

## SOFTBALL SLOWLY STRIKING OUT - LEAGUES HAVE BEEN ON DECLINE FOR MANY YEARS

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The parking lot is noisy.

Baseball cleats click on hot blacktop as softball teammates gather around pickup trucks before the 7 p.m. games on Wednesday night at Wesselman Park. They sit on tailgates and share bottles of beer as music blares from car stereos. The weather is perfect. Children run at their feet.

On the field, umpire Jeff Carver paces behind the plate. The aluminum stands behind him are nearly empty.

They used to be full.

"Back then when I was growing up," said Carver, 48, who played softball in Evansville from 1978 to 1986, "softball was the thing. Everybody on Wednesday nights went out to Wesselman to watch the good leagues play."

Between 1990 and 2001, 10 million people across the country stopped playing softball, according to U.S. Census data. About 600 teams have registered this year in Evansville, a 40 percent drop from 1990, when the city had a record high 1,000 teams.

Players blame increasing costs and lifestyle changes. Organizers say they're losing out on young adults, who are choosing other sports such as golf that don't require the kind of commitment that an 11-game softball season commands.

And it's not just softball. Adult recreation leagues are down in almost all sports. The Parks & Recreation Department has launched marketing and radio advertising campaigns to attract new softball players and has started a free-agent program to place stray players on teams.

"We never used to have to advertise at all," said Chris Rehn, the department's sports director. "We used to have to figure out how to cut teams."

Softball became popular in Evansville in the late 1960s, veteran players say. Most teams had sponsors. Almost every tavern in town had a team, said 62-year-old Dewey Boylls, who played his first slow-pitch game in 1962.

Teams had two and sometimes three different uniforms. Some resembled Major League Baseball uniforms, he said.

"You just had so many guys playing it," said Boylls, who still plays at least one night a week with his son, Doug. "Back in those days, softball was really family oriented."

Per capita, Evansville had as many teams as bigger cities such as Cleveland, a softball stronghold. Players competed hard. Boylls recalls playing up to 12 tournaments a year. By the early 1970s, softball "just ballooned and went crazy," he said.

The sport continued to grow. The number of players nationwide grew from 26 million in 1975 to 41 million in 1985, according to census data. The number of adult teams doubled.

"We were scrounging to find fields to play," said Rehn, who became sports director in 1979. Rehn scheduled games on grade school fields and behind hospitals to keep up with demand.

"We played wherever we could," he said.

The number of softball teams in Evansville grew to 700 by the mid 1980s, Rehn said. When Rehn attended national sports-related conferences, "(I) never saw a city that had as many teams as we did per capita."

The popularity of softball peaked in 1990 and has been slowly declining ever since, Rehn said. The drop has been gradual, about 15 to 20 teams a year. Softball teams are getting older. High school and college graduates who used to form competitive teams are getting married, working two and three jobs or spending their money elsewhere, Rehn said.

Some players blame the cost. Team prices for the 2005 season range from \$370 for a 10-game spring league to \$480 for a 12-game summer league. The cost of entering a tournament was about \$40 per team when Boylls played in the 1960s, compared with \$150 to \$175 today.

Businesses don't sponsor as many teams today, said Dan Eli, a 54-year-old beer retailer whose slow-pitch career began shortly after his 18th birthday. Industrial teams used to have their own league but don't anymore because they are so few left.

"I don't know what it is," Eli said of the decline. "Everybody is at work (on) computers and getting online, and they just don't want to come out and play."

The cost usually is less than \$30 per person a season – still cheap compared with other entertainment, Rehn said. "Cost won't prevent people who don't want to play."

And Rehn offers midnight and Sunday games to players who are too busy during the week.

"Ninety-five percent get their first choice of preference," he said.

When girls' fast-pitch softball experienced growth in the 1990s, Rehn and many others around the game expected a boost in the women's league. But since 2000, Evansville's 11-game women's league has lost nearly half its teams.

"There's just no young ones coming in," said Becky Dill, who has played slow-pitch softball for 25 years. "Every year, we go out on the ball fields, and it's just the same groups of women."

Dill, 53, tries to recruit fast-pitch softball players, but most girls won't cross over because they say the change of speed affects their swing.

The only niche that's growing is the senior leagues, Rehn said. The Senior Softball News, a newsletter that Rehn receives, reported that the number of senior players increased from 1.5 million in 1997 to 2.3 million in 2000. Most of that growth is occurring in retirement communities such as Arizona, Florida and Nevada.

"They're the people who used to make up the huge programs," Rehn said.

With about 600 teams, local interest in softball is still strong, Rehn said.

Still, he added, "I don't think you'll find too many sports directors around the country who will paint a picture of 'We'll get them back.'"

**Caption:** Photos, 3

JUSTIN RUMBACH / Courier & Press

LEFT: Clint Happe climbs onto the bench to root on his team, the E-Boli, during a Friday night softball game against American General Finance Services at Wesselman Park. The E-Boli team is a group of friends from Evansville who decided to start a summer team. ABOVE: Katie Hagan scoops up a ground ball while playing third base for the E-Boli team. The Dyna-Kleen men's team watches the action from the bench during a 9 p.m. game against Goebel Mechanics Inc. at Wesselman Park on Wednesday.

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