Dedication of Peter Drench Park at Isham Field
Saturday, May 24, 2014
Andover's softball program started in 1974 when the merger of Abbot and Phillips academies created a new coeducational institution. (Abbot Academy did not play interscholastic softball, but, under the direction of the legendary Shirley Ritchie, competed as part of its Griffins and Gargoyles intramural tradition.) Forty-one seasons and more than 400 victories later, a survey of the program's growth reveals a truly remarkable story. This story parallels changes wrought by the passage of Title IX. Although the law enabled sweeping changes in access to higher education for women, perhaps its most visible side can be seen in the transformation of girls' and women's sports in our culture. By the 1990s, PA softball was competitive against the best New England high schools. The program has produced more than three dozen players who have gone on to play at the collegiate level. Two have won league softball Rookie-of-the-Year honors, several have served as team captains, and alumnae have competed in NCAA Division I and III post-season tournaments.

The first softball team to represent coed PA was coached by former Abbot coach Marge Harrison. In five years under her leadership, PA's team won 20 of the 36 games it played. Coach Harrison's longest "season" consisted of just eight games! Coach Chuck Willand '70's strong teams won 46 games (.742) and three tournaments during his six years at the helm, but the softball season had only expanded to 12 games, still significantly fewer than baseball. Two games were added in 1985 and 1986, when Elwin Sykes and Sue O'Hara coached. O'Hara's 9–2 1986 team won another tournament, which Andover outgrew after two more championships (1988 and 1989) under Coach Peter Drench.

In 1990, Drench reached out to all 61 NEPSAC schools, offering to organize an officially sanctioned New England championship tournament. Despite only one response—to turn him down—prep school softball gained momentum. PA hosted a clinic to help launch Phillips Exeter's program and participated in several Northfield Mount Hermon tournaments, winning titles in 1994, 1995, and 1999. Beginning in 2001, eight eastern schools played in the first Big East Prep Invitational Softball Tournament, a two-day, double-elimination event cohosted by PA and Brooks School. To date, PA has won four of the eight Big East tournaments played to completion and finished as runner-up three times. A 3–2 victory over Exeter in the penultimate game of the 2012 season marked the 300th win for PA under Drench's direction.

Interscholastic sports like softball are an integral part of Andover's educational program. Players juggle demanding academic and extracurricular schedules, learning how to manage their time while seeking to perform at a consistently high level. Lessons are learned in the pursuit of athletic improvement and team building, from winning and losing graciously, to accepting personal responsibility while finding common cause with teammates of diverse origins. We hope these rich experiences will have a positive effect on future careers and relationships.

Today we celebrate those whose vision led to the decision to merge two of the nation's oldest and best boarding schools. The manifestation of that commitment can be seen in the beautifully upgraded athletic facility we are happily using. The generous backers of this project—whether their support came financially, through volunteer labor, or via words of encouragement—have made a ringing statement about the place of girls' and women's sports at Andover. Fast-pitch softball is a highly demanding mental and physical activity that requires considerable skill. Yet there is no one-on-one softball; playing depends on one's capacity to work with others. The long hoped-for project we have gathered here to celebrate is the product of many hands. As we say on our team: “Be inclusive.”

Women and men, boys and girls, working, learning, and competing together: that is the embodiment of the vision that animated the merger and opened the door to Andover’s future. Today, as we start coed Andover’s fifth decade, we mark a significant step toward fully realizing that vision. Today’s softball players, like their male baseball counterparts, wear home and away uniforms and play the same number of games. We are making progress!
2 p.m.
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Remarks
Mike Kuta, Director of Athletics
Rachel Bain ’98
Peter Drench, Head Softball Coach
John Palfrey, Head of School

2:55 p.m.
National Anthem
Ceremonial First Pitch

3 p.m.
Game 1

4 p.m.
BBQ begins
Entertainment

5 p.m.
Game 2

7 p.m.
BBQ concludes
Special Thanks

For Support from the Phillips Academy Community

Rachel Bain '98
Pat Diodati
Peter Drench
Anne Ferguson
Diane Glynn
Ann Harris
Mike Kuta

John Palfrey, Head of School
Jennifer Smith
Chuck Willand '70

Phillips Academy Grounds Department
Phillips Academy Athletics Department

For Design, Engineering & Construction Services

Todd Bateson
Vincent Bitetto
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Mr. Martin Mannion
Ms. Lindsay R. Maroney ’07
Mrs. Kelly Mendez ’81 & Mr. Larry W. Mendez
Ms. Andrea Campbell Mooney ’99 &
Mr. Robert J. Mooney
Ms. Anh M. Nguyen ’96
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Mr. T. Mark Woodworth

John Palfrey, Head of School
Jennifer Smith
Chuck Willand '70

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