

## **The History of Softball and the Amateur Softball Association**

Softball was invented inside the Farragut Boat Club on a blustery, winter day in November, 1887, in Chicago, IL. A bunch of Yale and Harvard alumni anxiously awaited the results of the Harvard-Yale football game, and when the news came that Yale had defeated Harvard, 17-8, one Yale supporter, overcome with enthusiasm, picked up an old boxing glove and threw it at a nearby Harvard alumni, who promptly tried to hit it back with a stick. This gave George Hancock, a reporter for the Chicago Board of Trade, an idea. He suggested a game of indoor baseball. Naturally, Hancock's friends thought he was talking about playing a game outdoors, not indoors.

Hancock wasn't kidding, however. Using what was available, he tied together the laces of the boxing glove for a ball. Using a piece of chalk, Hancock marked off a home plate, bases and a pitcher's box inside the Farragut Boat Club gym, with the two groups divided into teams. The final score of the game was 41-40, but what was significant was that Hancock and his friends had invented a sport that would continue to grow in popularity to where today more than 40 million people enjoy playing it each summer, making softball the No. 1 team participant sport in the United States. Hancock's invention eventually caught on in Chicago with the Farragut team challenging other gyms to games. In the spring, Hancock took his game outdoors and played it on fields not large enough for baseball. It was called indoor-outdoor and Hancock emerged as the recognized authority in the 19th century.

Hancock appended 19 special rules to adapt the outdoor game to the indoor game, and the rules were officially adopted by the Mid Winter Indoor Baseball League of Chicago in 1889. Hancock's game gradually spread throughout the country and ultimately flourished in Minneapolis, thanks to the efforts and ingenuity of Lewis Rober, a Minneapolis Fire Department lieutenant, who wanted a game to keep his firemen fit during their idle time. Using a vacant lot adjacent to the firehouse, Rober laid out bases with a pitching distance of 35 feet. His ball was a small sized medicine ball with the bat two inches in diameter. The game became popular overnight and other fire companies began to play. In 1895, Rober transferred to another fire company and organized a team he called the Kittens. George Kehoe, captain of Truck Company No. 1, named Rober's version of softball "Kitten League Ball" in the summer of 1900. It was later shortened to "Kitten Ball."

Rober's game was known as Kitten Ball until 1925, when the Minneapolis Park Board changed it to Diamond Ball, one of a half dozen names used during this time for softball. The name softball didn't come about until 1926 when Walter Hakanson, a Denver YMCA official and a former ASA president and commissioner, suggested it to the International Joint Rules Committee. Hakanson had come up with the name in 1926, but the committee didn't include the Amateur Softball Association (ASA) until 1934. Efforts to organize softball on a national basis didn't materialize until 1933, when Leo Fischer and Michael J. Pauley, a Chicago Sporting goods salesman, conceived the idea of organizing thousands of local softball teams in America into cohesive state organizations, and state organizations into a national organization.

To bring the teams together, Fischer and Pauley invited them to participate in a tournament in conjunction with the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago. With the backing of the Chicago American newspaper, Pauley and Fischer invited 55 teams to participate in the tournament. Teams were divided into three classes - fastballers, slow pitch and women. A 14-inch ball was used during the single-elimination event.

During the 1934 National Recreation Congress, membership on the Joint Rules Committee was expanded to add the Amateur Softball Association (ASA). Until the formation of the ASA, softball was in a state of confusion, especially in the rules area where the length of the bases and pitcher's box were constantly being changed.

The formation of the ASA gave softball the solidarity and foundation it needed to grow and develop throughout the U.S. under the network of associations proposed by Fischer and Pauley. Pauley and Fischer visited many of the states, inviting teams to participate in the tournament. Fischer and his sports promotion director, Harry Wilson, sold the Century of Progress Exposition on the idea of sponsoring the tournament and providing a field inside the Fair Grounds. The American's sports pages promoted the tournament daily and Chicago businessmen raised \$500 to finance the event.

On the opening day of the 1933 tournament, the Chicago American said, "it is the largest and most comprehensive tournament ever held in the sport which has swept the country like wildfire." With admission free, 70,000 people saw the first round of play. Chicago teams won the three divisions of play with Softball Hall of Famer Harry (Coon) Rosen leading the J.L. Friedman Boosters to the men's title, one-hitting Briggs Beautyware of Detroit, MI, in the finals. It was the first loss of the season for Briggs after 41 consecutive wins.

It was evident that softball finally had a foundation from which to grow, and, in 1935, the Playground Association Softball Guide, wrote: "the years of persistent effort, constant promotion and unchanging faith of believers in softball proved to have not been in vain, for in 1934 softball came into its own. All over America hundreds of leagues and thousands of players enthusiastically accepted this major team game.

"The promotional activities of the ASA played an important part in stimulating the interest that has been developing for many years. The battle for recognition of this splendid game is over. Softball has won a place among America's foremost sports."