

88 years ago, in 1929, you wouldn't have wanted to put all your eggs in the Wall Street basket. You wouldn't have wanted to be a member of Bugs Moran's gang in Chicago on Valentine's Day. You could, however, have enjoyed a movie at the newly opened Fox Theater and, on the way, might have listened to your newly invented car radio. On Sunday mornings that summer, you could also have enjoyed playing corkball at the newly formed Gateway Corkball Club League.

In the beginning, there were those days at the turn of the century when the game of corkball was played in alleys and on unpaved streets with only a broomstick, a piece of shaved cork, and a huge rock for home plate.

All that changed in 1929 when the Gateway Corkball Club League began. The history of the GCL is interesting. It seems that a group of St. Louisans parked their bayonettes at an Arkansas Army camp during World War I for a bit of recreation at corkball. Soldier boys of that era didn't have access to baseball and other athletic supplies. It was, however, easy to assemble a corkball game: a cornfield, a stick, a piece of cork, and a base and you were ready to play.

At the close of WWI, those St. Louis boys decided to further the interest of corkball back at home. Four members of that enthusiastic group pioneered the development of organized corkball in St. Louis. They were John Horan, Al Ulsas, Sr., Clarence (Doc) Moehl, Sr., and Johnny Jansen, who drift back to the days of 1908 when they represented the Elks team at Soulard Market. They would meet to discuss plans for starting a competitive corkball club league. During the discussions, pro and con, for a regulation league, those four "old timers" recommended changes.

- They tested various corkballs, starting with taped spheres, and bit by bit, advanced to the current ball that is a miniature edition of a major league baseball. There is a horsehide cover with blue and red stitches on the corkball of today.
- Broomsticks were out, regulation manufactured bats were in.
- Last, but most important of all, regular playing fields had been obtained. A tract at Delor west of Grand Ave. was the site of the new Gateway's playing field. That field was only a short distance from Gateway's current location at Walsh and Ulena where we have been for nearly 70 years.

Thus, the Gateway Corkball Club League was formed.

In 1933 Gene Roberts, a typo-club baseball star for years and years, turned to corkball which, with softball, was running neck and neck for leadership in popular pastimes. Roberts dreamed of a day when the game would be played in front of 10,000 or more customers for the city, if not the world, championships. It was written that the Gateway League was the stepping stone for many semi-pro and municipal league ball players like Gene Roberts, Frank Palubiak, Gus Salg, Chick Hammer, Ed Kriegesman, Al LaHay, Walter Kossman, Gus Lambert, Al Alsus, Jr., Joe Leaf, and others.

In 1936 Gateway Corkball was beginning its 8th season. Six teams of equal strength were formed at the beginning of each season and assigned to various sponsors: Gateways, Wilkes, Columbos, Neudecks, Carondolets, and Cizeks. Under this system, a member seldom played on the same team or with the same men each year. The 1936 schedule called for 25 weeks of play at the National Softball Park where each team played 3 sets of 2 games each on Sunday mornings. The season was divided, with the two winners playing for the championship. This structure remains largely intact today.

All of us have played a sport in a league where you show up once a week, you play, and you don't see each other again until the following week. Gateway Corkball Club, from its very inception was much more than a playing league. Clarence Moehl, Al Alsus, Sr., and John Horan had been playing the game together for 25 years and were chiefly responsible for making the club a social as well as athletic association. The Gateway Corkball Club League was certainly about playing corkball at its highest level, and special prizes were awarded ranking players, but it was also a social organization.

Men coming home from war – WWI, WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam, and the Middle East – found friendship and fellowship at the Club. Boys got the opportunity to do something with their fathers. They watched their dads, and perhaps uncles and grandfathers, play and they dreamed of the day that they could be out on that field. And while there are many, many sports in the world today, few of them exist where a father and son, and perhaps brother, cousin, uncle, could participate together in a competitive arena. It made for some stressful Sunday dinner conversation.

In 1936, the St. Louis Star Times reports that the Gateway Corkball Club League is “..an organization which does not confine its activities to the playing field, for picnics, banquets, and dances are part of the league's program for the summer.” From its very inception 88 years ago in 1929 until today, generations later, most of these traditions continue.

Games played in the Sunday Morning League were frequently attended by players' families. Later, Gateway Corkball expanded to a Wednesday Night League where fathers often brought their young sons to watch and learn the game. Since Ray and Ben Goedeker joined the league in early 1950, 20 of their sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, and nephews have played as well, sometimes even with – or against -Ray and Ben. Sons who were too young to play were known as the Gateway Shaggers. Many of us who have played for 20-40 years started off by shagging foul balls and returning them to one of our corkball heroes like Tom Niemeyer, who in one season threw 7 consecutive no-hitters, and Davey Welker, who won the batting title 17 of the 18 seasons he played, and Ray Kuchno who won 8 catching titles over his 4 decade career.

Today, 88 years later, the Gateway Corkball League boasts 90 plus playing, social, and retired members. Highly competitive League play continues on two fields every Wednesday evening from April through October, culminating in both an All-Star and Playoff competition at the end of the season. And why you ask? For the love of the game!