

SPORTS



Backyard lights illuminate Factor Field, the home of a longstanding neighborhood wiffleball group in Fridley. Two decades in, over 600 friends, family members and neighbors have taken part in at least one official game. Photo submitted

THE WIFFLE FACTOR

By Patrick Slack
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At the back of the yard, the legends stand watch.

The jerseys along the wall recognize greatness. The cracked game balls observe time.

At the corners, the daunting Olga and Helga — part commonplace trees, part mythological forces — look over and swat back towering drive after drive.

The roots of no ordinary league run deep at the Thompsons' in Fridley, a place where a simple game has stood the test of

time, centering a bond of friendship that has held strong two decades later.

It's a backyard of dreams and legends, where childhood memories have turned into adulthood get-togethers and safe havens, now shared with another generation.

It's the wiffleball factor. It's the Fridley Factors.

A legend begins

It began simply enough.

Looking for something to play together, Luke Thompson and his dad built a wiffleball field in their backyard.

It started small. A home run derby here, a pickup game there. Little did they know they were creating something that would still loom so large in their lives and their neighborhood nearly two decades later.

"The league really started taking off in 2003, once I went to high school," Thompson said. "The field had been built slowly over the years, and once we got lights, then it really gave the field some credibility."

The stadium was originally known as "X-Factor," later modified to its current "Factor Field." It didn't take long before more kids from the neigh-

borhood wanted to take part.

"Eventually enough people wanted to play that we figured we should name the field," Thompson said. "Word started getting around about the field."

First came the name, then the word, then more and more people wanting to check out and get in on the action.

Nearly two decades later, over 600 different people have played in at least one official game.

"We have gotten really lucky that we grew up with a neighborhood full

of kids who were looking for fun things to do," said Matt Duehn, who serves as co-commissioner of the Factors with Thompson. "To this day, most of the same neighborhood kids come and play."

History and tradition are intertwined with the Factors and keep players coming back every summer. Records are kept marking wins, losses, homers hit and homers robbed. On top of that, the outfield wall immortalizes the jerseys of Factor Hall of Fame inductees — and wiffleballs cracked open through the years.

The majority of the

original core group still plays, with a few new friends and family members added along the way.

"Most of the people who play nowadays are people who started from the beginning," Duehn said. "I would say over 80 percent of the people who still play today have been a part of it since the beginning, but we do have more of the younger generation coming through from siblings who have played and to now their little brothers have come. It used to be me sending specific individual texts to the same group of

Continued on page 21

SPORTS

Factors

Continued from page 20

people who play now, but now I send texts to literally anyone who I think would have a good time hitting some fades (homers) over the fence and playing a fun game of wiffleball.

“Back in the day, when we were not adults and we had summers, I would say we would have played up to 5-6 times a week, so basically one three-game series a day, and there would probably be on average 8-10 people who would be there on any given day.”

Wiffleball rules

Wiffleball is a modified form of baseball. Instead of a hard ball, the wiffleball is made of plastic and contains several small holes, hit with a long, narrow plastic bat. The ball design allows for unique spin on pitches and reduces how far it can travel, allowing for it to be caught without a glove as well.

“Wiffleball allows you to live out your baseball fantasies from the comfort of your own backyard,” Thompson said.

The Factors have developed a series of house rules as well to provide for an added challenge, including that players in high school or above have to hit with their weak hand during even innings.

“We did this when we were younger so it would give everyone a challenge instead of always hitting a home run every time,” Duehn said. “We also do ‘pitcher hands.’ What that means is that when someone hits the ball, if they do not get to first base before the pitcher has the ball, that means they are out. This also speeds up



Matt Duehn, co-commissioner of the Fridley Factors wiffleball league, gives the safe signal.

Photo submitted

the game and makes the game fun because the fielders have to be on their toes. Lastly, the trees in Factor Field are playable, which means if a ball gets hit in the trees and comes back into play, it is a playable ball.”

Those trees, of course, are Olga and Helga, an ash and a maple. Now both over 40 feet tall, they loom large over every game played on Factor Field, figuratively and literally.

“The story of the best fielders in Fridley Factor Field history in Olga and Helga originates from a time when we were younger when we were just playing a game and Olga and Helga had not been named yet,” Duehn said. “Then there was a kid named Graig Weber — hit a massive fade into left field that got robbed by the right field tree and was not a home run. He got really

mad and decided to call the big trees in right field and left field respectively by Olga and Helga. Olga and Helga probably have the most robs, by a huge amount, and they do not disappoint with their fielding prowess. They change the momentum of each game by just being still.”

No place like home ... or Factor Field

Factor Field has developed slowly over time. It now holds a scoreboard in the outfield, a pitcher's mound and lights. And a new owner at the house next door who is quite familiar.

There's no place like home. Or the home field.

“A few years ago I bought the house next door strictly for the wiffleball field,” Thompson said. “I'm not sure what that says about me. In our prime (around 2007) we would play every day, often all day. At one point I had to limit the amount of games to three a day because all the grass was getting worn away. Now we play less but have bigger events. Opening Day has a big 3-on-3 tournament. Each National Night Out in August we try to break our Factor Field record for most innings in a day. This year it was 115 innings. Matt (Duehn) has done a good job keeping the league alive by staying



Maggie Santos pitches at Factor Field in Fridley while pregnant with Luca Santos.

Photo submitted



Dan Duehn throws a ball at Factor Field in Fridley.

Photo submitted

in touch with the younger players and organizing pickup games in between the big events. Some games are 3-on-3, some are 12-on-12, depending on the event!”

Many Fridley Factors have gone on to play in the HRL Twin Cities wiffleball league based out of Hopkins. An all-star team from that league won the national championship in Pittsburgh last year. More than half of that team got their start playing on Factor Field, including the tournament MVP Tyler Flakne.

“The Fridley Factors are pretty laid back with slow pitching and a pickup game league setup,” Thompson said. “But it's

fun to know that we can still beat the best wiffers in the country in a fast-pitch, highly competitive setting. ... When you get into fast-pitch leagues, hitting becomes extremely hard, with pitchers throwing mid- to upper-90s with movement.”

Wins and losses are measured but take a backseat to the sense of community and the tales of games from years past that live on. It's a group that hearkens back to the days of sandlot ball prominence, grabbing a bat and ball and aiming for the fences with friends. A small group forming a tight bond that has grown and stood the test of time.

“For me personally,

what makes this group and league enjoyable to play in and with is Factor Field has always been a safe haven for me and to everyone who has come down to the field,” Duehn said. “Most of my memories from the age of 7 to now that I am 25 have been in that field. Just the raucous of commotion from having someone hit a walk-off home run in the bottom of the ninth inning, to getting robbed by Olga and Helga, to hearing laughter from all the jokes and fun. This league has brought me my best friends that I will have for the rest of my life, and it is crazy that a wiffleball has created such special memories.”

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