

Bice helped Prospect Meadows get off the ground

Written by Jim Ecker
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Richard Bice would love to grab his old glove and play a ballgame at Prospect Meadows this year, but it's probably not going to happen.

You see, Richard is 87 years old and played his last varsity baseball game for Woodward High School in 1951.

There will be games at Prospect Meadows this year for 8-and-under kids, but there won't be any for 88-and-under grandfathers, no matter how willing they are.

Nonetheless, just the thought of playing ball again puts a twinkle in Richard's eye. He'd love the opportunity.

"Oh, you betcha," he said with a big smile, relaxing at his long-time home in Marion.

The thought brought back fond memories.

"We used to use cow-chips in the pasture as bases," he said, laughing. "And we played all the time.

"Yeah, I love ball. I think it's the greatest thing we can do for our community and our young people."

For Richard, helping his community has been a life-long passion in sports, civic projects and his

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church. He's been an officer for Multiple Sclerosis and Muscular Dystrophy associations and he's been honored as the Alzheimer's Association Advocate of the Year for his work to combat the disease that claimed his wife, Carolyn, in 2013. They were married 57 years.

Richard's passion for baseball helped lay the groundwork for Prospect Meadows, the new baseball and softball complex that will be christened May 23 with Opening Day ceremonies and youth games that night. Richard and his friend Rick Freese, the secretary for the Prospect Meadows Board of Directors, began discussing their dream of building a major facility here more than a dozen years ago.

Richard coached the Marion town team in the Iowa Valley League for two years in the 1980's and learned how difficult it was to get a field. "We could never find a ballpark, to practice or play on," he said.

He'd drive to Des Moines and see a baseball complex right off the interstate, which made him determined to help build a facility in Linn County. "I just said, 'Why can't we do this?'"

He was not alone in his frustrations.

"So many people said to me, 'We have to drive clear to Des Moines for our kids to play in a tournament. That's ridiculous!'"

And when Richard Bice sees a way to help the community, he rolls up his sleeves and gets to work.

Richard and Rick Freese, his friend and fellow advocate, did some doodling on a napkin during one of their luncheons at the Granite City restaurant in Cedar Rapids, drawing initial plans for a baseball and softball complex that might rise out of the cornfields someday.

They broached the idea with Jerry Ford, the president and founder of Perfect Game, and Jerry

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quickly pledged his support.

With momentum growing, Richard and Rick talked to Jack Roeder about playing a prominent role. Their timing was perfect, because Jack had recently retired as general manager of the Cedar Rapids Kernels and was looking for something to get his mitts on.

The new team began making plans and added more good people. The Linn County Board of Supervisors earmarked 128 acres of farmland for the project and let Prospect Meadows keep the farm profits until the complex was being built, giving them needed capital and a 95-year lease for \$1 a year.

Richard had to step away from direct involvement with the project to care for his ailing wife at home, but he left an imprint on Prospect Meadows that helped get the whole thing started.

"Richard played an instrumental role in getting Prospect Meadows off the ground," said Roeder. "He was a big help with the original idea, the initial planning and with our fundraising efforts. We cannot thank Richard and Rick Freese enough."

Richard, who ran his own insurance company before retiring, lives a short drive from where Prospect Meadows has risen out of the farmland. Now in just a few short days, the vision he helped create will finally become a reality, with kids running around and playing ball.

"The thrill of seeing the reality of a dream come true ... I can't explain it to you," he said, searching for the right words. "It's kind of a vehicle for what you've done with your life.

"You want to give something to the future generations that's going to live on, after you were here. And it will.

"To me, it's not what we get, it's what we give," he said. "The joy of life is helping others."