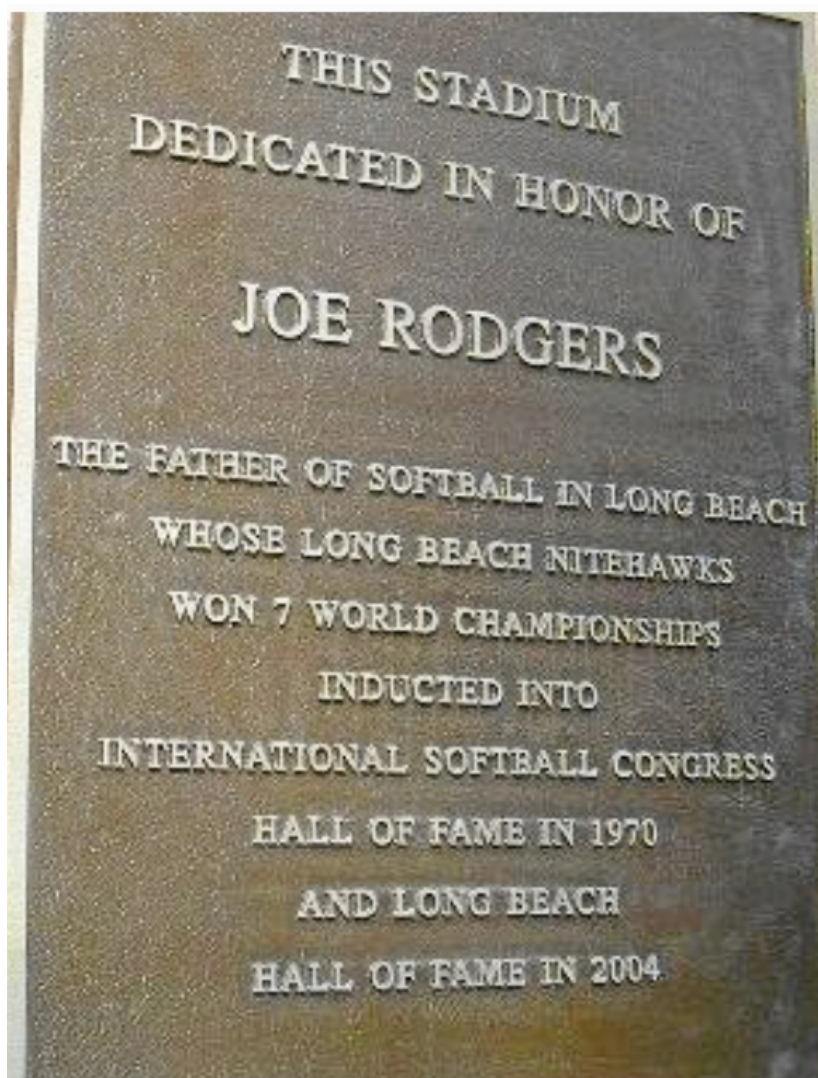


Joe Rodgers, Long Beach, CA



The world's interest in pro softball has largely waned, but there was a day when the sport was thriving, and Long Beach was its capital. The man responsible for that is local legend Joe Rodgers, whose tribute in the Long Beach Softball Hall of Fame reads thus:

"Joe Rodgers is solely responsible for putting Long Beach on the map in the fastpitch softball scene."

So it's fitting that the city's top softball venue bears his name, Joe Rodgers Stadium.

Rodgers was the founder, owner, and manager of the Long Beach Nitehawks, the top softball team in the area, and in the nation. Rodgers managed the Nitehawks to seven ISC World Titles, earning induction into the ISC Hall of Fame and the Helms Hall of Fame.

According to longtime fan and unofficial Nitehawks historian Dan Gooch, the draw of Friday night summer softball games in those days was as big as any football or basketball game.

"They were unbelievable," he says. "For 25 cents at what was then Park Avenue Field, you got an incomparable experience."

"One thing they always advertised was that they had Friday night home games all summer long," says former Nitehawks player Jim Herrick. The result was standing-room only crowds ringing the field, which was all dirt back then.

"Everybody was there," says Gooch. "And when they hosted an ISC World Title in the late '50s, it lasted 27 innings, until after one in the morning—and nobody left."

The Press-Telegram headline the next day — the sport was so popular they held the presses — was simply, “It Actually Went 27 Innings,” to help fans who were there convince their buddies they weren’t telling a tall tale.

Rodgers’ importance to the city can be measured by more than just the number of championships his teams brought home, however. He created a culture of excitement that can still be found in fans like Gooch — he has only one magnet on his refrigerator, and it’s a Nitehawks patch, even though the team disbanded in 1988. But Rodgers’ impact was even deeper than that: He was actually the original owner of the land where the softball field was put together, and he donated it to the city to ensure kids would continue to have the opportunity to play the sport that he loved.

The facility was dedicated in his name, and then five years ago, was dedicated again as Joe Rodgers Stadium, and the field was renamed as Red Meairs field, in honor of the man who succeeded Rodgers with the Nitehawks.