

## Bustin' sod on the softball field

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 29 October 2009 13:17 -

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Original team gathersto reminisce.

One spring day in April of 1950, Rex Fenner and Orvin Stevens decided it would be fun to start a softball team.

The farmers decided to attend a softball meeting at Nichols' Produce cream station where they perched on cream cans and wooden egg crates.

When chairman Herman Wolf asked if they had players, Fenner and Stevens said young farmers like themselves who lived north of town wanted to organize a team.

“So what’s the name of your team?” Herman asked.

“We hadn’t thought of that,” Stevens said.

Wolf said, “If you are all farmers, how about the Sodbusters?”

And that was how a bunch of farmers from German precinct began spending summer evenings after working in the fields all day.

Seven members of the original team, all now in their 80s, gathered at the Senior Center last Thursday to reminisce after almost 60 years.

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They said it didn't matter that the Sodbusters won only one of 12 games the first year.



"We still had fun," said Stevens who pitched for the team.

Team members still remember their first game when they were nearly shut out by a team sponsored by Bert and Earl's, a local tavern.

After the last inning, the score was 33-3.

Later that season, the Soddies beat Mann Hay Company 14-13.

"We really thought we did something," Stevens said.

That winter, Stevens said team leaders decided "to sift some players out."

In particular, a player with nine errors in one game.

"That was the kind we sifted out," Stevens said with a laugh.

Fenner, who played third base, described the team as "just a bunch of guys who didn't have anything else to do but play ball."

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“We always got the irrigating done before we played,” Stevens said. “Ball was No. 1.”

Over the years, they played local teams and some from North Platte, Lexington, Cozad, Arnold and Curtis.

Stevens remembers when a farm team from Lodgepole issued a challenge.

“They thought they had a pretty good team and we beat 'em,” he said.



For Fenner, the most memorable game for the Soddies was against Tri-County.

“They was tough,” he said.

Stevens described the team as about as good as the Sodbusters.

“And when we played them, it was for blood.”

Second baseman Willard Kuhlman said with a chuckle, “We was just a little bit better—that was the problem.”

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During one game, Fenner remembers sliding into second base.

“They heard my ankle crack clear up in the bleachers,” he said.

Stevens tore his knee open when the Soddies played the Farmalls from Cozad.

“Marvin Hilton was wearing spikes and was sliding into home when he caught my knee and cut it open. They had to sew me up,” he said.

During the surgery, Stevens said longtime doctor Burt Pyle told him, “There’s a better game like golf.”

Another memorable game was when the Sodbusters traveled to Curtis.

“We beat them so bad—20-something to nothing—we didn’t know whether or not to stay afterwards,” Stevens said, noting that none of the Curtis players even made it to first base. “They was about ready to run us out of town.”

The teammates decided not to go home right away and instead went to a local business to socialize and drink “barley pop.”

“It’s pop made with barley,” Stevens said with a grin.

Fenner also recalls how, whenever they got into an argument, left fielder Les Jobman “got us to quit.”

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"I didn't know we ever argued," Jobman said with a smile.

Fenner confessed that other teams "got us mad every once in a while."

When the Sodbusters first organized, team members said they were sponsored by Stebbins Implement and later by Nelson and Tetro who bought the Stebbins dealership.

"Rex and I had to go down and beg them to sponsor us," Stevens said about the new owners.

Their uniforms consisted of a red-and-white shirt with "Sodbusters" and a plow emblazoned across the front.

The team disbanded after about 12 summers when "we just got too old to play," according to first baseman Morris Devine.

However they reorganized in September of 1980 when the local Jaycees challenged the Soddies.

After lasting four innings, some of the sons of the Soddies took over and beat the Jaycees 21-20.

Talk of a reunion for some time was what prompted Stevens and Fenner to finally organize one.

"Most of us are still alive. That's because of all of the exercise we had at the time," he said, laughing.

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Devine said he got all his exercise "running bases at Curtis."

Second baseman Bob Plank described the farmers as natural ball players.

"It was all that good country living," said Shirley Stevens who is married to Orvin.

Besides the jokes and the games, Kuhlman said the players were close knit.

"That was special," he said.

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