

A diamond in the rough

Popular McMaster softball league offers friendship, fun

BY THERESA MACINNIS

After more than 40 years, you might say they've seen it all, except for an independent umpire that is.

And it's likely not for the reasons you may think. Sure, there have been battles over the years, and the Phoenix Cup has taken a beating, but players in the McMaster three-pitch co-ed softball league seem to have managed just fine to last this long.

This summer official umpires will take the place of players behind the plate to allow more playing time each night for 21 teams in two divisions.

"It made the game go smoothly and eliminated rules and it means I can schedule an extra game a night and also start the games a little later," says league commissioner Andy Duncan. "It's a good-natured group and we don't take it too seriously. The umpires who have done our tournaments have told us they enjoy it. It's a very laid-back league."

The league's official name is the McMaster University Graduate Student Association (GSA) Three-Pitch Softball League, but it's not just graduate students who play.

Duncan, a technician in the Department of Physics & Astronomy, began playing in 1981. He started scheduling the games five years ago when he offered to write a program for the Phoenix manager (the Phoenix is the GSA's restaurant in Wentworth House) who organized the schedule at the time. Duncan has been doing the schedule ever since. Others, like Jim Greenlee, have been playing in the league since 1968.

At one time there were 42 teams in the three-pitch league and another 12 to 16 in the men's slow-pitch league, says Duncan. The Time Bandits were always the team to beat for the Phoenix Cup until they split into two teams for this season.

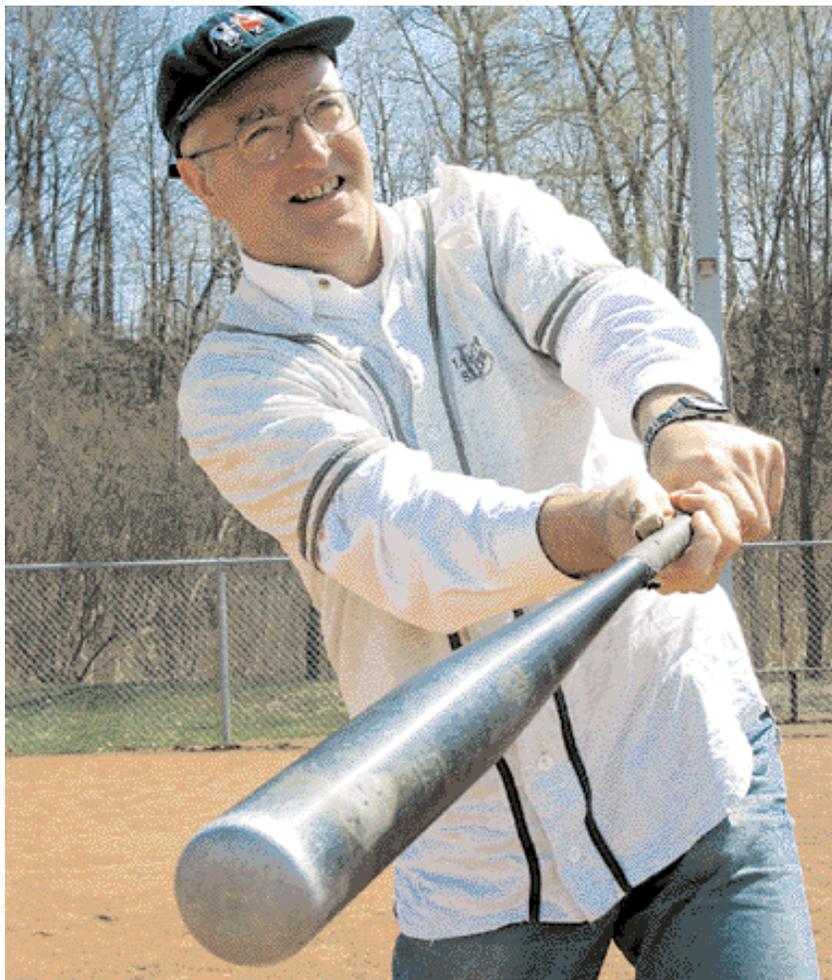
The 17-year-old cup had to be rebuilt last year by one of the carpenters in physical plant because it came apart in one of the post-game celebrations. Celebratory players have even tried to drink beer out of it, but it leaks.

The league is believed to have started informally around 1959 with the chemistry and physics departments playing fastball. Some players remember playing on the site of Wentworth House and the 10-acre field, (northeast of the recreation complex) in the past.

In more recent years, the league has called three fields by Zone 7 Parking home. In the past several years they have worked on the field, adding grass and, most recently, lighting and new fencing.

"I've talked to a lot of former employees, alumni and grad students, who remember it fondly," says Duncan. "It's the social aspect. After the game we get together and kid each other and have a good time. It's people like Jim Greenlee who enjoy it so much."

If you don't recognize the name Andy Duncan, "Weasel" may sound more familiar. A few years back he told his team if they won 10 games in a row or the Phoenix Cup he would buy them all a steak. The first year they had three victories, a loss, and then a string of seven victories. In the loss, he hit a



Batter up! Andy Duncan swings into a new season as commissioner of McMaster's GSA Softball League, now more than 40 years old.

fly ball to the right fielder with the winning run in place.

In the past 35 years Jim Greenlee estimates he has played just over 700 games. He keeps a record of every game he has played. He is a professor and chair of history at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University of Newfoundland and has been returning to Hamilton every summer since 1977.

"The league has been very good for me in several respects. It offers guaranteed respite from the term, gets the juices flowing and seems to give me greater energy to research and write. I guess this is because of the release it affords."

Greenlee says he loved his days as a student at McMaster (1964-1975) and he cherishes every opportunity to renew that connection each year. He says "McBall" makes him feel as though he had

never left.

"There is a romantic comradeship throughout the league that you cannot find elsewhere, let alone replace. I have come to value old opponents as much as long-time teammates."

Dustin Johnson, captain of the Naturals, is one of the newer members of the league. The second-year master's student says it was a great stress relief and a fantastic way to meet new people after helping to form the team last summer.

"This year, we have the majority of our team returning, plus word of mouth has spread and we've had to turn down 10 to 15 extra players that want to play with us. We are looking forward to another exciting summer of baseball, friendship and fun."

For more information about the league, or to read Jim Greenlee's reflections, visit: <http://www.physics.mcmaster.ca/gsasoftball/>.