

Throwing Like a Girl

Hardball-playin' New York women have a league of their own.

By Michael Malone

WITH HER FLUID windup and smooth mechanics, Susan Winthrop could pitch all day. And she may just have to.

At 48, Winthrop's old enough to be Jesse Orosco's older sister. She's on the hill for the Queens Cyclones of the New York Women's Baseball Association (nywomensbaseball.com) in the first game of a doubleheader against the Manhattan Giants, on a perfect summer Sunday in Central Park's North Meadow.

That's right, *baseball*. Overhand. Fast-pitch. Hardball. Regulation field. Women. Not softball.

Why *not* softball, I ask league founder Winthrop, who coaches softball at NYU and plays saxophone professionally. "Baseball's more challenging," she says. "A lot of us here always wanted to play baseball, and just never had the opportunity."

She's throwing against Maia Weinstock, who's almost half her age. Weinstock writes about physics and planetary science for *Discover Magazine* by weekday, and plays ball on weekends. "I was that girl on your Little League team growing up," she says as she munches on sunflower seeds. "I switched to softball after my first year of Babe Ruth, but I didn't like it as much—the underhand pitching, the small field, the big ball you couldn't really rip."

Winthrop has four pitches in her repertoire—overhand fastball, sidearm fastball, curve and occasional knuckler—and none is much harder than those dealt by nearby Little Leaguers. But her command is excellent—thanks, perhaps, to her father—a windmilling softball pitcher who still competes.

Skill levels in the NYWBA vary: there are double steals and snap throws at leaning baserunners, and there are missed fly balls and around-the-horn pegs that sail into the outfield. Cyclones shortstop Amanda Beck, who plays softball at Bates College, is a stud. So is Giants third baseman Jen Laurie, who rips an RBI double in the first inning. Beck answers in the second, driving one deep to left for a double that ties it up.

Cyclones coach John Lenhart, who drove through the night to make the game after a week at a youth baseball camp in Maine, applauds Beck's effort. Lenhart looks every bit the ball coach: cap low over his eyes, bat in his

cheek, endless stream of baseball truisms flying out of his mouth ("The little things are what matter!") baseball pants so tight one can almost count the change in his pocket.

Lenhart's enthusiasm is tested in the third. After Cyclones catcher Stephanie Kung drives in two with a bad-hop single past the shortstop (to the delight of her two young daughters, who serve as scorekeepers and batgirls), things go sour for Queens. Beck makes a Jose Reyes-esque stop deep in the hole, but her catchable throw to

she bangs a single up the middle for first and third with one down. The excitement picks up, though it's downright docile compared to the Little League game, spectators clanging bells, waving Puerto Rican flags and yelling "Yeah, baby!" after every play as Borinquen and Crillo compete for the age 8-11 championship.

After a brief meeting with Lenhart, Rochelle Robert steps up to the plate. Weinstock deals, and Beck breaks from third as Robert squares around for the bunt. The suicide squeeze is on! Alas, the ball falls foul. Robert then grounds it sharply back to Weinstock, who freezes Beck before throwing to first for the out.

The next batter walks to load them up for, fittingly enough, Jacqueline Wagner. She wears a grave mask of intensity; perhaps the mouthpiece is to keep her from grinding her teeth to stubs.

"Nowhere to put you, Jackie!" yells Lenhart, and she nods grimly. Weinstock delivers, and Wagner rips one to short. But Claire Kirk is there to snare it for the third out.

Winthrop buzzes through the Giants in the sixth, and the Cyclones have their last ups in the top of the seventh. Lenhart gives a pep

talk ("This is it. It's there for the taking.") and the Cyclones put their hands together for a cheer ("1-2-3 Fight!"). Winthrop takes a strike, then grounds out to third. The next batter strikes out on three pitches. Weinstock is getting stronger. Up steps Derika Legg. "Give Amanda a shot!" yells Lenhart, as the dangerous Beck swings a bat in the on-deck circle. Legg takes the token first strike, then rips it through the box. The Giants second baseman makes a diving stab, gets to her feet and throws out Legg by a leg.

"That's a tough one," Lenhart tells his charges after the handshakes. "You left it all out on the field. That's all you can do."

Players shake hands, then retire to the shade for a little grub before the second game. The unfailingly upbeat Winthrop gives contact info to an inquiring woman from the Borinquen/Crillo game, then convenes with Lenhart. "Am I pitching again?" Winthrop asks as she enjoys a slice of swiss cheese.

Lenhart weighs his options. "Awright," he responds, and Winthrop smiles.



HIGH FIVES between Queens Cyclones, Manhattan Giants.

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second sails past Jacqueline Wagner's glove. Wagner then drops the ball on a would-be forceout, and after a double steal puts runners on second and third, she fields a grounder cleanly, but mistakenly goes to second with it. All hands are safe.

"Let's shake it off!" yells Lenhart as Wagner moves to leftfield. As luck would have it, the next batter hits a monster fly her way. Everyone tenses as Wagner poises, then squeezes it for the inning's final out.

She pops a mouthguard out as she jogs in. "I am SO sorry," she says to her mates, and gets nothing but support in return. Wagner's new to the game—a personal trainer who was interested in helping the league with fitness, and ended up playing. "I'd never held a baseball, or even a softball, before," she says. "Growing up, my family was like, stay inside and cook and sew. You'll get hurt out there." Sadly, they were right—Wagner recently chipped two teeth after taking a grounder in the face.

Kung is new to the game as well, though she grew up in Queens watching Lee Mazzilli and the Mets. With the Giants up 6-5 in the sixth,