

1. We know that each one of you represents a different club. Can you give us a brief history about how your club was formed and is thriving today?

The history of the Gateway Corkball Club League 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 Souldard 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.
- Broomsticks were out, regulation manufactured bats were in.
- Last, but most important of all, regular playing fields were 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.

Today..... 88 years later, the Gateway Corkball League boasts more than 90 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. From a social perspective, we have an annual Awards Night for the players, annual Banquet for members and spouses, annual Family Picnic, Kids' Christmas Party, and several fundraising and philanthropic events during the year.

2. I have heard that you have been playing corkball for many years. Can you tell us how the game has changed over the years?

Cages and Tournaments

I started watching corkball in 1959. Besides playing at Gateway every Sunday (and later every Wednesday, too) players competed in corkball cages at local bars or taverns, many of which were on South Broadway. Later Gateway would send its best players up north to play in the cages in Florissant – places like Jack Dunn’s Tavern or BJs Bar. There was a very competitive atmosphere between the North City/County and South City/County teams. Today, there are few, if any, corkball cages remaining in the St. Louis area.

In the 60s, 70s, and 80s, there were also many summer tournaments and beer games between local and outstate clubs to determine who really had the best players in the Midwest.

Equipment

In the early days, a catcher could wear just the small almost “half-mask”. However, starting in the mid 60s Gateway catchers had to wear chest protectors and full face masks along with other protective gear. At the same time, batters were required to wear protective helmets.

The ball has also changed. In 1936, St. Louisan Bill Pleitner designed and manufactured the ProLine ball. If ever there was created a perfect, beautiful corkball, it was the ProLine ball. It was a very tightly wound ball with pronounced stitches, which allowed a pitcher to throw a variety of breaking balls more effectively. It was the only ball used by Gateway players for nearly 60 years, until Mr. Pleitner retired in 1995 and the ball was no longer available. Today we use the mass-produced Markwort ball. We are very happy we can still get a quality ball, but the ProLine was a much better ball.

Rules

In the 60s, 70s, 80s pitchers in our club were allowed to throw spitballs. At the time, this was accomplished by using bark from the slippery elm tree. This is still legal in our club, but no pitchers currently utilize this pitch.

Prior to the 60s, hitting the batter resulted in a ball. In the mid 60s, a hit batsman was awarded first base. In the late 80s, we went from having only singles and homeruns to singles, doubles, triples, and homeruns.

3. What do you like best about being a member of the Gateway Corkball Club?

At my current age of 63, Gateway provides me the opportunity to participate in a very competitive league with talented players of all ages:

- future All-Century players like **Tony Minor, Bob Goedeker, Jared Haman,** and **Mike Goedeker,** and
- former All-Stars **Wayne Cupp, Jack Buck,** and **Eddie Martz,** who are currently 80+ years of age and still playing

I also enjoy the opportunity to act as “mentor” to the new generation of members and players on whose shoulders the success of the Club will rest.

All of us have played a sport in a league where you showed up once a week, played, and didn't see each other again until the following week. From its inception, Gateway Corkball Club has been much more than that. Playing the game is only part of being a member of the Club. Opportunities to socialize off the field are many and often include our families. I am confident that I speak for all members when I say that our wives, partners, and children also feel that they, too, “belong” to something unique and special.

I consider it a privilege to be a part of a great organization with a long and rich tradition. I appreciate the spirit of brotherhood among our 90+ playing, social, and retired members who come from all walks of life: policemen, firemen, business executives, brewery workers, college professor, candy- maker, and IT guys. We even had a playing priest in the 80s! From the barely-employed to the multi-millionaire, we are all brothers whose collective goal is to insure that Gateway remains a thriving organization for 88 more years.

4. Can you tell us about a few of your fondest memories of corkball?

It is very difficult to whittle down my fondest memories since I have been around this organization since I was 5 years old and I have so many. I began coming to Gateway Corkball Club with my dad in 1959. I came to the Club every week from the time I was 5 years old until I went away to college in 1972. I was fortunate to have watched generations of great corkball players, both with Gateway and other clubs. It was a fantastic way to spend time with my dad and men of his generation.

The Club was a place where a young kid could learn how to play ping-pong, bumper pool, and shuffle board, and, perhaps, a few new words. Many of us

started our corkball careers as kids by shagging foul balls and returning them - with our hardest throws - to our corkball heroes.

As a young kid, the biggest day of the year for us was the Gateway Corkball Picnic, where we could have all the ice cream and soda we could eat and drink. From a middle class family of 7 kids, there was not much that surpassed free ice cream. Also, the picnic was the first place where I learned about the game of Crowns (Bottle Caps). The boys who were high school age and older could play Crowns with the men at the picnic.

I began to **play** corkball as soon as I was eligible after graduating from college in 1976. I always looked forward to those Sundays when my wife and 4 daughters, my mom and friends would come to cheer us on. Fathers often brought their young sons to the Wednesday Night League to watch and learn the game. Since my dad, Ray, and his brother, Ben, joined the league in the early 1950s, 20 of their sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, and nephews have played as well, sometimes even with – or against -Ray and Ben.

Also among my fondest memories:

- The opportunity to compete against some of the greatest corkball players of all time
- Playing with Gateway's best players in the North County Cage leagues at Jack Dunn's
- Admittedly, some of my fondest memories are personal achievements:
 - pitching in my first game for the Club in 1976 against players whom I had looked up to all my life
 - pitching in front of several hundred fans, including 50+ Gateway members, to win the 1979 Jefferson Barracks Tournament Championship
 - being named to the All-Century Team, and later, being recognized as the Comeback Player of the Year at the age of 59.

5. I also understand that Gateway has a Hall of Fame. Can you tell us a little about how it was created and mention a few players that you played with that will never be forgotten?

Gateway's equivalent to a Hall of Fame is the "All-Century Team". Established in 2000, the award recognizes the 12 most outstanding players (3 pitchers, 3 catchers, 6 outfielders) from 1929 to 1999.

The Greco Brothers – Lou and Dom

Joining the Club in the 1950s, Dom and Lou Greco are known and loved by generations of Gateway members. Dom, now deceased, is an All-Century Team catcher; 92 year-old Lou is currently our oldest active member and still supervises the “fish breeding team” at our annual fish fry.

Tom Niemeyer –pitcher

Tom was a 6’6” St. Louis cop who, in the 70s and 80s, won 10 pitching titles with an extremely intimidating fast ball and slider. Tom once threw 7 consecutive no-hitters in one season. If that wasn’t enough, he also threw 24 scoreless innings in a playoff game before his team pushed a run across in the bottom of the 24th inning to win the Gateway season championship.

Dave Welker

Dave was the most dominant hitter in the history of the Gateway Corkball Club. Dave won 17 batting titles out of a possible 18 over a 9 year span from 1974-1982, playing both Sundays and Wednesdays. A truly dominating hitter, Dave hit for both average and power. During those 17 titles, 90% of the time he won most home runs and most RBIs. He once hit .605, an average that has never been eclipsed.

Ray Kuchno - catcher

Ray won 8 catching titles during his 4 decade playing career from the 60s to the 90s. Ray was one of the few catchers who could catch a well-thrown spit-ball.

Don Spinner - pitcher

Don was perhaps the best all around corkball player of his generation in our club. A fierce competitor with a nasty spitter, Don won 5 pitching titles. Although Don was one of the early adopters of the spitball and mastered the pitch with ease, his one flaw was that he had a weak stomach and often, after delivering a spitball, would bend over and throw up on the mound! Don also won 2 catching titles and 4 batting titles.

Marty Kerner

Playing on both Sundays and Wednesdays, Marty won 9 batting titles, 3 pitching titles and 4 catching titles and continues to play today. Marty’s dad, Dan, is represented as the manager of the All-Century Team.

Goedekers

The All-Century Team includes 3 Goedekers. Together Bill, Don, and their Uncle Ben amassed a combined 11 pitching titles and 12 batting titles.

- **Bill Goedeker** was the only player to win a batting title in a season when Dave Welker played.
- **Don Goedeker** threw 34 games in 1979, suffering only 2 losses. His 17-1 record on Sundays matched his 17-1 record on Wednesdays.
- For the last 50 years, the Wednesday night league at Gateway has been called the **Ben Goedeker** League. Ben was a terrific athlete who, for years, at the Gateway Picnic, after consuming non-Gatorade beverages, would entertain the crowd by successfully hurdling a badminton net.