

# Everyone's Playing Softball



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOE DANIELS

**TOM BREZSNY**

**O**ne hundred and sixty teams. Two thousand players. A lot of beer and cheering. They all make slow pitch softball the biggest game in town.

The Santa Cruz rainy season notwithstanding, true city league softball players begin dusting off their gloves and rubber spikes on January 2nd—the day after New Year's. Field space is fought for at a half-dozen local sites each weekend. Second base is a perpetual puddle, but practice goes on.

To the uninitiated it may not be clear why anyone would want to play baseball in the rain. But in Santa Cruz, a traditionally sports-minded town, the number of softball addicts who want to do just that is growing at a phenomenal rate.

Locally, slow pitch is by

far the most popular version of softball. While baseball has always been a spectator sport, in Santa Cruz the mid-seventies saw more people discovering slow pitch softball as a sport to play. In 1974 there were 28 slow pitch teams in Santa Cruz. Last year there were 120.

Baseball is not just a game played by the young and athletic, and it is no longer only a man's game. There are women's leagues as well as men's and coed leagues. The old, the out of shape, and even the uncoordinated are accommodated by a city league structure that assigns players to teams on the basis of ability and talent.

Slow pitch holds overweight players in special esteem. Each extra pound adds distance to a long fly ball, the theory being that paunch equals punch, I suppose. After all,

if the ball goes over the fence for a home run, you can take your time running the bases.

Older players who used to grow melancholic over the thought of fading skills have seemingly found a way to play forever. Ages in city softball range from 18 to 55. The advanced weight and age of some of the players is no deterrent to action in Santa Cruz slow pitch. It is a hitter's game marked by dramatic home runs and high scoring. The fast pace makes it as exciting to watch as play.

Slow pitch's mass appeal makes it a true family event. There is a picnic atmosphere at most of the city league parks. For many Santa Cruzans, softball and beer have replaced mom and apple pie in the American ethos.

Entire families become immersed in softball for six months out of the year. Husbands go to watch

their wives play. Wives bring the kids to watch Dad play. On other nights, (after the children have been dropped off at little league practice) husbands and wives play together on coed teams. The weekends are reserved for tournaments, played in places such as Watsonville, Hollister and Redwood City.

Dave Karon, 31, is a successful local real estate broker. He is also a city league softball fanatic. On his college baseball team Dave was the starting shortstop. In his last college game he went five for five, batted in seven runs, and fielded flawlessly. Dave graduated, got married, had kids and stopped playing sports. He got rich and naturally grew a little fat. But that last college game stuck in his mind.

Several years ago, at his wife's urging, Dave began playing on a slow pitch softball team. In his first game he hit a homerun. Now softball is a way of life for him. He begins practicing in January, and during the spring and summer he devotes as many as four nights a week to the sport.

"It's my dope," he says simply. "I can get completely lost in it. I can get out there at night, drink a little beer, get loud and abrasive and try my absolute best without worrying too much about failure."

Competition seems to be a big part of the slow pitch obsession. "I realized in my first softball season that it was okay to be competitive. Competition was not a dirty word like some people would lead us to believe. "Winning and losing takes place on a very basic level," he adds, "not

**Slow pitch holds overweight players in special esteem. Each extra pound adds distance to a long fly ball, the theory being that paunch equals punch.**

in sublimated and sneaky ways like in the business world."

Dave's wife Sally plays one night a week on a women's team and one night with Dave on a coed team. She began by watching her husband play for a couple of seasons, and even kept score for the team one year. Last year, Sally decided she'd like to try it herself. Now with a season under her belt, she's hooked, too.

"I already knew a lot about softball from watching Dave play all those games, but I wanted to feel like I was doing something physical too," Sally says. "I wanted a chance for self-improvement, and the structure of slow pitch gave me an opportunity to test myself."

Slow pitch softball is as much a competition with oneself as it is with the opposing team. The ball is served up in a slow, high arc. The batter is contending with himself and his patience, waiting for the endless pitch to come down. Hitting is a question of timing.

Women also enjoy the team aspect of softball. Egos seem to be less a part of women's softball than of men's. Fundamental rules of the game such as proper baserunning and throwing to the right base assume greater importance. Says Sally: "Winning

is not always determined by who is the strongest. Often it's determined by who is the smartest."

Coed softball is, overall, the least competitive of the slow pitch leagues. "We enjoy it," Karen says. "It's more like pure recreation with correspondingly more beer drinking, jiving and joking." Spirited baseball banter often flies back and forth between the sexes.

But coed also gives men and women a chance to blend their unique skills and attitudes about the game. The outcome of each contest depends on how well the men and women on a team are integrated into the game.

In the relaxed atmosphere of the coed leagues, softball surfaces as an art form. It is an unhurried ritual in which the game's strategies are played out with great ability, skill and intelligence. This year a new coed league will begin its season in September and play through the end of October. This is good news for city softball fanatics. It means they will only have to endure two months of waiting before they can begin practicing their art again. •

*All local softball leagues, except Scotts Valley's are now filled. For more on softball, see the Sports column in this issue.*