

Girls take swing at world series

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BY RUMMANA HUSSAIN Staff Reporter

Natalie Martinez started pitching, hitting and catching on boys baseball teams when she was 5 years old.

Ever since she first picked up a bat, the Gordon Tech High School freshman has dreamed of enjoying the national pastime with other girls as skilled as she is.

So Natalie jumped at the chance to join the all-girls Chicago Pioneers and compete with others like her from places such as Australia, Canada and Japan in the Women's World Series VI in Orlando next month.

"Playing with boys is something I enjoy and am used to, but playing with girls is something new and really exciting," said Natalie, 14.

The Chicago Pioneers -- which banded together through the efforts of local parents, coaches and the American Women's Baseball Federation Inc. -- is the first all-American team in the 14-and-under category in the international competition's history.

Other American girls in "Disney's Sunshine Showdown," as the Women's World Series is also called, are on teams with Australians and Canadians.

"It's just kind of cool being able to represent the United States," said Chicago Pioneers pitcher and catcher K.C. Dunne of Buffalo Grove.

'Team is committed'

The girls, intent on paying some of the costs for their Florida trip, have raised \$4,500 through lemonade stands, golf ball sales and donations. And they're planning a car wash at a Niles Wal-Mart Saturday to help raise an additional \$5,000 so they can bring more than nine players to the Women's World Series.

They're also holding out hope that Katie Brownell -- the Oakfield, N.Y., girl who was honored at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum for pitching a perfect Little League game in 2005 -- will join the team before the Oct. 6-9 tournament at the Disney Wide World of Sports Complex.

"This team is committed," said parent Judy Callans of Wilmette. "They're out-of-their-mind-excited to be going."

Seen as equals by boys

Sometimes being the sole girl on a baseball team means dealing with "loud boys who think they're all tough," as 13-year-old K.C. puts it. But for the most part, the girls say their male counterparts have grown to see them as equals.

Still, playing with other girls is another ballgame altogether, some Chicago Pioneers said.

"I feel like I can talk to them more and stuff," Callans' daughter Carly, 12, said of the new teammates she practices with weekly at Northbrook's Glenbrook Sports Academy.

"I think when you're playing with a group of people who are the same sex as you, you seem to step up more," added 14-year-old Northwest Sider Anna Cella, a member of a 2005 Women's World Series team that was comprised of Americans and Canadians. "You don't have to prove yourself, but at the same time you still have to work hard to show you're not just a pretty face."

Some switched to softball

The girls, organizers said, are trailblazers, because they stuck with baseball while many of their peers shifted to softball. The Women's World Series will only strengthen their self-esteem and sharpen their skills, American Women's Baseball Federation Inc. president Jim Glennie said.

"I think they'll realize their career doesn't end when the boys get stronger than they are and that they can continue to play baseball in all-female leagues with the competition being as good as they want it to be," Glennie said.

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