

The Snakes: An Amazing Softball Team

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Earl Nall brings us this story of a truly unique softball team.

From the beginning, Oak Ridge Nuclear contractors provided a plethora of recreational activities for their employees, all of which had overflowing participation.

There was a sport or club that fit about anyone's interest: Camera club, Men's and Women's softball, volleyball, basketball, and bowling. Tag football, billiards, bridge, ping pong, golf, rifle, and even skeet shooting.

Early on, each plant had individual recreational departments with little inter-plant play, but that all changed in 1972 when one central recreational department was created for K-25, X-10, and Y-12. Until the late 1950s, the plant leagues were fast-pitch softball, but in the early 1960s, they replaced it with slow-pitch, which immediately increased participation.

Not only at the Oak Ridge facilities, but the 1970s were emerging as the golden days of slow-pitch softball nationally. Every city had multiple leagues; there were two major national softball associations: **ASA**, the Amateur Softball Association, and **USSSA**, the United States Slow-pitch Softball Association. National, regional, and local tournaments were everywhere.

One of these new slow-pitch teams was the Y-12 Snakes, which were put together by the Y-12 Statistics Department in the spring of 1969.

The Snakes, which were hastily put together on the last day to enter the Y-12/K-25 softball league, were just like hundreds of other teams over the years, with no thoughts but to play softball for the summer recreation league. The team consisted of statisticians, engineers, and software developers so they were not your typical jocks so success on the softball field was not expected.

No one on that team could have known they were part of the start of an extraordinary 11-year run that would see them become the most dominant recreational long-term softball team the plant leagues had ever seen.

The ingredients for a perfect storm played out in that first season - luck, statistics, a once-in-a-lifetime player, and a leader who turned a bunch of individuals into a tight-knit family and built a sustaining foundation that would carry the team to an 11-year win-loss record of 230 - 12.

Halfway through that inaugural season, the Snakes were undefeated. That was unexpected. For the first time, team members started to feel something was different about this team. They had already encountered some statistical oddities -- turning five double plays in a seven-inning game and coming back from an 11-0 deficit to win another. They had won the coin toss every game, which had helped in three games being won by a single run.

There was more. Horace Moorman, a newly hired statistician from Nashville. Moorman was shortstop for the Tennessee State University baseball team that went undefeated in 1968. Nobody had ever seen anything like him in the history of recreational slow-pitch softball at the plants.

He was incredibly quick getting to the ball, but also had a lightning-fast release on his accurate and powerful throws. His range as a shortstop allowed the third baseman to play closer to third base, the left

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and center fielder could play deeper, and the second baseman to shade further towards first base - all these adjustments increased the defensive ability of the team. All of this was because Moorman could cover more of the field than a normal shortstop.

Word was getting out, and attendance of Snake games swelled as fans wanted to see the shortstop - the legend grew. One of the upcoming opponents of the Snakes had even been practicing hitting to right field to keep the ball away from him.

The Snakes continued to win, and ironically, their last game of the season was against the Braves, another undefeated team. Both teams entered the game at 17-0. The Braves won 13-3 to end the season undefeated. The Snakes were outclassed.

The Braves were much better. They were the heavyweights of the league and had some well-known softball players: Jim Milligan, Gary Ellis, Stephen Babb, Bobby Hopkins and Larry McDonald. The Snakes played like the team that had hoped to win 50% of their games in 1969.

One thing the Snakes did do, however, was run the table, winning the coin toss to start the game -- they were 18-0. And the statisticians liked repeating that the probability of doing that was 1 in 262,144.

So, the success of an average team got everyone excited about the next year, and the person who would keep the momentum going was Charles Holland. Holland, using his wits, political savvy, and salesmanship, recruited three big-time players for the next year that laid the foundation for adding great players every season - until their final season in 1981 when the Snakes called it quits.

Holland had a history of success in sports. In college, he put together an intramural team that won every sports championship that the school had. In the early 1980's he developed a rating system that used a high-level modified multivariate factor analysis program that analyzed the data he entered on high school football recruits. And as a by-product introduced the 5 Star ★★☆☆★ system that is used today by all recruiting organizations. He had a top 100 that was so accurate that national magazines picked up his rankings, and he became nationally known. He burst into the spotlight when he was soon to be famous Herschel Walker # 1, and no other system had him listed. Same thing with future NFL Hall of Famer Reggie White. He left Y-12 in 1982 to create QualPro, a company that helps organizations/businesses achieve breakthrough improvement using a unique MVT® Process that he had developed. Holland used those skills to put together the successful Snake team and a structure that enabled them to be so successful for 11 years.

The next softball season in 1970 started quite differently from the previous year. One difference was that the Braves didn't field a team. The Snakes tied for the regular season 1st place and won the postseason tournament.

Starting in 1972, the first year of a combined recreation league of all Y-12, X-10, and K-25 plants, the Snakes compiled a regular season record of 171-6 over the next 9 years. (with 3 of those losses coming in 1975 but still finished first). After finishing in 2nd place in 1969 they finished in 1st place every year until they disbanded after 1981.

With the new combined recreation department, Clark Center, with its two softball fields, became the new home for all games. It was the perfect setting. Little traffic, plenty of parking, children could run about

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without worry of cars, plenty of picnic tables -- and for softball players and family, a place to relax and socialize before and after games.

The creative Holland had found a way to keep a team winning. He had built a solid foundation of a core group of players, but he understood that this was a recreation league, and not all players could be there for every game. So he devised an ingenious plan. Holland was well known at all three plants for his statistical prowess, and he had a network of people who knew great softball players who didn't play in the plant league.

Each year, he would sign up a few of these players with the understanding they would be put on the roster and he would call them to play when the team was to be short-handed. It was a good deal for these players -- they might play one game with the most dominant and well-known team in the league, and with that would probably get a trophy and a T-shirt. Stan Stines, Doug Pollett, Neal Nolan, John Murphy, Ron Jeffers, Rick Hicks, Mike Ritter, and Joe Greenlee were some of these one-game players.

Over the 11 years the Snakes played, they had a total of 64 players. Twenty-one of these players were with the team for six or more years, and many of them were, according to Holland, 5-star recruits. Horace Moorman, Bob Culton, and Earl Nall were the only players to play all eleven years with the team.

There was Arnold Hawkins, Richard Tate, Harold Conner, Lonnie Hawkins, and Yancy Hampton, all of whom played on big-time softball teams that flew on weekends to tournaments all over the nation. There was Marvin Anderson, who was an all-star city league player (still playing softball in 2024), Ricky Stacey who was the Most Valuable Player in the Knoxville City tournament that had over two hundred teams competing, Earl Nall, who pitched for Solway Hardware when they won the state ASA Class A tournament, and E.T. Stamey who was a small college baseball All-American.

Two others were unique and the most solid players you could imagine. Calvin Angel only played for the Snakes. He didn't play in the city or church league and every year turned down offers to play for more competitive teams. How good was Angel? One time, the Snakes didn't have enough players and were within five minutes of forfeiting a game when he arrived. He hurried out of his car, ran up the hill to the big field at Clark Center, picked up a bat, and ran to home plate with his slip-on shoes on and hit the first pitch 30 feet over the center field fence.

Bob Culton was another. Bob was from Pineville, Kentucky, and had been all Eastern Kentucky in both football and basketball in high school. He went to the University of Kentucky to get his degree in mathematics. While at Kentucky, he played intramurals. One of his positions was punter. He was so good that Kentucky head coach Blanton Collier came to his games and asked him to punt for the varsity. For the Snakes, he played first base and in eleven years never dropped a throw - the most solid player most had ever seen.

Others were solid contributors -- Ron Sharp, Horace Miller, Holland, Hoyt Eason, and Jerry Harris.

Other utility players were there to fill out the lineup if needed -- and several times made a critical play that helped win a game - Gerald Scott, Mike Sherrill, Vaughn Thomas, Bud Leete, David Alspaugh, and others.

The Snakes were friends off the field... Each year, there was a pre-season cookout at Culton's lake home and a post-season party at various places.

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Despite all the winning, the Snakes stayed true to the spirit of recreational leagues. If anyone had a city or church league game, they played there. If someone had any other outside party or event to go to, they went. The Snakes played plant league games for the fun of it. In 1978, the Lasers beat the Snakes on a Friday night when the Snakes had most of the team playing in another tournament. That win snapped a 56-game win streak. After the loss, the whole team walked over and congratulated the Lasers for their victory. That was the sportsmanship of the team.

Miscellany: The Snakes never lost a game when they had their full team present. Winning streaks of 56, 48, and 42 games. Hoyt Eason once had 18 consecutive hits. Earl Nall once had 13 consecutive doubles. The team had seven consecutive home runs in an inning (Conner, Hawkins, Tate, Angel, Stamey, Stacey, Anderson). One loss over six seasons. Almost had a perfect-pitched game and retired the first 19 hitters before someone hit a single. Nall pitched 3 years without walking anyone. Powerful Arnold Hawkins hit a line drive that the opposing shortstop almost caught, but the ball was hit so hard that it cleared the outfield fence by 20 feet. Hawkins also hit a home run onto the top of the hill in center field on the little field, and 2 innings later, it rolled back down the slope. The team originally wanted to be named "They Forfeited," but was vetoed by the recreation department. They once had a game delayed for 20 minutes because of skunks on the field. In 1969, there were wooden bats, unrestricted flight balls, 60-foot bases, no fences, no shorts, no T-shirts, no spikes. In 1981, bats were all metal, a very restricted flight ball, 65-foot bases, a fence, everyone wore shorts, T-shirts, and had rubber spikes. They once scored 27 runs in the first inning. And finally, the Snakes were involved in maybe the strangest play in plant league softball history. It was a late game and foggy. After a hit ball, the runner who was on first base ended up on third, and the batter scored with no outs being made. Both teams and umpires could not figure out what happened, but the play stood.

How good were the Snakes? Could they have won a state tournament or even a national softball tournament?

There is strong evidence they could have competed at the highest levels. They certainly could have competed in the State ASA Industrial tournament. Consider: The Snakes always defeated the team that won numerous Tennessee **ASA** state Industrial tournaments. Scores like 23-5, 32-7 were the norm. (Note: No contractor of the Oak Ridge facilities sponsored athletic teams, but the **ASA** requirement was that every player on an industrial team had to work at the same company, so the team that won the state tournament just got another business to sponsor them - they were legal.) The Snakes would not try to compete in the industrial state tournaments since six of their players played in the ASA Open division (The big boys) in weekly national tournaments. These players were blue chips - 5-Star from the Holland rating world.

Since the team that the Snakes beat in the plant league frequently won the state industrial championship each year and always made a good showing in the nationals -- it is solid logic that the Snakes would have been a major factor in the **ASA** nationals.

In 1975, the league was split between men's softball and mixed league softball. Mixed league where a team had to have seven men and three women on the field at a time. The mixed league was a huge success.

The first year the Snakes played, there were 18 teams in the K-25/Y-12 league. Each team played all the others in the regular season. By 1981, there were 76 men's and mixed league teams, and scheduling

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games became a nightmare for the recreation department. With that many teams, each having a roster of around 15, that means that almost 10% of the employees at the three plants were playing softball. The max games that could be held each night on the Clark Center fields was 8, and they only played 4 days a week -- so the maximum games a week would be 32. With 76 teams, there are not enough summer weeks to schedule games for that many teams. When there were 18 teams, it would have taken just over 4 weeks to complete the regular season. With 76 teams divided into 5 leagues, it would take 16 weeks or 4 months to play a season. Recreation had tough decisions to make about softball schedules.

In 1969, a perfect storm of events led to the creation of the Snake softball team. In 1981, a perfect storm of events convinced the Snakes it was time to retire from softball. Plant league softball had seen dramatic changes - there were fewer all-men's teams, and the mixed leagues were on a growth spurt. Of the 76 teams, 52 (68%) were mixed league and growing. There were so many teams that it was hard to schedule officials, and not enough months to play all the games necessary.

Nationwide, the boom days of slow-pitch softball were over. City, county, and community leagues were seeing a rapid decrease in participating teams. Numerous national softball organizations were created to challenge the **ASA** and **USSSA**, so there were literally hundreds of "national championships" offered -- the prestige of winning a state or national championship was waning. There were fewer travel teams, which affected the six Snake players who had enjoyed all the free weekend travel. For the Snakes -- many players had played for multiple years, and their physical abilities and personal goals were changing. It was the right time to retire.

Thanks, Earl, for an excellent review of the amazing Snakes softball team.

Note: The legacy of the Snakes was preserved by Earl Nall, who wrote a 51-page book, "*The Snake Almanac*," detailing the history of the Snakes that was packed with statistics and recollections of the rich history of the team. Most information in this book was used in this story.

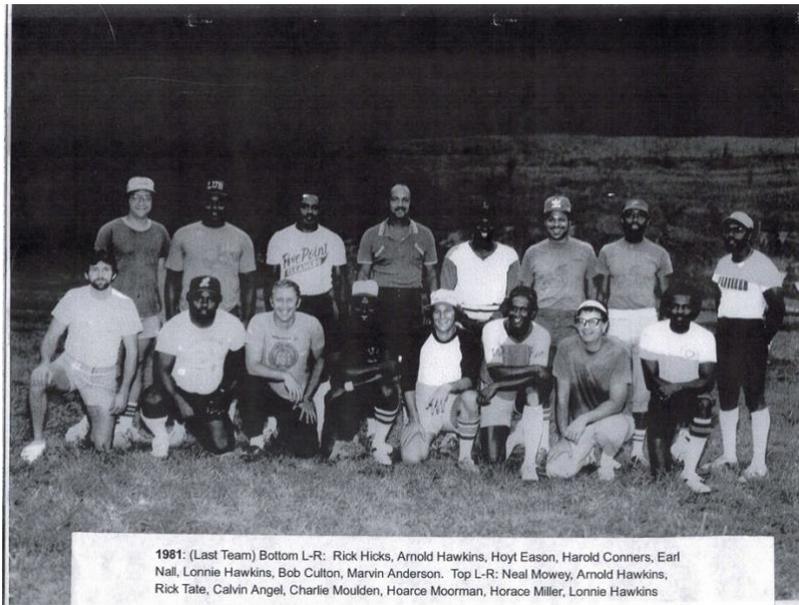


1969: (Fist Snake Team) Bottom L-R: Jerry Harris, Bud Leete, Loyd Wyatt, Phil Mason, Bill Maaddux. Top Row L-R: Horace Moorman, Earl Nall, Bob Culton, Jim Batch, David Alspaugh. Not pictured Chuck Holland

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Snakes Softball Team started in 1969 (Courtesy of Earl Nall)



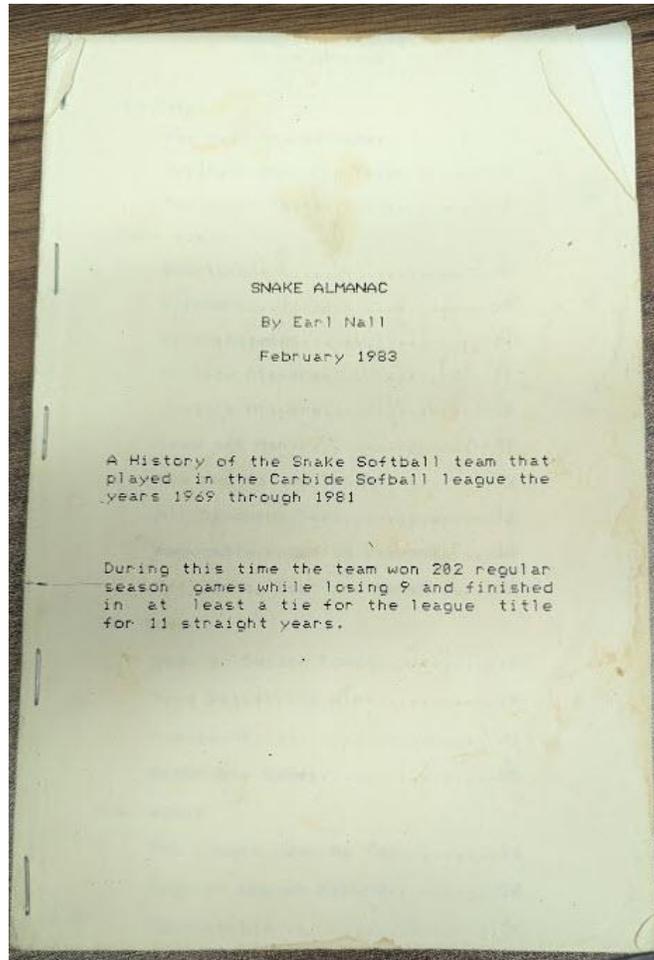
The last Snakes Softball Team in 1981 (Courtesy of Earl Nall)



These three people were on the team all 12 years, left to right, Bob Culton, Earl Nall, and Horace Moorman (Courtesy of Earl Nall)

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Book written by Earl Nall to document the Snakes Softball Team (Courtesy Earl Nall)