

Chicago Tribune

Spring action *Warmer weather brings out the athlete in all of us*

By Campbell Roth

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When the temperature spiked last week and the lakefront paths and beaches swelled with Chicagoans coming out of hibernation, one thing was clear: Spring was finally on its way. Wednesday is the first full day of spring--and for many, it arrives not a moment too soon.

"There's only a couple warm months in Chicago, so it makes people want to get outside and enjoy it," said Jason Erkes, president of the Chicago Sport and Social Club. "People are cooped up all winter and can't wait to get outside." Erkes said that's why spring sports leagues, including softball, soccer, football and kickball, are so highly anticipated. "All you have to do to see how popular the spring leagues are is notice how many people were out running, walking and blading outside last week," he said.

About 60,000 people register for Chicago Sport and Social Club leagues, making up about 4,500 teams year-round, Erkes said. The most popular event is beach volleyball in the summer, and registration already is under way, Erkes said. Sports Monster, another recreation league organizer, enrolls more than 350 teams in the spring, court sports manager Gwen Mikolajczak estimated. That number jumps to 600 in the summer, she said.

Colleen Curtis is one of many Chicagoans ready for spring play. The Uptown resident couldn't decide between softball and kickball, so she picked both. She's on two softball teams--one on Sundays and one on Mondays--and a kickball team on Tuesdays that was formed entirely on Craigslist. "We're called Perfect Strangers since no one knows each other," she said.

"You want to go outside anyway, so you think, 'Well, this is organized, and everyone has to show up,'" the 24-year-old said of her reasons for getting involved in team sports after finishing college at Loyola. The sports are fun to play, she said, and the team aspect makes it easy for her to meet people her own age. "I'll do it with a couple of friends, but we won't form our own team, we'll just go on a random team, so you meet everyone else," she said. "I've met quite a few people that way."

Not everyone is looking for friends--or a friendly game.

Steve Esposito of Old Town is organizing his own basketball team to play in a league at Windy City Fieldhouse. After playing as an individual for two years in the league and finding the other players didn't compete at his level, he's scouting for talent on Craigslist. "I've got about nine or 10 guys so far. We're going to meet up and practice and I'm going to evaluate them," said Esposito, 28. "I want someone who plays hard and will go out there and hustle. ... I want to win."

Curtis, on the other hand, said she just likes meeting up with people week after week to throw the ball around, go out for a drink afterward and just celebrate spring in Chicago. "You meet new people, and you get to run around, and it's fun," she said. "It's a lot better than running by myself."

'Like gym class for adults'

With multiple sports and various levels of competition, there's a team out there for anyone who wants to play. Registration is under way for outdoor spring sports, and even some summer sports such as beach volleyball. The fees, which vary according to sport and level of competition, typically include a shirt or jersey, equipment, and food and drink specials at a local bar, where teams go to celebrate a win or mourn a loss.

If you sign up as an individual, you can request to be on a team that suits you, whether it's more social or more competitive, said Gwen Mikolajczak of Sports Monster. "It's like gym class for adults," she said.

Here's a listing of sports, sign-up and start dates, and fees, according to league organizers' Web sites. For location information, visit the sites listed.

-- Campbell Roth, Redeye Special contributor

KICKBALL

Chicago Sport and Social Club

Registration: Ongoing; season starts in early May.

Fee: \$650 to \$800 per team or \$75 individually.
Sign-up: chicagosocial.com

World Adult Kickball Association

Registration: Now open; season starts May 1.

Fee: \$70 individually.
Sign-up: kickball.com

Sports Monster

Registration: Now open for two leagues; seasons start Sunday and March 28.

Fee: \$575 per team or \$70 individually.
Sign-up: sportsmonster.net

FLAG FOOTBALL

Chicago Sport and Social Club

(flag and touch; co-ed and men's; teams of 7 or 8)
Registration: Ongoing; season starts first week of May.

Fee: \$775 to \$1,015 per team or \$85 to \$125 per person individually.
Sign-up: chicagosocial.com

SOCCER

Chicago Sport and Social Club

Registration: Ongoing; season starts in early May.

Fee: \$780 to \$1,250 per team or \$85 to \$100 individually.
Sign-up: chicagosocial.com

Sports Monster

(co-ed, men's, women's; teams of 5, 6 or 11)
Registration: Ongoing; multiple leagues available, earliest start date is March 28.

Fee: \$775 to \$995 per team or \$115 to \$140 individually.
Sign-up: sportsmonster.net

SOFTBALL

Chicago Sport and Social Club

(co-ed and men's, 12" and 16")
Registration: Ongoing; season starts in early May.

Fee: \$750 to \$1,300 per team or \$85 to \$100 individually.
Sign-up: chicagosocial.com

Sports Monster

(co-ed and men's, 12")
Registration: Ongoing; multiple leagues are available, earliest start date is Monday.

Fee: \$825 per team or \$80 individually.
Sign-up: sportsmonster.net

Chicago Park District

(co-ed and men's, 16")
Registration: Ongoing for multiple leagues; seasons begin April 2, April 23 and May 8.

Fee: \$200 to \$410 per team.
Sign-up: chicagoparkdistrict.com

VOLLEYBALL

Chicago Park District

Registration: Ongoing; season begins April 2.

Fee: \$10.
Sign-up: chicagoparkdistrict.com

Beach volleyball

Chicago Sport and Social Club

(co-ed, men's, women's)
Registration: Ongoing; season starts first week of June.

Fee: \$190 to \$500 per team or \$85 to \$95 individually.
Sign-up: chicagosocial.com