

**EDGEWATER**

# Edgewater Baseball relaunches with girls at-bat

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When youth baseball returns to Edgewater's Veterans Field on Saturday, nearly three dozen girls will suit up with the boys ready to play ball.

In doing so, they'll be bucking a trend that has been more than a century in the making: hardball is for boys and softball is for girls.

"I don't think any sport is just a boys' sport," said Regan Lynch, an 11-year-old aspiring slugger who's taking her first crack at hardball this year. "I think any sport can be boys and girls."

Some 35 girls have enrolled in the program's tee-ball and minor league divisions this season, which returns Saturday after a five-year hiatus caused by the remediation and reconstruction of Veterans Field. But as of Thursday, only Regan had enrolled in the oldest age group, which includes children in fourth to sixth grades.

If Regan rounds the diamond all season — as the Edgewater program's organizers hope — she'll join the ranks of girls who are steadily breaking an athletic barrier.

Girls typically begin to feel social pressure to segregate around 8 or 9 years old and they hit baseball's glass ceiling by 12, said Jennifer Ring, the author of "Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don't Play Baseball."

"That's the point where girls are given the strong message that 'you can't handle the regulation-size diamond and if your parents have any sense, they'll get you into the pipeline to get scholarships in softball,'" she said. "That's a real crushing message to give to girls and sooner or later they internalize it and they do drop out."

With that in mind, the Edgewater program is re-launching with a special focus on girls.

“They haven’t really been given a chance to play baseball on the same level with the boys,” said Mark Capra, the Edgewater Baseball president. “We created a baseball program where they can learn how to play right, have fun and not have a separation between the girls and boys.”

Though Regan is not the first girl to play baseball in Edgewater, the program leaders hope she serves as inspiration for other girls.

“I would love to see them come out, but we can’t force them,” said Jill Sullivan, the recreation department’s youth activity coordinator.

Hardball and softball severed along gender lines with the professionalization of baseball in the 1890s and hardball has retained a “manly” patina ever since, she said.

“It was associated with national identity and you couldn’t really have a respectable national sport that girls played too,” Ring said. “So they were just driven out.”

Softball -- or “sissy ball,” “nancy ball,” “kitten ball” and “panty waist” as it has been derogatorily called -- became the feminine version of baseball and is now the most common way for girls to advance in the sport.

But 5-foot-4 Regan stands taller than her teammates and has no trouble keeping up.

During a recent practice, she threw a baseball back and forth with a coach with ease, she rarely missed a pitch in the batting cage and mingled with the boys.

“She’s definitely not intimidated by being the only girl on our team,” said A’Jahn Huggins, co-coach of Lynch’s team.

Regan said years of playing on all-male basketball teams provided ample preparation. She jumped at the chance to add baseball to her roster of sports, which also includes softball and soccer, as soon as Edgewater Baseball offered the opportunity.

“I just wanted to try it out. I like to try new things,” she said. “I think I’m capable of doing anything.”

Regan’s love for America’s pastime began at Yankee Stadium, where she has attended games with her father and found a role model in Derek Jeter. She took up tee-ball at 5, and when the time came to advance to a more challenging game, she transitioned to softball.

“At the time, I never thought about it, I think it was just automatic,” Nicole Pagnozzi, Regan’s mother, said. “Boys and girls play together in tee-ball and next they jump automatically to a

girls' team and a boys' team. I never thought she'd play baseball."

Anna Maria Gualtieri, an Edgewater Baseball board member, said the program is in a unique position to tackle that mentality as it rebuilds from the ground up and has made a concentrated effort this season to recruit girls.

"I feel strongly that girls shouldn't be told that they should play one sport over another because of their gender," she said. "I would encourage any parents with girls to give baseball a try ... It really sends a priceless message to your daughter that she can do whatever she wants to do."

Gualtieri's 9-year-old daughter, Mara, has taken that advice to heart. She began playing tee-ball five years ago, transitioned into baseball in the first grade and has no intention of stopping.

"She didn't like how big a softball was, the underhand pitching was unfamiliar to her so we encouraged her to stick with baseball," said Gualtieri.

Regan said she is treating her first year of baseball as a trial run and would consider continuing to play if she likes it. So far, she's pleased with her ability to hold her own on the field.

"I'm pretty proud of myself. I don't feel like they are leaving me out in any way," she said. "They throw me the ball, they'll hit with me. I don't feel like they don't want to play with me so I'm happy about that."

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