

## Chicago Tribune



### **KICK START YOUR SOCIAL LIFE**

*Kickball isn't just a kids game, it can help you make connections*

Courtney Linehan, REDEYE

Jun 8, 2006

Marisa Baile and Mike Johnson, her boyfriend of three years, met on the kickball field.

Kate Brandes landed a new job thanks to her kickball connections.

And Laura Klocker built bonds with co-workers after starting a team at work. The game, almost synonymous with grad-school recess and junior-high gym class, is gaining popularity among adult recreational athletes who have taken kickball from child's play to an effective business and social networking tool. With at least five major leagues in Chicago this summer, kickball may be on pace to become "the new American pastime," according to the World Adult Kickball Association.

"What makes it different from flag football or softball leagues is those are real sports," Baile said. "This really isn't, so it's easier to have that social aspect."

Networking seems to define adult kickball from a team's first meet-and-greet to the leaguewide end-of-season parties.

Baile, 30, and boyfriend Johnson, 36, met playing kickball three years ago. Baile remembers introducing herself as Johnson came up to bat--she was playing catcher--and later trying to keep the young relationship secret from their kickball friends.

Baile, who lives in Wrigleyville, said the possibility of meeting people was a big part of why she started playing kickball. She and Johnson have a joint social network and friendships that extend beyond the league, even now that Johnson no longer plays. Last year, she said, they even visited a former league member who was transferred to Tokyo.

"You meet people in entirely different industries," Baile said. "A lot of those relationships carry on beyond the kickball field and beyond kickball season."

Brandes, 29, said her kickball teammates organize bar crawls, bowling leagues and 5K runs together. Brandes said what kickball lacks as a competitive sport--"from an athletic workout standpoint, it's not going to do much," she said--it makes up for with social events.

But the networking often extends beyond socializing. Brandes said she and fiance Aden Beihl found jobs through kickball connections. Brandes, who lives in the Ukrainian Village, learned that her current company was hiring when a member of another team e-mailed her that she'd heard about an opening.

"After college, if you're looking to expand your social network, it offers a really great opportunity to meet people you wouldn't know otherwise," Brandes said.

Or to get better acquainted with people you do know. While most kickball leagues allow players to sign up as individuals, it is just as common for whole teams to register. Brandes said most of her teammates went to college with Beihl, while Baile signed up when a friend decided to start a team.

Klocker organized a team with her co-workers at the Federal Home Loan Bank of Chicago. She said her group's 23-player roster includes people from various parts of the office and has enabled her to meet fellow employees with similar interests. She said she initially was surprised at some of the people who came out for the team and by how competitive games can get, but she enjoys getting to know co-workers in a more relaxed environment.

"At work we're all fairly conservative, I mean, we work for a bank," said Klocker, a 29-year-old Lakeview resident. "But in kickball you can see people let loose a little bit, and that's fun."

And kickball's popularity is only gaining speed. Jason Erkes, president of the Chicago Sport and Social Club, said leagues have grown every season since starting 2 1/2 years ago. World Adult Kickball Association representative Tiffany Ficklin said her organization has doubled its membership each year since its start in 1998. And Jessica Statz, one of ChicagoKickball's founders, said she's been impressed with the success the league is having in its inaugural season.

"It's a game where you don't have to be very athletic, you don't really need to know the rules to play," Statz said. "And if you mess up, it's just part of the fun."