



A Cooler by the Lake



Softball and hardball rec leagues are as Chicago as it gets as long as you don't forget the beer. Bladder up!



By Mark Sinclair

Although not always evident at Wrigley Field or in the parking lots at U.S.Cellular Field, there is more to baseball in Chicago than heckling ump's, wolfing down Vienna Beef and dreaming of World Series victories that never come. Some people actually take to the diamonds to experience the thrill of victory and agony of defeat for themselves.

Want to join in? Chicago Sport and Social Club and its fellow recreational sports league organizers are already hosting "spring training" games, but league play for 12- and 16-inch softball takes place at intervals throughout the spring, summer and fall, and it's pretty much rolling admission, so keep an eye on their websites and jump in whenever you're ready. Baseball leagues, populated by more seasoned players, are another matter. If you're a free-agent hardballer eager to hone your rusty skills, it can take longer to find a team, so start making inquiries now.

Sixteen-inch softball

Invented by a group of transplanted Harvard and Yale alumni in the late 1800s, this baseball variant is a venerable Chicago tradition.

So little does the game resemble its hardball cousin, that tourists visiting Grant Park on a summer afternoon can be forgiven for gawking at men and women shagging fly balls sans mitts and swinging at an object resembling a half-deflated soccer ball.

Although there are a few exceptions, hitting a foul ball with two strikes results in an out, and a tenth roving fielder is allowed, the rules resemble closely to those of baseball.

But oh, that crazy ball. Its enormity can be misleading. It's tempting to swing out of your shoes at the Great Pumpkin sized projectile floating your way, but salty old pros know better. "A lot of guys will tell you it looks like an offensive game," says Clem Jaskot, owner of Phyllis' Musical Inn and a longtime 16-inch softballer. "But if you play better defense, you'll win more games."

"You start out with a new ball, but as the game goes on, it turns into a sponge," adds John Huston, a Ukrainian Village journalist who's an avid player. "If you can put it between infielders, you have a better chance than if you try to hit it as hard as you can."

Players range from scream-at-the-ump serious to chug-a-beer-at-every-base laid-back, and there are women's, men's and coed leagues at every level. Chicago 16-inch ball is also linked to the city's bar culture, and rivalries between taverns are common. Bar sponsorship helps defray costs and provides an integral meeting place after the game. "The best is when you're playing against a team that's a bunch of dicks," Huston says. "Afterwards you say, 'Oh, I hated that guy.' A lot of good bonding comes out of that."

Get involved: Chicago Sport and Social Club (www.chicagosocial.com) offers a huge variety of leagues, as do its competitors Sports Monster (www.playfulmonster.com/chicago) and Players Sports Group (www.playerssports.net). Teams can also organize their own leagues on certain fields through the Chicago Park District (www.chicagoparkdistrict.com). Check the Park District website for contact information for specific parks.

Twelve-inch softball

With its faster pitching and a harder ball that maintains its density throughout nine innings, this game is closer in spirit to baseball, but less intense and without the same potential for injuries. Players' hands are protected by gloves, so it's less damaging to the digits than 16-inch. "You see these guys with the first knuckle of their pinky finger at a weird angle, and you know they've played 16-inch at some point," Huston says.

Chicago Sport and Social Club president Jason Erkes, whose organization registers about 400 to 500 softball teams every summer, says that 12-inch ball is the game of choice for the city's most intense softball competitors. But not all 12-inch enthusiasts smear on eye black and adopt nicknames like "The Crusher." With so many fields hosting so many leagues, it's easy to find a game at any level of devotion to winning. Most of the competitive teams play in single-sex leagues; coed groups tend to be more recreational.

Get involved: Sport and Social, Sports Monster and Players Sports all organize a gaggle of leagues, complete with bar sponsors and myriad opportunities for flirtation. Also, check in with the Park District to see if you can arrange to play directly through your neighborhood park's own administration.

Baseball

When Jack Pohlmeier, president of the Chicago Central Men's Senior Baseball League ("senior" meaning crusty old-timers of 28 years or better), says, "Baseball's just different from softball," he's talking about more than basic details like distance between bases (90 feet versus about 60), pitching (overhand versus underhand), and the ball's size and density (9 inches around and hard enough to raise welts on your shins). "Baseball is a difficult sport," he says, "because if you don't play it, you lose the skills."

Few, if any, purely recreational adult baseball leagues exist. A per-season cost of about \$300 for each player to cover field rentals, plus a significant outlay for equipment, from spikes to bats to baseball pants, force players to treat the game as more than a lark.

"I have guys from my team who pitched in the minor leagues," Pohlmeier says. "There are very few guys in our league who didn't play at least high school baseball. It's for people who have played organized ball, not for people who say, 'Well, I love watching the Cubs on TV. Maybe I could play, too.'"

Playing baseball often requires a suburban road trip. "The fields in Chicago are usually pretty bad," says Michael Schweda, who heads up five teams all called the Chicago River Bandits in various leagues. His teams usually play on suburban high school or college baseball diamonds.

Get involved: "The Web is the best way to find leagues in your area," Schweda says. The sites for the Chicago River Bandits (www.chicagoriverbandits.com) and Chicago Central Men's Senior Baseball League (www.chicagocentralmsbl.com) are good places to start. It's too late to register a team with these leagues, but they're always looking for individual players to fill weak spots on teams. These two leagues barely scratch the surface of the amateur baseball subculture. Expect to have to try out if you want to be considered. These guys aren't screwing around.

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