

Chapter 4

Softball

“An Arizona dentist cancels all appointments for a week. A Canadian businessman works nights so he can leave the office. Five carloads of men leave Florida. A California electronics worker and his family change their vacation trip plans.

They share two things in common: each man is a championship softball player, and all have the same destination—the annual All-Church Priesthood Softball Tournament in Salt Lake City, one of the world’s largest and most unusual sports events.”¹

After basketball, softball was the largest Mormon sport and all-church tournament. It provided a summer time activity for boys and men. In the 1950s and 1960s softball parks were part of the Church’s environment. Mormons participated in what some studies describe as the sport with the most participants in America. One reason for softball’s success in the United States was that the sport adjusted to meet the needs of boys and girls and women and men. For example, a switch from fast pitch to slow pitch increased participation.

In this chapter, a brief history of softball is followed by the LDS Church’s involvement in the sport. A discussion follows that focuses on the all-church tournament and the impact softball had on Mormon men and boys. Unlike basketball, the oversight of softball was assigned to the priesthood, and General Authorities encouraged ward leaders to report the program’s success in converting and reactivating men and their families.

Softball History

To the untrained eye, softball and baseball look like the same sport. But those who play and understand the sports quickly point out more differences than similarities. Both have diamonds, but a baseball field is 90 feet on each side and a softball diamond is 60 feet per side. In baseball the pitcher’s mound is 60 feet 6 inches from home plate; in softball the pitcher stands 46 feet away from the batter. A baseball is about 9 inches around and weighs 5 ounces. Under the white leather cover are layers of yarn encasing a cork and rubber center. A softball has similar construction but is

between 11 7/8 and 12 1/4 inches around and weighs between 6 and 6 3/4 ounces. A softball is not “soft,” but it is not as hard as a baseball. Baseball pitchers throw overhand; softball pitchers throw underhand. Baseball teams have nine players; softball teams have ten. A baseball game is nine innings; a softball game is seven.

Softball started in 1887. Some young men gathered in Chicago waiting for the telegraph report of the Yale-Harvard football game on Thanksgiving Day. One threw a boxing glove at another, who then hit it with a broomstick. George Hancock, the father of softball, then grabbed the boxing glove, tightened the laces to create a ball, and declared, “Let’s play ball.” Later that year Hancock designed a ball larger than a baseball and two years later published his rules for indoor-outdoor baseball.²

Over the years the game developed. It was played at a world’s fair where the name *softball* was introduced. In 1933 the Amateur Softball Association standardized the rules. That year the association sponsored two fast-pitch national tournaments—one for men and one for women. The sport expanded and eventually reached its peak in the 1940s. However, according to one study, spectators and participants enjoyed the sport because of “the novelty of watching spectacular underhand pitching performances.” As the pitchers improved, there were more strikeouts. The game evolved into a duel between the pitcher and the batter. Pitchers developed windmill and slingshot releases that controlled the delivery and fooled the batter. Team members who played other positions in the game lost interest.

Instead of giving up on softball though, some players switched from fast pitch to slow pitch. The ball and field are the same in both types of games. The major difference is in the pitching style. A slow pitcher must throw a ball with an arc between 6 and 12 feet at a moderate speed. Unlike baseball and fast pitch, the goal is to have the batter hit the ball. The team depends on fielders for outs. As a result, everyone on the field is more involved. The first national slow-pitch men’s

championship was held in 1953.

Slow pitch continues to be a popular community recreation sport because people of all ages can participate. Slow-pitch players do not have to run fast, hit well, and field with much skill to have fun. The game can be adapted to players of all ages and athletic abilities. Community programs find softball to be an excellent co-ed sport where men and women and boys and girls can play together. Some studies claim that slow-pitch softball is the most played game in the United States. Fast-pitch softball has become a college and Olympic sport for women.³

Mormon Church and Softball

Studies disagree on when the LDS Church first sponsored softball. According to some records, the M Men started playing softball in the 1920s but then turned it over to the elders quorums who often participated in community recreation programs.⁴ The Provo, Utah, Recreation Department sponsored an elders' league with only LDS teams during the 1930s.⁵ Eventually the Church took over the elders' league. A BYU master's thesis identified eight teams who came from fourteen divisions that played in the first tournament in 1938. Another article reported that church leaders created the all-church elders' softball association in 1940 and held the first official all-church tournament in 1941 but mothballed it because of the war.⁶ Newspaper accounts and the annual MIA athletic manuals listed the first YMMIA tournament as 1949. While other community groups held tournaments that included LDS men, this seems to be the official beginning of church-sponsored softball. Sixteen teams competed the first year, and Church President George Albert Smith threw out the first pitch. All participants received a medal, and three trophies were handed out—winner, runner-up and sportsmanship.⁷

In 1954 softball moved from the YMMIA control to the Melchizedek Priesthood. That meant that instead of the YMMIA planning and operating the softball teams, the softball officials reported directly to the stake president. The stake president could select a stake softball director from the

high council or from the MIA stake board. These leaders encouraged all men and boys to participate. If there were too many men and boys for one team, the ward could have several teams. Church leaders argued that softball was more than just a sport; it was a way to keep men active.⁸

Softball grew in popularity because church leaders encouraged members to play. Joseph Fielding Smith, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, asked all stake presidents in 1961 and 1962 to get teams ready for the upcoming softball season since this was an “important priesthood activity.” While he praised the 1960 season as having the highest participation ever, he was sad that half the wards did not organize teams. He explained every congregation needed to participate because “the softball activity is a highly effective tool in converting and reactivating. We commend it to you for those noble purposes and as a means of providing wholesome recreational activity for the brethren of the priesthood.” He concluded, “Remember, brethren, that winning games is not our prime purpose. Our activity is such that everyone participating can benefit.” But the program worked only if the leaders supported it. According to Smith, “Your enthusiastic support and efficient and early planning are essential to the success of the priesthood softball activity.”⁹

There are no records that suggest why Joseph Fielding Smith singled out softball as a priesthood responsibility instead of basketball. Basketball was always a more popular sport in terms of number of teams and participants. It started before softball and always attracted more players. Smith may have wanted softball to grow in popularity because there were opportunities for more boys and men to participate simply because there were more players per team. Also few schools had softball teams, so fewer players were restricted from playing on church teams because of their participation in high school and college athletics. Other than Joseph Fielding Smith’s letters though, the basketball and softball programs ran very much the same.

By 1960 the program had expanded to include 28 regions, 53 divisions, 89 districts, and 319 stakes.¹⁰ But still the sport was fairly new in church circles. An informal survey showed that more

Mormons knew about basketball than softball. That year the MIA sponsored the first softball coaches' clinic at Brigham Young University. Glen C. Tuckett, the BYU baseball coach, provided instruction on "hitting, fielding, pitching and general softball strategy."¹¹

Local and Regional Play

On their way to the all-church tournament, ward softball teams competed first on a stake level. Winners moved on to division and zone play and then to the Salt Lake City event. A newspaper article showed how the regional play worked. In 1949, eight teams played in the Division 6 playoff in Utah County. A Denver team from the Western States Mission could not afford to come, and the Wasatch Stake, Utah, winner could not participate because the team had ineligible players. The Vineyard Ward from Orem, Utah, won the Division 6 playoff and advanced to the all-church tournament. The *Deseret News* declared Vineyard Ward as one of the favorite teams at the all-church tournament.¹²

D. Mark Hutchings described his route to the all-church tournament. First, his Merced, California, slow-pitch junior team played in a round-robin stake competition where every team played each other in divisions and the top teams advanced to the final. After the preliminary play was over, the teams also competed in a stake tournament. The stake included wards in Fresno, and the teams played their tournament games there. Fans and teams from Merced, traveled an hour each way to participate. The winner of the stake tournament advanced to a regional tournament in Fresno and competed against other Fresno stakes. The winner went on to compete in the Reno/Sparks area. In 1969 the Merced Second Ward did not have enough players for a team, so Hutchings played with the First Ward. In 1970 the Merced First Ward had its own team and won the area championship that was held in Stockton, California. Hutchings was thrilled when he hit a home run.¹³

Year-by-Year Tournament History

The final goal for the local, regional, and area competition was to be eligible for the all-

church softball tournament. Each year that tournament had exciting games, thrilled winners, and frustrated losers. Gordon Norman Oborn's 1960 BYU master's thesis listed all the participating teams and the winners of the senior division fast pitch. He also added game details. For example, in 1939 the Liberty First Ward from Salt Lake City defeated the Palmyra Ward from Spanish Fork, Utah. The game was scoreless for fourteen innings before the Salt Lake ward finally won. The same ward won in 1940.¹⁴

The 1949 "official" church tournament took place at White Park, a Salt Lake City-owned baseball field. California teams won the first two years. A Wellsville, Utah, team placed fourth in 1949 and third in 1950. In 1951, according to Oborn, "Wellsville was not to be denied the championship" with "rock ribbed defense, solid hitting, and tough hurling." Archie Darley, the pitcher, did an "outstanding hurling job." Wellsville kept returning to the all-church tournament, and even though the team did not win in 1952, Darley was named to the all-star team.¹⁵

Those tournaments were highlights for Darley. He grew up on a farm, attended one semester at Utah State University, fought during World War II, and then returned to the farm. As a boy, he played softball and baseball for fun. In high school he played in a valley softball league sponsored by local businesses. However, he recalled, "When the Church took over, that made it better. They started having church tournaments." The year the Wellsville First Ward won, Darley bragged that six thousand players and six hundred teams had played throughout the Church. He declared, "Wellsville First which was one of the smallest towns won."¹⁶

A ward from another small town—Pocatello, Idaho—won the sportsmanship trophy in 1951 and the championship in 1952. In 1953 a Tucson, Arizona, team won both the championship and the sportsmanship award. One reason was that the pitcher George Busby congratulated every runner at second base during the game. The *Deseret News* called it "one of the greatest teams in the history of Church sports."¹⁷

The softball tournaments continued to grow in popularity. In 1954 the tournament represented the best of the ten thousand players and one thousand one hundred teams. Thirty-two teams competed at all-church, and an Ogden, Utah, team defeated the favorites from Wellsville and Plain City, Utah. But having so many teams stretched the park capacity in Salt Lake City. Archie Darley remembered playing at White Park near the fairgrounds in 1949. When the team won in 1951, they played at Glade Park, a new field near Fort Douglas. The Church rented Derks Field, the professional baseball field in Salt Lake City, in 1954. In 1955 the tournament was held at Jordan Park, and a new church-owned four-plex at 2300 South 200 West, Salt Lake City. At the annual banquet that year, leaders announced the park's name—George Q. Morris Park.¹⁸

Church leaders named the park after George Quayle Morris, a strong supporter of the Mutual Improvement Association and priesthood softball. Morris was born in 1874 in Salt Lake City. He attended Brigham Young University and graduated from the University of Utah. Throughout these years he worked for his father's marble polishing business. His father died just before Morris served a mission in England. When he returned in 1902, he worked with his brother Nephi L. Morris for his father's business and became general manager and president of Elias Morris & Sons. Morris served twice as president of the Salt Lake Stake MIA. He became a member of the YMMIA General Board in 1924, and in 1935 he became the YMMIA's first assistant general superintendent. In 1929 Morris chaired the *Improvement Era* committee and worked on improving the magazine. In 1937 he replaced Albert E. Bowen as president of the YMMIA when Bowen was called to be a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Morris led the MIA until 1948, when he became president of the Eastern States Mission. In 1951 he was called as an assistant to the Twelve, and in 1954 he became an Apostle.¹⁹

The Church paid \$100,000 to build the Morris softball complex, which included four lighted diamonds, grandstands for twenty-five hundred people, two dressing rooms, four

restrooms, a press box that overlooked all the diamonds, a refreshment stand, outfields with grass, and parking. The area could host the entire sixty-four-team tournament with thirty-two teams playing each day. Finally, the Church did not have to rent facilities.²⁰ Later organizers added two thousand seats and two unlit diamonds in 1964.²¹

Joseph Fielding Smith dedicated the Morris Park on June 12, 1956. To celebrate the new park, church leaders invited teams from Utah and Idaho to play. Eight games took place with outstanding senior and junior teams. After the exhibition games, Smith spoke and explained that completing the facility fulfilled a long-time dream. While the newspapers carried short articles and summaries of Smith's comments about the park, there are no records of his speech or prayer.

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Later in 1956 San Antonio, Texas, won the tournament. San Diego, California won the next year defeating Wellsville. In 1958 a Mesa, Arizona, ward won; Wellsville placed seventh. The final game in 1958 was televised for the first time. A Snowflake, Arizona, ward beat a Mesa, Arizona, ward in 1959. Arizona continued to dominate, and a Mesa ward won in 1960.²³

Some of the same teams came to the all-church tournament nearly every year. Other years new wards sent teams. Oborn summarized the tournament participants up through 1960 when he wrote his thesis. He listed two hundred teams who placed in the top eight from 1949 to 1960. Teams from five states won the championship led by Utah who won five and Arizona who won four. Teams from four states received the sportsmanship award led by Utah who won six and Idaho who won three. Wellsville First Ward came to the tournament nine times, the most of any ward. A Pleasant Green, Utah, ward placed in the top eight teams a record seven times, every time that it attended.²⁴

Oborn's thesis only reported fast pitch seniors. But that was not the only division. As in basketball, juniors competed in fast pitch softball as well. The tournament was called all-church, but at least in 1957 and 1958, nearly all the teams came from Idaho and Utah, mostly from the

Salt Lake Valley. When the church softball committee added slow pitch for seniors and juniors in 1961, the leaders explained it would continue if it worked. By 1965 more teams played slow pitch than fast in both senior and junior divisions.²⁵ The following chart shows the total number of teams and the increasing popularity of slow pitch over fast pitch from 1957 to 1972. Records were not available for every year.

Yr	1957	1958	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972
Sr	n/a	n/a	1,695	1,814	1,931	2,063	2,116	2,268	2,216	1,729
fast	1,125	1,245	678	602	570	512	481	426	407	221
slow	n/a	n/a	1,017	1,212	1,332	1,463	1,595	1,766	1,819	1,385
Jr	n/a	n/a	1,688	1,826	1,907	2,071	2,156	2,211	2,216	1,473
fast	978	1,059	718	643	570	450	443	411	263	185
slow	n/a	n/a	970	1,183	1,316	1,621	1,640	1,733	1,723	1,188

The *Improvement Era* did not carry softball articles as it had basketball information in the 1930s. But the magazine did list the softball tournament winners. In 1959 nearly all the teams in the finals in all four divisions were from Arizona and California. In 1961 Arizona dominated; junior teams from Chandler and Queen Creek competed for the championship. There was a more even split between Arizona, California, and Utah in 1963; rain delayed the tournament, but there were still 135 games played during the week.²⁶ That year the slow-pitch finalists were all teams from Utah.

In 1968 the tournament represented the best of four thousand teams and ninety-six teams competed at all-church; there were thirty-two senior and junior slow-pitch teams and only sixteen junior and senior fast pitch.²⁷ The 1970 tournament also had ninety-six teams representing five thousand teams from thirty-seven zones.²⁸ In 1971 fifteen hundred players on one hundred twelve teams came from across the United States.²⁹ These figures show that the tournament remained

very popular over the years. Like the rest of the nation, the all-church teams switched from fast pitch to slow pitch but interest in softball remained strong.

The All-Church Tournament

As with basketball, the all-church tournament required a lot of preparation and money. The Church committee covered the expenses of the tournament by charging an admission to games, selling concessions, and collecting a three-dollar registration fee for every team that participated in church softball. The tournament raised less money than basketball, but it also did not cost as much to run. The annual reports showed a small profit without counting the registration fees.³⁰

Teams had to get to Salt Lake City and have places to stay. Until the George Q. Morris complex was built, the teams had to rent the parks throughout Salt Lake City. As with basketball, players mostly remembered the games, but they sometimes referred to the details. Unlike basketball, there were no local young women sponsors. Other than that, the details between the softball and basketball tournaments were very similar to the larger tournament.

Travel and Lodging at All-Church

Participating teams had to deal with the logistics of getting to Salt Lake City. Most teams drove. They stayed with members and slept in churches, or occasionally the Church paid for hotel rooms. In 1954 three teams slept on the Deseret Gym floor. One player complained, “We play ball during the day and sleep on floors that are hard as rocks at night.” One team cooked their meals at a park. Wendell Eyring’s team came from Queen Creek, Arizona, in three cars. He was not sure who paid for the gas, but the Church paid for the housing and meals at the University of Utah.³¹ In 1969 and 1970, D. Mark Hutchings remembered traveling from Merced, California, in a new car. His grandmother lived in Salt Lake City and several team members stayed there or with their Utah relatives.³²

Opening Activities

The church leaders and softball committee wanted to be sure the youth and their coaches kept the spiritual purpose in mind. Committee members and General Authorities often spoke at a fireside in the Salt Lake Tabernacle before the tournament started. These included Marion D. Hanks, a Seventy, in 1957; Elder Mark E. Petersen in 1968, Elder Marion G. Romney in 1970, and Elder Delbert L. Stapley in 1971.³³

Elder Ezra Taft Benson gave a typical devotional address on August 21, 1966. He started out explaining this was a tournament of champions because they had to win other tournaments to qualify. While the games would be a “challenge” and “explosive,” that was not the main goal. Softball was “a part of the great program to build men.” There were “problems, sure,” but the games served a bigger purpose. “As we go into this great church softball tournament of champions may we not forget that much greater ball game of life. May we all be champions in that all important tournament.” In conclusion, Benson offered a blessing. “May [the tournament] bring joy to our hearts, may it teach you valuable lessons, may it make you appreciate more fully the rich program of the church, the purpose of which is to build men and women of character and strengthen and deepen spirituality.”³⁴

Four years later, in 1970, the program followed a usual format. A mixed chorus performed musical numbers. The congregation sang an MIA hymn, “Carry On.” Wayne Player from the softball priesthood committee conducted the meeting. Ben E. Rawlings from the Ensign Stake Committee gave the opening prayer, and YMMIA athletic committee member Malcolm F. LeSueur gave the closing prayer.³⁵

The devotional in 1970 had a lasting effect on Mark Hutchings, a team captain. The previous year, two members of the joint Merced First and Second ward team had not been allowed to play because they were caught smoking. The General Authority speaker, Loren C.

Dunn, a Seventy, mentioned that experience. Hutchings was sad and told his team that he wanted to make sure that never happened again.³⁶

The softball committee also sponsored a banquet for the participants where team members met new people and renewed friendships. Players also had an opportunity to meet General Authorities. In 1960 Clark N. Stohl, assistant to the softball committee chair, asked church leaders to attend the opening banquet, which would “feature spiritual messages from our leaders as well as good entertainment.” Stohl continued, “We are certain that the men and boys coming from all the Church will appreciate meeting you.”³⁷

Of course, food was a focus. The 1956 banquet at the Cannon Stake House featured a fresh melon fruit cup, tomato lettuce salad with French dressing, steak with mushroom sauce, French green beans, potatoes au gratin, relish dishes, hot rolls and butter, and apple pie a la mode. The program featured church leaders. A. Walter Stevenson, a YMMIA committee member, was master of ceremonies. Elders Joseph Fielding Smith and George Q. Morris along with YMMIA committee members Elbert R. Curtis and Clark Stohl welcomed the group. Elder Harold B. Lee presented a message.³⁸

There were also opening activities at the ball park. The tournament started with an opening prayer and the singing of the “Star Spangled Banner.” At the first game on the first day a church leader threw the first ball or batted first. In 1957, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith threw out the first ball. Every other day started with a prayer and the American national anthem.³⁹

During the tournament, church leaders often came to the games. Softball chairman Malcolm LaSeur even added a place for church leaders to sit in the press box and raised the scorers above them. A special highlight was when Church President David O. McKay attended. As he became more feeble, he could not get to the press box so instead he watched from a small parking lot. One time he got out of the car and sat on a stadium chair. Effie Gunderson

remembered, “Some little old guy that was as old as he was came and brought him a blanket.” When parents brought their children to shake the president’s hand, Elder Ezra Taft Benson insisted McKay wanted to watch the game. But McKay said, “Let them come.” Mel Jones recalled a similar experience when McKay came to a game. Although “he was quite feeble” and had to be helped into the park, “he really seemed to enjoy the games. . . . We just felt so happy to have him that interested.”⁴⁰

Church leaders’ wives also attended sometimes. But Gunderson was not sure they were that interested in the game. Jessie Evans Smith, the wife of Joseph Fielding Smith, suggested Gunderson needed a lazy susan because Gunderson ran around so much. She also offered to whistle to get the game chairman’s attention.⁴¹

Games

While the other activities were enjoyable, the players mainly remembered the games. Bob Anderson from Arizona recalled, “They played four games at a time, all day long, five days a week. It was just exciting. We’d just sit around the motel, waiting for the ball game, get down there an hour early, warm up and go for it.”⁴² Years later some players could still give a play-by-play on each game they participated in. Mark Hutchings’s team won the slow-pitch junior championship and sportsmanship trophies in 1970. That year instead of a single elimination, the thirty-two teams first played in a four team round robin. All the participating teams were divided into groups consisting of four teams. All four teams played each other, and then the top two advanced. Hutchings’s team won all the games and was seeded number one from that group. Then the team moved on to a single elimination format. The first game “we won fairly easily.” The second game was against a team from Beaver, Utah—Hutchings’ father’s home town. “This team had some good athletes. I remember the game was very close. Our fielding came into play. . . . We won the game three to two.” The next game was against Layton, Utah. “We got off to a

real good start and beat them by eight or ten runs.”

The championship game was against a team from Walnut Creek, California. Hutchings recalled, “I know that because their star player was the brother of a girl I later dated.” The Walnut Creek center fielder was missing an arm, but Hutchings recalled his fielding was amazing. Hutchings hit a ball “to the gap in right center field.” He figured he was fast enough to stretch a double into a triple. He recalled, “I’ll be darned that that guy that had the one arm fielded the ball with his glove. They said that he put the glove under one arm. He threw a bullet right to third base and threw me out.”

The game was close. At the top of the seventh inning with the other team coming to bat, Hutchings’s Merced team was ahead by one run. One of their best players dropped a foul ball, and then the Walnut Creek’s best player was up to bat. Fortunately, the Merced right fielder “made a running, diving catch.” Remembering all these details, Hutchings concluded, “We were about as excited as you could be. It was like winning the world series basically for us.”⁴³

Press Coverage

As in basketball, Judy Donaldson, the YMMIA athletic committee secretary, produced a daily in-house bulletin, the *Batter’s Bugle*.⁴⁴ In 1956 the one-page sheet included upcoming games, results of games from the day before, and some interesting tidbits. For example, the August 24, 1956, issue reported that the Weston, Idaho, Ward was competing for the fourth time. The team had been the runners-up in 1953. In 1956 Weston was playing the Grant Third Ward for the consolation championship. The same issue congratulated Dick McFerson of the Inglewood, California, Ward, for pitching a no-hit and no-run game and three one-hit games during the season.

By the mid-1960s the format had changed. In 1966 the *Bugle* was a two-page report of the tournament, which welcomed the teams and discussed special activities. These included a

home-run derby in which each team could enter four players. There were also some human-interest stories. For example, there was a short biography of George Busby and a comment that losing three toes off his drag foot had not slowed him down. He still played softball, served as bishop, and was the father of eight children.⁴⁵

The *Deseret News* carried colorful reports of the games. Gary Rummler wrote on August 20, 1957, “Plain City started slower than a boy going to the dentist but ended up sprinting as it broke loose for eight runs in the sixth inning” and “South Gate pitcher Randle Romney only struck out one Provo batsman but his teammates led by the sparkling defensive plays of left fielder George Yoder kept the bases clear. Yoder made several shoe string catches that choked off potential Provo threats.”⁴⁶

In 1959, the Snowflake Second Ward team played the Mesa Sixth Ward team for the all-church finals. The newspaper commented that the eighteen hundred fans who came to see the final there were about eight hundred more than lived in Snowflake, a small Mormon community about two hundred miles north of Mesa. The two teams had already played in the Division 13 playoffs. According to the *Deseret News*, “The fact that nine such good men could come from such a tiny community . . . is something in itself when considering the magnitude of the All-Church program.” The Snowflake team repeated its stellar performance in 1966 when it won the all-church tournament. Pitcher Larry Brewer was the most valuable player in 1959; in 1966 he shared that honor with his brothers Ron and Gary.⁴⁷

Volunteers

The softball tournament required volunteers to keep the score and announce the game. Effie Gunderson started attending church sports after her marriage because her husband coached basketball and softball. She explained, “I was there, so he put a score book in my hand.” At one game the umpire asked to see her books and then invited her to be “the first woman to score the

all-church championship.” Gunderson went on to serve on the all-church softball committee. She arranged for scorers and announcers who worked twelve hour days. She also reported scores to the newspapers.⁴⁸

Another volunteer, Claudia Shelton, helped because her father, Paul “Red” Shelton, served on the all-church tournament committee and asked her to help. The Shelton family loved sports. Claudia attended baseball games at Derks Field with her aunts and uncles. She recalled, “We never missed a game.” But watching was not enough. Claudia explained, “Since Dad didn’t have a boy, he taught me how to play sports. That’s where I started was softball.” In addition to playing, Claudia attended the all-church tournament. “My girlfriend and I were the ones who went to the George Q. Morris Field. We would be the scorers and announcers. We did all the Church softball games. Our ward happened to go to the junior softball tournament and took first place. We were so excited about that. That was just before I went on my mission. We enjoyed it so much.”⁴⁹ Claudia played softball on the stake level, but there was not an all-church tournament for women.

Softball Goals

According to church leaders, winning games at the stake, regional, or all-church level though was not the final goal of church softball. Church leaders were quick to point out, “The primary aim of the Church recreational program is spirituality.”⁵⁰ They felt that if young men were required to attend church meetings and obey church rules to play softball, then the things that they learned in the meetings would affect them positively. The goal was not winning but giving everyone a chance to play. So Elder Joseph Fielding Smith focused on the total number participating. In 1961 he bragged that there were 1,408 teams, but he hoped for 2,000. In 1962 the number grew to 1,544. In 1964 he reported 1,662 senior teams and 1,705 junior teams with about 50,000 men and boys playing. He explained that not all these players were excellent at the

game, but the goal was participation—not skill.⁵¹ David Smart who grew up in Rexburg, Idaho, fit that pattern. He described himself as “a second-rate athlete” so he did not play school sports. But church ball offered him “a place for me to test my skills and win this confirmation that I was okay.”⁵²

Softball also changed lives. These were more than softball players; they were active members and a few nonmembers who lived LDS standards. After the 1949 tournament, the *Deseret News* declared, “What may yet turn out to be the largest softball league in the world, if it isn’t already” was successful “far above . . . all the wins and losses of the various teams” because of the “great amount of good accomplished. . . . Many men who have been inactive in church service have been brought back into activity through playing and association with fellow active church members.” In 1951, Elder Ezra Taft Benson told the softball banquet attendees, “Nothing is worth the doing if it doesn’t make a man.”⁵³ The Wellsville, Utah, Ward showed that could be done with a team of nearly all Melchizedek priesthood holders.⁵⁴ The *Deseret News* bragged that the Vineyard Ward in Orem, Utah, which won that Division 6 championship, said that winning was nice but it was more important that all the athletes attended church meetings and held the priesthood.⁵⁵

All of Joseph Fielding Smith’s letters to stake presidents asked the leaders to report baptisms and reactivation among those associated with softball. Smith reported 250 converts and at least 350 wives and children who joined in 1963. In addition, 1,600 men and boys returned to church attendance. He added that those figures did not include the “untold number who remained active” because of softball.⁵⁶

In 1966, Elder Delbert L. Stapley, who took over responsibility for encouraging softball from Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, explained that 164 stakes had reported 109 conversions, 90 conversions of families, and 1,179 reactivations; he speculated that if all the stakes had reported,

the numbers would have been 400 converts, 350 families, and 4,432 reactivations.⁵⁷ Even in 1971 just before the tournament ended, Stapley was still asking stake leaders to keep track of the number of converts and people returning to church activity. “We are anxious to determine the actual accomplishment from the church softball program.”⁵⁸

Another important aspect was sportsmanship. Church magazines declared that the sportsmanship trophy was “sought for” because it was a reminder “of the highest ideals of the world’s biggest and cleanest softball.”⁵⁹ Monitor C. Noyce wrote in the *Church News* in 1954, “While there were as many losers as winners, the vanquished were quick to congratulate the winners and the winners in turn gave the losers a pat on the back for playing a fine game.” W. Floyd Millett, the tournament chairman agreed, “I was delighted with the tournament as a whole and with the fine grade of teams participating. I thought the teams played well and conducted themselves in a fine manner.”⁶⁰

As part of the 1963 softball report, committee member Dale R. Curtis included a letter from W. Floyd Millett, also a committee member and later a BYU basketball and football coach, to Elder Ezra Taft Benson. After quoting President David O. McKay that all young men should play, Millett explained that wards with strong athletics programs also had strong Aaronic Priesthood programs. Softball “strengthen[ed] testimonies” and “point[ed] the way to missions and temple marriages.”

To demonstrate that statement, Millett included letters from Wayne B. Hales, a BYU stake president, and James E. Hill, the bishop of the Jacksonville, Florida, Fifth Ward. Hales said that his team lost the championship. After the game “the boys were disappointed, of course, but there was no bitterness nor self or team condemnation. There was only great appreciation for the wonderful experience they had had together as friends and for the opportunity to represent their ward and stake in the tournament.” The coach told them, “Men, we lost to a great team. You did

well.” Hales summarized, “It was one of the greatest soul-lifting events that I have ever experienced to see such a victory come out of what others might call a depressing defeat.” Hales praised “spiritualized recreation.” Hill listed each position on the Jacksonville ward team and then where the young man was on a mission. He said at the first of the season, three had not been attending church and only two were considering missions. All the Mormons, however, ended up serving missions, and the nonmember was still attending meetings.⁶¹

Herman E. Funk wrote about the 1967 tournament in *Softball Illustrated*, a national softball magazine. In “96 Teams, 1000 . . . Mormons Invade Salt Lake City, [to] Battle for Church Softball Titles,” he explained, “For magnitude, sportsmanship, good clean fun, and plenty of good softball, the annual five day tournament . . . is hard to beat.” During the fast-pitch tournaments, games were scheduled every one and a half hours; for the slow-pitch tournament, games were scheduled every forty-five minutes starting at 7:30 a.m. Forty-eight games were played each day. Funk explained, “Typical of the spirit of sportsmanship of this tournament was the hospitality of the Rosedale [Salt Lake City] team which went beyond the call of duty.” The San Diego, California, Tenth Ward stayed with Rosedale team members. The two teams played on Thursday, and San Diego won 8 to 2. But Funk reported the San Diego team “still had places to sleep the rest of the week.”⁶²

Stories

A 1971 article explained, “There were 1,780 players in this year’s . . . tournament . . . and each one has a story.” For example, Arlo Williams of Brigham City, Utah, lost four fingers on his right hand in an industrial accident. But he had developed a one-hand swing. Then there was Scott Hansen from Syracuse, Utah, who did not wash his socks while his high school baseball team had a winning streak. He continued that tradition to the all-church softball tournament. Another story was from the team from a university branch in Missoula, Montana, which decided

to come to the tournament and make up their school finals afterwards.⁶³ While it is interesting to talk about the general outline of the tournament, its greatest impact was on the individuals. The following stories highlight the effects church softball had on some players.

Mel Jones

Mel Jones grew up in Virden, New Mexico. His high school basketball team won the state championship in 1944. This was before there were classifications where small schools played other small schools, and yet his school of only thirty-five to forty high school students beat the larger schools. As Jones explained, “I had played with my compatriots there on the team ever since we were first and second graders. We were quite familiar with each other’s abilities.”

Immediately after high school Jones went into the service. While he was stationed on Okinawa, a group decided to play fast-pitch softball. Jones learned how to pitch by throwing to a catcher who was backed up by a hill. Jones remembered, “If I missed him—which I missed him plenty for the first while—the ball would hit on the hill and roll back.” After being released from the service, Jones went to the Southern States Mission, where he helped organize a softball league and competed on a missionary team. After attending college, he moved to Mesa, Arizona, where he played city and church ball. At that time the age limit for M Men playing church ball was twenty-five, so he had one year left that he could play. That year the team went to Salt Lake City for the tournament and “we had fun.”

Jones recalled the playoffs to get to the all-church tournament during the summer of 1952. To qualify, his team had to play three games in one night. They won the first game. Then they beat the next team, the one that had beat them on Thursday night, the day that Jones’s wife delivered a baby during the game. And then Jones’s team won the third game. When they went to the all-church tournament, they saw an exhibition game of slow pitch. He remembered, “We laughed” because the team thought slow pitch would not be popular. He added, “I was never

more wrong in my life.”

Jones continued to promote church sports. In 1965 he won the Homer Pug Warner all-church athletic award for service to youth. Because he was so busy at work and as a bishop, he did not plan to go to Salt Lake City for June Conference. His stake president called and told Jones he needed to go to receive the award. Jones traveled all night, and the next day he sat on the stand at the Salt Lake Tabernacle. “[I was] just overwhelmed by it all.”⁶⁴

Lowell Budge

Lowell Budge grew up in Malad, Idaho. When he was fourteen, the bishop asked him to put together a softball team to go to a tournament in Brigham City. He got his brother and some of his friends together and created a team. With little understanding of softball, they lost that first year, but Budge came home after the tournament and taught himself how to pitch. The team went back the second year, took second, and got to all-church. That year they were eliminated by the team that had won the year before.

The Malad team eventually did well enough to get to the finals against the Salt Lake Thirtieth Ward. That game is etched forever in Budge’s mind. After going extra innings on Thursday and Friday, Budge’s team had to play the championship game on Saturday. Budge was pitching. “We were in the sixth inning 0-0. I had two outs, and nobody on the bases. He hit a ball down the first baseline. It was spinning in the sand. The first baseman ran over, grabbed the ball, ran back, and tagged the bag. He didn’t have the ball in his hand. He thought he had it. From then on it was two inches here and there, but they just started scoring runs.” Despite losing, Budge concluded, “It was a tremendous experience.”

Budge’s team played a Price, Utah, ward when church leaders dedicated the George Q. Morris Field. It was great to have the new complex so the teams did not have to play at fields all over the Salt Lake Valley. But it was a special honor to be chosen to play for the dedication.

Budge explained, “That was kind of odd. We beat them 6-0, the same thing we got beat by Salt Lake Thirtieth.”

The Malad team rented a school bus to travel to all-church. Budge’s father rode with the team and attended the game, but the father did not watch. He was so nervous he would hide in the grandstands and come out only to see the score. The year Malad took second place, Budge won most valuable player. But for him the highlight was “everyone except myself and [one other player] filled a mission.” Some of the boys came from inactive families, but sports brought them into the Church. Even though he did not go on a mission, Budge continued going to church and later was a ward bishop. Although he saw the downside, especially the competitiveness, he sighed, “I thought it really inspired young people to stay close to the Church. It gave them something to work together to accomplish.”

Although Budge played high school football, basketball, and baseball, the all-church softball title was more important to him. He explained, “We won the football championship in a state league when I was a senior in high school. We were probably the smallest team in the league and ended up winning the championship. I think being the most valuable player in all-church is probably the most exciting thing that ever happened to me in sports.”⁶⁵

Michael Mitchell

Michael Mitchell grew up near Derks Baseball Field in Salt Lake. His ward played all its games at the George Q. Morris Park, so he called it his home field. He was not a member of the LDS Church but did not consider that a problem. No one tried to convert him because he lived with his grandparents who did not like Mormons. Still he went to church twice a month as required to participate on the team. He did not explain why, but he said he played for other churches and preferred playing with the Mormons rather than the Baptists.

When his team went to all-church, the coach told them they needed to worry about the

second game and not the first. They played Centerfield, Utah, who had a top football player on the team. Mitchell, the shortstop, had a ball slip between his legs. The center fielder got it but threw to home rather than to Mitchell. Two runs scored, and Centerfield won 3 to 2. Mitchell's team won the consolation, and except for the error, he played very well. He received the most valuable player award. When Elder Ezra Taft Benson asked Mitchell why he was not a Mormon, Mitchell said no one had ever asked him. As a result, he talked to the missionaries, listened to their lessons, and was baptized in December. Mitchell said church sports were "a great experience. It turned my life around. Sports is a big tool I think to bring people into the Church."⁶⁶

David Wilson

David Wilson grew up in poverty in Los Angeles, California. He remembered that his father met the missionaries and listened for awhile. But he decided not to join the church. Wilson was impressed though and decided to be baptized. He left home after a disagreement with his father.

Wilson did not make the school baseball team, so he decided to play church softball. He explained he was not very good, but coach George Busby worked with him. Wilson improved enough that he was able to play first base. In 1966 when he was eighteen, he could play junior or senior ball, but not both. The junior team was excellent. They were winning easily at regionals when the coach substituted new players into the game. The opposing team caught up and even when the coach put the regulars back in, the team lost. Wilson lamented, "We were a whole lot better than they were, and they ended up going to Salt Lake."

The senior team did qualify to go, but the first baseman broke his leg in a motorcycle accident. The coach then asked Wilson to play in the regional games. His Palmdale Ward played their arch rivals, Studio City, who knew he had already played junior ball. Studio City leaders let

the game go but when they lost, the leaders protested. Elder Nathan Eldon Tanner, an apostle, decided that Palmdale could go to all-church as the winner but Wilson could not play. Instead, he went as a third-base coach. The team got third place at the all-church tournament and won the sportsmanship trophy. The experience did not sour Wilson about the Church or its leaders. He even named a son Nathan after N. Eldon Tanner. “For some people the [experience] would have chased them off and ran them off the Church. It just strengthened me. The sports program was really super great to me. It helped keep me together.”

After his ward was split, Wilson pitched against his former coach. “It was me against George pitching, and I beat him. He was the last batter up, and I struck him out. I must have jumped ten feet in the air. It was just really awesome. I considered George my hero, and I had struck him out and won the ball game. He wasn’t very happy. If he only knew how I really felt about him, he would have been happy.”

Wilson’s coach, George Edward Busby, was awarded the Homer Warner Award at June Conference in 1968. His life was a remarkable story. Busby had polio when he was nine months old, which limited the use of his left arm, shoulder, and leg. When he was small, he fell out of a tree and broke his left arm so it never fully developed. Still he overcame all the hardships. When he was twelve, he played softball with the men because he was too fast for the boys. Busby participated in school and church athletics and won numerous trophies and ribbons. His teams won the all-church basketball tournament in 1944 and the all-church softball tournament in 1953, 1954 and 1964. But the years that mattered the most to Busby were 1953, 1956, and 1966 when his teams won the sportsmanship trophies. “Sportsmanship and all that goes with it—fairness, honesty, generosity, concern for others, wholesomeness, and a spirit of good cheer—have long been trademarks of Bishop Busby,” Wilson declared. Busby “was totally a hero.” Although Busby never went on a mission Wilson said, “[Busby] was probably the greatest missionary I’ve

ever known. Because of the sports program, he brought in many people to the Church.”⁶⁷

Gerald Broadbent

Gerald Broadbent would agree that softball brought people into the Church. He grew up in Utah and played baseball and softball in the Salt Lake Valley. After serving in the Korean War, he moved to California where he played with the Vista First Ward softball team and served as ward athletic director and coach. The ward had space for a softball field, but it became an unpaved parking lot. Broadbent and another player groomed the field, changing the parking lot into a softball field each year. The ward’s main competition was the Escondido First Ward. Broadbent’s team could never beat them because they had a better pitcher. Eventually the Vista ward team moved to slow pitch.

In 1967 the junior and senior teams from Vista went to the regionals. The junior team lost by one run in the regional finals. The senior team played San Diego, California, Fifteen Ward, a team which had been to all-church for three years and won the all-church tournament the year before. Broadbent recalled finally beating that team: “We were behind in the seventh inning seven to five. It was the last time we were to bat. I got all the team together. We had our home run hitters in the middle of the batting order. . . . The pitcher on the other team was really not consistent in pitching strikes . . . so he walked a number of people. We figured we could beat them if we could get the bases loaded and have one of our men hit a home run. He walked our pitcher Lou Schmidt. Then Bob Swanson got a single. . . . Our third batter walked. We now had the bases loaded and our home run hitters coming up. . . . We had two outs. . . . Steve Jones . . . came to bat and hit a sky high fly ball. It went clear up out of the lights and the center fielder on the other team couldn’t find it. In the mean time the guys were running because it was two outs. Eventually the ball came down and hit on the field behind the outfielder. By that time we’d scored three runs so we won the game. . . . We were jumping up and down all over the place with

joy.”⁶⁸

Getting to the all-church tournament was a problem. There were five married men who had to arrange time off from work. Broadbent remembered going to a fireside before the tournament started where Elder Marion D. Hanks said, “Today you’re all champions. Tomorrow some of you won’t be.” But he went on to explain that winning was not everything. Softball had other purposes. Men who had not previously attended church meetings became active because of softball and nonmembers also took part. They may not join but they “got acquainted.”

Broadbent’s team beat Minnesota Eighth Ward, but then he had to return to work in California. The team lost the second game. Still “it was a great thing for us, because we were a little, small dinky town, and only a few of us Mormons in that whole area. We got this opportunity to come to Salt Lake and play in this big, huge tournament. The guys were real tickled.” The local newspaper wrote up the story. At a dinner honoring the team, the mayor declared it “LDS Church Softball Day.” Later, Broadbent stopped attending church. A bishop asked him to do softball again, so he returned. He had missed going to church and appreciated the chance to come back through softball.⁶⁹

Eloise Godfrey Fugal—A Woman’s Story

Women who played sports never participated in all-church tournaments, but they did go to regionals. According to the YWMIA sports and camp manuals, intra-regional sports were allowed when stakes were close and the teams could easily get to a central location for a tournament. Stakes had to sponsor their own tournaments and select a winner that could go to the intra-regional contest. A regional supervisor made the arrangements, and all the stake presidents and YWMIA leaders had to support the activity. The manual suggested that after the tournament that the region sponsor a social for the winners to get to know each other.⁷⁰

Regional tournaments were as exciting for women as the all-church tournament was for

the men. One excellent example is a women's softball team in Cornish, Utah, that Eloise Godfrey Fugal described in an oral history interview. Fugal, a graduate of Sky View High School in 1969, took part as a student and later as a coach with the ward team.

Cornish, Utah, a small town (population averaged between 100-200) on the Utah-Idaho border, had a great community baseball team around the middle of the twentieth century. Everyone went to the games and played unique roles there. Many felt baseball put Cornish on the map because the team always competed for the league championship and often won over much larger communities. The community baseball league finally folded in 1966, but according to Eloise Godfrey, that sport was replaced by women's church softball. Just as everyone came to see the town baseball team, they came out to her softball games.

Fans took on new roles. Godfrey recalled, "I think we had an interesting fan in the grandmother of one of the girls who came to every game. We tried to be really good sports. She sometimes would embarrass us with the things that she said." And her comments were frequently directed at the players. This woman was "quite free with her advise. . . . If you fouled up, one of the worst things was knowing she was going to be on your case. I think we all didn't want to make mistakes because she had a pretty good way of expressing herself, shall we say."

Softball also strengthened community bonds between the girls. Godfrey recalled a non-Mormon who played softball because of its popularity in Cornish. The young woman eventually joined the Church, although Godfrey was not sure what role church sports played in that conversion. As the coach one year just after she was eligible to play, Godfrey recalled a girl who was not a softball player. They needed her to play. Godfrey recalled: "By her choice she played right field where the ball never comes. I don't know if it was the last game of the season. It probably really wasn't. My mind probably just made that up to make it more dramatic. In one of the last games of the season and it was against Lewiston Fourth Ward. They were still one of

the teams to beat. She accidentally caught a fly ball. It came right to her. It landed right in her mitt. There was not a thing she could do about it, and it just was there. She was carried off the field like an Olympic hero. It was a wonderful, magic moment.”⁷¹

Summary

Softball was the second largest all-church tournament. While basketball was more popular in Utah and then later throughout the United States, softball was the preferred sport in warmer areas like Arizona and California. Overseeing softball was a “priesthood responsibility.” Church leaders such as Elders Joseph Fielding Smith and Delbert L. Stapley wrote frequent letters to encourage all wards to participate in softball. They emphasized that winning should not be the goal. Instead the ward and stake leaders should provide an opportunity for everyone who wanted—members and nonmembers—to play. The end goal was not coming to Salt Lake City to play in the all-church tournament. The desired goal was to change lives, to convert men and boys to LDS principles, and through them to bring their families into the LDS Church.

Like the rest of the United States, the Mormon softball program started out emphasizing fast pitch. Since that game often became a duel between the pitcher and the batter, some felt that the other players were not involved. Over time, like other Americans, the Mormon program shifted to include slow pitch. At first some fast-pitch players disliked slow pitch; many considered it a “sissy” game. But by the time the program ended in 1972, more slow pitch than fast-pitch teams came to the tournament.

Basketball and softball were the major tournaments, but the LDS Church also sponsored other sports. The next chapter deals with other all-church activities.

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27. *Church News*, August 17, 1968, 15.
28. Ibid., August 8, 1970, 10; August 22, 1970, A7; *Improvement Era* (October 1959), 41; (October 1961), 742; (August 1962), 776; (November 1963), 914; (October 1964), 856; (November 1965), 250; (October 1967), 21; (October 1968), 851; (November 1967), 74-75; (October 1969), 79; (October 1970), 34; (November 1970), 113.
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30. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942-1972. Used by permission.
31. Wendell Eyring Oral History, interviewed by Michael Cannon, 2003, Mesa, Arizona, 5-6.
32. Hutchings, 15.
33. *Church News*, August 17, 1968, 15; August 14, 1971, 5.
34. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942-1972. Used by permission.
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41. Gunderson, 9.
42. Bob Anderson Oral History, interviewed by Michael Cannon, 2003, Mesa, Arizona, 5.
43. Hutchings, 17-18.
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