

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Bring back Badgers baseball

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Bernie Goldstein, 88, of Nashville, Tennessee, just watched another College Baseball World Series without the Wisconsin Badgers.

The dream of a UW-Madison team in the World Series ended for good in 1991 when the university dropped its baseball program. Goldstein was the student manager for the Badgers baseball squad from 1946 to 1948. He still has a license plate that reads "Badger Nut," and he's a member of the W Club.

Goldstein stopped giving money to the university after they dropped baseball. He says his friends in Tennessee ask him why the Badgers don't field a team like the other 13 teams in the Big Ten Conference.

"It's embarrassing," he says.

Back in 1991, the UW Athletic Department was in a financial crunch under Title 9 pressure to add women's sports to close the gender gap. Twenty-six years later, the movement to bring back Badgers baseball is very much alive.

Jeff Block, 37, runs the club baseball program at UW-Madison. He says 100 to 150 guys try out every year. They are young men who love baseball so much they want to play after high school. They actually have Division I and Division II club teams competing in the National Club Baseball Association. UW's club team goes on a spring trip to Florida every year, playing in the Great Lakes Conference in the West Division against club teams from Marquette, Northwestern, UW-Eau Claire, UW-Milwaukee and UW-Whitewater.

Block played high school ball at Prescott in the late '90s. He says he would have tried to walk on for Wisconsin if it had a team. He could have played Division II or III somewhere else, he says, but he wanted to go to school in Madison.

Block is now a software engineer and consultant. He knows if Wisconsin brought back baseball it likely would want to add a women's sport as well. Block believes UW baseball alumni and other advocates could put up the money for that to happen privately.

"I sent (UW Athletic Director Barry) Alvarez a 14-page proposal that accounts for four main factors; Title IX, money, facilities and competitiveness," Block says. "It gained a lot of attention from media outlets and university staff ... but Barry Alvarez wasn't willing to discuss a path moving forward with me and others. Even (former Major League Baseball Commissioner) Bud Selig was supportive in letters to me."

Alvarez was unavailable for comment, his staff said. About 2,640 Wisconsin baseball advocates have signed an electronic petition to bring the once-proud national pastime back to the UW campus, Block says. And an already approved proposal to build club seats and a party deck in the end zone for Badgers football would more than pay for Badgers baseball and a new women's sport, he added.

In the meantime, UW is building a new recreational ball diamond with lights near University Hospital. The current club teams can play there instead of scrambling around town to secure a field.

Baseball is deeply in Block's blood as his hall of fame high school coach and father drives four hours down to Madison on weekends to serve as an assistant coach for the club teams.

That love of Wisconsin baseball is very much felt by former Badgers varsity ballplayer Bill Buchholz. Now a successful businessman in Madison, Buchholz won a state basketball championship at Manitowoc in 1963 but earned a baseball scholarship to Wisconsin. UW baseball was good to him.

"I realize the issue is a complicated one," Buchholz says, "but as I watch the College World Series this time of year, I often wonder, what if?"

He's not alone. Former student manager Goldstein hasn't given up the dream a month before his 89th birthday. He remembers the bond that grew on those teams from sticking together during the tough times.

"It was so cold on some days, we had to practice in the Red Gym," he remembers.

But it gets cold in Minnesota, too. Somehow the Gophers and every other Big Ten team can be seen on the Big Ten Network running out wearing their school uniforms to play baseball. Wisconsin should be able to, too.

Mitch is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic. The Mitch Henck Show is broadcast live at www.madisontalks.com.

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