

Fastpitch by the Bay

San Francisco league seeks reinforcements

Story by Don Cameron

Some recreational athletes like secrets. That secret powder stash on the mountain. The secret cove for catching waves. The little-known links where you can get from the parking lot to the first tee in 60 seconds.

Adult fastpitch players treasure their sport, but

they're eager to spread the gospel. They want to let the secret out.

But it's just not happening. Adult fastpitch numbers are woefully diminishing across the country.

Sid Aguilar, catcher and manager for Noe's, the most recently dominant team in the San Francisco



Men's Fastpitch League, lamented, "Just like the national trend, fastpitch is not as popular as it used to be in San Francisco. I would think that more baseball players would want to go to fastpitch. I just don't understand why they don't. Fastpitch is more of a challenge, there's more emphasis on defense, it's a faster game, a speed game, with bunting and stealing."

Decades ago, dozens of men's fastpitch teams battled on Bay Area diamonds. The 2009 league will feature just five survivors — the Crabs, Jaguars, Noe's, LaRocca's and Tommy's.

"It's a case of getting some advertising out there and getting some of these slow-pitch guns to think about playing fastpitch," said Ron Bourdon, who played the game for half a century and now spearheads the organizational effort for the city's rec department. "... The key is pitching. The great ballplayers, the guys who have played baseball and are working now and want to play some ball, but they don't get into hardball, we need to get these people. They need to know that fastpitch is a lot closer to hardball than slow-pitch."

San Francisco's demographics haven't helped. Real estate prices skew property to the wealthy. A busy singles scene lures athletes to the coed slow-pitch game for the social benefits. Even with just five teams, the fastpitch league needs to draw players from well outside the city.

Dirk McCall, who played the game at a high level for four years in Denmark, runs the Crabs. He travels from Marin County, and calls on players from Sacramento, San Jose and Livermore. McCall, who also pitches, points to Americans' impatience — and penchant for sure success — as a barrier to fastpitch recruiting.

"A lot of guys are afraid to look bad, that's why they play slow-pitch," McCall said. "Guys want to hit home runs. I'd rather strike out three times, then get a hit off a good pitcher."

Still, he has been able to keep the Crabs going while the league has dropped from nine teams in 2002 to the current five. Recruiting on community bulletin boards such as craigslist has helped him fill the roster. He has started using active.com to allow his

players to register and pay dues online.

McCall's European experience has helped him organize better. In Denmark, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, where men's fastpitch is well-established, club teams keep the sport thriving. In the States, McCall said, an ideal scenario is to have a coach who just coaches, a treasurer who handles collection of all league and tourney fees, and a president who administers the club but is not involved with on-field decisions.

Despite the organizational challenges, Bourdon said the mid-level game of fastpitch offers the ideal balance to keep pitchers, batters and fielders content. "I struck out maybe two or three batters a game, but I wouldn't walk anybody," the retired pitcher said. "If I didn't have great defense behind me, we wouldn't win. To me, it was a perfect game to get everybody involved, and I really enjoyed it. Nothing against the super-duper fastpitch teams that are pitcher and catcher, but the game we played was a lot of fun."

The San Francisco spring league starts in late March and runs through mid-June. A summer league starts in August and takes advantage of the region's superb Indian summer weather, playing well into October. The league, classified as Open Fastpitch B, plays games on Thursday nights.

Noe's has won the league title in 10 of the past 13 seasons, but last fall, the Jaguars bested Tommy's for the championship. Noe's, though, features Scott Peradotto, a Hall of Fame pitcher with a reputation for throwing Hall of Fame fastpitch parties that unite the sport's community.

Like most adult fastpitch leagues across the country, the ballplayers trend toward the older, veteran type in the San Francisco league.

"I just want to play. I get in a good space when I'm playing," said McCall, who savors being able to play a competitive sport into his 40s.

Aguilar makes a pitch for a favorite T-shirt — "Friends don't let friends play slow-pitch" — before explaining his motivation. "Every at-bat, every pitch is magnified in fastpitch," Aguilar said. "Every play could be a gamebreaker. When a break doesn't go your way, that could be the difference between winning and losing."

Interested in joining the San Francisco Men's Fastpitch League? Check out www.sfsoftball.com or contact the league office at 415-831-6317 or leagueoffice@sfsoftball.com.

