

# Pickup Softball in Central Park: An Appreciation

By LAWRENCE SAVELL

It's 9 A.M. on a Sunday. Most sane New Yorkers are sleeping, relaxing with Charles Kuralt or someone else, or contemplating dietary sabotage at a local brunchery. There is, however, a small, determined population that, weather and knees permitting, may be found striving for glory on the softball fields of Central Park.

It doesn't matter that the vast majority of these players never made their high school baseball teams—a personal tragedy that in their minds may rank far ahead of such setbacks as not making law review, having a cat die or being dumped on the way to the altar. For softball is, to paraphrase a former Yale hardballer, a kinder, gentler game than baseball. The ball is bigger, the distance to be run on the basepaths is shorter and a batter can get hit in the head with a pitch and still lead a meaningful life. And softball is, like sex, a game that virtually everyone can play with a modicum of proficiency—though, as with sex, some practitioners are better than others.

As New York City has a housing shortage, it also has a softball field shortage. Although Central Park has 26 diamonds, they are invariably all jammed on the weekends. Some people overcome that problem by joining organized weekend leagues, thus being assured of a place to play, although they may be banished to the bench. Some true aficionados rely on the phenomenon of the "pickup" game—a cross between Abner Doubleday and Charles Darwin, in which the rule is one of "Survival of the Hitters."

The process of natural selection or, more precisely, selection of "Naturals" in pickup softball games is one that may occur several times a day on a given field. It begins early in the morning, before the first games have been played, at a time when a scattering of insomniacs pepper each field. At this point, players' peripheral vision and their ability to discern coordinated movements of bodies at great distances are tested, as they seek to determine where teams will next be chosen.

If one is indeed fortunate, he will find a field where teams are just being chosen and one more player is required. More likely, he will join a group that is short several people. In that event, he takes part in a ritual that can be best described as an extremely abbreviated spring training, where everyone is a walk-on. All the prospects are out in the field, except when they take a turn at bat in a rotation of unfathomable sequence. Those fielders, especially infielders, who have in mind a particular position display an awareness of territoriality unparalleled in the animal kingdom: Once they have staked out a spot, though two such positions will be available in the game to follow, they will not relinquish it without a fight or at least a

sneer.

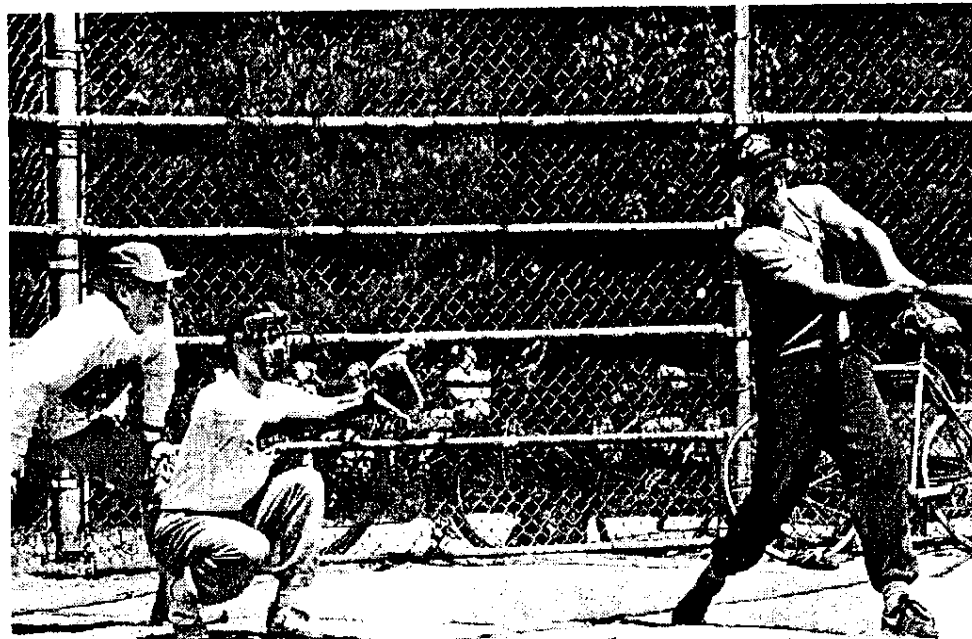
When some Type A personality realizes that the field has reached its saturation point of 18 to 20 people, he indicates that it is time to choose sides. Immediately, he and another of his inclination appoint each other as captains. That is the signal for the rest of the players to begin posturing and placing themselves in the visual range of the choosers, in a spectacle not unlike a photo session with contestants for the Mr. Universe title.

Given the nature of a pickup game, no team resulting from the selection process has players dressed even remotely alike. The effect is as if one were playing with delegates to the United Nations, each attired in their native garb. The cardinal sin, which is even more heinous in St. Louis, is to show up in a uniform modeled after that of the Mets or the Yankees. Anyone committing such a faux pas is open for abuse: "Congratulations! I see they finally called you up from Tidewater."

In pickup softball games, nobody has a last name. People are "Al" or "Nick"—or "Roto-Rooter" or whatever name is discernible on their shirt. Players save their last name for writing on their mitts, since 9 times out of 10 you will be entreated to lend your glove to an unfortunate on the opposing team who, equally invariably, will prove to perspire significantly more than you do.

Some of the rules of pickup softball bear only a slight resemblance to the rules of baseball. For example, a runner cannot steal but may be picked off base. Additionally, unless an appropriately myopic individual can be found to serve as umpire, the concept of balls and strikes commonly is jettisoned in favor of the "three-swing" rule—an effective way for a selective batter to delay the proceedings until he is provided with a pitch so slow and straight that he can read the trademark on the ball. Then, too, since the fields generally do not have fences, all home runs are inside the park—Central Park—and depend on running speed and stamina as well as long-ball power. Even the bats are different: The standard implement is an aluminum bat, which, at the time of purchase, was brightly colored and bore a bellcose moniker such as "Crusher" or "Slammer."

Those who play in the park take their softball very seriously. Aside from the cognitive dissonance they endure for having sacrificed scarce hours of sleep, people also play hard in pickup games because they are aware of the high cost of losing: deportation. Given the excess of demand over supply in the Central Park diamond market, one can generally be sure that another panel of contestants has already staked a claim by



On a Saturday in May, a pickup softball game on the Great Lawn near 83rd Street involves "the Regulars," who claim to be Central Park's oldest continuous pickup team, having played for 25 years. In photo above, Richard Miller, a graphic designer, is batting and Herbert Weitz, a bookbinder and book dealer, is the umpire.

Photos by  
PHILIP GREENBERG

uttering the legal password "Next Game!" Consequently, when the final out is made, it is customary for the victors to assuage the agony they have caused by approaching the vanquished in a manner reminiscent of the ritual following the Stanley Cup series in hockey. Invariably, members of the winning team will reach out their hand and say "nice game," even if you had the three grounders hit to you ricochet off your groin and you went 0-for-5 at the plate. Forced to leave their familiar ground, the losing team scatters toward other diamonds, like so many dusty refugees looking for a new homeland.

The softball fields have surfaces that resemble a blasting zone. There are always too many players and too little space. The only available water is in the Reservoir. Nevertheless, people play. They play pickup softball because it offers the opportunity for belated athletic redemption, and maybe even a little glory, that lingers—and, eventually, expands—in memory.

