

Métis Softball Legend Joe Gallagher Receives Recognition as Gordie Howe Fastball Field is Renamed in His Honor



(picture above is from the official renaming ceremony)

“Joe was well known and very much liked. He had coached for 40 years. And he was a very community-minded person. He was very involved in sports.”

A Saskatoon field originally named in honour of one of the greatest hockey players of all time has been renamed to recognize a local Indigenous sporting legend.

During a ceremony staged earlier this month, Saskatoon’s Gordie Howe Fastball Field was renamed the Joe Gallagher Field.

Gallagher, who was Métis, died in March 2016. He was considered a legend in Saskatoon softball circles, having played and coached the sport in the city for more than 50 years.

But Gallagher was known for much more than just his softball contributions. He held various jobs during his life, including being a teacher.

His career included being an itinerant teacher who taught Native studies at every Saskatoon elementary school. He also assisted with the writing of the Indigenous studies curriculum, still being taught in Saskatchewan schools today.

About 750 people attended the ceremony June 6, renaming the field. The ceremony was held prior to a Senior A men’s contest in the Saskatoon Amateur Softball Association (SASA).

A few weeks later family members are still overwhelmed that SASA and city officials joined forces to rename the field.

“The word I’ve been using to describe it is surreal,” said Gallagher’s son Brian, who threw out a ceremonial opening pitch during the ceremony.

SASA president Bryan Kosteroski said officials from the association started talking about renaming the field two years ago, while Gallagher was still alive.

“There’s a process of due diligence in changing names,” Kosteroski said. “We were surprised when he passed away. But that sped up the process of getting the name change.”

On behalf of SASA, Kosteroski had submitted a request to rename the diamond to Saskatoon’s naming advisory committee in April of 2016, a month after Gallagher’s death.

Though Brian Gallagher knew others were doing their best to honour his father, Joe Gallagher was unaware of any proposed changes.

“He never knew about it,” he said. “I know he would have objected.”

City officials agreed to the name change in mid-May of this year.

“The renaming was perfect timing,” said Kosteroski, adding a multi-million-dollar reconstruction of the facility was recently completed.

Howe, who grew up in Saskatoon and went on to become one of the National Hockey League’s best players, also died in 2016.

Howe played 26 seasons in the NHL and six years in the defunct World Hockey Association. He was an NHL all-star 23 times and won the Stanley Cup four times with the Detroit Red Wings.

Howe's family members agreed to the name change of the field. The entire Saskatoon-based facility, however, will continue to be known as the Gordie Howe Sports Complex.

The facility includes eight softball diamonds and five baseball parks.

Joe Gallagher was among those who were instrumental figures and helped raise funds for the then named Gordie Howe Fastball Field way back in 1964.

During the renaming ceremony, Brian Gallagher was joined on the field by his brother Dennis and his sister Wendy Sekulich. About 40 members of the extended Gallagher family also attended the ceremony.

"It was a very emotional moment," Brian Gallagher said.

After tossing the ceremonial pitch, Brian Gallagher was given the ball. He in turn gave it to his brother. And his brother then gave it to a SASA official. The plan is to have SASA officials find a location to display the ball.

"It was a very special moment," Kosteroski said of the renaming ceremony.

Kosteroski was not surprised to see the large number of people who showed up that evening.

"Joe was well known and very much liked," he said. "He had coached for 40 years. And he was a very community-minded person. He was very involved in sports."

Brian Gallagher lives about five kilometres away from the field honouring his father. He still finds it overwhelming that a diamond is now bearing his late father's name.

"It's very emotional," he said. "I'm not sure how to describe it. There's hundreds, if not thousands of people who will be passing through there every night. It's one of the best complexes in the world."

Brian Gallagher is also touched by the fact countless people who didn't know his father will now be asking who he was once they see his name on the field.

Joe Gallagher was born and raised in Grandora, a hamlet located about 25 kilometres west of Saskatoon. He moved to Saskatoon at age 19.

"Softball was a big part of his life," Brian Gallagher said. "It's one of the reasons he moved to the city. He wanted to play softball."

By Sam Laskaris, Windspeaker Contributor



Edmonton Playboys vs. Saskatoon Merchants in the 1976 Merchants Tournament at Gordie Howe Fastball Field.

Gordie Howe Fastball Field – Full of History

Saskatoon's old Cairns Field set a standard that the Gordie Howe Fastball Field was forced to live up to. In 1964, the SASA gathered 8900 signatures on a petition to city council for a lighted fastball field and led by Peter Sereda, a local softball group began raising funds to help build and equip the Gordie Howe Softball Diamond.

In January of 1965 city council approved the funding required for construction over three years. With old Cairn's Field torn down, teams had to share the new J. F. Cairn' Field (adjacent to BVT) with baseball for a few years so they were happy to see that unlike many recent projects, Gordie Howe Fastball Field was completed ahead of schedule. On June 26, 1966, it opened with a men's league double header. Early SASA men's doubleheaders brought in crowds as large as 1200. One of the highlights of the opening season was when the King and His Court made a return visit and faced pitchers Pete Zacharias and Red Friesen of the Saskatoon College Lads in front of more than 2,500 people. Those numbers came back in 1980 for the final of the Sr. Men's National when Tournament Chairman Lyle Hassen ordered bleachers set past the outfield fence and people were told at the gate there were no seats so they would have to find a place to stand. A huge crowd lined the fences outside the park. When event treasure had to take out the cash for deposit late in the game he had to order a police escort. Some Merchant tournaments featured a roped off section in the outfield where people sat on what is now the warning track.

Over the years this facility hosted an amazing amount of softball including 22 Canadian championships and 3 men's and 1 women's world championship. It has the reputation as one of the finest men's softball parks in the world.