

## Sports and Recreation

Early discussions about creating West Park referred to 'property for an athletic field' and to 'West Side Park and Athletic Field'. Recreation was clearly important to West Park from the start.

**Ball Diamonds** Within two years of West Park's creation, two ball diamonds were constructed, and with the ball diamonds came rules:

"Rules Adopted for West Park

1. Gentlemenly conduct and regard for the rights and pleasures of others is expected at all times. Profanity is forbidden.
2. The main diamond is reserved every day after 4: p.m. for the exclusive use of men over 18 years of age, except by special permission.
3. City League games are on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday at 5 p.m. and at such other times as may be arranged by special permission.
4. Any teams wishing to reserve either diamond for a game at other than City League hours, may do so by securing a permit from the Secretary of the City League at the City Y.M.C.A.
5. The caretaker of the park has full authority to enforce the above rules.
6. Any matter concerning this park should be referred to the Park Commission.

The above rules were adopted, ordered printed, and posted."

– Park Board minutes, May 3, 1910

Bleachers were soon built:

"Resolved, That a bleacher, fifty feet long be erected on the West Park parallel to first base line as soon as funds are available." – Park Board minutes, September 2, 1910

"Resolved that the Park Commission be requested to build a bleacher, at a small cost, on West Side Park, providing they have enough material or money on hand." – Common Council, June 19, 1911



Land was obtained in April 1915 to give more space behind the backstop.

Unlabeled photo from Park Dept. file for West Park.

Ball diamonds needed maintaining:

"Petition received from Sid W. Millard and forty others requesting Council to cause the base ball diamond in West Park to be filled in where necessary, rolled, and put in first class

condition and surveyed if necessary to correctly place the base stakes. Moved that it is the recommendation of the Council that this petition be honored, and that the Board of Park Commissioners take whatever steps are necessary to comply with the request. Adopted."

-- Common Council, May 21, 1932



May 1938 photo, Ann Arbor News archives courtesy of OldNews. AADL.org

When softball entered the scene is not

entirely clear, but apparently it superseded baseball at some time probably far removed from the 1930s. Did the shift to softball occur in the 1970s or early 1980s, when there were recreational leagues for not just men's softball, but also women's softball and co-rec softball (teams with both men and women players)? Possibly. What is clear is that the Park Department's West Park Time Line document c. 1995 mentions a scheduled league-use softball field in West Park and nothing about baseball.

**Tennis Courts** Tennis courts were featured right from the start:

"Petitions.

Of Mrs. F. C. Newcombe, et. al. relative to tennis courts on West Park received and referred to Park Committee."

– Common Council, August 1, 1910

"Resolved and carried that Mr. Otis be instructed to grade one tennis court on West Park Immediately.... Carried." – Common Council, September 2, 1910

So one clay tennis court was constructed two years after West Park came into being. In 1914 two clay courts were added. In 1928 two more clay courts were added, making a total of five clay tennis courts, all constructed of good clay, stabilized with calcium chloride. The first paved city tennis courts came into being in 1937:

"Motion made that the Superintendent be authorized to contract with the Ann Arbor Construction Company to construct one asphaltic tennis court at West Park and one at Burns Park. Carried."

– Common Council, July 7, 1937

**Ice Skating & Sledding** There has been some suggestion in city records and in publications quoting them that the area that became West Park was, in earlier days, a skating park:

"In 1868 there is mention in Council minutes of a skating park on the west side of Ann Arbor on Miller Avenue...." -- 1973 Parks Department document.

However, the skating park was near, but not in, the area that became West Park. Writing in the 1960s, a local author Lela Duff refers to an 1870 map showing “Skating Park” marked just north of Miller Ave. (on the opposite side of Miller Ave. from what would become West Park). She also quotes memories of “an elderly lady of a generation ago who had a gift for historical reminiscence and often obeyed the urge to write it down” who had skated there. The 1870 map marks the Skating Park between Allen’s Creek and the mill race, east of Spring Street and bounded on the north by North Street (now Kingsley Street, though that particular bordering section is no longer street). Apparently both the skating park and the mill race disappeared with the coming of the “Annie” – the Ann Arbor Railroad– running north-south and coming from Toledo, Ohio. It reached Ann Arbor in 1878, running west of downtown along Allen’s Creek.

Though the West Park area was not a skating park in 1870, shortly after West Park was created the public was requesting skating at West Park and other parts of the city:

“Petition of G. A. Young requesting the council to authorize the Board of Park Commissioners to construct and maintain skating places for the youth of the city, by damming Allen’s Creek at West Park, and by flooding a part of the fairgrounds, received and on motion of Ald. Pipp, referred to the Park Committee.”  
 – Common Council, December 16, 1913

“Gentlemen: Your Park Committee have had under consideration the petition relative to maintaining skating places at West Park and the Fair Grounds. We find that it would be impracticable to flood West Park by a dam on Allen’s Creek. We respectfully recommend that some of the low places at West Park and the Fair Grounds be flooded by fire hose under direction of the Street Commissioner. Adopted.” – Common Council, January 6, 1913



Though early photographs of ice skating in West Park were unavailable, these 1940s and 50s photos give a flavor of ice-skating and ice hockey in West Park in flooded low-lying areas there.

An idea of providing more than just temporary skating ponds at West Park would take shape in the early 1930s, when an artificial lake was built in West Park using as relief for unemployed workers.



1948, 1950, and 1956 photos, Ann Arbor News archives courtesy of OldNews. AADL.org

The hills of what became West Park surely must have called to children and their sleds long before the park was created. Sledding in West Park itself was possible once rolling land was added to the park, most likely by about 1920. The thrills of gliding down West Park’s hills have continued through the years.



January 1956 photo, Ann Arbor News archives courtesy of OldNews. AADL.org

[For many decades organized recreation activities were on-going summer and winter in West Park.](#) This included all-day programs for youth. From the late 1950s on through the early 1990s, West Park was a hub of activity for youth from the surrounding neighborhoods and wider community. During that time a recreation program staffed by public schools ran year long. It offered skating in winter, and in summer sports and crafts and wading or playing in the sandbox provided activities for all ages of children. Youngsters would bring their lunch and stay the day.

As the 1990s rolled around, though, the climate around West Park and organized sports and crafts for youth changed. Homeless people were using the park for shelter, drugs were being used, Miller Manor became problematic,

and there were substantial reductions in state funding for services, including education. This rippled out to impact the organized youth activities at West Park. During the early 1990s the summer recreation and winter ice-skating programs were phased out as cost-cutting measures for tight budgets, because parents were scheduling their children's activities in other summer programs, and because of safety concerns about sending them on their own to the park.

The end of skating and summer recreation programs meant large chunks of time with no organized activities in West Park. The park became emptier, and problems escalated. League softball/baseball games and concerts and plays at the Band Shell continued, and the city and parks department took measures to better ensure public safety in West Park.

#### **Note**

1. [Ann Arbor Yesterdays](#), Lela Duff, Ann Arbor, MI: Friends of the Ann Arbor Public Library Publishers, 1962, p. 119.