

# Girls finally get a team of their own

## With Chicago Pioneers baseball, girls 11 to 14 no longer have to give up the game

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Anna Cella has always played baseball with boys and remembers fondly her first fake leather glove that she used when tossing a ball with her dad in the front yard.

After turning 14, the high school freshman was expected to drop baseball and move into softball, like other girls.

But Cella and a mittful of youngsters from Chicago and the suburbs are refusing to give up their game. They are starting their own team, the Chicago Pioneers, which makes its debut at an international tournament in Orlando next month.

Baseball may be America's national pastime, organizers say, but not for most girls who want to play it.

While a smattering of women's baseball teams exist in the country, including the amateur Chicago Gems, there are few opportunities for their younger counterparts.

In fact, the Pioneers are the only team from the Chicago area--and one of a rare few nationwide--that features all girls, ages 11 to 14, officials said. The fledgling team will be the only U.S. entry in Disney World's Sunshine Showdown. They eventually hope to start a league of their own.

"I knew there were girls out there who played baseball. I just never knew where to find them," said Cella, of Resurrection High School in Chicago, who plays catcher and shortstop.

In other countries, such as Canada, Japan and Australia, girls play baseball well into their teens and adulthood, league organizers said. No one seems sure why American girls are steered into softball.

"It's just a non-traditional thing," said Jim Glennie of Lansing, Mich., president of the American Women's Baseball Federation, a non-profit organization that promotes amateur baseball.

The association is developing baseball programs across the nation for girls 14 and under and is

searching for sponsors, he said. Besides Chicago, he said he expects to see more teams form in California, Arizona and the East Coast.

"Everyone thinks it's OK for girls to play baseball up to the Little League age," Glennie said. "After that, they just go into softball. It never made sense to me."

One effort is under way in San Francisco. Officials who saw the number of girls on co-ed teams decline as they grew older organized a new baseball division that opened this spring. The coaches pitched during the inaugural season, because the game was new to many of the 43 players, ages 9 to 13, who formed three teams, said Cara Prieshoff, director of the non-profit Excelsior Sports Club.

Chicago-area parents began recruiting team members last summer by calling baseball coaches to inquire about female players. As a result, they drew together a dozen players from Chicago and Wilmette, Evanston, Winnetka, Buffalo Grove and other suburbs.

They're looking for more players, not only to participate in the Sunshine Showdown Oct. 6 to 9, but also to set up a permanent team.

"For the girls that really like baseball and are able to remain on a [boys] team, they have to be pretty talented and pretty tough cookies," said Mary Jo Stegeman, 51, of Skokie, who launched the effort.

"Usually by the time they're 12, they're not only the only girl on their team, they're the only girl in their league."

Stegeman, a former Loyola Academy bowling coach, was instrumental in persuading the Illinois High School Association to sanction varsity boys bowling. She also established several high school bowling conferences in the Chicago area.

She became interested in forming a baseball league for young girls after struggling to find places for her daughter to compete.

Her daughter, Joni Stegeman, 22, attends Northwestern University with a major in mechanical engineering. In high school, she didn't make the cut for the boys team at Loyola. So she joined a women's team, the now-defunct Chicago Storm.

"Women have been playing baseball since 1866," said Mary Jo Stegeman, who is on the advisory board for the American Women's Baseball Federation. "It's just not mainstream in the United States, which is odd because it is our national pastime."

She is determined to smooth the way for more youngsters who prefer baseball.

Take Carly Callans, 12, of Wilmette, who has always played on boys teams in the Evanston Baseball Association. Last summer, teammates didn't much care that she sported a ponytail after she displayed her 62-m.p.h. pitching skills.

Her goal is to become the first woman to compete in Major League Baseball, preferably with the Cubs.

"I'm a die-hard fan," said Carly, whose favorite player is Matt Murton.

Her bedroom wall sports a poster-size baseball card picture of her aunt, Lou Arnold, who played for South Bend's Blue Sox in the 1940s. The team was part of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League, formed during World War II, that was the inspiration for the movie "A League of Their Own."

During the baseball season, her mother notes the reaction of other parents when her daughter bounds out of the dugout with the boys.

"Initially there will be some cheering, `Come on, boys!'" Judy Callans said. "She hits a double and then it's, `Come on boys! Go Carly!'"

Callans has found most boys and coaches to be accepting too--at least after they've seen her perform.

"She has to prove herself early, but to be honest we haven't encountered any bad experiences," Callans said.

Carly, like Cella, started playing T-ball as a youngster and returned to play baseball every year. Neither one has anything against softball, but simply see it as a different game. They enjoy the speed and unique skills required in baseball, the smaller ball, the nine innings compared with softball's seven. The distance between home plate and the pitcher's mound is longer in baseball, and baseballs travel farther into the outfield.

But Stegeman looks forward to the day when no girl should have to justify why she prefers baseball.

"Girls are constantly asked, why aren't you playing softball?" Stegeman said.

"It doesn't seem fair. Like anybody playing anything, they had an interest in it. They kept playing because they liked it."

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Play ball

For information on the American Women's Baseball Federation, call Mary Jo Stegeman at 847-707-8944. The Web site is awbf.org.

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