

You Gotta Play Ball

The girls and boys of summer have dusted off their gloves.

Sunday, May 17, signaled the beginning of the 1987 city league softball season, and with more than 200 teams in the area, it's plain to see that Eugene's a baseball kind of town.

Men's, women's and co-ed teams will be slugging it out all summer long and all over town, working toward each league's big trophy at the end of the season and all the bragging rights that go with it.

You can find a game going on every night of the week from now until the middle of August, or even several games going on at once as they do at Amazon Field, the Shasta Junior High ballfields on Barger Drive and at Softball City on Airport Road, which hosts its own 115-team league independent of the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department's summer league.

Softball just may be the best thing America owns for bringing together people from all walks of life. Cruise through the overflowing parking lots at the fields and you'll find everything from beat-up Jeep pick-up trucks to shiny new Jaguars, and everybody from bank managers to bartenders side by side on the fields.

The reasons to play vary for these fierce fans of hot softball and cold beer, ranging from athletes looking for a way to stay in shape to those in search of a sociable evening out with friendly like-minded people.

One thing is for sure though; softball can really get into your blood.

Pat Furlong is somewhat of a "softball junkie," participating in summer softball since 1974. Although he's only on two city league teams this year, Pat confesses to playing on as many as four teams at once in previous

seasons, and misses the once laid-back attitudes of league organizers.

"I can remember when you used to be able to grab your bat and mitt, head out to a tournament and find a spot on a team," he says. He laments the stricter player eligibility rules making that much harder nowadays.

Mary Kay Hessel got hooked on softball 10 years ago when she helped the Alpha Phi intramural team here at the University to three championships. She now holds the office of league administrator for Softball City and handles all marketing and promotions for the 22 weekend tournaments the facility's holding this year.

The more social aspects of the game are undoubtedly a large part of the appeal, and those interested in them are rarely disappointed.

Susan Uhrich is a student at the University and plays for Doc Nelson's Gumballs in an EPRD co-ed league. "It's just fun getting everybody together. We're just here to have a good time," she says. "We're not really very competitive, that is, as long as we win."

Page Fogarty, a manager at Key Bank and a member of The Goons co-ed team, says she spends about 10 hours a week on baseball-related activities, "mostly drinking beer and eating pizza."

Some have more esoteric theories for softball's popularity, like Jonathan Siegle, the former arts and entertainment editor of the Oregon Daily Emerald, who has played city league softball every year since he formed the now-infamous Betty's Bar team with Harry Esteve, the former editor of the Emerald and now a reporter with the Eugene Register-Guard.



Photo by Maria Corvallis

Members of Cedar Works Spas, a men's "A" League team, congratulate themselves after a win at Shasta Field on Barger Drive in Eugene.

"It's a basic American principle, at least with boys, that you gotta play ball, and that means baseball. You just gotta, gotta play ball," he says, adding, "It's all part of that male bonding stuff — you know, drinking beer and all that shit."

Siegle plays on the Tough Act team this year, made up mostly of people from the theatre community. He's confident the team will do well. "Actors can be tough," he says.

Not all of the action happens on the field. A constant buzz of activity circulates on and around the stands as players' compa-

nions laugh and joke with each other, sharing insights on the game. They punctuate these friendly conversations with yells of encouragement aimed at favorites on the field and really cut loose during exiting plays, which are frequently preceded by the dull crack of aluminum connecting with horsehide, and usually occur every two or three pitches.

There is another constant buzz of activity going on, except this one goes on a little lower, down about knee level.

Players' and spectators' children often find themselves

with unlimited outlets for an equally unlimited supply of energy as the adults keep their attention focused on the games. After watching them for awhile, you may think they're having at least as much fun, if not more, than their older counterparts on the playing field.

In softball, as in life, someone's always playing the heavy. In the world of softball though, the heavies aren't that bad.

Frank Maldonado has umpired since he retired three years ago from a maintenance position at Elmira High School. An umpire's life isn't too bad at this level of competition, and Frank takes a lot of it in stride.

"You'll get a little harassing, but that's part of the game. As the season progresses, they get a little hotter, but they know if they get too out of hand they can get kicked out of the league," he says. Frank also commented on the exceptional memories of some players.

"Some guys will see you two years down the road and say, 'Hey, he's the ump that made an error on me in the third inning,' but I've never had any problems. They're all pretty good," he says.

Although it's too late to join any of the leagues now in progress, both EPRD and Softball City offer fall leagues. In the meantime, if you've got a few hours to spare some evening, take a trip down to the local fields and watch a little ball, drink a cold one and yell at the umps. You just might pick up some pointers, and you're sure to make some friends.

— TIM CHAURAN



Photo by Maria Corvallis

A Eugene Parks and Recreation District City League co-ed batter swings for the wall at Amazon Field. EPRD is hosting men's, women's and Co-ed softball through August. Including other leagues in the area, there will be more than 200 teams participating this summer.