



Sports

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Softball legends' reunion game today in Forest Park

By Tim Egan

Today's 16-inch softball players may think they have the bragging rights of being the best in the history of Chicago's original game.

But let's journey back to those thrilling days of yesteryear when players couldn't conceive of playing with a glove and weren't outfitted from cap to bat bag.



Pingatore

Of course, when there is talk about the history of 16-inch softball, it's described in two words — Bobcats and Sobies.

And the best way to hear about the legend is direct from the sources, like former Cicero resident and St. Joseph basketball coach Gene Pingatore,

Pingatore remembers Sobies-Bobcats rivalry

who was a coach for Sobies.

"It was a fierce rivalry," Pingatore said. "There were a lot of great players out there. We gave them everything they had to handle. We probably ended up beating them as much or more than any other team."

The rivalry, where some coals are still lukewarm and will be rekindled at an Old Timers' game before the championship of today's Forest Park Invitational, began as a neighborhood softball rivalry.

Before Sobies, also tagged American Rivet, became a powerhouse in the game, a core group of Pingatore; John Hornacek; and John and the late Bill Bereckis played for Dick Triner's Hall in Cicero.

"We were just OK than," Pingatore said. "We were a put-together team. Some guy said,

'Let's play money ball,' and at first we got our heads kicked in.

"Each year from that year on we kept picking up players. A couple here and there and we were pretty successful."

Triner's made it to the first World Tournament, held in the early 1960s at Grant Park in Chicago.

"The schedule times were messed up," Pingatore said, "and we ended up forfeiting out. We made it next year, someone threw the ball at the ump and we got thrown out of the tournament."

Triner's Hall didn't sponsor the team again and they moved to former DePaul basketball standout Ron Sobie's bar, also in Cicero. "We eventually did win the world," Pingatore said, "and it was a three-year stretch."

When the team changed sponsors, they became known as Sobies/American Rivet and came on the scene to challenge the widely known Ed Zolna and his Bobcats.

"We were playing ball every night of the week," Pingatore said. "There was a lot of softball. In one league, we were sponsored by a bar in Lyons. Some guy thought we were a local team and told us we were pretty good."

"He said he could set up a \$10,000 game with another bar team from the North Side. Sure enough, when we went out to the field, it was the Sobies against the Bobcats."

"Of course, the bets were off. We played the game and had a good party, but there wasn't nearly as much money flowing around as expected."

Not only was there money involved in the games for Sobies and the players of the time, but also personal sacrifice.

"One Saturday, we attended Billy Bereckis' wedding," Pingatore said, "and had a tournament on Sunday. He postponed his honeymoon to play in the tournament."

According to those who played in the 1950s and 60s, the game has changed, and some things for the worse.

Cicero resident and Bobcat Frank Osysko, one of those early stars, said "There was no dancing all around the mound in those days."

"Everything was for money back then, every day of the week. Now you've got to play a tournament to win any money," added Osysko, who also is

scheduled to play in today's game.

And gloves were out of the question.

"They should have never allowed gloves in the game," Osysko said. "It makes the games 2-1 or 3-2. It takes away from the game."

"The gloves become an equalizer," Pingatore said. "Our group was against bringing them in."

Softball for those that once were is more than the money and games won or lost after almost 20 years.

"We had a lot of great players," Pingatore said, "and still hang together, but now we play cards and golf. The biggest part of playing softball all those years was making friendships."

The Old-Timers' game is scheduled approximately at 5 p.m., before the championship game of the Forest Park Invitational, 7501 W. Harrison St..