

# Church leagues stress 'spirit' of the game

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

The softball players from St. Mary's took their 24-9 loss to Pultneyville Reformed with good grace.

"Hey, I wonder if all those guys go to church," one of the St. Mary's players quipped good naturedly.

The game was played at Forman Field in Pultneyville on July 25. It featured plenty of hitting, spectacular — and not-so-spectacular — plays in the field, and determined base running.

But unlike so many other league softball games, this one included no drinking, no swearing, no dirty play — and it began with a prayer.

The two teams participate in the Christian Ridge Softball League. Eleven churches in Wayne County — including St. Mary of the Lake, Ontario, and Church of the Epiphany, Sodus — banded together to form the league two years ago.

This is not the only such league. The Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity plays in a church league in Cayuga County. And St. Patrick's, Owego, has a team in the Women's Church League.

The goal of these leagues — and of the teams in them — is not only a trophy or a league title.

"It's good, Christian fun," noted Pat Sweet, coach of the 5-1 team from St. Patrick's. "It's just a fun way to occupy a couple of nights during the summer."

"It's not a hard core league," observed Stan Zerniak, who has guided the Trinity team to a 7-0 record. "It's trying to get

other people involved (and to) promote community among all the churches."

St. Patrick's team members are all women. The other parishes' teams play in coed leagues, which require a certain number of women to be on the field at all times. The Ridge League, for example, requires at least two women to play at all times — a measure to keep play from becoming too rough or intense.

The game at Forman Park provides a handy example. St. Mary's (5-3) fell behind early, trailing 4-0 after one inning, down 7-2 after three innings. The team came back to close the gap to 7-4 in its half of the fourth inning, but then the Pultneyville team scored eight runs in the bottom of the inning to put the game out of

reach.

Through it all, the players from St. Mary's kept up the same good spirit.

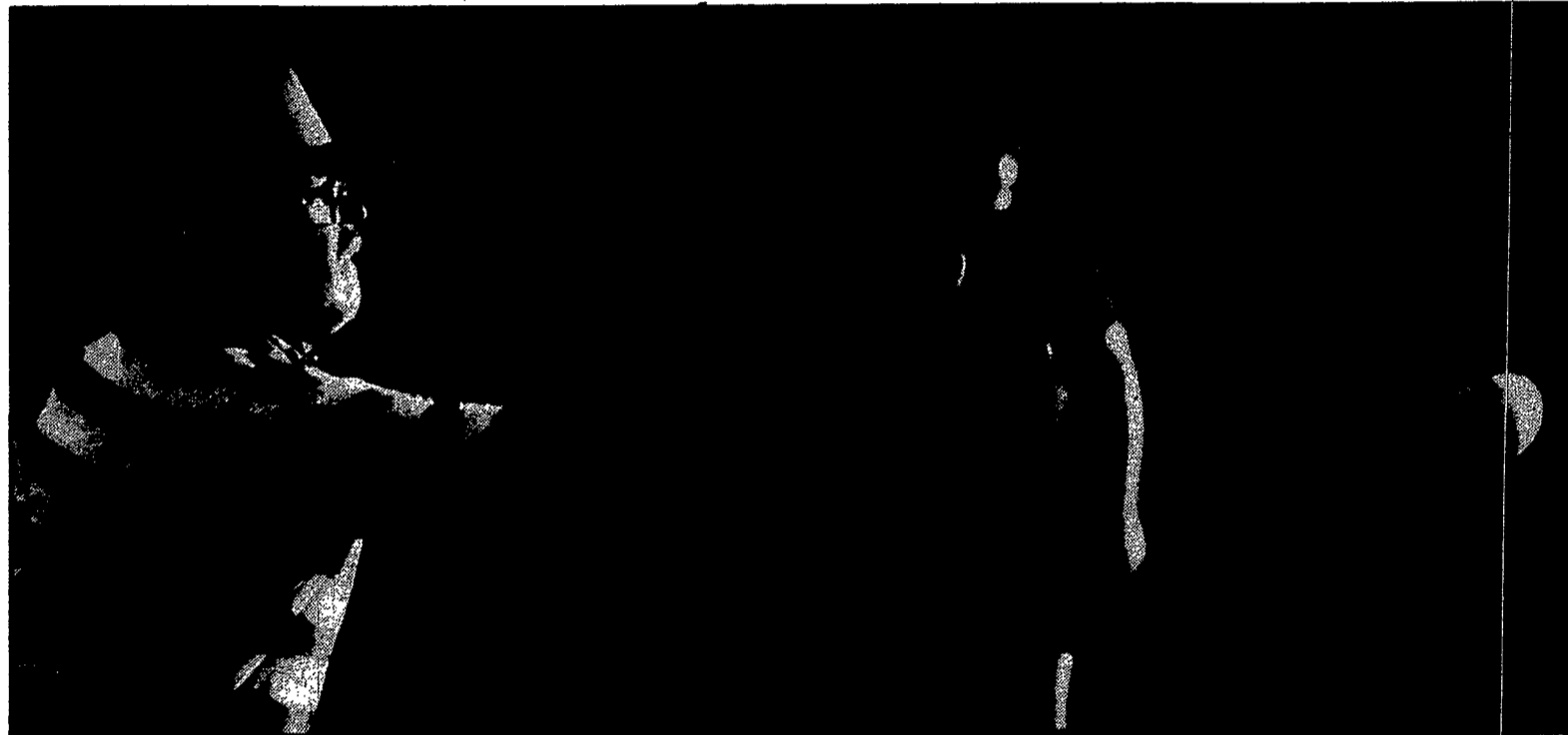
The game was marked by dropped balls and throwing errors. No one yelled at the miscreants. Instead, they were greeted with encouraging words when they returned to the bench. And when those same team members made redeeming plays, they were honored with cheers and applause.

George Steinbrenner would have a hard time with this team.

Families comprise a number of church teams, with husbands and wives playing. Children come along to watch, or to play with each other.

Zerniak likened the games to family gatherings. In fact, he noted, when his parish's team began, it relied primarily on players from two families. Now the team has players from six or seven families.

Mike Clark, coach of the 5-3 team from Epiphany, pointed out that the good Christian conduct during the games is part of what makes them fun. "In a lot of other leagues there's a lot of drinking and pro-



Dennis Bielewicz pitched for St. Mary of the Lake's team in a July 25 softball game against Pultneyville Reformed.



John Hassler, right, has his eye on an extra ball in the backstop, while Steve Showman watches his parents play.



Prior to batting, Dan Mangano "warms-up" with the sunset as backdrop.

fanity," he observed.

Church league softball is the only athletic event in which many of the players participate. Sweet noted that her team is made up mostly of players in their 30s and 40s. "The team is for exercise mainly," she said.

"We don't have anybody who plays on any other team," observed Jim Nail, one of St. Mary's designated hitters. "But we all look forward to Wednesday nights."

For most of the teams, the season will end in a couple of weeks. The leagues do not award trophies, and no champion is crowned.

But that's not the point, Nail observed.

"It's the spirit of the game, not the winning," he said.

Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer



Barbara Hassler makes her way safely to second base during the game's first inning.

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**This week's question:**  
How many times has Greg Le-mond won the Tour de France?

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