

When the third annual Villages Masters Athlete Softball Championships wraps up on Oct. 26, 2008, in The Villages, Fla., the Southern Trace Chiropractic Center Silver Bullets hope to walk away with the gold once again.

"Last year was our second win and this year will be our third," said Penny Zielinski, the 55-year-old captain of the 50+ women's team, which has won the tournament two years in a row. "We got a heck of a team." Zielinski and a friend founded the Silver Bullets three years ago, when they discovered their hometown of The Villages, an active adult retirement community of 70,000 in central Florida, didn't have a 50+ team they could join. The team has been winning ever since.

The squad recently won the Senior Softball World Championship Spring Nationals in Winter Haven, Fla., in April. "They've got some talent," affirmed Avis Vaught, manager of the Village Vixens, who won their 50 + division at the Florida Senior Games State Championships in 2006 but surrendered to the Silver Bullets in the finals of Villages Masters Athlete Softball Championships in both 2006 and 2007.

The Bullets' are successful despite rarely practicing together. While most players live in The Villages, others live in Clearwater, on Florida's west coast and several fly in from New York for big tournaments. The teammates play in local leagues on other teams and practice as the Silver Bullets only about once a month. "Most of the girls play by instinct so everybody really knows what they're supposed to be doing when we do get together," said Zielinski who works out with a neighborhood league on weekends and Wednesdays. "The skill level is so high, that team practice isn't crucial to their performance."

Softball is exploding in the senior market and in The Villages in particular, said Villages Masters Athlete Softball Championships tournament director Joe Bouthillette. "Seven years ago we had one field," Bouthillette said. "Now, we have nine fields and organized play is run six days a week." At last count, The Villages was home to 3,000 softball players, many of whom once played professionally, including Ray Knight, former third basemen for the New York Mets and MVP of the 1986 World Series. At last year's Villages Masters Athlete Softball Championships, Knight threw out the first ball and acted as master of ceremonies.

Just like the spread of softball in The Villages, the tournament has expanded each year since its inception. In 2006, 12 teams and two divisions - a women's 50 + and a men's 50 + -- participated in the Championships. Last year, the number of teams increased to 24 with the addition of 60+ men's and women's divisions. This year, the organizers expect 32 teams with the addition of 70+ brackets for men and women's divisions. While 40 percent of the teams participating in the tournament hail from The Villages, a city that which sprawls over three Florida counties, teams across the United States and Canada come to play, and softball fans turn out in droves to watch them. Last year hundreds of spectators packed the bleachers all three days of the tournament.

"They come here to The Villages because of our first-rate facilities," said Bouthillette. "You're

not going to get a barebones softball tournament - you're going to get a festive atmosphere. When you come to The Villages for a softball tournament you're getting a mini vacation as well." Shelby Simmons, 65, whose Orlando, Fla.-area team, Mandolin's Senior Moments, won the championship's 60+ division last year, outplaying the Villages Merchants White, agreed. "They're a great host, with great facilities," said Simmons, an infielder who manages the team. "There's another national tournament going on in Orlando that same weekend but we choose to go the Villages."

Simmons attributed last year's 12-10 win in the final to the team's defensive play, which culminated in pitcher Jerome "Killer" McCoy's game-ending double play. With the addition of several younger players, his team hopes to contend for the championship again this year, Simmons said. "By younger players I mean people who are just turning 60," Simmons said, laughing. "That's young for us." (Story by Meghan Deerin)