

Chicago Tribune



PlayBall

Adults get a kick out of kids' games

*Chris McNamara for RedEye
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GET OUT

A handful of spectators had gathered along the fence surrounding Chase Park, 4701 N. Ashland Ave., on Saturday. They watched two teams square off in a kickball match on the dusty softball diamond. There was giggling between plays and squeals when the ball went airborne. But the players weren't children--they were adults doing their best impressions of free-wheeling kids.

It was a beautiful sight to Aden Beihl. "This is a blast," said the Midwest regional representative for the World Adult Kickball Association. "What a beautiful day."

WAKA has blown up like a red rubber ball since it's founding in 1998; the association hopes to have 25,000 members this year. "We're a social-athletic organization that promotes the joy of kickball to those young at heart," Beihl says.

It's a growing market; the young at heart are beginning to reclaim the games of their youth. In addition to WAKA, other sporting leagues including Chicago's Sports Monster and the Sport and Social Club offer kickball as well as more "adult" sports such as football and golf. Windy City Fieldhouse has hosted Wiffle ball games and dodge ball contests.

"We started a year and a half ago with 12 kickball teams," says Sport and Social Club President Jason Erkes. "Today, we have 60 to 70 teams playing in multiple seasons." Most of the players in these leagues are in their 20s and 30s. Kickball offers them a non-strenuous supplement to treadmills and aerobics classes.

"This is the least favorite sports amongst physical educators," Beihl admits. "It's not active enough."

Of course, the trappings of adulthood do creep into kickball. Players sign waivers before they take the field. Last year, a nasty knee injury sent one player to the emergency room. And after the games, rather than heading home for dinner and homework, players head to the bar. Facing jobs and mortgages and taxes, adults are drawn to the innocence of the games they played as children. "This is a fun, no-pressure game, and the simplicity makes it accessible to all," Beihl says.

Erkes believes that kickball, broom ball (a derivation of hockey played on ice, in sneakers, with brooms and balls) and other "kiddie" sports offer nostalgia along with exercise. "You can remember your days on the blacktop outside of school," he says. "These are great flashback sports."

Kate Brandes, 27, had her flashback when she joined a charity kickball game a few years ago. The return to her childhood hooked her, again, on the sport. "It's just fun to be running around in the park with your friends," she says. "It's inconsequential. It's just a kickball game."

Join a league

WAKA's kickball season begins May 25. To register, visit www.worldkickball.com. The next available kickball league with Chicago Sport and Social Club begins May 8. To register, visit www.chicagosocial.com.