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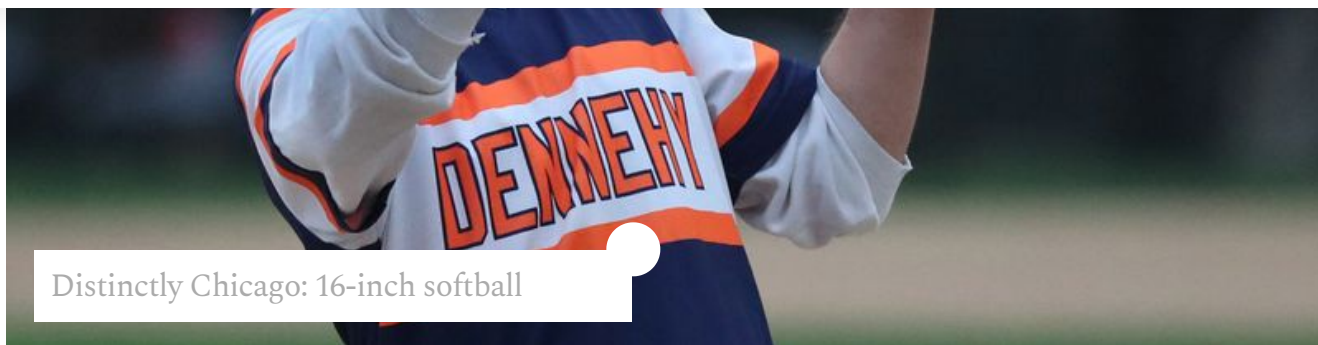
Chicago Park District 16-inch coed softball tournament to return after 10-year hiatus. The game 'is part of the DNA' of the city.

By ZACH HARRIS
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Distinctly Chicago: 16-inch softball

Chicago is the place to find 16-inch softball. It's also known as mushball or cabbageball.
(Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

The Chicago Park District this summer will resume its annual [**coed adult 16-inch softball tournament**](#) after a 10-year hiatus.

“(Sixteen-inch), in my opinion, is part of the DNA of Chicago,” said Al Maag, co-founder of the 16-inch softball [**Hall of Fame**](#) who advised the Park District on the tournament. “It’s part of the culture.”

The double-elimination tournament will be held July 24 at Humboldt Park, according to Irene Tostado, deputy director of communications for the Park District.

While the game of softball was founded at the Farragut Boat Club in Chicago in 1887, 16-inch softball came around during the 1920s, according to the Hall of Fame’s website. And it has been a Chicago staple since.

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When most people in the U.S. think of softball, they envision a game that is played with gloves and a 12-inch ball. Sixteen-inch is played with, well, a 16-inch ball and traditionally no gloves. Some players now wear gloves. While the game is dear to Chicago, it is played in other cities and states, such as San Diego, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Oregon, Arizona and Washington.

“West of the Mississippi (River), there’s a lot of stuff happening,” Maag said. “And I’ll tell you, these guys are good.”

It was not uncommon for the Windy City Softball League to draw several thousand fans during its existence from the early 1930s to about 1950. Some of those games attracted more fans than “the Cubs and (White) Sox did,” Maag said. Multiple Windy City players went on to the [major leagues](#), including former Chicago Cub Phil Cavarretta and former major leaguer Bill “Moose” Skowron, who played with the White Sox, Yankees and other teams.

Other notable past 16-inch players include Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan former Secretary of State and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton, an NBA Hall of Famer and one of the first Black players in the league, according to Maag. Legendary Chicago columnist Mike Royko was also a big fan of the game and sued when the Park District tried to require players to wear gloves. The city ruled in his favor.

Infamous Chicago mobster “Machine Gun” Jack McGurn was a big fan of 16-inch, according to Maag. McGurn bet \$10,000 per game and was a supporter of the Nut House Café an Italian team, Maag said.

The Park District noted that many Chicagoans have played the sport 30 years or more.

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Men play 16-inch softball on Aug. 13, 1973, in Chicago. It's also known as as mushball or cabbageball. (Lee Olsen / Chicago Tribune)

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Tony Dinon slides into home during the March of Dimes Snowball 16-inch softball tournament on Jan. 23, 1988, in Lincoln Park. (Michael Fryer / Chicago Tribune)

The Park District discontinued the coed tournament because “it lost momentum” as “trends changed,” said Jamie Teichmann, the event organizer. At the end of the 20th century, people grew away from the game as leagues charged more money to play, according to Maag.

But now, the game is having “a renaissance,” he said.

Six men and four women are required on the field, according to the Park District [website](#). Women are allowed to wear gloves, but men will not, Teichmann said.

Registration for the tournament is closed, and six teams will participate, Tostado said

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Maag said other teams that were interested had already entered other tournaments. He said if that can be avoided in years ahead, the tournament will grow.

“Anything they do to get the game being played more by the park districts and by other coeds, I’m all for,” he said.

Dennehy team players Ellen Ross, center, and Rebecca Goesling laugh before their 16-inch softball game at Welles Park in Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood on July 8, 2021. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

One of the teams that is participating has been around since 2013 and is called Dennehy. Players have come and gone since then, but “mostly it’s the same group of guys and ladies” since the beginning, said Neil Hynes, the team’s captain.

Some on the team have known each other since high school, others not, but all are from Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. The team’s name is a reference to a song of the same name by Chicago-based rapper Serengeti In the song, Serengeti

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Chicagoan whose thick accent punctuates his love of Chicago sports and actor Brian Dennehy. Dennis raps “favorite actor Dennehy, favorite drink O’Doul’s / Bears, ‘Hawks, Sox, Bulls” in the refrain.

“(The song) is just, like, full of these deep Chicago references, and it’s, like, pretty silly,” Hynes said. “We were 23 when we came up with the name. We loved that song, we still love it today.”

Hynes’ teammates refer to him as “Skip,” as in “Skipper,” a joking reference to the colloquial name for the captain of a baseball team. During his first at-bat in a recent league game, which ended in a base hit, a friend cheered him on and called him “Big Cat,” a nickname from high school. He hadn’t been called that in years, he said, and his high school coach at St. Ignatius in University Village gave the nickname to him. He was a catcher in high school, and catchers are supposed to have quick, catlike reflexes. But Hynes didn’t, he said, so it was another lighthearted quip.

After graduating college and beginning their respective careers, Hynes and his friends looked for a way to get together during the week, he said.

“Sixteen-inch seemed like more our speed than some kind of, like, adult baseball league or something like that, so that’s what we gravitated toward,” Hynes said. “It’s also, you know, like it’s a big Chicago thing, 16-inch softball so that felt cool ... we’ve loved it since 2013 and we just keep coming back.”

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Sixteen-inch softballs lie on the ground July 8, 2021, as members of the Dennehy team come to bat during a game at Welles Park in Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

As the years pass it is increasingly difficult to get a big group of friends together, Hynes said, so Dennehy has become a way for people to hang out and see one another on a regular basis during the summer.

Hynes describes Dennehy as not “the most physically talented team,” but members play solid defense and are good situational hitters, he said. They get big hits when they need them.

“Having last summer off, like, we’ve been trying to play, like, as much softball as we possibly can,” Hynes said. “And so people thought that the tournament was going to be, like, a really fun, like, Saturday hang. Plus, you know, play some softball, hopefully win a few games.”

But not everyone who plays the game is a Chicago native. Ethan Armstrong, who is

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marry and have a child with. Armstrong umpired 16-inch games for Live to Support, an organization that puts on recreational leagues and tournaments with the goal of donating a portion of each team's registration fee to a charity of the team's choice, according to Armstrong.

"I've actually never played in a (16-inch) league," Armstrong said.

Armstrong, who has played 12-inch softball and baseball his whole life, is the captain of the Wood Chippers. In the past, Armstrong has pitched "because none of the other guys would ever do it," he said, and played both third base and shortstop. The team is composed of five Chicago residents and "eight or nine" more who will make the trip from Minnesota for the tournament, Armstrong said.

"What we always used to do was play in these weird softball tournaments all throughout Minnesota," he said. "(The tournament) is back to our roots of what we used to do throughout our 20s, which are a blur now. Now we're all in our mid-thirties and trying to rekindle that spirit."

Among those on the roster are people Armstrong has known his whole life, he said. The team also includes "the wife of a friend who was a college softball player and then her sisters who both played softball all the way through too," he said.

Maag said the reemergence of the game can be attributed to the Slow-Pitch Softball Association, which started in 2011 and regularly streams games on Facebook, and the fact that the game is coed.

"How about just one word? Diversity," Maag said. "You've got women playing more, you've got Black (people), and you've got Hispanic (people). That has been the growth of the game from the city point of view.

"I am just ecstatic that these young leaders from the Park District ... that they're so excited and passionate about it," he said. "If they have 20 teams or 10 teams, it's a success to me because I know what will happen, it will grow as time goes on."

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