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San Francisco Chronicle

Girls play hardball at national tournament in S.F.

By **Lizzie Johnson** | July 27, 2016 | Updated: July 27, 2016 4:42pm



Photo: Lea Suzuki, The Chronicle

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Bay Sox players listen to manager Alex Oglesby address the team before its game against the D.C. Force at the Baseball for All tournament. About 240 girls are participating in the event.

She had already made it through years of being the only girl on the baseball diamond. At tryouts for Roosevelt Middle School's team, she weathered the stares of confused spectators. And on the field, boys ridiculed her or ignored her altogether.

But Isabel Tilles, 12, of the Mission District stuck with the sport. She liked the overhand toss and the solid weight of the baseball — smaller and harder than a softball — in her glove. Last year, Isabel realized she wasn't alone in her love of the game. She joined 13 girls on an all-female baseball team, a first for the Bay Area.

This year, the Bay Sox are one of 20 teams from across the country competing in the second annual Baseball for All youth tournament, an all-girls event at the Moscone Recreation Center in

North Beach. About 240 girls in five age divisions are competing, with the finals held Thursday. The games last six innings, or 1 hour and 45 minutes, whichever comes first.

The original Bay Sox team, for which Isabel plays, came in third last year at the tournament in Orlando. This year, it's hoping to win the tournament, which has nearly doubled in size since last year, when 130 girls participated. Locally, the number of teams has expanded to six, or about 80 girls, across the different age divisions.

The Bay Sox are sponsored by the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department. The tournament is the only one in the nation exclusively for girls.



Photo: Lea Suzuki, The Chronicle

Cecelia McQuaid, 13, of the Bay Sox keeps her eye on the ball during batting practice before the national tournament game against the Force.

‘Antiquated notion’

“This is a world where girls shouldn’t be told that they can’t do something or that something is not for them,” said Phil Ginsburg, Recreation and Park Department general manager. “We are on the brink of electing the first female president. The idea that baseball isn’t for girls is an antiquated notion.”

More than 100,000 girls participate in youth baseball teams in the United States, yet only 1,000 continue to play in high school, said Justine Siegal, founder and director of the tournament. Siegal cracked the glass ceiling after being hired by the Oakland A’s to work in the instructional league in 2015, becoming the first female coach in Major League Baseball.

“If you tell a girl she can’t play baseball, what else will she think she can’t do?” Siegal said Tuesday, watching a game at the Moscone Rec Center. “When these girls get to play with other girls, they feel so empowered. You can see it on their faces. As a kid, I felt alone being the only girl. Here, we’re a community.”

On a dusty baseball field surrounded by chain-link fences, Isabel’s team warmed up Tuesday afternoon for a game against the Washington, D.C., Force. Sunscreen streaked the player’s faces. Their smiles revealed tidy rows of braces looped with neon rubber bands, a hallmark of the awkward transition from childhood. Isabel, her thick brown hair loose under a baseball cap, ran to the outfield.



Photo: Lea Suzuki, The Chronicle

Bella Caruso-Commisso, 11, of the San Francisco Bay Sox exchanges a fist bump with umpire Perry Barber after a game against the D.C. Force in the Baseball for All tournament at the Moscone Recreation Center.

‘Just as tough’

“No offense, boys,” she said, winking, “but I like playing with the girls more. We are just as tough as them, if not better.”

By the bottom of the second inning, the Bay Sox were leading 6-2. From the dugout, a few girls watched the game intently, crunching on dill pickles and sunflower seeds, and popping Big League Chew bubblegum. Equipment lined the fence behind them. None of it was pink. They yelled encouragement to their teammates on the field.

“Bases, bases,” said Sophia Turnbull, 11, of the Westwood Park neighborhood. “Come on.”

The team’s coach, Alex Oglesby, a health and wellness consultant, crouched, hands on her knees, waiting for the next play. A former catcher, she frequently jokes that other teams didn’t

realize her gender until she peeled off her mask. Now, she's passing that passion for baseball to the next generation.

"I could hear taunts from the dugout," she said, without shifting her gaze from the game. "If I got somebody out, it was, 'Oh, you got out by a girl.' Like it was a bad thing. We're changing that here."

In a flash, the pitcher threw the ball. It smacked Caroline Robinson, 11, of Millbrae in the shoulder. She walked to first base. The bases were loaded.

"Wow, she's pretty tough," said a spectator from the bleachers. "I would be crying after that one."

With a crack, the next batter sent the ball sailing. The girls ran the bases, ponytails flying. From the stands, parents cheered loudly. In that moment, the hardships of being a girl in a historically male sport vanished.

All that mattered was the game.

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