

# ANOTHER League Of Their Own

NYWBA tries to introduce 'real hardball' for women

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**T**he game was baseball, just baseball, yet people veered off the walking paths in Central Park, pressed their noses against the backstop and tried to wrap their brains around what they were seeing.

Sure, that pitcher threw overhand. Sure, that runner led several steps off first base. Sure, that ball made an unmistakable *ping* every time it hit a bat, not the dull *pwong* you'd expect from, say, a softball.

But weren't those players ... women?

"It takes them a while to get it into their heads," said Susan Winthrop, who last year co-founded the New York Women's Baseball Association, a week-end recreational league playing its first full season. "It's always, 'You mean you're playing softball?' And we're like, 'No, baseball. Real hardball.'"

On a recent glorious Sunday, the women of the NYWBA were in Central Park for a doubleheader. The league has three teams, the Long Island/Queens Cyclones, the Westchester Yankees and the Manhattan Giants. Enough players for only two teams showed up, however, so the Giants turned their jerseys inside out and joined the Cyclones or Yankees.

As usual, the Cyclones' starting lineup for Game 1 included players with varying levels of experience.

Their starting pitcher was Winthrop, 48, whose playing career nearly ended 28 years ago. In 1975, Winthrop shattered her elbow sliding into second base, had surgery and did not throw a ball again for 10 years. Now here she was in Central Park, not only pitching but also planning — scheming, really — to unveil a new pitch: a knuckleball.

As Winthrop warmed up, the Cyclones' 22-year-old shortstop, Derika Leggs, marveled at how baseballs disappeared inside her glove. Twenty-four hours earlier, that glove had caught only softballs. But when Leggs arrived at Ardsley Middle School expecting to play some pickup softball Saturday afternoon, "No one was out there," she said.

"Well," she added, pointing to her new teammates, "they were out there."

The league welcomes beginners, so Leggs hopped onto the field and started taking grounders. She stayed for



Photos by Vincent Fave Jr.

The Yankees' Maria Weinstock, left, winds up against the Cyclones in an NYWBA game, and Nancy Haggerty, above, has a tough time on a play at the plate. Below, Cyclones teammates Susan Winthrop, left, and Claire Kirk enjoy a victory.



hours, declining to leave even when the coaches temporarily halted practice to take another player, who had been smacked in the left eye by a ground ball, to the hospital. Afterward, Leggs drove to a local Modell's and bought her first pair of baseball pants.

"The ball's so much smaller and moves so much faster," she said between innings Sunday. "It's almost like taking softball and just bumping it up a level."

Pitchers have an especially hard time adjusting. Their windups are relatively basic — no high leg kicks or long follow-throughs — and their fastballs don't exactly whistle as they slice through the air. But the pitches don't arc high over hitters' heads, either; they move fast enough that a player who makes solid contact can hit the ball a long way.

With the Cyclones' Jen Gulley leading off first base in the third inning of Game 1, Erika Fermaints slammed a pitch over the centerfielder's head and onto a faraway field where men were playing softball. The centerfielder tracked down the ball and whipped a throw to the relay woman, who threw

to home plate as Gulley rounded third.

The ball beat Gulley to Yankees catcher Nancy Haggerty, but Gulley lowered her shoulder and plowed forward, knocking Haggerty to the ground as the ball trickled toward the backstop. Fermaints followed Gulley home, and the Cyclones were on their way to a 10-2 win.

But the Long Island/Queens team had a problem. Winthrop's surgically repaired right arm had survived the first game — even throwing that knuckler in the fifth (the pitch bounced in the dirt) — but Winthrop wasn't about to risk pitching seven more innings.

Suddenly a fresh-faced rookie appeared, just off a plane from Puerto Rico. Mary Perez, 44, was in New York visiting relatives and noticed the women's game while watching her nephews' Little League team play nearby.

"What are you doing?" Perez asked Winthrop.

"Playing baseball."

Minutes later, there was Perez, who plays on a softball team in Puerto Rico but had not played baseball in 31 years, pulling on a Cyclones jersey and

volunteering to pitch. Problem solved.

"Everyone say hello to Maria," John Lenhart, the Cyclones' coach, told the team.

"Mary," someone reminded him.

"Oh. Everyone say hello to Mary. She's starting for us today."

Perez appeared timid early on, as if she were worried the mound might topple if she stepped on it too hard. She had a gentle pitching motion, like a second baseman tossing a ball to first, and she had trouble throwing strikes.

Her first pitch sailed to the backstop. Her second hit the Yankees' lead-off hitter in the left thigh. When Perez walked the next batter on four pitches to put runners on first and second with none out, a hush swept across the field.

But Perez's next pitch went right down the middle for a strike, and everyone exhaled.

The Yankees scored two runs in the first, but Perez eased into a pitching rhythm. By the time she ended the inning with a strikeout, she had already decided that when she returned to Puerto Rico, she would urge her softball teammates to switch to baseball.