

on-the-cover



The Word is Out

The buzz reverberates among business and community officials throughout Central Illinois: Something's different about Decatur these days.



Fletcher's Field of Dreams

Movie fiction mirrors reality for Dr. David Fletcher — a passionate White Sox fan whose imagination leads him to baseball's past, and future.



Team Spirit

Crisp fall days and clear skies rise against a backdrop of changing colors and set the stage for local fans to rally 'round their favorite teams. Whether it's red, or blue, or orange and blue - passions, loyalty, and a genuine team spirit permeate the fields of Illinois and give Decaturites something to cheer about - starting with the city we call home.

cover illustration by tronnie goss

Baseball in a Border Town

With the World Series right around the corner, Contributor Kathy Schanefelt reflects on loyalties bred in a family, and a hometown, divided by Decatur's own Mason-Dixon line: Cards on one side; Cubbies on the other.



Remembering the Chief

The history of Chief Illiniwek's early connection to Decatur is well documented, and rests with a colorful individual — the late A. Webber Borchers. And although Borchers is no longer here

Fletcher's Field of Dreams

by Billy Tyus



Travel through Mount Zion, past homes, stores, and restaurants, to a place where development gives way to open corn fields ripe for farming, and you could unexpectedly run into the Triple J Ranch — Dr. David Fletcher's own personal field of dreams.

Just beyond a fire-engine red barn-like structure sit a pair of baseball fields better suited for ground balls and double plays than combines and tractors. Inside the building is an operating batting cage and walls adorned with baseball memorabilia, including several signature pieces featuring the Chicago White Sox former home at Comiskey Park.

To call Fletcher a baseball fan would be akin to calling Frank Sinatra a simple lounge singer. In fact, after spending a little time at Triple J talking with Fletcher, you begin to feel like you've stepped right off the set of "Field of Dreams," the 1989 sports movie blockbuster.

"Field of Dreams" tells the story of Ray Kinsella, an Iowa farmer who hears a voice from his cornfield that he believes is telling him to build a baseball diamond on his farm. Once constructed, the ghosts of eight Chicago White Sox — banned in 1919 for allegedly attempting to throw the World Series — appear to play ball, helping Ray understand the power of faith, passion, and pursuing dreams in the process.

For Fletcher, movie fiction resides close to reality.

"I'm 36 years old, I love my family, I love baseball and I'm about to become a farmer. But until I heard the voice, I'd never done a crazy thing in my whole life."

— Ray Kinsella, explaining his reason for building the baseball field.

Dr. Fletcher readily admits his two biggest baseball passions these days are somewhat unusual: He's leading an effort to build what will be known as the Chicago Baseball Museum and, for several years, also has worked to clear the name of George "Buck" Weaver and have him reinstated to Major League baseball.

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Weaver was starting third baseman for the White Sox during the 1919 series, which the Sox lost to the Cincinnati Reds. The following year, allegations surfaced that several players had participated in a plot to "fix" the series. Though they were acquitted in a jury trial, the players were banned from baseball for life. Many have since argued, however, that of all the players, Weaver is perhaps most deserving of reinstatement.

One of the players featured in "Field of Dreams," Weaver died in 1956. Fletcher felt "called" to his story in the early 1990s — specifically, on the night the White Sox completed the transition from Comiskey to the current U.S. Cellular Field.

"(In one night) I became a real-life Ray Kinsella," Fletcher says. "But instead of a fictional character building a baseball field in a cornfield, my real life mission is to clear a dead baseball player's name and restore his honor. That was the calling."

"Weaver still has one living daughter, and it would mean everything in the world for her to see him reinstated before she dies," he adds.

After years of campaigning, Fletcher "sees the light at the end of the tunnel" in his fight to clear Weaver's name. Earlier this year, he received a letter through a third party from Major League Baseball Commissioner Alan H. "Bud" Selig indicating he'd be willing to personally discuss the issue with Fletcher.

"If you build it, he will come."
— The Voice, "Field of Dreams"

As for the Chicago Baseball Museum, Fletcher predicts scores of visitors will flock to the proposed facility, just as players began showing up at Kinsella's field. According to organizers, the Museum's mission will be to "pay homage to the rich heritage that the city has contributed and continues to offer to our nation's pastime."

According to Fletcher, the Museum will focus on education, rather than serve as a "hall of fame." Yet he believes it will compete

successfully with the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

Museum organizers currently are raising funds for the proposed project, with planning efforts guided by an advisory board including baseball Hall of Famer Ernie Banks, Patricia Brickhouse, wife of legendary Chicago broadcaster Jack Brickhouse, and White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf.

Organizers hope to complete the first phase of fundraising by the end of this year.

"Son, if I'd only gotten to be a doctor for five minutes... now that would have been a tragedy"

— Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham in response to Ray's comment that many would consider it a tragedy that Graham's baseball career and dream had lasted only five minutes.

Baseball runs deep in Fletcher's family history — his great grandfather managed one of the first professional baseball teams, and his parents witnessed the game that snapped Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hit streak at Cleveland in 1941.

He's continued the tradition, attending spring training each year, and exchanging wedding vows at the site of Comiskey Park's former home plate. In July, Fletcher received the 2005 Hilda Award by the Baseball Reliquary, annual recognition that acknowledges "a person's unique passion and dedication to the game of baseball."

Yet Fletcher has no regrets that his career path led to medicine, rather than baseball.

"I love medicine, and I love what I do," he says. "But at the same time, you need balance in your life, and I think (baseball interests) have offered some balance."

For more information on the Chicago Baseball Museum visit <http://www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org>. For information on the campaign to lift the ban against George "Buck" Weaver, visit <http://www.clearbuck.com>.

An avid Yankees fan, Billy Tyus's moment of local sports glory came when he played on the Decatur baseball team that won the Khoury League national championship in the early '80s.

The "Real" Field . . .

More than 60,000 visitors a year experience their own "Field of Dreams" moment at the actual film site — a small farm near Dyersville, Iowa, that's about a four-hour drive from Decatur.

Pick-up games are daily occurrences here and, on certain days throughout the summer, a team of "ghost players" dressed in White Sox uniforms emerges from the cornfields to stage a game, just as was depicted in the film.

Because the field was constructed on the properties of two separate owners, the site's divided into two attractions. One party operates what is known as the Left and Center Field of Dreams, which encompasses left and center field, while the infield and right field are controlled by a second owner. Each has a separate access road and gift shop.

For more information, visit <http://www.leftandcenterfieldofdreams.com> or <http://www.fieldofdreamsmoviesite.com>.