

Pottawatomie & Beyond...

A publication provided for the community by St. Charles Park District

Fall 2010

Park District Softball League Player Makes It to Hall of Fame

If anyone had told Dave Villarreal when he was a teenager playing softball at Pottawatomie Park that thirty years later he would be inducted into the Illinois USSSA Hall of Fame, he wouldn't have believed them.

And yet, come November, that's exactly what's going to happen when Dave takes the stage at the organization's annual celebration in Rockford. For Dave and his family, it will be the culmination of decades of hard work and sacrifice, travel and expense, and, yes, fun and satisfaction in seeing his love for the sport of slow-pitch softball gain the official recognition it so richly deserves.



USSSA stands for the United States Specialty Sports Association, a non-profit, all-volunteer, sports governing body of some 3.7 million members. Founded in 1968, the acronym originally denoted the United States Slo-pitch Softball Association, but in 1998 the organization expanded to include thirteen other sports, including basketball, wrestling, soccer, lacrosse, karate, and volleyball.

According to the Illinois USSSA's website, admission to the Hall of Fame "is the highest honor bestowed on any individual who has excelled as a player" and, as such, an inductee becomes part of "an elite

group of individuals" who "have excelled in the highest levels of competition that the Illinois USSSA has to offer."

Competing at the highest levels is something that has always appealed to Villarreal. He began playing league ball at Pottawatomie Park right out of high school, and then continued while a college student at Waubensee. After college, he kept playing softball with his buddies, but the more he played, the more he wanted to go beyond league softball and get into tournament play.

"I wanted to play the best tournament competition there was," he recalls. "I've been fortunate enough to play with the best players in the country at the very highest levels. It just drove me more. I wanted to compete with those guys and be part of that group."

The USSSA runs sanctioned tournaments that teams have to qualify for before they can go on to compete in world tournaments. Dave first got involved with a travel team based in Plano called the "Boys Out of Illinois." His pitching skills were noticed and eventually he was able to move up the ladder of competition to play for an Arlington Heights-based team called "Joe Black" that attracted players from all over the country, including ex-major league players, talented college players who chose not to turn pro, and players who were once in the minors.

"'Joe Black' was the cream of the crop, one of the best known teams in the country," says Villarreal. "These guys are tremendous athletes. Once you see them, you want to be part of it, to see if you can compete at their level."

What made their success even more remarkable was that, as a traveling team, they played together only on weekends. To hone their skills, baseball players must

"get their swings in" during weekday softball leagues.



"St. Charles Park District's league was one of the best in the area by far," says Villarreal, who praises the professional manner in which the park district league is managed. "It has been one of the most competitive leagues for years. I've always enjoyed playing at Pottawatomie Park. It's such an awesome atmosphere and destination. It was a lot of fun playing for the people who'd walk down from the surrounding neighborhoods to see you play."

However, Villarreal's nomination into the Illinois USSSA Hall of Fame has a bitter-sweet aspect to it. Last year, he took his son David, also a league player whom Villarreal now coaches, to Joliet to catch some tournament games. One of the men stationed at the ballpark's entrance gate was John Sturgill, an old friend and former coach, whom Villarreal hadn't seen for more than fifteen years. The two struck up a conversation, but it was a little stilted, which seemed out of the ordinary. Back at work on Monday, Villarreal gave John a call, during which John apologized for not being very talkative. "John said, 'Dave, I heard you had died. I heard you had a heart attack.'"

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Park District Honored with St. Charles Chamber of Commerce Award

The St. Charles Park District and Kane County Forest Preserve District were presented a 2010 Civic Image Award from the St. Charles Chamber of Commerce in recognition of the development of the Randall Road Bike Bridge.

Park Board Commissioner Nancy Cox said "Now we have a safe access for bikers and pedestrians crossing Randall Road while encouraging more users to utilize the trails."

Spanning Randall Road directly north of Silver Glen Road, the bridge ties together the Randall Road Bike Trail, the Great Western Trail and the Fox River Trail. The \$2.5 million dollar bridge was funded by \$2,023,000 in

State and Federal grants and the balance was funded by the Park District and Kane County Forest Preserve District.



Shown above: Rose Canfield, St. Charles Chamber of Commerce President, John Hoscheit, Kane County Forest Preserve District and Nancy Cox, St. Charles Park District.

Emerald Ash Borer on Park District Property

The emerald ash borer has now spread throughout Kane County and made its presence known on St. Charles Park District property.



Park District staff began removing ash trees in early 2010 at a slow and measured pace. To date, four percent of the 2,500+ ash inventory has been removed from these local natural areas: Hickory Knolls Natural Area, Delnor Woods Park, Persimmon Woods, the Kingswood/Majestic Oaks complex and the south boundary of Norris Woods. The majority of removed trees were hazards to trails, parking lots or boundaries of private home owners. Others were previously scheduled to be removed due to restoration effects.

Referendum Progress Update



Construction has moved along steadily at **Otter Cove Aquatic Park** - the 9.2 acre pool complex site located at the corner of Peck and Campton Hills Roads in West Side Community Park. Concrete has been poured for the lazy river, pool decks and sidewalks. Contracted crews have installed gutters and mechanical operating systems. Interior building components, such as cabinetry, countertops and toilets, have been installed for the pool lobby, restrooms and locker rooms. The diving board and equipment for the spray amenities and water features will be installed soon. Park District staff members are actively planning for a grand opening to be held in June 2011.



Otter Cove Aquatic Park

Every day brings the **Hickory Knolls Discovery Center** another step closer to completion. Since construction resumed last spring, concrete floors have been poured and walls have gone up. A minor setback with roofing occurred in early summer when a contractor filed for bankruptcy, but the situation was resolved, and work has proceeded as planned.

As fixtures and floor coverings are put in this fall, the true character of Hickory Knolls' nature-based interior design has begun to take place.

Earth tones accented with bright splashes of color mimic the natural landscape that can be seen out the building's expansive windows.



Meanwhile, other elements important to Hickory Knolls' "green" architecture and energy efficient operation have been ensconced in the building's infrastructure, never to be seen again. Wells were drilled and the inner workings of a state-of-the-art geothermal heating and cooling system have been installed and structural insulated panels (SIPs), a high-performance, energy-conserving building material, have been lowered into place.

Stay tuned for information of a grand opening celebration.

For People Who Are as Busy as Bees, St. Charles Park District Offers “The Buzz”

Necessity, as they say, is the mother of invention. Faced from time to time with the need to respond to a flood of inquiries from area residents expressing concern about the status of one upcoming event or another, Erika Young, the Park District’s Public Relations and Marketing Manager, wanted to find a way to get such breaking news alerts out pro-actively rather than reactively.

“If we had a way of contacting people we knew were interested in a certain event or program, we could communicate news about it directly to them,” she said. “I wanted to find a way that we could reach a lot of people in a short amount of time.”

Ideas began swarming around the District’s marketing office. “What-if” scenarios spun themselves out. What if a busy mother with a mini-van full of kids headed out to East Side Sports Complex for a summer sports camp, only to discover that unforeseen road construction had forced the Park District to relocate the event to the Pottawatomie Park? An instant update sent directly to mom’s cell phone via text message could have nipped that day’s frustration right in the bud. Or maybe a local businessman who was part of an after-work softball league was concerned that an upcoming business trip would coincide with some games. A quick check of the schedule could help him juggle his calendar accordingly.

St. Charles’s responsiveness to the needs of frazzled parents and focused professionals alike set Young and the District’s website designer, John Staples of Bartlett-based Visionary Webworks, brainstorming about harnessing the power of current communications technology. They knew that in an era when even answering machines and e-mail seem about as reliable as smoke signals, many people prefer texting and Tweeting when they have something to say or information to share. They also knew that social networks such as Facebook weren’t just for teens anymore. Not only has their appeal spread across all demographics, social media are now considered standard venues for corporate and organizational marketing plans.



The Birth of “The Buzz”

And so it was that “The Buzz” was born. An instant communications tool that connects the District’s website to a person’s desktop computer, “The Buzz” represents a cutting-edge approach to patron communication that enables it to send out information, alerts, program brochures, newsletters, special offers — you name it! Accessible as a page on the District’s website, “The Buzz” also can appear as a downloadable widget, generate information via RSS feed, post a message on Twitter and Facebook, or send a text message to a user’s cell phone.

Available at all times as a feature on the District’s website, “The Buzz” is a one-stop destination for the most current park district news — a hive of information, if you will.

With its streamlined design, “The Buzz” is organized to help a user navigate the District’s website with maximum efficiency. But the real beauty — the centerpiece, if you will — of “The Buzz” is a desktop widget that can be downloaded to a person’s computer. If one thinks of a widget as sort of a mini-website, “The Buzz” encapsulates the most essential elements of the park district’s site onto one compact application.

“It’s always there when they need it and, once downloaded, is accessible without any further activity on their part,” says Staples.

Staples, who works almost exclusively with parks and recreation agencies, views the St. Charles Park District as a trailblazer in this area. “There might not be a parks and

recreation agency anywhere in the country that has done something this extensive or advanced to create a network that will disseminate information and communicate and engage with their community,” he says.

This Buzz Is For You

But even the easiest-to-use applications are meaningless if they don’t provide the type of content users want. One of the best features of “The Buzz” is that the information it offers can be customized by the user to fit his or her needs. With its bright-eyed bumblebee icon cheerfully perched on a field of green, the versatile and flexible “Buzz” practically invites users to “bee all they can bee.”

Let’s take our busy mom with the sports-minded youngsters. She’s most likely to be interested in the Park District’s t-ball leagues, mini-golf hours, and special events at Swanson Pool. Her own mother, however, has just retired and is looking forward to spending her free time exploring long-neglected hobbies. She’d rather know about a digital photography class, a senior’s golf tournament, and the Adult Activity Center’s upcoming trip to Chicago for an architectural river cruise. In much the same way one would use a Table of Contents, “Buzz” users can create a list of channels tailored to their areas of interest, choosing from categories geared toward Adults, Age 50+, Early Childhood, Teens and Youth, and about Park District facilities ranging from Primrose Farm to Pottawatomie Golf Course.

“It’s not only a way to organize how the Park District sends out information,” says Staples, “it also allows the user to choose the kind of information they would like to receive.”

Here’s how it works. An Early Childhood channel, for example, could have subcategories about Dance, Arts, Pottawatomie Preschool, and other programs geared toward that age group. Information from the Park District would be posted to “The Buzz” in a format very similar to blogs — a brief line or two of introductory text, followed by a hypertext link inviting them

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Hall of Fame Player...

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Obviously, John was mistaken, but not by much. In 2006, Villarreal's 15-year-old son Dustin, an outstanding football player at Geneva High School, died suddenly of a congenital heart condition. It devastated Villarreal, his wife Jena, and their surviving son, David.

"After Dusty died, I didn't have the interest. It was a tough time. Playing softball meant nothing to me," says Villarreal.

But reconnecting with Sturgill opened the path that ultimately led to Rockford and the Illinois USSSA Hall of Fame induction in November. A director on the Hall of Fame committee, Sturgill told Villarreal he wanted to sponsor him for induction. Then it would be up to Villarreal to complete and submit his application, listing his performance statistics and detailing his career accomplishments.

"I wasn't really comfortable doing this," he recalls. "In my competitive years, I always thought it would be neat if I got in the Hall of Fame someday, but as I got older and got

out of tournament play and traveling, I just never did anything about it."

Last fall, Sturgill picked up the phone and dialed Villarreal's number. "I just want to be the first to welcome you into the Hall of Fame," he said.

Today, Dave Villarreal has left tournament play behind him, but there's another Villarreal — his 23-year-old son David — who wants to get into the game. And who better help him find out what USSSA tournament play is all about than his Hall of Fame father? Now Villarreal coaches his son and some of David's friends, and the St. Charles Park District is once again playing an important role with the next generation of Villarreal players.

"When I started coaching my son, I said, 'Let's go back to St. Charles.' They're a much better league and they'll prepare you better if you want to go on."

Villarreal is very enthusiastic about coaching his son, and encourages other

up-and-coming players to consider USSSA competitive play. "I think anytime you can play or do anything at the highest level, it's pretty gratifying. If it's something you really want to do and be the best you can, then you have to do it. You have to be a part of it."

There's a famous line from an old "Saturday Night Live" sketch where Garrett Morris's character says, "Baseball has been very, very good to me." It's a sentiment Dave Villarreal echoes. "It's a tremendous thing. I encouraged both my boys in sports, because there's nothing like the highs and lows. It's a character builder. You always know nothing works out the way you want it to, but you brush yourself off and do it again. That's the way life is."

And sometimes, life rewards you for those efforts. The St. Charles Park District is proud to congratulate Dave Villarreal upon his induction into the Illinois USSSA Hall of Fame.

The Buzz...

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to "read more." And not only would Mom be able to turn to "The Buzz" to find out what classes will be available in the next session, she could also opt to receive breaking "alerts" if a class was cancelled — remember that detoured softball game? — via text message on her cell phone, an RSS feed on her computer, a Tweet, or a note on her Facebook page. Or all of the above. And if she found a cool gymnastics class for Hannah, she could register for it right on the spot by clicking on the Leisure Link icon, which accesses the Park District's online registration program.

But say Park District patrons didn't know what activities and events were available to them and had no idea how they would want to customize their own channels. With "The Buzz," the current season's complete program guide is only a click away. The cover of each season's catalog appears on the widget; selecting it opens a PDF of everything that exists in the print version. The fact that this is also a very "green" way of distributing this

material is yet another benefit of "The Buzz's" interactive design.

Just as St. Charles residents and visitors alike have come to rely on the St. Charles Park District for its willingness to develop new programs and activities, to preemptively restore existing facilities and proactively construct new ones, so have they come to depend on it to bring that same responsive commitment to the methods it employs to communicate those achievements and activities to its patrons.

"We try to be on the cutting edge of what we offer to the community, whether it's services, education, facilities, or technology," says Young.

That's definitely a mission worth buzzing about.



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