

At this point, Olsson began looking for business partners, starting with Kelly Richardson of Richardson Sports.

Richardson had always been Olsson's first call, according to Olsson. The pair had worked together on a variety of projects at Sheldon High School, including a covered stadium project in the mid-2000s and a renovated baseball facility in 2014.

Olsson met Richardson at Richardson's restaurant, North Fork Public House, for a beer in summer 2020, and said, "I'm thinking of doing this, and I'd like you to be my partner." Olsson says that Richardson responded by saying, "I'm in, but it's just you and me because if we get someone else in on it, then it will be a cluster."

So Olsson and Richardson were in business once again, this time with Bushnell University and Springfield Public Schools.

All the sides began crunching the numbers and the project came to a little under \$5 million with in-kind investments. The group came to an agreement that Bushnell University would pay for the turf, costing a little over \$1 million, Olsson and Richardson would pay for the stadium and dugout cost of \$1.5 million and Springfield Public Schools would pay \$1.4 million for a new scoreboard, team rooms and public restrooms, the latter two of which are shared by the nearby track and soccer field.

THE BEER BUMP IN THE ROAD

The biggest hurdle during the project was that Olsson and Richardson wanted to sell beer at Drifters games. "The big question mark was whether we could sell alcohol on the school property," Olsson says. "For us to be successful, we need to be able to sell alcohol."

At the time, Springfield Public Schools had a ban on alcoholic items on school property, but according to Olsson, the Springfield Public Schools own a camp near Fall Creek Lake and were hoping to change the rule to allow for exceptions so they could hold weddings at the camp and serve alcohol.

In October 2020, Springfield Public Schools voted 4-0 to revise the previous policy of alcohol consumption that prohibited alcohol on school property. The new policy states that "alcohol is prohibited except when specifically authorized by the superintendent in writing," which allowed the Drifters to receive a liquor license to sell beer during the summer when kids are not in school.

THE AGREEMENT

Approving alcohol sales was the final check mark of the project, as the agreement was soon finalized. In the agreement, Bushnell gets priority for use of the stadium September to October and January to May 1. Its contract is for 30 years, and it's reassessed every five years with the contract expiring on Dec. 31, 2051. Because of its contributions, the contractual agreement states Bushnell will not be required to pay for the use of the stadium for the first four years; however, starting in 2026, the university will begin paying an "appropriate rental fee for hours used in/on the premises during fall and spring seasons."

The Drifters, who were the largest beneficiaries of the project, similarly will not pay rent for the first four summers of baseball due to their investment in the stadium. After four years, a variable percentage of all the club's profits will be given to the school district. "The Drifters are going to be successful," Olsson says. "But the Drifters are also going to be great stewards to the community."

Springfield Public Schools owns the land and gets to use the new facilities when the other parties aren't using them, including the latter half of the high school baseball season. Springfield High School will also benefit by being able to play more early-season baseball games at the stadium because the playing surface is equipped for wet weather, and they get to use the field when Bushnell is not using it. The students at the school benefit, too, by having dedicated athletes play baseball at a high level on campus. "There are often times where the students are invited to attend games at no charge and enjoy the games," says Brett Yancey, the chief operating officer of Springfield School District.

THE EMS

The leasing of baseball field use with a university and public school in Lane County should sound familiar. For years, the Eugene Emeralds played at 4J School District's Civic Stadium.

In 2010, the Ems paid the University of Oregon \$2 million to help build PK Park. The \$2 million comes from a yearly rate of \$200,000 the Emeralds paid upfront for the use of the field at PK during their current 20-year contract.

Although the contract runs through 2030, the Emeralds were elevated from Class-A short season to High-A full season in 2021, resulting in an overlap in seasons between the Oregon Ducks and the Emeralds due to the Ems' season start moving to April from mid-June. As a result, the Ems are now having to search for a new stadium before 2025 because of the struggles caused by two teams sharing the same facility in April and May. This week, the Emeralds were forced to forfeit multiple weekend home games



Photo by Mike Eyster

THE WCL, WHICH FEATURES 16 TEAMS THROUGHOUT THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST AND CANADA, IS A WOOD-BAT BASEBALL LEAGUE.

and play on the road in Pasco, Washington, due to Oregon baseball hosting a NCAA Super Regional at PK Park and the Ducks having priority use of the field. That problem is avoided at Hamlin Sports Complex because Bushnell's season ends more than a month before the Drifters' begins.

Currently, the Emeralds are in a situation where visiting teams are forced to set up near Autzen Stadium in portable trailers with rented lockers inside for their players and coaches because of the conflicting schedules with UO. Umpires are required to walk downstairs inside Autzen Stadium with additional showers and bathrooms located downstairs for female coaches such as Hillsboro Hops Manager Ronnie Gajownik.

Teams also can't use the field until 6 pm because of the Ducks' practice schedule most days, which means Emeralds games have to start at 7:35 pm, causing low attendance. "7:35 start times are late for kids and families on school nights," Eugene Emeralds General Manager Allan Benavides says.

With the MLB requiring the Emeralds to build a new stadium by 2025, the Ems have been exploring the possibility of building a new stadium at the Lane County Events Center, which Benavides describes as a similar project to what the Springfield Baseball Project did — but on steroids. The total cost for the Emeralds' new stadium is "double the \$45 to 50 million that we expected," according to Benavides, but also features a similar community-first vision that he hopes allows more events, concerts and high school baseball games to take place at the new stadium outside of Ems' games.

The Emeralds look to chip in \$13 million and use county, state and federal money to help fund the project. They hope to have the funds secured in the next eight months to build the stadium by 2025 and keep minor league baseball in Eugene, which has existed in the Emerald City since 1955.

COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

Ike Olsson's vision for the Drifters going forward is to continue to build something exciting and positive in the community. "We want to be the place where a family of four can pay \$6 for a ticket, \$5 to \$6 for a beer, and \$2 to \$3 for a hot dog," he says.

Womack said multiple times that Olsson was "undoubtedly the hero" of the project. "If Ike isn't Ike and doesn't use the blessings that he and his family have received and have an honest desire to bless the community around them, then this doesn't happen," Womack says.

Two years after its start, the stadium has finally been built, with all the team rooms and facilities completed. "They were riveting during the games last season," says Corey Anderson, Bushnell's athletic director.

The field is used throughout the year with local youth baseball camps being held when Bushnell and the Drifters aren't using the field. "I'd literally rather have it this way than owning my own stadium," Womack says. "It's an efficient economic use of field, but also we are integrated with the community."

By being integrated into the community, youth in Springfield are able to benefit from the new facilities and have a great influence in collegiate baseball to look up to. "The kids in Springfield and this community could be exposed to what it could be for you if you stay in school and do all the positive things," Olsson says.

"Springfield loves us being there," says Bushnell's Anderson. "During the games, when you have recess, all the kids are there screaming, 'Let's go Beacons!' It gives our kids the ability to be really good mentors for those kids over there."

The community also benefits from another baseball team in the region. With the Drifters in Springfield, and the Emeralds in Eugene, there are baseball games in Eugene/Springfield 60 out of the 120 days between June and August, allowing for fans to be able to catch a game most days of the summer.

FUTURE PLANS

In the future, Olsson and Richardson will have the naming rights for the stadium complex, while Bushnell University will have the naming rights for the field. At the end of December 2026, the first five-year-reassessment of the 30-year contract will take place with Bushnell and Springfield Public Schools coming together to adjust the contract.

Bushnell wrapped up its program's second season at the end of April, finishing 23-25, an improvement from last season's 11-37 finish. Several Bushnell road games at Oregon Tech in Klamath Falls and Corban in Keizer were moved to Hamlin Sports Complex this spring due to the field's ability to be played in inclement weather, a trend that looks to continue in the future.

The Springfield Drifters kicked off their season on June 2 sweeping the Port Angeles Lefties. The Drifters look to improve after a 17-37 finish in their inaugural season. You can find a full list of their schedule at DriftersBaseball.com. ①

The stadium is at 326 Centennial Boulevard in Springfield. To view Bushnell's baseball schedule go to BushnellBeacons.com/sports/baseball/schedule/2023. For information on the Springfield Drifters, check out DriftersBaseball.com.

Knight Jarecki is a broadcaster for the Springfield Drifters.