

A full count: Men's fastpitch softball on decline !

By WAYNE ORTMAN (AP)

SIoux FALLS, S.D. — It was family ties that got Kevin Leick of Marshfield, Wis., into the game he loves 35 years ago.

His father and older brothers played men's fastpitch softball, the lesser-known branch of fastpitch. The 50-year-old Leick recalls playing slowpitch back in his 20s and how it "meant nothing" to hit a home run.

"Fastpitch is more challenging. It takes strategy to score runs," he said between games at a recent tournament here.

Trouble is, the sport is struggling. It has plummeted in popularity over the past half-century, shoved aside by slowpitch, baseball, even soccer. There's a notion that it's a girl's game and clearly women's fastpitch has emerged as a powerhouse high school, college and four-time Olympic sport with stars like Lisa Fernandez, Cat Osterman and Jennie Finch becoming nearly household names. No such stars on the men's side, though there is a USA Softball-sanctioned men's fastpitch national team. It just doesn't have the buzz.

"Are we losing teams? Yes, constantly," said Ken Hackmeister, executive director of the International Softball Congress. "But what people don't fully understand is we've been losing teams every year, year in and year out, since post World War II."

A count of fastpitch teams nationwide is difficult to compile because there are numerous sponsoring groups. The national governing board for softball, the Amateur Softball Association of America, registered 3,400 men's fastpitch teams in its most recent report last year.

"I think you could safely say that between 1970 and 2005, the sport has dropped by 70 percent," said Benjie Hedgecock, executive director of the North American Fastpitch Association, whose recent tournaments in Sioux Falls drew teams from as far away as California, Florida and New Jersey.

Soccer and baseball have steered boys away from softball. The slowpitch game — where hitting is emphasized — has exploded. The weak economy has also scared off sponsors and some players have turned their attention to jobs instead of softball.

"If you look at the demographics of the U.S., we had our peak of age-proper male participants when the baby boomer kids hit in the '70s," Hackmeister said.

That's about the time Lonnie Andersen found the game through a college buddy who needed a catcher for some pitching practice.

"I just fell in love with the game, but it did take me a few years to learn how to hit," said Andersen, now 54 and player, coach and sponsor of the Scarlett's fastpitch team in Sioux Falls. "I can't run as fast, but I can still hit."

He played baseball as a youngster and gave it another try later on a small-town adult amateur team. But the hourlong drive, warm-up, nine-inning game and "a little beer afterward" turned into an 8- or 9-hour commitment.

"Plus," he noted with a smile, "you played 25 baseball games but you could play 75 to 100 softball games in a season."



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Andersen said his estimated \$3,000 annual expense as Scarlett's sponsor is money well spent to keep young people in the game — four of his players are under 20 — and help preserve the city's fastpitch league.

The Sioux Falls Recreation Department recently opened an eight-field softball complex to help handle a burgeoning variety of slowpitch leagues. The city had nearly 200 men's slowpitch teams this summer and 16 fastpitch teams.

"We just do not have the visibility for men's fastpitch like we do for the women's," said Warren Jones, the Amateur Softball Association state commissioner in Ohio and chairman of the committee that selects the men's national team.

Boys were drawn into the game by watching their father, uncle or neighbor play fastpitch in its heyday, Jones said. A shrinking player pool means less exposure. Societal factors also are involved.

"Fastpitch for boys, teenagers, is considered what the girls play, so they don't want to go out and play with the girls," Hedgecock said. "They want to play baseball, which all their friends are playing. It's hard to break that stigma."

Hackmeister said men's fastpitch remains strong in Canada because of tradition. "For years and years and years they had no baseball, and they have a lot of rural areas which even to this day are very much like the U.S. was in the '40s, '50s and '60s," he said. "Every small town in the country had a team, if not a league. And they still have that today." What sets fastpitch players apart is the satisfaction in going 1-3 or 1-4 against a good pitcher throwing the ball 70 mph from 46 feet away.

"That doesn't fit in with the instant gratification that the U.S. mindset wants right now, where everybody wants to succeed at everything they do," Hedgecock said.

From On the Net:

- Amateur Softball Association of America: <http://www.softball.org/>
- North American Fastpitch Association: <http://www.nafafastpitch.com/>
- USA Softball: <http://www.usasoftball.com/folders.asp?uid1>

