

OVER THE HILL AND PICKING UP SPEED

.This decade has provided a revolution in the values and attitudes of our senior population. Today's seniors have smashed the stereotypes about the aging process and changed the way all of us will think and behave as we arrive at 50-plus. As we continue to push back the frontiers of aging, we find some interesting societal changes. Seniors are searching for ways to stay healthy and enjoy their lives with diversity, energy, and a commitment to feeling good and looking good (Stefan, 1997).

The new millennium will challenge recreation professionals to provide for the senior user group. Highly competitive masters and seniors games are growing in every sport and require quality facilities and the support of program specialists. No where is this more evident than in the game of softball. Invented (1888) in Chicago as an indoor game, it was at various times called indoor baseball, mush ball, playground ball, kitten ball, and, because it was also played by women, ladies ball.

The Rage for Play Continues

According to a recent article in the Dallas Morning News, there are more than 1.3 million men and women over the age of 50 now playing softball, and the numbers continue to grow. Softball has always been the most popular amateur team sport in the United States United States, officially United States of America, republic (2005 est. pop. 295,734,000), 3,539,227 sq mi (9,166,598 sq km), North America. The United States is the world's third largest country in population and the fourth largest country in area. . With more than 40 million participants nationwide, it truly is America's pastime. A diverse sport that accommodates people regardless of age, gender, race, or special needs, it has become the sport of choice of increasing numbers of senior athletes.

This fascination with playing ball is deep-rooted in our country's heritage. British colonists brought with them various forms of cricket. In cricket, other than Test matches, One-Day International matches, Twenty20 matches and First class matches, other forms of the sport do exist. At all levels, the rules of cricket are often modified. , a stately game divided into innings and controlled by umpires, and founders, a children's stick-and-ball game. Over the years, various forms of town-ball were devised and played on city streets, schoolyards, and college campuses. The playing rules, field layout, and equipment depended on local conditions, and varied from place to place. But across the country these ball games were an important component of the social fabric of the day.

In 1824 while a student at Bowdoin College, at Brunswick, Maine; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that ball playing "communicated such an impulse to our limbs and joints that there is nothing now heard of, in our leisure hours, but ball, ball, ball. I cannot prophesy. And patriot Walt Whitman wrote in 1846: "I see great things in base ball. It's our game -- the American game. It will take our people out of doors, fill them with oxygen and give them a larger physical stoicism.

The softball version of the game quickly spread throughout the country. The games made their way into vacant lots, city streets, farm pastures, front lawns, and backyards. The game went to Europe during World War I and flourished during the Great Depression. It was standardized and organized throughout the country in 1933 with the establishment of a national governing body, the Amateur Softball Association.

Hundreds of new softball fields were built under the order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Public Works Administration Public Works Administration (PWA), in U.S. history, New Deal government agency established (1933) by the Congress as the Federal Administration of Public Works, pursuant to the National Industrial Recovery Act. projects. And during World War II nearly all military bases, at home and abroad, hosted softball games.

Feel Great, Participate

Today's seniors literally grew up with the game of softball. Some learned to hit the ball during the Depression when there was little else to do. Others may have taken a break to raise a family or advance their career, then returned to the game. At 50-plus, these "ageless";

athletes are healthy, strong, and can still run and play the game.

Given the opportunity to play among their peers, the excitement stirs, and dreams of on-the-field success are rekindled. Most senior players can commit to the time and cost of travel and play. Therefore, popularity and growth of senior softball has been phenomenal.

The 1980s saw a proliferation of teams playing slow-pitch all around the country. Most of the original senior softball teams that appeared on the scene during this time were products of senior centers or other special senior programs run by government agencies. Efforts to engage seniors in active team competition naturally led to the "ball" game. Early games were played for fun and exercise. But before too long the games began to get more competitive. A new sport -- senior softball -- was off and running.

By 1989, senior-level softball had become so popular that a Senior World Series was organized in Greensboro, N.C. During the 1990s, many of the players moving into the senior program had played-competitive softball through their thirties and forties. The game thus moved to a higher level, taking with it the expectation of using the best fields and equipment available.

Today hundreds of senior teams travel around the country to play in senior tournaments established by sanctioning organizations. The travel, a welcome side benefit of participation, has elevated the senior program to an important component of sport tourism.

Players Make the Difference

While the rules of the game remain essentially the same for seniors, the older players have developed a camaraderie special and unique to the sports world. Teams still play as hard as ever to win. Players put on their game faces and give 110 percent toward a winning effort. But after the final out is made, the special relationships become evident. Players share a close kinship, a common bond of senior sportsmanship.

Too Gray to Play?

Senior softball players come from all walks of life. Professionals, business owners, government workers, and retired civilian and military leaders all mesh to "become" senior softball. On the local level, one will find business and political leaders, a veritable community Who's Who.

Park and recreation professionals will face the challenge in years to come of accommodating this exploding senior user group. Local park leagues are forming in all parts of the country and will continue to grow as baby boomers come of age.

Small communities, which may only support a single team, have formed regional or statewide leagues that hold once-a-month weekend tournaments during the season. Diversity is of the essence here.

Seniors are so committed to returning to athletic competition that they will adapt their local program to accommodate the needs and skill levels of players. At the national level, competition is arranged according to age. This gives players the opportunity to compete against their athletic equals. The organizers of senior softball programs have provided seniors with the chance to participate in an environment that allows fair competition and fosters the camaraderie that exists today.

Adding Years to Life/Life to Years

The next century will witness an explosion in the 50-plus crowd's involvement in health and fitness programs and senior sports. Senior athletes will seek participation in events designed for the elite of their peer group. Not unlike other age groups, seniors appreciate the recognition that competition provides.

At a time when a little encouragement is necessary to improve self-esteem, senior sports may be the best prescription for many older Americans. Team sports provide physical activity and mental alertness, foster esprit de corps among companions, and require individuals to set goals for the future.

The evolution from sandlot sports hero to super senior athlete brings a new zest for life. As we enter a new tomorrow, recreation professionals will be forced to focus on both the physical and social aspects of senior issues. In turn, senior athletic groups will provide a valuable resource to local recreation programs. The ballgame will continue to be an important tradition in our society, and senior players will carry that banner into the next millennium.

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EDITOR'S NOTE (2011)

R.B. Thomas Jr., Executive Director of the International Senior Softball Association, has spent the past 17 years working to enhance recreational opportunities for seniors throughout the United States. Senior programming, however, says Thomas, continues to be neglected by many park and recreation departments.

"Seniors, for the most part, are reluctant to lobby for their own issues," Thomas

says. "They would prefer to work for their children's and grandchildren's recreational needs.

"Many officials are not cognizant of seniors' needs or the growing 'active and ageless' senior population," he continues. "The new millennium will challenge recreation professionals to find the resources to provide for the senior user group. Blind to the issues of age, gender, and physical disabilities, senior softball allows seniors to continue 'feeling good and looking good'."