

Legion baseball



READING EAGLE/EVAN JONES

Helping things run smoothly at Owls Field as volunteers for the West Lawn Legion baseball program are, from left, former treasurer Mitch Hettinger, current president John Piscitelli, former president Jay Vaughan, Ted Palka and Arlean Palka. The West Wyomissing park is named after Ted Palka.

Owls Field has changed, but volunteers' dedication continues

By EVAN JONES

READING EAGLE CORRESPONDENT

The area around Owls Field at Ted Palka Park in West Wyomissing has changed quite a bit in the past 50 years.

At one time the grounds held a sizeable picnic grove and tennis courts besides the baseball field. It used to be the home of the Apple Dumping Festival.

Besides hosting American Legion baseball — Owls Field has the Mid-Atlantic Regional Tournament today through Monday — a constant for the facility has been the group of volunteers that has made it tick.

Palka himself has been working at the field for 50 years and was helping get the concession stand ready Tuesday evening. A sizable group of volunteers was preparing for the tournament as the host team, the West Lawn Owls, held practice.

Palka presently works from a wheelchair and has a personal window in the concession stand to watch the action on the field. He is so dedicated that he delayed open heart surgery until the end of last season. He then spent the winter in rehab getting ready for 2012.

A retired meat cutter, Palka, 88, remembered when he first came over to the field just after his son turned 7. Palka had built a smaller diamond by the nearby railroad tracks.

"They needed some help, and the guy running it said he needed some help," Palka said.

From there he worked in the concession stand and joined a group of fellow community members who turned the complex into a summer destination.

For the volunteers, going over to Owls Field turned into something that came naturally when the weather got warm.

"After the Region 2 Tournament was over (in July) he was talking about what needs to be done for this weekend," Ted's wife, Arlean, said.

Working on Owls Field has been a labor of love for Palka and the other volunteers.

"There's been a core group for years and years," said Jay Vaughan, who was president of the Owls Sports Club for 30 years. "That's what built the core group, getting guys interested by seeing the camaraderie. It was five days of hard work (at the Apple Dumping Festival) but they

to Sinking Spring, and the Spring Township firehouse now stands on the site of the picnic groves. One pavilion still stands, and the Owls baseball teams use it as a batting cage.

The baseball field backstop has been moved, and the tennis courts are now center field.

The Owls sports program has Senior and Youth Legion Baseball teams and a softball team. The Owls Sports Club continues to lease the land from Spring Township.

Along with the kids come the parents who help with the volunteer work, something that's also spanned generations.

"All the kids that played here had parents that volunteered," Arlean Palka said. "Now they have kids who play and they're volunteering."

The Owls also don't have a sign-up fee to play; a rarity among recreational sports programs these days.

"We don't charge the kids to participate in the Owls program," said Mitch Hettinger, who was the Owls treasurer for three decades. "What some teams charge really blows my mind."

They're able to keep it that way through the sponsorship of local businesses, fundraisers and hosting a handful of big events through the season such as Legion and college tournaments. It has also led to the improvements at the field, including lights, a scoreboard and the infield surface.

"We keep it level with other

places, and people want to come," Hettinger said.

Under the leadership of club president John Piscitelli, the Owls are looking to continue to thrive with the help of the community.

"It's all volunteers," said Arlean Palka. "They should all be credited."