
The Establishment of Softball as a Sport For Women, 1900-1940

by
MERRIE A. FIDLER
University of Minnesota

In the formative years of its development, softball was consistently identified with institutions and organizations promoting or reacting to social reform. The trend began with settlement house playground programs and social workers who lobbied for the opening of school playgrounds. It gained momentum through the National Playground Association, a product of the former movements. Industrial sponsorship of men's and women's teams contributed to the popularization of the game among adults. The depression which catalyzed government support of social reform questions, helped crystalize the future of softball. People had the time and space to play and were encouraged to participate. Those who promoted organized softball for park and school playgrounds lauded its social and moral values as well as its physical values.

A significant aspect in the development of women's softball was the concept that it was a suitable game for girls and women. This concept was verbalized early in softball's history and originated with the game's physical characteristics, including a large, soft ball and short basepaths. Neither of these attributes threatened physical harm or overexertion. The sport was also viewed as a viable means of building social and ethical character among girls during a period of time when such training was viewed necessary. From 1900 to 1930 girls were encouraged to play modified baseball in schools and on playgrounds just as the boys were encouraged to play. When national softball organizations developed and promoted

high level competition in the 1930s, it was logical for them to promote women's tournaments as well as men's. The fact that men's and women's games and tournaments were conducted in the same manner distinguished the development of women's softball from the development of other women's team sports.