

Pioneers travel uncharted path

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By DENNIS MAHONEY Staff Writer

Now they can be considered pioneers in the truest sense.

The Chicago Pioneers, an under-14 age group team based in the north suburbs, became the first female girls baseball team from the U.S. to capture an international tournament Monday in Orlando, Fla.

Managed by former United States national women's team coach Jim Glennie, the Pioneers tore through a field of teams from Canada and Australia and claimed the title at the Sunshine Showdown held at Walt Disney World by edging Canada 7-6 in Monday's championship game.

The Chicago squad outscored the competition 71-20 in five games, tripping Canada 15-5 and 9-7 and Australia 20-2 and 20-0 twice to advance to the title game.

In the finale, Buffalo Grove products K.C. Dunne and Lara Horwitz switched on the power and accounted for three home runs to secure the crown.

Dunne's remarkable run included five home runs and 15 hits in 19 at-bats. She also earned the victory on the mound for the Pioneers with a four-inning stint in the championship game.

Other members of the championship squad included Meredith Fischer of Winnetka, Joanna McElroy of Northbrook, Carly Callans of Wilmette, Sarah Costello of Des Plaines, Danielle Pauly of Chicago, Mikayla Leyden of Chicago, Kate Moriarty of Chicago, Anna Cella of Chicago, Natalie Martinez of Chicago and Lindsay Horwitz of Gurnee.

Costello Maine West, Pauly Lane Tech, Cella Resurrection, Martinez Gordon Tech and Lindsay Horwitz Warren are all high school freshmen.

"I haven't been much of a power hitter before this tournament, but the fences were only about 200 feet," said a modest Dunne, a 13-year-old who attends St. Mary's in Buffalo Grove. "We only practiced together for about a month and we just came down here hoping to play our best. It's really exciting because all of our hard work paid off.

"I stopped playing in the Buffalo Grove Recreation Association last year because there were no other girls playing anymore. Now I want to try to play with the boys in high school. I've been playing baseball since I was 5 years old, and when the chance to play on this team came along, it made me realize I want to keep playing."

For McElroy, a second baseman/outfielder, the attention the squad received at the team hotel and at the airport was something she'll never forget.

"It was so amazing to have everyone asking about the team, asking how we're doing," said the Northbrook Junior High student. "It'll probably be tomorrow, or maybe next week, before it hits me that we made history at this tournament.

"I thought me and one of my neighbors were the only girls playing baseball around here. She goes to Cooperstown site of the Baseball Hall of Fame with a travel team to play and she said there are absolutely no girls when she goes there. But I've been playing baseball since I was 4 years old.

"People are always asking why I don't play softball instead of baseball, but it isn't the same thing. I think baseball is more fun and more challenging."

"A lot of people say softball is for girls, not baseball. What we're saying is that's not true," added Fischer. "Baseball is just in my blood, and I fell for it when I was real young.

"This is so cool. It's nice to know other girls are doing what you're doing and we spent a lot of time talking about our experiences playing. This team really bonded over a short period of time.

"I've been playing in the KWBA Kenilworth/Winnetka Baseball Association since I was in second grade, and I've always wanted to keep playing baseball. We didn't know how we'd stack up going down to Florida -- but we beat them all."

Greg Stegeman of Skokie, whose wife Mary Jo founded the team and whose daughter Joni is a past member of the U.S. women's national squad, served as coach for most of the workouts and every game but the title game.

"If there was a surprise, it might be the fact we were deeper than the other teams down there," Stegeman said. "I knew they could play after all the practices we had. They're all very good athletes and I heard from several of the parents that having the chance to play on a team with only girls for the first time made such an impact on them.

"It was such a pleasure to coach these girls. We worked out a couple of days a week indoors at Play Ball in Des Plaines and Glenbrook Sports Academy in Northbrook, but we only had one full practice on a field before we left for Florida.

"The look on their faces when they're out there playing is unlike anything I've ever seen in sports at any level. They play with a passion. I feel the same sense of pride watching them that I had with my daughter Joni."