

'It's been a life mission for me': Madison Heights Youth Baseball's Adams reflects on years of service

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Ronnie Adams poses for a photo at the Madison Heights Youth Baseball Association fields on Tuesday, July 5, 2022.
Kendall Warner

If the Madison Heights Youth Baseball Complex best describes Amherst County's field of dreams, one of the key dreamers is Ronnie Adams.

Adams is the president of the of the Madison Heights Youth Baseball Association, a role he's held for the past 31 years. He's a major contributor in steering the Dixie Youth baseball program that has served generations of ball players and families in the county.

A lifelong county resident who's lived within 20 miles of the ball fields he has spent much of his life, Adams played in the program when he was a boy.

"I was an average player at the most," Adams said. "I was not the guy who made the All-Stars every year and all that."

He began coaching in the early 1980s and joined the Dixie Youth board in 1986, taking over the president role five years later. He played adult softball for two decades and recalled one of his mentors, the late Leroy Floyd, a Dixie Youth leader at the time who urged him to home to baseball.

"He kept telling me, 'You really need to quit playing that game and start getting involved with these kids,'" Adams said of Floyd. "It just kind of became a passion, just thinking you're maybe improving a kid's life somewhere along the line."

Adams said the Dixie Youth program started in the 1950s and, in 1962, the county became among the first few localities in Virginia to join. Sixty years later, he looks back at key influences in his life, such as Floyd and the late Glenn Ricketts, whose contributions to the program are still much felt, and he's adding to that legacy.

"I think about them and what they put into it," Adams, 67, said of past Dixie Youth leaders. "... I tell my coaches — and this came from one of the guys in my past — these kids are going to remember you for the rest of your life. My expectation out of you as a coach is to make good memories."

'All in the master plan'

At one time, Adams said, the program was running with 550 to 600 kids; now it's at about 300. While the numbers have dropped some, the love of the game and commitment of a range of volunteers whom he described as the backbone of the program remain strong.

When asked about why he gives so much of his time to youth baseball, Adams echoed a comment from a close friend Bobby Layne, who also has contributed much to the program: "Somebody did it when I was a kid."

Adams also was a major player in the formation of the Madison Heights baseball complex just adjacent to Monelison Middle School, which consists of five fields and a football field. He said much work was devoted to getting it built, breaking ground in 1990 and beginning the first games there two years later.

By 1995, the complex was used full time and Dixie Youth baseball's former fields on Lakeview Drive in Madison Heights became home to the girls' softball program.

"They've done a remarkable job with it," Adams said of the softball fields on Lakeview Drive.

That transition period benefited both programs significantly, he said. Adams, who played Dixie Youth in Madison Heights when he was a boy, recalled his first games on the former fields beside where the U.S. Post Office now is located on Lakeview Drive. He later played on two of the fields on Lakeview Drive, Shrader and Floyd fields, that are currently part of the softball program.

Adams remembers sitting in the Dairy Queen in Madison Heights with two other key figures in the Dixie Youth program and drawing a blueprint of the Madison Heights complex on a napkin.

"And you'd be amazed at how close it is to what we did," Adams said. "A lot of people back then were really dedicated and a lot of, a lot of, volunteer labor went into this [complex]."

Another major venture was the Madison Heights Community Center, which the nonprofit association owns and regularly rents out for meetings, gatherings, weddings, reunions and other events. The project started in 2005 and opened for use two years later on nearby Woodys Lake Road, he said.

"It's all in the master plan and it's good for the community," Adams said of operating the complex and community center in the central hub of Madison Heights.

A fortunate feature of the program is the program's board of directors has 10 to 12 members who have been on there for years and are highly dedicated, Adams said.

“Without those people, I wouldn’t be where I am,” Adams said. “I should only get a small amount of the credit. I’ve had so many good volunteers back in the day when we were building this. The list goes on and on of guys who gave so much developing this place.”

He said Dixie Youth is important for children who need activities in their lives and serves all levels of play across a variety of age groups.

The program went through a lot of with the pandemic and losing time on the field, which gradually came back as restrictions lifted. More than a year of rentals was lost at the community center, he added.

“We went through pretty tough times but never to a point where we would give up,” Adams said. “We’ve rounded well. Last season the numbers were great coming back; we had the largest fall ball season we’ve ever had. We were able to add four teams in the program throughout the division.”

Beverly Jones, a retired Amherst County Public Schools teacher, was among a group of individuals Adams reached out to more than a decade ago to establish the Amherst County Sports Hall of Fame. Jones, who has known Adams for nearly a lifetime, praised his dedication in growing the county’s youth baseball scene.

“Ronnie is a strong advocate for the youth of Amherst County,” Jones said.

Jimmy Ayers, who serves on the Amherst County Board of Supervisors, also has known Adams a long time and said he doesn’t know if Dixie Youth would be where it is without his deep involvement.

“He has been a pillar of that program as far back as I can remember,” Ayers said. “Ronnie has definitely dedicated his heart and soul to that program. And the kids in the community have been inspired by the dedication.”

Ayers complimented Adams for the great amount of volunteer hours he has devoted and he enjoys the visits to the ball fields to see the youth engaged in America’s pastime and the fellowship among the families.

“It’s always a great feeling to see that on opening day,” Ayers said. “It’s very inspiring to see that in our community.”

‘The good stuff’

Adams remembers his dear friend, the late Glenn Ricketts, whose name is enshrined at the complex, and the feeling he had watching Ricketts’ former players come up to him and say affectionately ‘remember when.’

“I’m at the point now where I’m enjoying the same thing,” Adams said.

On a recent weekend, he enjoyed reuniting and reminiscing with Tim Sandidge, an Amherst High School star athlete who played football at Virginia Tech.

That often happens with generations of players who have come through Dixie Youth, he said.

“Man, that’s the good stuff,” Adams said with a smile. “That’s special, man.”

Madison Heights Dixie Youth also has played host to the World Series in 2001, 2007 and 2011, an endeavor Adams said takes about two years to plan and execute. Thousands from up and down the East Coast to Louisiana came up to and he recalls one night having 9,000 to 10,000 in the complex with bus shuttles taking place.

He has coached in nine World Series tournaments and said it's a festive atmosphere but one that takes much financial commitment.

Adams said as much as he loves the complex, he doesn't want to be buried there, and he emphasized the importance of being committed to family.

"If I had one regret — it would be maybe I gave this place more time than necessary when my kids were small," Adams said. "That's why I encourage my coaches now, the number one thing in your life has got to be your family. Don't let this take time away from family time because it's so important. In today's world, it's more important to be a good role model and make sure you put your family first. If you do that, you're going to be successful."

Adams said without the volunteers and association board members, none of the program's success would have happened. He also complimented Steve Sprouse, a past board member still active as a groundskeeper, for his contributions of probably putting more backbreaking hours into the complex than anyone ever did.

"The key word is we did this, as a group," Adams said. "It took so many people to do this and make it happen."

He said he is often asked about when he will quit.

"I don't know if I ever will. I think about it every year," Adams said.

Looking over the fields, he admitted he can feel burned out at times, and he'll often ask himself: "Do I really want to do this anymore?"

Time passes, and baseball season nears with the answer as crisp as a pitch landing in the catcher's mitt.

"Then you say, 'Yeah, you do,'" Adams said of staying in the game. "I've really enjoyed it. It's been a life mission for me."