

IT'S A HIT!

Softball, the Sunday picnic sport,
goes pro

By JOHN CZARNECKI

This fairy godfather story began eight years ago when Joe Nucci, an ex-beauty parlor operator, convinced himself that true happiness wasn't winning a million dollar lottery, but something called a softball world championship. As in all good underdog tales, the community howled and snickered at Nucci. But Joe Nucci persisted. Sure, he lost a job or two, had to re-mortgage his house and spent so little time at home that his kids couldn't pick him out of a lineup, but that was just so much necessary sacrifice. Things he had to do to create the city's very best slo-pitch softball team.

Often, this meant partaking in a Sherman-like march through anyone's team as long as it had a player essential to the grand design. Some of Nucci's players suffered ruined marriages, lost their jobs and more, all for the "good of the team." His total involvement as the manager, his lust to be a winner caused some friends to desert him and there were days when nobody would buy him a beer.

But his players, hand-picked and dedicated, respected Nucci. In seven years his teams won 601 of the 755 games they played and reached the summit last

year after four tries, winning the United States Slo-Pitch Association World Championship. Nucci had the ceremonious last laugh.

A couple of months ago, though, a tired Joe Nucci sat in a restaurant, crying in his martini. All this softball had cost him. "This might be my last year," he said. "I owe it to the guys to defend the title, but after that, I don't know." He mentioned becoming more aware; he said that in the beginning he was naive in believing a great softball manager could earn a living at it.

"I always thought there was a career here for me," he said. Then in the next breath Joe Nucci, the promoter, began dreaming about pro softball, about how it could make it big here in Rochester, that he had the team, everything, all he needed was the right sponsor, preferably with an open billfold.

Just last month the sponsor came on the scene, lugging a 19-inch color TV under each arm, loose bills stuffed in his rear pockets. All Dick Hill did was wave his wand and presto!, Rochester's top amateur team (Mazzola-Castle) was a professional one, joining the 12-city American Professional Slo-Pitch League. The TV man quickly named them the Zeniths.

To completely understand this "dream come true" story, you have to understand softball mania, which inevitably parallels egotism. "As soon as someone hits three home runs in a game, he thinks he's Reggie Jackson," says Nucci. There are probably a hundred area players who believe, given a chance, they could be softball pros. This sport is that wacky, that zany and, to those who play it, that wonderful.

Just because Hill has arrived and the game is now professional doesn't mean a greater commitment on the part of Nucci's players. They already had planned to spend 40-plus hours a week and anywhere from \$600 to \$1,000 out of their own pockets to play in a national amateur league.

For the players, slo-pitch softball has always demanded mental and physical dexterity and often submitted a family to what some would label unnecessary demands. The game has meant a summer without vacations, fathers playing 16 straight weekends, plus two week-

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day nights a week, and little extra cash for material treats.

And yet softball always is pictured as exhilarating, fun and rewarding. Grown men talk passionately of it. They unashamedly refer to it as their life, their release, their way of dealing with life's frustrations. The competition has allowed them to make a name for themselves, something they can't always do in a factory job.

"I don't want to ever give up playing," said Doug Farrell, one of the Zeniths' star outfielders. "Especially now while I can still play. I believe I'm speaking for all of us when I say, 'There is nothing like competition.' Believe me, everyone likes to be a winner—at something."

To some extent, those sentiments are shared by more than 20,000 players—men and women—in Monroe County. While Buffalo is still messing with hardball and fast-pitch softball, Rochester has become in the last 10 years a slo-pitch mecca.

There are more than 1,700 sanctioned teams here in industrial, city recreation, town and company leagues. The USSSA women's world champions (Pace Electronics) also are from Rochester. The sport has developed here in a big way, but thus far it has remained strictly participatory. You may see a dozen wives and children and a 100 friends at games, but the crowds of thousands every weekend, like those in Detroit or Charlotte, N.C., have not gathered. Not yet, anyway.

The magnitude of softball can be rationalized by listening and watching the group of 20 men, aged 23 to 37, who are school teachers, Kodak workers, insurance men, a sprinkling of professionals, who make up the world champions and comprise the new Rochester Zeniths.

To simply say they are aging jocks who can't let go would be cruel and insufficient. Realistically, they are yesterday's high school legends who tried low levels of major league sports (15 of them either starred in college baseball or were signed professionally), but failed to graduate to the big time. Yet their drive, the need for competition didn't end.

What has happened is a continuation, an extension of their sports life. Some still carry reasonable doubts of their baseball abilities; they have sensible, honest answers to why it didn't happen. And so they have funneled their talent and enthusiasm into something many might consider silly. Their rebuttal is that you don't understand the caliber of slo-pitch softball.

To them, and to millions across the country, it is not beneath the dignity of a man 6-foot-2, 220 pounds to play on Little League-sized fields, master a strange-sounding aluminum thing called a Bombat and be guided by a leader who is as caustic and as involved as the Yankees' Billy Martin.

Indeed, these men have transformed a Sunday picnic beer sport into a major league reality, complete with three colorful sets of sand-knit uniforms, \$70 warmup jackets and road trips to cities like Milwaukee and Louisville.

They are weekend wonders pumped with Pete Rose and Bruce Jenner enthusiasm. In the effort, time and the money they have invested in their sport, they are comparable to amateurs preparing for the Olympics.

When the decision was made to go pro, they had already been conducting weeks of drills indoors, and had been excited about a summer of playing in a top-flight amateur super conference. Their sponsors, Gene Mazzola and Michael Castle, both insurance men,

'A booming success'

were prepared to invest \$7,500 each in the team and Nucci projected a \$30,000 budget. The players were expected to pay their expenses with the remainder coming from program advertising, a special stag night and whatever they won in tournaments.

Now this entire burden is on Dick Hill. He will cover all travel expenses (the team flies everywhere), the hotel rooms and \$25 for meal money on the road. At one time there was talk of paying the players \$75 to \$200 a weekend, but Hill has it pegged closer to \$50 a weekend or less. He said the league average salary last year was \$600.

The Zeniths open their home season today. A doubleheader is tentatively scheduled at 1:30 against the Cleveland Jaybirds at the Softball Centre in Wheatland. "I think it's going to be a booming success," said Hill of his franchise. "It's so different from the basketball league I was in (the ill-fated All-America Basketball Alli-

ance). I'm not even worried about not being successful. I'm not saying I'm going to make a lot of money, but we won't lose very much." (Hill reportedly lost \$40,000 to \$50,000 on basketball.)

Hill envisions this year as just the beginning. The primary drawback to his involvement was the suitability of Pat Kehoe's Softball Centre field. But Kehoe has promised improvements to the field, 2,000 extra seating, a press box, lighted scoreboard and additional parking. "It's worth his while to do all that because of the business he'll receive," said Hill. "He'd be cutting his own throat not to do it."

Already Hill has investigated the feasibility of a new stadium closer to the city (Softball Centre is 16 miles from downtown.) He has checked with city councilmen and the state Department of Commerce about the vacant land between the Genesee River and Mt. Hope Avenue, north of Gateway Towers.

4 Because of their talents, most of the group knew one another before they joined Nucci. There is a pervading respect throughout. What can be fascinating and reassuring about them is that they are sanely driven men who have calmly rationalized their rainbow chasing. ~~They~~ sacrificed and involved their families and most have wives and girl friends who understand.

Andy Santillo is atypical because he has been involved longer than most (10 years) and exudes a more serious air. He explains that he is there to do a job, not to have fun. To him there can be no substitute for pride and personal achievements. Last year he was named the All-World shortstop, a position that's the heart of the team's defense.

Santillo is 30 now, but the

Left, Jimmy Adams plays all 10 positions. Below, outfielder Bill Kreger, Nucci and Zeniths coach John Warren, right, clock a dash to first base.

idea of becoming a pro has squashed any retirement thoughts. "I want to see this thing work here," he says. "I'd honestly do it for nothing because I like the thought of being a pioneer. My wife's with me on this."

Before the pro opportunity materialized Santillo talked of playing "one year at a time. I have three children (aged 10, 8 and 7) and they keep me pretty busy. My wife (Mae) has always understood. She really has been great about it.

"I do worry, though, about the time I spend at it, away from the kids. But they do come and watch. I just hope that in the end they don't come and say that I neglected them. That would be my only regret about playing. When I'm not playing, I really am a homebody. I stick around and spend a lot of time at home during the winter."

"To be honest, I never thought when we got married that Andy would spend this much time playing softball," his wife said. "But I never pressured him to quit. I know it has been tough on some women, but it hasn't

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5bothered me. His sons are proud of him and they cut out all his pictures when he gets in the papers.

"When we met in high school, I knew then how sports-minded he was. I guess for a while there I even hoped he would go to the pros (baseball). He's put a lot into it and he deserves the good that has come from it."

The composition of the Zeniths is widespread, in fact three out-of-towners play and the rest come from a merger of two local amateur teams, plus the addition of Al Drechsler and Pee Wee Dorsey from a third team, Pace Electronics. The result was one "super" team and the decimation of Rochester's Major A League.

One of the big name additions is Cal Carmen, a 35-year-old legendary slo-pitch superstar from Detroit. Carmen owns an automobile reconditioning business and golfs, sometimes 54 holes a day, usually to gamble. He is an eccentric, talented first

baseman. Carmen adorns the cover of the first issue of *Slo-Pitch* magazine, caught in his intimidation game. He loves shredding people's nerves.

What he does is stand 5 to 10 feet away from opposing hitters, on the first base line. He is yelling, name-calling, kicking dirt, doing whatever possible to disturb the hitter's concentration. It sounds and looks ridiculous, but the stunt often succeeds because softball, like any sport, can be as much emotion as it is talent.

In slo-pitch where the ball floats or spins toward the hitter in a very slow 10-foot arc, the strength and timing of a hitter is incomparable. There are many ex-major leaguers, Jim Northrup and Norm Cash for example, who haven't mastered a consistent home run stroke. There are two players for Amateur Softball Association champion Nelson Painting of Oklahoma City who hit more than 200 homers each last season. *Continued*

6 Fences in the league are a mandatory 300 feet and some are farther, so speed and defense play a large part in the game. Also, unlike most softball teams, Nucci carries 20 players so he has defensive specialists, pinch-hitters, pinch-runners, a full complement of talent. Most teams carry 12 or 13 players because no one really tolerates sitting the bench in this sport.

"In the 10 years I've been involved," Nucci says, "the type of athlete has changed tremendously. They tend nowadays to be all-around athletes, more intelligent and sophisticated."

Typical of the all-around athlete are Doug Farrell, the Bishop Kearney High School basketball coach who attended Niagara University on a full basketball scholarship, and Rick Page, a 33-year-old physical education teacher in the Rush-Henrietta School District. Page was a small college

All-East split end in football at the State University College at Cortland and is an assistant coach at Sperry High School.

Page was such a good punter that in 1965 he was second in the nation with a 44.4-yard average. He was later drafted by the Dallas Cowboys, but thought twice about it because there was little security "and the Vietnam War was going on and I had a family." So Page decided on graduate school and teaching.

"I'm so positive about this succeeding, though," Page said, "because we know what it takes to be good. I know there is a difference between being a professional and an amateur, but what it really boils down to is pride. We'll want to perform because there has always been pressure to do well. The pay is going to be secondary. If you're going to bring money into the thought process you're never going to be successful. You have to prepare

yourself mentally for this."

For some of the old-timers on the team like Glen Eichelberger and Frank Taccone, this opportunity is nirvana. Five years ago Taccone, a lovable large man, was considered the Babe Ruth of Upstate slo-pitch. He's hit more than 300 homers in his career, but last year he sat the bench most of the season. But in the championship game he was a pitching hero and ultimately hit the game-winning home run.

And then there is Jerry Lasponara, who was this year's Local Amateur Athlete of the Year. His world series batting average was .722 and he won the most valuable player award.

Below, pitcher Mike Decillis is varsity basketball coach at Gates-Chili High School. Opposite page, long before the spring sun warmed the softball field, team members started working out at Bishop Kearney High School.

7 "To tell you the truth I didn't know what to expect when I first got into slo-pitch," said Lasponara, a 6-2, 215-pounder who played college baseball and is an excellent fast-pitch softball player. "I knew it had the stigma of being a lower form of baseball. But I think the image has really changed. There are no cases of beer on our sidelines."

That was one aspect Dick Hill noticed about his new team, that they were no-nonsense individuals. "I wouldn't have gotten into this league without the Mazzola-Castle team. In fact, I think I'm going to call Gene Mazzola right now and thank him." 