

# The Boys of Summer

by MARK R. JOHNSON

With teams from the mills to the minors, baseball has long had a home in Bend

Few things mark the arrival of summer like the crack of a bat as it finds a fastball. Somewhere between the riffs of John Fogerty's "Centerfield," the aroma of buttery popcorn and the spectacle of the home team taking the field, we slip headlong into baseball season. It happens in stadiums across the country—and it's no different in Bend.

This city's field of dreams, Vince Genna Stadium, has been around for more than half a century, hosting thousands of innings and scores of teams. These days it's the Bend Elks who draw the fans, but baseball was a popular pastime long before Genna Stadium existed.

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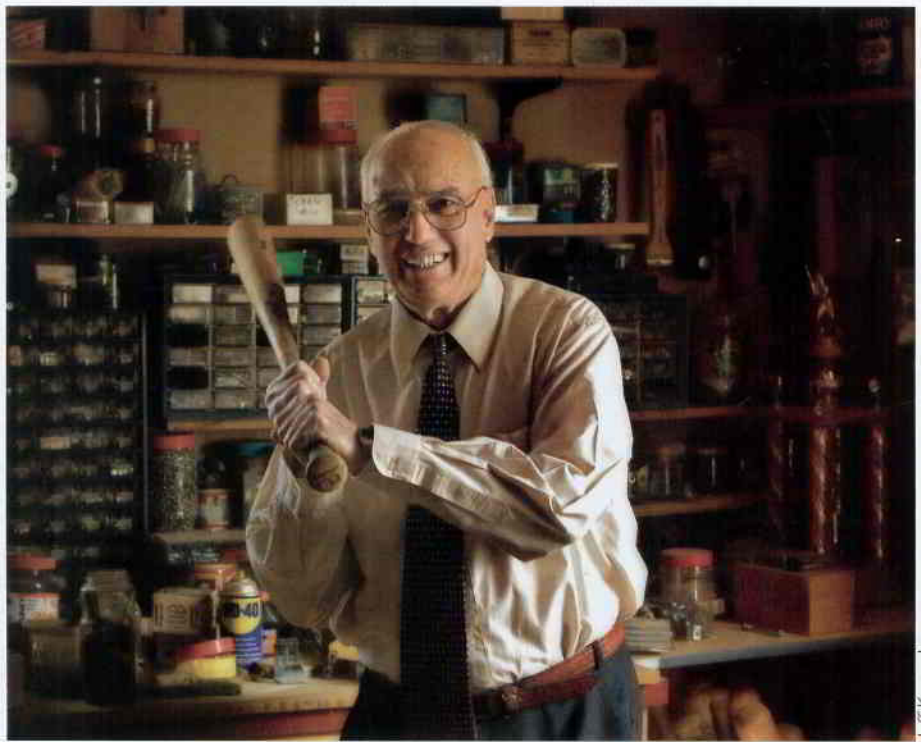
Bend High School teammates discuss strategy before a spring game. Young men have played baseball in Bend for nearly 100 years.

In the early 1900s, mill owners, eager to boost employee morale and flex their competitive muscle, created a semipro baseball league, handpicking employees who knew the game and recruiting college ballplayers to beef up their rosters. Teams like the Elks, Loggers and Merchants assembled each summer to swat balls into the junipers and slide for home in the volcanic dust. The great Johnny Pesky of Boston Red Sox fame once played for the Elks in the old Oregon State League.

For years, games were played at O'Donnell Field, a baseball diamond-in-the-rough that was more of a rodeo and circus arena than a ballpark. Located close to Division Street, near Miller Lumber Company and the railroad station, the field was named for Bend pioneer Monte O'Donnell, a onetime catcher for the St. Louis Cardinals.

In 1935, as local baseball became more than just a summertime distraction, O'Donnell Field evolved into an officially designated ballpark, complete with bleachers for mill workers and their families. But in 1947 the city decided to raze O'Donnell: With its prime railroad access, the spot was deemed ideal for an industrial property.

So Bend selected a new spot for a field—a government trailer park at the corner of SE Fifth Street and Roosevelt Avenue. On May 22, 1948, it was dedicated as the Municipal Ballpark. Designed for softball, the park later underwent reconstructive surgery under the guidance and vision of Vince Genna.



Still spry at 84, Vince Genna wields an old Louisville Slugger.

Jeff Kennedy

### The House That Vince Built

Genna (pronounced with a soft “g”) is a household name in Bend, and Vince is widely considered to be the godfather of local baseball. “I’ve been in baseball all my life,” he says of his passion, which was kindled as he listened to his Chicago teams on the radio. “I loved it as a little tiny kid.”

Now 84, Genna recalls first visiting O'Donnell Field as a shortstop with his Salem High School team in 1939: “We barnstormed all of eastern Oregon and we played in Bend,” where the great fans and nice weather made a lasting impression.

After serving in Italy during World War II, Genna returned to Bend in 1954 to take a job with the city’s parks and recreation department. Before long, he was its director, a position he held for more than 37 years.

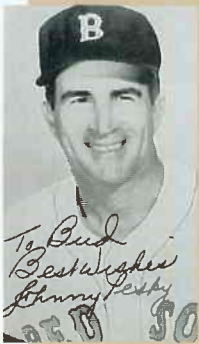
In addition to being a ballplayer and avid fan, Genna coached many Bend American Legion teams, some to stardom. In 1958 his team won the Oregon state championship and, in '59 and '60, the Area 1 crown. Genna’s influence would later help bring professional ball to Bend, and he served as a bench coach in the late '90s for the Bend Bandits.

But Vince Genna’s name is perhaps best known as the one etched on the city stadium. “I got a lot of blood and sweat in it,” he says of the endeavor to upgrade the field, which began in 1958.

Municipal Ballpark’s original configuration made it cramped for baseball, and its fences were only seven feet high. Genna didn’t like the pine walls, either: “There were splinters all over heck, and I thought, I’m not going to coach some kid and have him hang an eyeball on one of those things.”

From a highway advertising company he bought the panels that still form the stadium’s walls, raised the fence’s height to almost 12

### From Bend to the Bosox



Johnny Pesky, known to many Boston baseball fans as Mr. Red Sox, spent the summer of 1937 with the Bend Elks. A Portland native, Pesky led the league in batting with a .543 average to help his team win the state league title. (When Boston Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey owned Oregon’s Silver Falls Timber Company, Pesky actually played for the Red Sox—the Silverton Red Sox, that is—before he headed to Fenway Park.)

In Boston, Pesky played shortstop and third base. In 1950 he joined teammate Ted Williams as the only players to have scored 100 or more runs during each of their first six seasons in major-league ball. Now 86, Pesky is a charter member of the Boston Red Sox Hall of Fame.



Courtesy of Vince Genna

Vince Genna, at top right, coached his 1958 American Legion team to the Oregon state championship.

feet and extended the entire outfield. He planted the trees that ring the stadium and installed the lights. And although he considered the odd layout a home-field advantage—batters had to squint into the sun each evening—he raised screened nets to block the sunset glare. Soon, the house that Vince built was officially renamed Vince Genna Stadium.

“Many pro players, asked what their favorite minor-league ballpark is, have said it’s Genna Stadium in Bend,” says Jim Richards, owner and general manager of the reincarnated Bend Elks.

### From Rainbows to Elks

In July 1967, the creation of the Bend Professional Baseball Association enabled the city to host several regular-season games of the Northwest League, a short-season rookie league with teams of first-time pro players assigned to Eugene, Salem, Medford and other towns. The association had two aims—to bring some big-time baseball to the city and to test its appetite for professional ball.



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A Hood River player dives back to first base during a game against Bend High.

Bend proved hungry.

“In 1970, the first pro team came to Bend—the Bend Rainbows,” Richards says. A farm club of the Hawaii Islanders of the Pacific Coast League, the Rainbows would be just the first in a string of Bend minor-league teams. “Throughout the ’70s, and then ’80s,” Richards recalls, “the [Philadelphia] Phillies had clubs here, the [California] Angels had a club here.”

Genna, who helped bring the minors to Bend, says it seemed as if Bend had a different A team every year. They included the Timberhawks (1978), the Phillies (1979-1986) and the Bucks (1987-1991). On June 16, 1992, Genna Stadium was home to the Bend

Rockies (1992-1994), a Colorado Rockies minor-league development team that played the first-ever game in that club’s history, before it became a major-league franchise. After the Rockies relocated to Portland, Bend welcomed an independent professional team—the Bend Bandits—between 1995 and 1998.

“It was baseball,” says



Crowds begin to fill the grandstands at Vince Genna Stadium.

Courtesy of Vince Genna

## Sign of the Times

In the May 4, 1935, edition of the *Bend Bulletin*, Miller Lumber Company ran an ad that offered “a load of box wood” to the Bend Elk who had the highest batting average in the following day’s game.

Richards, “but independent baseball is a tough sell. You’ve got players that aren’t from this area and they’re looking for the first ticket out of town.” Attendance began to drop, and after the Bandits left, the stadium sat empty for a year.

In 2000 Richards purchased a franchise in the Pacific International League, and the Bend Elks officially returned to Central Oregon. For five years the Elks competed in the PIL, capping their 2004 season with a league championship. Along the way, they reinvigorated local fans with what Richards has promoted all along—playing for the love of the game.

“Our players come here unpaid,” he says. “Our players are the ones who groom the field, and our fans love to see that. They know that is a direct connectivity with our old-fashioned style.”



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This year the team is part of a new chapter in regional baseball: the West Coast Collegiate Baseball League, an NCAA-certified league that is a port of call for promising young players. Relationships with such universities as Oregon State, Washington and Gonzaga have helped keep top athletes on the roster; the Elks also look for players and coaches from throughout the nation.

This approach to talent has paid off: In the past five years, more than 20 Elks players have signed professional contracts. Some are home-grown players, such as pitcher Jared Sanders, a former Mountain View Cougar, who now plays in the Cincinnati Reds organization. Others have come from outside the area and found a place with the Elks: Californian Brian Barden did in 2000; he nearly made the Arizona Diamondbacks' roster out of spring training this year before settling in the high minors.

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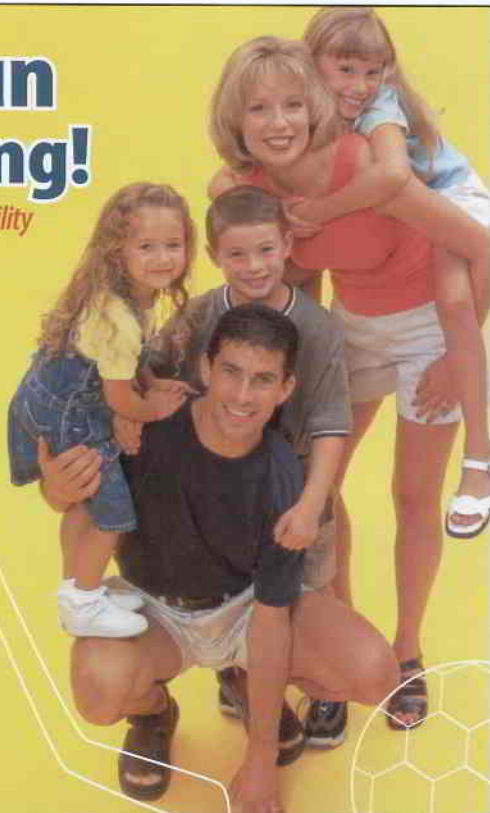
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## Hollywood Hitter

Actor Kurt Russell stole bases before he stole scenes. A second baseman for the Northwest League's Bend Rainbows, Russell made his professional debut at Vince Genna Stadium on June 25, 1971, hitting a double and a single and stealing two bases.

"He owns a smooth, compact swing," wrote *The Bulletin's* sports editor, Dennis Anstine. He called Russell a player of "unlimited" potential.

"He could hit the ball," recalls Genna, "but the movies got to him."

To be fair, not long into his baseball career, Russell was sidelined with a shoulder injury sustained in a collision with another player. He officially retired from baseball in 1973.

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## Benched? The plight of Vince Genna Stadium

What will be the future of Vince Genna Stadium?

Controversy has nipped at the heels of discussion by the Bend Metro Park & Recreation District about closing down the stadium and using the location for other recreational purposes. A parks board meeting in early 2005 included talk of luring minor-league baseball




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back to Central Oregon with a modern stadium on the former Bend Pine Nursery site, in northeast Bend.

For now, however, the Bend Elks have two years remaining on their exclusive lease with the parks district. Team owner Jim Richards says the team would like to stay at Genna Stadium long beyond that time.

"It's a great ballpark, a great place to play ball," he says—and a major attraction for top-level northwestern college programs that send players to the Elks for summer baseball.

This summer in Vince Genna Stadium, where the scene swells with equal parts home-team pride and sheer baseball devotion, the Elks expect to average a thousand fans per game. Genna gets to home games as often as he can, sitting in different parts of the stadium, cheering on the team with all the other fans.

"Players love to play in front of boisterous crowds, and we create that environment," says Richards. "It's good old-fashioned baseball." 



Many players on Bend High's 1930s teams were the children of mill workers.

Des Chutes Historical Center



*Bend Elks*

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### Take Me Out to the Ballgame

#### Bend Elks' 2005 Home Schedule

June 10	Portland Wildcats	7 p.m.
(opening day)		
June 11	Portland Wildcats	7 p.m.
June 12	Portland Wildcats	5 p.m.
June 21	Wenatchee Applesox	7 p.m.
June 22	Wenatchee Applesox	7 p.m.
June 23	Wenatchee Applesox	7 p.m.
June 24	Kelowna Falcons	7 p.m.
June 25	Las Vegas Astros	6 p.m.
June 26	Las Vegas Astros	7 p.m.
June 27	Las Vegas Astros	6 p.m.
July 8	Spokane Riverhawks	7 p.m.
July 9	Spokane Riverhawks	7 p.m.
July 10	Spokane Riverhawks	6 p.m.
July 15	Kitsap Blue Jackets	7 p.m.
July 16	Kitsap Blue Jackets	5 p.m.
(doubleheader)		
July 19	Bellingham Bells	7 p.m.
July 20	Bellingham Bells	7 p.m.
July 21	Bellingham Bells	7 p.m.
July 23	Central Oregon Bucks	6 p.m.
July 25	Aloha Knights	7 p.m.
July 26	Aloha Knights	7 p.m.
July 27	Aloha Knights	7 p.m.
July 29	Mt. Hood Cardinals	7 p.m.
July 30	Mt. Hood Cardinals	7 p.m.
August 2	Portland Kings	5 p.m.
(doubleheader)		
August 5	Central Oregon Bucks	7 p.m.
August 6	Central Oregon Bucks	7 p.m.
August 9	Black vs. Gold	7 p.m.

For a full schedule, visit [www.bendelks.com](http://www.bendelks.com).