

LaDuca's Own 'Field Of Dreams'

Nov 19, 2017

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Through the years, Charlie LaDuca, far right, has played in Men's Senior Baseball League World Series with former Major Leaguers, including pitchers Bill Lee, second from left, and Jim Bouton, second from right. Submitted photo

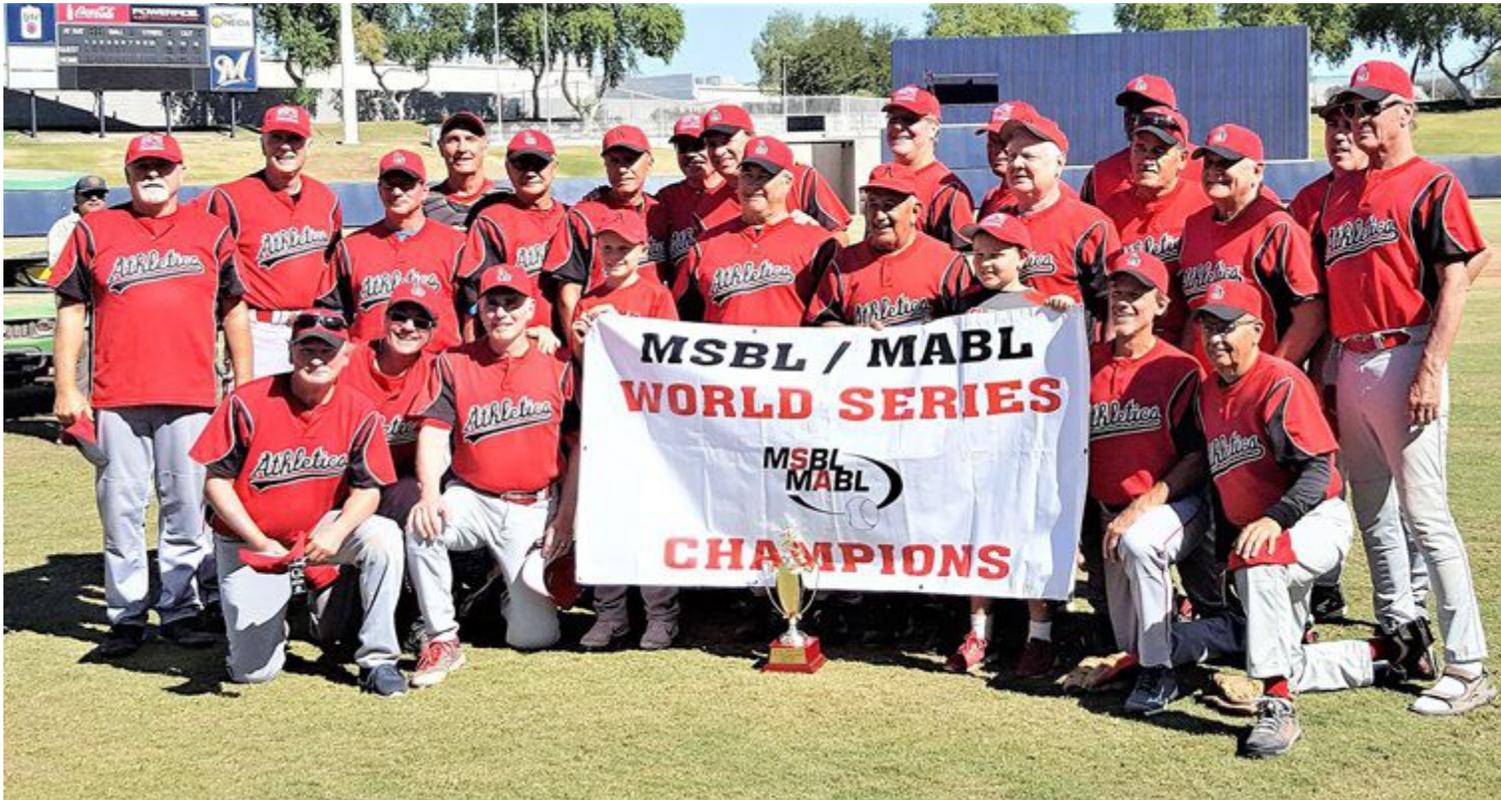
Charlie LaDuca grew up on Buffalo's east side in the 1950s. Across the street from his family's apartment building was a small field where his love for baseball took root.

It wasn't a carefully manicured piece of real estate. Heck, it wasn't even a diamond, but Charlie still has warm fuzzies five decades later as he recalled the times he spent on it with his dad, Sam. Typically armed with only one baseball, which was usually wrapped in electrical tape, a bat and a shared passion for America's pastime, father and son created memories.

"He would throw it, I'd hit it and he'd go chase it," LaDuca recalled earlier this week. "... I don't ever remember him playing (organized) baseball, but ... we played a lot of catch and had a lot of batting practice."

And when they weren't playing the game, Sam would frequently take Charlie to the old Offerman Stadium in Buffalo to check out the Bisons.

"It was just a different era," said Charlie, now 65.



Charlie LaDuca, standing third from left, was a member of the Los Athletics team which won the Men's Senior Baseball League World Series last month in Arizona. Submitted photo

In 1992, at the age of 41, Charlie and two buddies from Fredonia joined an adult baseball league in Buffalo as part of the national organization known as the Men's Senior Baseball League. Several of Charlie's games were held at Lincoln Park where he played as a kid. In the warmest of ironies, when Charlie would take the mound, his parents, Sam and Joan, would usually be cheering him on from the stands.

Just like they did when he was a kid.

Not long after, Charlie helped form a local 25-and-older team. The Pro Bats Yankees, sponsored by the wood-bat company he owns, is part of the Chautauqua Men's Senior Baseball League, which celebrated its 25th anniversary this past summer.

"I've always enjoyed the game," said Charlie, who had a decorated coaching career at Pine Valley Central School that helped land him in the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame earlier this year. " ... Growing up with my dad, going to the old Bisons games, it's been a love affair. ... I like the fact that it's a difficult game to play. Obviously, as I get older, my skills have deteriorated, but it's the people you meet from all different walks of life. At this point, it really keeps me young to be around these younger players and it gives me something to look forward to as far as staying in shape.



*Charlie LaDuca holds the Men's Senior Baseball League World Series championship trophy.
Submitted photo*

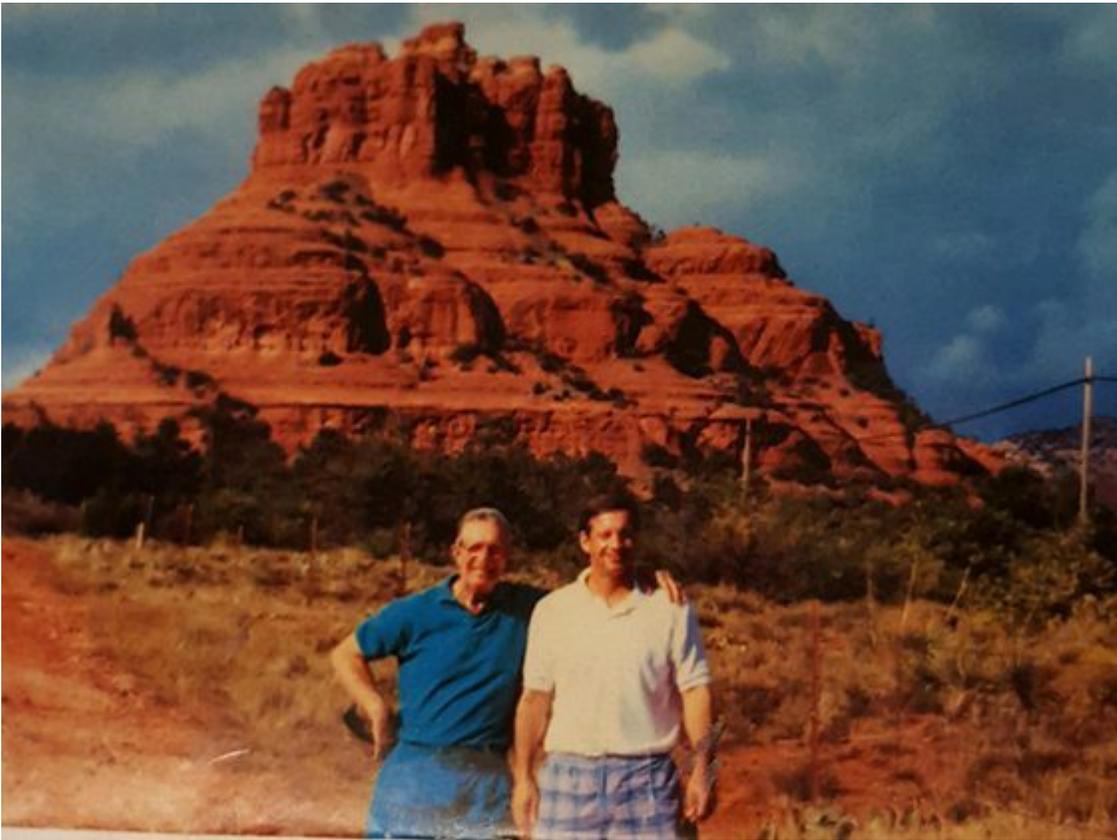
“It’s a beautiful game, an amazing game.”

But don’t get the idea that Charlie, who will turn 66 next week, is ready to hang up his spikes and glove anytime soon.

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In October, Charlie joined 25 teammates from throughout the United States — all 65 and older — in the Men’s Senior Baseball League World Series in the Phoenix, Ariz. area.

Guess what?



During a trip to the Men’s Senior Baseball League World Series in 1994, Charlie LaDuca, right, and his father, Sam, pose for a photograph at Bell Rock in Sedona, Arizona. Submitted photo

Charlie’s team, the Los Angeles Athletics, won.

After 23 tries in various divisions of the MSBL — yes, Charlie has been at it that long — the monkey is finally off his back.

“Bob Sherwin is the manager of the team and he’s actually a wood bat customer of mine,” Charlie said. “I wrote an article for the MSBL organization, he read it and he said, ‘I didn’t realize you were 65. Why don’t you come play for us.’”

That conversation was in May. Five months later, Charlie was taking the mound in Game 1 of pool play of the MSBL World Series.

To say that he was on his game would be an understatement. In fact, the Fredonia Central School baseball players he helps coach each spring would be proud.

In eight innings, the left-hander gave up one unearned run; the Athletics ended up going 5-0 in pool play; and they won the championship game, 14-5. To prove that he can do more than throw strikes, Charlie also had a single in the title game and finished the series with five hits in 11 at-bats. His only concession to Father Time was when he was pulled for a pinch-runner after his base hit in the championship game.

“I really can’t run,” Charlie said. “After my knee replacements, everything changed.”

Not his love for baseball, though, which means Sam, Charlie’s dad who died 13 years ago after battling lung cancer, is smiling somewhere.

“In late October (2004), I was actually (in Arizona) playing in the tournament, and I really had to hustle back (home),” Charlie said. “By the time I got back, he was in a coma.”

A month later, Sam passed away.

To honor his memory, Charlie has his father’s initials written on the brim of his baseball cap.

“It was definitely heavy on my mind when we won (in Arizona),” Charlie said. “I just looked to the heavens and said, ‘We finally did it.’”

Which brings us to Charlie’s favorite movie, “Field of Dreams.”

In one scene, character John Kinsella, played by Dwier Brown, had a conversation with his son, Ray, played by Kevin Costner.

The dialogue goes like this:

John Kinsella: Is this heaven?

Ray Kinsella: It’s ... Iowa.

John: Iowa?

Ray: Yeah ...

John: I could have sworn it was heaven.

Ray: Is ... is there a heaven?

John: Oh, yeah. It’s the place where dreams come true.

Ray: Maybe this is heaven.

“When I watch ‘Field of Dreams,’” Charlie said, “I have to watch it by myself, because I get choked up.”

Who says there’s no crying in baseball?