

Finding a league of their own at Ashford

By Stefanie Kornfeld

The crack of the bat, the smell of hot-dogs grilling, the good old US of A — these are some of the images we conjure up about baseball. On a Saturday afternoon in Ardsley, a team gets ready to practice. So what's so exciting about that?

Just ask Susan, Amanda and Derika.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it's the New York Women's Baseball Association and it offers a setting for female fans of America's favorite pastime to get out there and "play ball." Team members come from all walks of life and include executives, homemakers, psychologists, writers, musicians and students.

When interviewed, several of the players stated that the film "A League of Their Own" was definitely an inspiration to them. "It's hard to believe that women's baseball wasn't either continued right after WWII, or brought back during the '60s women's movement," said Raphael Amaya, the team's pitching coach.

For Sleepy Hollow resident Derika Legge, an executive in sales at Heineken, joining a women's baseball team was a fluke. She was out of the country on business for a year and upon her return went looking for her old softball team. She couldn't find it, but she did find the Westchester Yankees practicing at Ardsley's Ashford Park ballfield and was invited to join. "I was a little hesitant at first because I had been playing softball on a more relaxed level; my family was concerned because when you're batting, the ball comes at you faster and harder."

This is the same game that men play — regulation baseball. Differences between softball and baseball include the distance between the bases (60 feet vs. 90 feet) and the ball goes faster and farther; in general, softball is an easier, slower game. Now that a forum exists for women to play baseball, some say they will never go back to softball.

Founding member Susan Winthrop, a musician and composer who serves as head coach for the NY Women's Baseball Association and was former head coach for New York University's girls' softball program, confides that "it can be challenging to find women with good pitching and catching arms, however, anybody who is a good softball player will probably be a good baseball player."

The league has established three teams since its launch last year: the Westchester Yankees, the Queens Cyclones, and the Manhattan Giants. The games are played on a rotating basis, one week in Westchester at Westchester Community College, next week in Man-

hattan's Central Park, and the Queens games are held at Eisenhower Park in Nassau County.

Each team has their own coach and consists of approximately 15 players. "We usually always manage a decent double header," says Winthrop. Most often, the teams oppose each other, except when they play against other leagues, in Boston and Washington, D.C. The indoor practice season starts in March, they move outdoors in April and games begin in June and continue through Labor Day. Due to this summer's rain, the season is being extended through September.

Julie Croteau, a board member of the NYWBA, was the first woman to play NCAA college baseball. She took a major stand when, as a senior in 1998, she took her high school to court because of its refusal to allow girls to play baseball. The outcome affected state policy regarding school sports, which ultimately became more inclusive for girls. Until very recently, girls who completed Little League baseball were pressured into switching to softball. Now, with women's baseball leagues springing up throughout the U.S. and Canada, they have the option to stay with the game they love.

Susan Hart, a mother of three from New Rochelle, hadn't played baseball since she was 8 (she is now 40). "Girls weren't eligible for Little League back then," she said. "I always wanted to play but never had the chance. My family is 100 percent supportive — they know this is something I've always wanted to do." Susan's two daughters, ages 9 and 12, play Little League baseball and are excited about being able to stay with the game. Susan explained that although playing baseball doesn't make her richer or thinner, it's something she does "just for me, and at my age it's hard to find new things that I'm good at. This league enables me to focus on myself, on what I'm doing, and see myself improve. The training and coaching are unbelievably great; it's cheaper than therapy."

Susan goes on to explain that "it's different from sitting in the playground with other neighborhood moms. The league encompasses all women from different backgrounds and ages, making it a unique female bonding experience."

Pleasantville's Amanda Beck, a biochemistry major from Bates College in Maine, is home for the summer and heard about the women's baseball team through a friend and decided to give it a shot. "I went to a practice session and played in the next day's game." Beck played college softball but had not played baseball since age 12, when after finishing Little League she was one of four girls on a boys' baseball team until the

pressure to switch to softball became too strong. Her family loves watching her play baseball. "I've had a lot of fun this summer," she says. "If there was a competitive level in college, I would play all year." Beck noted that "this league has different skill levels including people who have never played before." For the more polished players, "it's a nice mix because while they offer helpful tips to newcomers, they also get something out of the teaching experience which makes them better. The coaches are also very supportive and try to work with each player on what they need to work on. Anybody can come and join. It's good clean fun and that's what it comes down to."

This fall, the NYWBA will be taking part in a historic 24-hour game Oct. 18-19 in San Francisco. This event will raise funds for the health care of African women and children who are at risk for contracting AIDs. In addition to raising money for medicine and training personnel, the game will also make history in the Baseball Hall of Fame as the longest women's baseball game ever played, with approximately 125 innings. Tryouts were held on Saturday, July 19, in Ardsley and continue taking place around the country.

Several people have helped the league get its start, including Matt Arone, the superintendent of parks and recreation in Ardsley, along with Ardsley Community Center coordinators Betty Larsen Giaccio and Lorraine Kuhn. Almost two years ago, when Winthrop approached Giaccio and Kuhn to inquire about a practice field, they provided Ashford Park. Today, Winthrop works with Arone selecting dates to reserve the park's ballfield for practice on Saturdays.

The NYWBA is a not-for-profit corporation dedicated to providing baseball instruction and competition to women and girls of all ages by providing classes, workshops and pitching/catching clinics for such organizations as the Girl Scouts, CYO, and the YWCA. The league is looking to expand and encourages interested girls, starting at age 14, and women of all ages to apply and not be afraid that they might not have what it takes. All levels are welcome.

For more information about the teams, call their hotline at (212) 539-8800. They can also be e-mailed at nywb@nywomensbaseball.com or check out their website at www.nywomensbaseball.com.