

BASEBALL

Venturi-Veenema looking for growth in women's baseball

BY BILL SKOWRONSKI | STAFF WRITER

Regina Dominican athletic director Bridget Venturi-Veenema decided not to kick back and relax on a beach this summer with a tropical drink and a pair of flip-flops. Instead, the 40-year old Deerfield resident spent her summer vacation in Taiwan winning a baseball world championship for her country -- not softball -- baseball.

It may come as a surprise to many people, but American women are playing baseball. Curious friends and strangers often interrupt by clarifying, "You mean softball, right?" However, Venturi-Veenema continually reminds them and reminds everyone in the world that women can and are playing baseball.

Venturi-Veenema plays for the USA Baseball Women's National Team with 17 other women, ages 15 to 40, from across the country. After winning a gold medal in the 2004 Women's World Cup, she was elected to the USA Baseball board of directors in 2005.

Earlier this month, her team defended its gold medal with a 13-11 victory over Japan at Tienmu Baseball Stadium. The win gave Team USA a 5-1 record and its second consecutive gold medal at the IBAF Women's World Cup. Venturi-Veenema was named an all-star outfielder while batting .444 with eight hits, four RBI and two stolen bases.

With her success this summer, Venturi-Veenema hopes women's baseball will see a surge in popularity across the country.

"I expected to go in and defend our gold medal from 2004," Venturi-Veenema said. "At that time, we thought it was going to break some ground for women's baseball, but it didn't. We battled back to get funding and the opportunity to do it again whether I was on the field or behind the scenes."

Unfortunately, the notion of women playing baseball hasn't reached many people. In a culture where boys and men play baseball and girls and women play softball, it appears the United States is not sustaining America's Pastime around the world. Recently, in the shadows of the World Baseball Classic, baseball was removed from the list of official Olympic sports.

Nonetheless, Venturi-Veenema continues to play into her adulthood for the love of the game. She began playing in youth baseball until she was 12 years old. Then, she played softball at Regina and earned a scholarship to play at the University of Michigan. After college, she accepted an opportunity to play for the Colorado Silver Bullets, a women's baseball team that competed against men's teams.

Being paid to play in major league and minor league stadiums rekindled Venturi-Veenema's love for baseball. She realized she didn't have the same love for softball and continued to play in the Chicago North Men's Senior Baseball League for the Blue Jays.

"Gender, religion and politics all disappear on the baseball field and that's the beautiful thing about the game," Venturi-Veenema said. "Because I lack the speed and strength of a male, by God's design, I have to be that much more fundamentally sound. So when I play with other women, I am that much better."

The hard work proved useful against a Japanese team that was treated rather differently than female baseball players in America.

"The Japanese team had a full camera crew following them wherever they went. They're baseball fanatics," said Venturi-Veenema. "The eastern culture has an approach that competition is the honorable part of playing. It's disgraceful to lay down for your opponent. The fans are into every pitch and every play."

"The fundamentals of the game are pure, so if you're a baseball purest, it's still enjoyable," she added. "But it's important for the USA pastime to be defended on the global scale. The United States needs to be a leader in developing baseball internationally."

The beginning stages of women's baseball may exist in the development of girls youth baseball. Locally, Mary Jo Stegeman serves on the AWBF advisory board. She hopes to create an opportunity for girls to play baseball in the Chicagoland area and beyond.

"It's important to let these girls know there's a place for them to play if this is their interest," Stegeman said. "Currently, there really aren't enough girls to have entire leagues, so we're trying to get the word out."

Disney's Wide World of Sports recently picked up the Women's World Series (Oct. 6-9). The Disney Sunshine Showdown offers two youth divisions for girls to play baseball.

More encouraging, perhaps, is the news USA Baseball recently signed a 10-year business partnership with Major League Baseball. Ideally, MLB would put its weight behind developing the women's program.

For more information on women's baseball, visit the American Women's Baseball Federation Web site at www.awbf.org.