

Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

*No Olympic
Dreams –
Now what?*

On September 8, 2013, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted to allow wrestling back into the Tokyo 2020 games. This decision meant that softball will not be re-admitted to the Olympics – not for 2020 nor for the foreseeable future. There is a slight chance that this could change at the next IOC session scheduled to be held during the Winter Olympics in 2014, but it's a long shot. Social media was abuzz after the decision was publicized. Players, families, and fans posted their disagreement and disappointment with the IOC. News sources both in print and online ran articles and commentary about the decision and what it means to both baseball and softball.

Photo by Mitch Alexander

To the uninformed, the decision doesn't seem like such a big deal. So what if softball isn't in the Olympics? We have plenty of softball out there - the Women's College World Series (WCWS), the National Pro Fastpitch, the World Cup of Softball, Pan Am Games and various other tournaments that Team USA competes in. After all, USA Softball was only asking for a six day tournament format. So what's the real fallout from not having Olympic softball? This is a complex question to answer. Keilani



Ricketts was thrown into the center of the issue after the WCWS championship earlier this year.

When softball was an Olympic sport, stipends were available. USA Today reported in June, 2011 that once softball was eliminated from the Olympics, USA softball suffered deep cuts to its funding from the US Olympic Committee. USA/ASA softball executive director Ron Radigonda sadly announced that the governing body of USA softball would be unable to provide stipends to its players. Stipends help the athletes focus on their sport while still being able to pay their bills. CNN Money reported in May, 2012 that USA swimming provided \$3,000 per month stipends to its high ranking swimmers and a total of about \$7 million for all of its swimmers.

The Olympics is big money. Really big money in lots of countries. Many countries and sponsors give medal bonuses. Win a bronze medal and you get a low bonus. Win a silver and you get a moderate bonus. Win the gold and you get a big bonus. CNN reported that Ryan Lochte, a USA Swimming gold favorite in 2011 was expected to earn upwards of \$3 million in 2012 – mostly from sponsors and medal bonuses. While softball may not draw as much Olympic attention as swimming does, sponsorships deals are given to some of the athletes. These sponsorships allow the most talented to keep playing their sport. They are a type of stipend as well.

In a world without Olympic softball, stipends don't exist. Sponsorships are very limited. There are no medal bonuses to be earned. Scholarships are provided to fund high performing college players. However, once these players graduate, their choices are limited if they want to keep playing softball. Right now it's Team USA or the National Pro Fastpitch. Both only accept the top athletes.

In 2011, Players like Jessica Mendoza, Cat Osterman, Caitlin Lowe, Natasha Watley, Monica Abbott, Lauren Lappin, Andrea Duran, and Vicky Galindo decided to take a break from Team USA in support of the NPF. At that time, Team

USA was unwilling to modify their schedule to allow players to participate in both Team USA and the NPF. The players were left to decide which they wanted to play for: a national team with no Olympic future or a four team professional league with hopes of growth and expansion. A similar situation happened this summer with Keilani Ricketts. She was drafted by the NPF USSSA Pride, while having already played two years with Team USA. Ricketts stated that she was told she could not compete this summer in a Team USA uniform unless she signed a multi-year contract, something she did not feel comfortable doing as a recent college graduate. Signing with Team USA would have precluded her from playing in the NPF.

According to the ESPN website, “NPF commissioner Cheri Kempf confirmed [in July] the league has been rebuffed on a number of proposals for cooperation, and USA Softball executive director Ron Radigonda dismissed any potential benefits thereof in a June interview.” What we’re left with is our two top softball programs at odds with each other.

Things are not all rosy in the NPF either. In August, the NY Times ran a story about Amber Patton, a pro softball player with the Chicago Bandits and how she can’t afford to play softball any more. The article stated that each team has a \$150,000 salary cap and that most players earn a ridiculously low salary of \$5,000 to \$20,000 for each 48 game season! Top players who don’t have other “day jobs” then go to Japan to play in their pro league where they can earn \$60,000 or more. At the end of the year, our nation’s top players are earning close to a \$100,000, while playing in two countries, and in many more games than our pro baseball players do for millions of dollars.

USA Softball is a program where very few players participate. It used to be the best of the best when softball was an Olympic sport. Now, we have situations like the one with Keilani Ricketts, where the top pitcher from the college scene turned pro instead of playing for Team USA. The NPF, accommodates perhaps four times as many players as Team USA, but the pay is just a token.

As a softball community, we need to get our act together in this post-Olympic world. USA Softball and the NPF need to work things out and do a better job of collaborating. At the very least schedules need to be accommodated so that players don't have to choose between USA Softball and pro softball. Our players are heading over to Japan to play, while pro baseball enters the most competitive part of its season. We need to extend the NPF season by playing in the spring through the fall. The NPF needs more sponsors, including non-softball related sponsors. NPF teams are lucky to be breaking even right now, but this needs to change. They need to be able to pay their players a reasonable wage. \$5,000 a season is not reasonable. If each player could earn \$50,000, that would be a start.

Fans need to get out and support the NPF like never before. I've taken my family to four games this year. This is something I couldn't do before the NY/NJ Comets brought the NPF to my region of the country. We had a great time at each game. The level of play was amazing. All of the players from both teams came up to the concourse after the games and met with the fans and signed autographs. No one was turned away. Every question was answered. Every player acted like an ambassador for the sport. Tickets were ridiculously inexpensive. The seating is general admission. Get to the game early and you have your choice of front row seats! We attended Keilani Rickett's first trip to the circle in a pro game when the USSSA Pride played the NY/NJ Comets in NJ. It took us more than 2 hours to get to the stadium, but the trip was well worth it! Perhaps the thing that surprised us the most was there were only about 900 fans in attendance.

The NPF needs to create (at least) an Internet channel where every game is available for streaming. I would pay to subscribe to a channel like this, and I know others would too. Perhaps we need a few "angels" to provide grants and other types of monetary support to really get the NPF off the ground and into the mainstream consciousness. A few more teams would help as well. Right now

the NPF is more of an east coast sport, as we don't have any teams on the west coast.

We can keep dreaming that softball will be re-instated into the Olympics, and continue to whine about other “questionable” sports that made the cut, or we can move on. I am not saying we should abandon efforts to get softball re-instated. However, like all good plans, we need a backup plan. Bolstering the NPF can act as our backup plan as well as our growth plan. A successful NPF is good for the sport of fastpitch softball. We need to do everything we can to make sure it succeeds.

Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at fastpitch2001@optonline.net.



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