at home, that's the last thing. I can't imagine. After I took my Christmas tree down last year and cleaned up everything, polished some silver, did this, that and the other, a few hours went by and I thought is this what life's going to be like? I didn't have any plans over the holidays. Usually I do because I'm there with some girls, whatever. And, I thought, oh my gosh this is it and I knew then I didn't want that. So, when they said I'd have some transition time, did that work? Does it ever!

Well, I imagine being around so many little kids and I guess kids from three to thirteen or fourteen, it sure does keep you young.

It does keep you young. And, it's such a thrill to see these children who have progressed through our program. And, now we have two in the major leagues of baseball. And one playing for the Colts. I mean how exciting is that! I just love it.

Well, I think that everybody's thrilled that they went through this league. You'd really have to look long and hard to find somebody that really wanted to complain unless, of course, they didn't get into the league, which is possible because a leagues gets closed out sometimes. And, there have been ways to sweep people in, but you

have to know Jane to get in to do that. My daughter-in-law said one time she can always tell when it's time to register because people would call them. Now, we're new to this, so make sure you put a good name out there for us, which doesn't have a thing to do with it.

Well, I don't have any more questions. This is great. I mean, Jane, you've added so much to so many people's lives in this neighborhood and I drive by the park, I think I'm like everybody else who drives by the park or walks around the park. It brings smiles to everyone.

What a great place.

It's a great place and it's a nice place and people have just had a wonderful time here and I think it's in a large part because they love coming back and you make them feel so welcome.

Keep in mind that people like you, all the ladies, all the volunteers, the men, the coaches, the board. That's what has made this and I've been lucky because I've outlived so many people, I guess to be a part of it and it is a prideful thing, but the thank-you's go to all of you who have done this and can you just imagine, I mean we have over 1200 volunteers right now that are active in the program. That's pretty cool.

It is pretty cool and NYO is a great program.

That was easy. I have to tell you I was dreading it a little bit.

“Her Amazing Impact”

Jane Wilkins

★★ 69th EDITION ★★

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