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Child's Play, Adult Spin

If kickball's hot now, what's next? Dodgeball?

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If the ball in one corner of Brands Park calls to mind the movie "Bend It Like Beckham," the ball in the opposing corner recalls another British export, TV's "Teletubbies."

As bouncy and banana-yellow as the Tubbie named Laa-Laa, the kickball in this Monday night game rarely plays hard to get, inviting contact to the same degree that the neighboring soccer ball seems to dodge it during a simultaneous match.

That accessibility helps explain why so many Chicago adults are regressing to a prepubescent pastime.

The Chicago Sport and Social Club's co-ed kickball league, introduced last fall with 10 or 12 teams, sold out of slots this spring. More than 50 teams now play either on Monday nights at Brands Park on Belmont and Elston Avenues or on Saturdays in Lincoln Park.

Separately, the World Adult Kickball Association, based in Washington, D.C., is branching to Chicago as it builds to 10,000 players across the country. On June 17, the North Side's Deep Dish Division kicks off at Chase Park, then on June 19, the Great Fire Division on the South Side begins at Sheridan Park, near the University of Illinois at Chicago.

A level playing field

"Kickball gives people that flashback to childhood of playing fun games out in the park," said Chicago Sport and Social Club President Jason Erkes, 33, who jokes that dodgeball could be the next big thing.

"It's not like anyone got scholarships going to a major university playing kickball," he said. "No one was on a high school all-star team playing kickball. Everyone has pretty much the same skill level. It's fun."

Accessibility isn't the only attraction. It's also the sensory association with simpler times.

"It's the sound and smell of the ball--it's not so pleasant, it's a rubber smell--and when you kick the ball just right, you can hear this ring, like a 'phting!' and it just reverberates," said Soren Bakken, the World Adult Kickball Association's first full-time employee, by phone from Washington. There, a group of college buddies started playing about six years ago "just as a pickup thing- -and to pick up women," Bakken, 31, said, half-joking.

This generation of kickball is not exactly child's play. Nor is it sloucher's sport.

In the Chicago Sport and Social Club league, there's the occasional mid-inning cigarette in the outfield. There's also the occasional pulled groin at home plate.

Umpire Patrick Gillespie, 32, said he sees one of these injuries about every two weeks.

"People haven't kicked a kickball in years," Gillespie said. "They come out swinging and, all of a sudden, whoops!"

The social aspect attracts many. But the atmosphere is not always laid-back, Brands Park players reported.

"It's not as intense as softball leagues would be--that's what we thought going in to it," said Ryan Ratliff, 31, who lives in Rolling Meadows.

"The first teams we played were insane, gung-ho. They all had matching shirts."

In the inaugural matchup, his team fell victim to the slaughter rule, losing 16-1.

"The first game we were hanging out on the grass, and the other team was stretching and running," said Erin Arnheim, 25, a teammate of Ratliff's who lives in Wrigleyville. "We thought, 'We've got to step it up.'"

The team secured sponsorship by a bar. "And we practiced in the rain the next week," Arnheim said. Now they have a couple of wins under their own shirts.

As if to drive home the point about the progress, Ratliff scored a home run in the third inning of this recent Monday night game.

From bowling to this

A few yards away, another team was warming up with stretches on the grass. But it was the cooler stocked with refreshments that members credited for their winning streak.

Six of them met "in another thing I'm not too proud of"--a bowling league through the same club--said Andrew Winton, 27, of Lincoln Park.

Asked which of the two undertakings so far has demanded more athleticism or held more sex appeal, Winton self-mocked, "'Let's see, Andrew's sports are bowling and kickball.' ... I don't think the girls are going to be pounding down my door."

Charlie Uchill, 35, of Wrigleyville, however, glowed with pride after his game that night. Was this--about five home runs in one game--his most triumphant performance ever?

"Back in 3rd grade, I had one that came close," he said, passing sweat-soaked soccer players on his way to post-game festivities. "But this is right up there."