

The Boys of Autumn

by Chip Colandreo

For Altamonte's senior softballers, the extra innings just keep coming.

It's a few hours after dawn at the Seminole County Softball complex in Altamonte, the outfield grass on each of five fields still wet with dew. The only diving catches on these fields so far are those of the egrets as a flock pecks down into the turf searching for breakfast. The infield dirt is a pristine carpet of raked copper sliced with two fresh, ice-white chalk lines. It's still, and beautiful, in the timeless way only a baseball field can be.

Then, they come. The players walk slowly – some more slowly than others – but their smiles are wide and their eyes bright. Because today, for at least one more day, they get to play the children's game again.

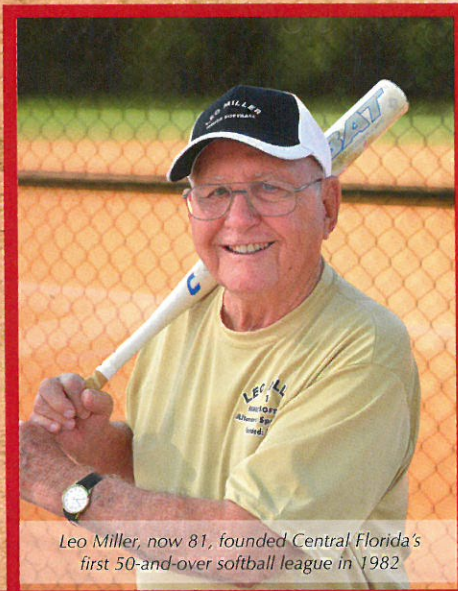
In the 2011 baseball movie *Moneyball*, scouts talk about the children's game. When trying to convince then-über-prospect Billy Beane to give up a full scholarship to Stanford in exchange for a fat signing bonus and the chance to play for the New York Mets, the scouts claim, "We're all told at some point in time that we can no longer play the children's game. Some of us are told at 18, some of us are told at 40, but we're all told."

Well, somebody forgot to tell these guys...

By 10:00 a.m. every Wednesday morning, the 100-or-so players of the Leo Miller Senior Softball League are laced up, loose, and ready to "shine once again in the Florida sun," as the boys like to say.

"The benefit to us is as much emotional as it is physical," says 70-year-old Shelby Simmons of Longwood, who represents and helps organize the league. "We come together for the camaraderie, for the chance to be together on the field. We trade our war stories in the dugout, brag about our grandkids, and lie about what good ballplayers we all used to be," Shelby adds with a wink.

Shelby's being modest, because these seniors – some as old as 90 – can play.



Leo Miller, now 81, founded Central Florida's first 50-and-over softball league in 1982



The solid *thwap!* of aluminum bat on plump leather ball is a constant sound in this league. Going three for six at the plate is often considered a slump, and plays in the infield and outfield look a lot like those from last night's big-league game on TV.

However, since every player on the field is also on Medicare, there are a few accommodations to make the children's game more senior-friendly. Every at bat, for example, is a one-pitch affair. Any type of strike – swinging, looking, or foul ball – is an out, but any pitched ball outside the strike zone is an automatic walk.

Courtesy runners are also common. For players who can still swing the bat but prefer not to run the bases, a courtesy runner is always quick to hop off the bench and assume the hitter's duties on the base paths. Each Senior Softball League field also features two home plates. If there's a close play at home, the catcher fields the ball at one plate while the runner sprints toward the other to avoid any potential collision.

If somehow you think this brand of softball might be just a tad too soft, don't forget these seniors play a doubleheader every time they take the field. The first game is always seven innings. If the game ends in a tie, the first inning of game two serves as sudden death. The second game is another seven innings in the spring and fall but only five innings during the heat of summer. The entire league takes a few weeks off in the winter to rest.

"I started the league before I was old enough to join it," laughs Leo Miller, now 81, who founded Central Florida's first 50-and-over softball league in 1982 when he was the activities director for the city of

Orlando, a role he held for 33 years. The league moved to the Seminole Softball Complex when it opened in 1993. "When I finally turned 50, I started playing. I was commissioner of the league for a long time, and I only stopped playing a few years ago when I couldn't run like I used to. I was honored that the fellas decided to rename the league after me and retire my number 11."

The league's growth, especially in recent years, has been phenomenal.

The Wednesday morning division is reserved for players 60 and over of any skill level. Monday night games are for those 60-plus who like to be a bit more competitive. Thursday nights are open to competitive players age 50 and older, and team rankings are kept. The entire league is also open for business every Saturday morning at Red Bug Lake Park

in Casselberry, where players gather for informal pick-up games and quality time on the softball diamond with their friends.

Among the league's ranks are dozens of military veterans, including a few World War II vets, and several former college and minor-league ballplayers. Every year, the league organizes a cruise trip to the Bahamas, where they play teams from senior softball leagues in Freeport and Nassau. A senior's team from Aruba comes to Seminole County every year to reciprocate.

"The league gives seniors who love the game a place to go, be active, and be surrounded by peers who love to play, too," says Shelby. "We're always looking for more players to join us, and we always have a good time. Out on the field, we always feel like children again."

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