

## Chicago Tribune



### 16-inch Superheroes

*Weekend warriors come out in force to play*

*Chicago's unique softball game*

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It's 12:30 on a Sunday afternoon, and members of the 16-inch softball team Ishtar on Beta are trickling onto the outskirts of a diamond at Grant Park. "Who's number -3?" shouts one teammate as she hands out the jerseys on May 16, the first day of the spring season. The bizarrely numbered players and even more bizarre team name are typical for the quirky sport, a beloved Chicago pastime.

Sixteen-inch softball is still going strong in the Windy City, where it was created on Thanksgiving Day 1887. Legend has it that an excited Yale University alum threw a boxing glove in the air in celebration of his alma mater's football victory over Harvard University--but a frustrated Harvard alum nearby swung at the glove with a broomstick. Indoor baseball, the grandfather of 16-inch softball, was born.

There's no doubt it's an odd sport. The ball is big and hard to grip with one hand. It's a big boulder fresh out of the box, but becomes a leaden pillow late in the game. Pitchers lob it in underhand, which means all the power has to be generated by the batter. Long, lazy fly balls will kill an inning, but sharp grounders and liners can keep a team batting for hours. The bases are close together and--here's the key--the defense isn't allowed to use mitts.

"Everybody's had jammed fingers," says John Sangimino, 33, of the North Side. "That's just part of the game."

With such a high probability of hand injuries and concussions, not to mention unpredictable Chicago weather, why do 16-inch softball loyalists exist? "Part of it is the tradition," Sangimino says. "It's a very Chicagoey thing to do."

Teammate Tom Ellis, 34, of Lincoln Park grew up playing 16-inch ball on the South Side with his dad. Now he says he sticks with the sport because the slowness of the pitches makes it possible to "get old and still be able to play a decent game."

After moving to Chicago six years ago and learning about 16-inch softball, Ishtar rookie Katrina Sopkovich, 29, joined her company's squad and, taking the suggestion of a friend of a friend, switched to Ishtar on Beta. "It's one of those great summer pastimes," the Lakeview resident says. "It's a great way for me to meet people. The sun, a fun sport and new friends--it's great."

#### Leagues let players have a ball

For some, the game is all about the fun. Ishtar on Beta is one of 12 teams in the Chicago Sport and Social Club's Sunday 16-inch coed recreational softball league at Grant Park. The club sponsors 16-inch softball leagues throughout the week, most of which are co-ed. Some leagues are men-only. In addition to calling Grant Park home, some of the leagues play at Lakeshore, Lincoln, Revere, Waveland and Wrightwood Parks, and the New City YMCA.

Every Sunday, 17 people--ten men and seven women between the ages of 27 and 40--show up in Grant Park suited up for Ishtar on Beta. The team takes its name from one of Gary Larson's "Far Side" comic strips, where the character goes to hell's video store and the only movie rental available is the flop "Ishtar" in beta format. "It's a horrible name for the team," player John Sangimino says. "But that's what makes it good."

Ishtar--the team, not the goddess--last won its league championship two seasons ago, and Sangimino is optimistic for this year, even though the team hasn't had much success so far. Ishtar lost its season opener and missed out on its subsequent games due to rain and the Memorial Day holiday.

### NAME CALLING

Chicagoans take off the gloves and get a little dirty when naming their softball teams. This year is no different as teams tap into a number of inspirations to find names.

Ross Anthos, an image technology director, used his name for his team: Ross Vegas. "I'm not trying to be ... full of myself," Anthos said. It's just that he does "all the legwork, like putting up the money, getting the sponsors."

Pop culture rouses creativity for teams called The A-Team, Mr. T and the Damn Fools, The Stooges, Children of the Corn, The Stone Cutters and Kurt Cocaine and the Speedball Fanatics.

Other team names are designed for the sole purpose of being ludicrous. These include:

- The Dead Presleys
- Dirty Dozen
- The Donkey Punchers
- The Marlboro Men
- Grass
- Poodles in Heat
- The Knumbskulls
- Detox
- The Raunchous Brothers
- The Boozers
- Slow, Fat, Drunk and White.