

# Looking for a league of their own

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GURNEE -- Just four months ago, Gurnee resident Lindsay Horwitz, now 15, was a member of a groundbreaking all-girls baseball (that's baseball, folks, not softball) team that captured a three-team international tournament in Orlando, Fla.

The aptly named Chicago Pioneers, consisting of 12 players from Chicago-area suburbs, came together as quickly as a Nolan Ryan fastball, and within a month had swept the five-game 14-and-under Women's World Series competition in the Disney Sunshine Showdown against all-girls teams from Canada and Australia.

The sudden and wild success of the fledgling team belies the overriding question hanging over the Pioneers, girls baseball and Horowitz's continued participation in the sport she so loves.

"What now?"

The Pioneers continue to practice informally on a weekly basis at a Northbrook indoor facility and at times in Des Plaines, and according to catalyst Mary Jo Stegeman of Skokie, the groundswell of their success has upped the number of interested girls to a core group of 30, ranging in age from 9 to 15. Horwitz, once the lone participant from Lake County, has been joined by five other girls from Lindenhurst, Lake Villa, Mundelein and Antioch.

They all have one thing in common; a desire to play baseball with and against players of their own gender.

"It was so much less pressure playing with a team of all girls," said Horwitz, a Warren High School freshman who pitched and played center field for the Pioneers, scoring a team-high 14 runs and hitting .412 for the tournament.

"Everyone had each other's backs. It was so much more relaxing."

As compared to being the only girl on an all-boys team. That's the dangling, unsaid thought. Otherwise why would someone express utter relief, joy and lack of pressure for a player representing her country at an international competition?

Horwitz tells of a decade's worth of playing baseball, beginning at age 5, mostly as the only girl player on, for lack of a better description, "boys teams." Her experiences are mirrored by teammates who came together in three months to form the Pioneers, with Stegeman and others reaching out to Chicago-area youth baseball organizations in search of girls who had played baseball against boys.

In Horwitz's case, she became "pretty much the only girl" on her Gurnee Youth Baseball teams beginning about age 11.

In that kind of atmosphere, she said, "You feel if you make a mistake, people automatically think it's because you're a girl."

Lindsay says she and her dad, Gary, never discussed the prejudices and slights that go with being "the only."

"I felt the prejudices naturally," said Lindsay. "We never had to talk about it."

While playing on village league teams, she regularly tried out for the Warren Blue Devil Travelers, which bills itself as a feeder team to Warren High School and plays other similarly exclusive teams in the state. After three years of not making the cut, she made the team at age 14, and pitched and played shortstop.

"She was, of course, the only girl on the team," said Gary Horwitz. "And in the 65-70 games we played throughout Illinois, she was still the only girl we saw on any team."

Which brings things full circle regarding the possibility of parlaying the success of the Pioneers into furthering the cause of all-girl competitive baseball in the Chicago area.

The Pioneers have an excellent Web site, detailing the recent history of the team and a number of options for the upcoming baseball season. But absolutely nothing seems to be set in cement at this point beyond encouraging as many baseball-playing girls to contact Stegeman and to attend as many of the team's informal practice sessions as possible.

Stegeman and the Web site are working toward the following possibilities:

- Participating in several all-girls tournaments that are in the planning stages for 2007, including the possibility of an inaugural USA Baseball Champions Program for girls 15 and under. (Chicago is being looked at as a possible site for such a tournament).
- The establishment of a Chicago-area all-girls baseball league, which would require numerous participants and sponsors.

"We're also hoping an existing Little League will start a girls division and give girls a regular outlet, ideally on the North Shore somewhere," said Stegeman. "We're not advocating at this point that girls stop playing Little League on boys teams. As of yet, we don't have the numbers to offer girls a complete baseball experience. Right now we're just spreading the word by word of mouth and working to make something take off."

"If I don't get in a league with girls or if the Pioneers aren't really active, I'll play with the boys again," said Lindsay who is a guard on the Warren freshman girls basketball team.

Baseball, she said, is her favorite sport, and her feelings reflects others of her gender when she says that softball just does not offer the same experience for her as does The National Pastime.

She's worked hard at her baseball skills, including attending pitching and hitting camps, and would like to play as long as possible and said that others with similar hopes should "Keep with it and not let anybody tell you not to do it.

"The people I know who play softball respect the way I feel, " she said. "All my friends think it's cool that I play baseball.

"They think that I rule."

### **Chicago Pioneers Contact Information**

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