

Norm Perry Park needs care ASAP

Dan McCaffery - August 2022

It's time for Sarnia city council to take a long look at the future of Norm Perry Park. The historic stadium, which has been at the corner of Christina and Exmouth streets for the past century, is in pretty rough shape. I attended all three Sarnia Imperial football games there this season and was appalled by the park's crumbling condition. On the positive side, the scoreboard and the field are both first class. But that's about as far as it goes. The bleachers on the north side of the facility are warped and rotting. I fear it won't be too much longer before they are a safety hazard. If the municipality isn't careful, it could find itself facing a lawsuit after someone gets hurt sitting in those bleachers.

The decline of Norm Perry Park has been gradual but significant. One hundred years ago, when it was known as Athletic Park, it was a showcase facility that was home to a big league football club.

The original Sarnia Imperials played there for decades, hosting teams from the biggest cities in Canada. In 1933, the Imps hosted the Grey Cup game, taking on the Toronto Argonauts.

Officially, the attendance was a little over 3,000. But the late Paul Blundy once told me the real figure was more than 5,000. Many got in by hopping the fence. This was the height of the Great Depression and many people simply could not afford to buy a ticket. Blundy, who went on to become the city's mayor, gained access by volunteering to carry in gear for one of the Sarnia players.

A few years later, the park hosted a Grey Cup semi-final contest between the Imps and Montreal, with Sarnia winning 63-0.

Right up until the mid-1970s the park was a going concern, sporting a covered grandstand that seated about 1,000 spectators. It was eventually torn down after a fan was hurt falling through its floor, which was full of dry rot.

Council did not replace the grandstand, even though Sarnia was far more prosperous in the 1970s than when the facility had opened many decades earlier.

Things were so bad during the Depression that destitute individuals went door to door, begging for food. John Matheson, who went on to become a Sarnia councillor, remembered his kind-hearted mother giving hobos whatever food she could spare. But despite such poverty we were able to build an impressive stadium that attracted huge crowds to various events. This was all the more impressive when you consider Sarnia was a very small place back then.

Today the grandstand is long gone and the bleachers on the north side will soon have to undergo repairs or be demolished themselves.

Council should start looking at what should be done about this sad state of affairs right now. It should set up a committee charged with looking for fundraising options for a complete revamp. Hopefully, private donations can be raised, along with funds from the federal and provincial governments.

The next time Ottawa and Queen's Park announce infrastructure programs for municipalities council should be ready to submit a proposal for the rehabilitation of Norm Perry Park.