

INDOOR SOFTBALL FAST BECOMING A FAVORITE

Story and photo by
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After a half inning the Rug Burns and Undertakers were tied 4-4. Right away, one thing that makes Roseville Arena Softball different from regular softball is the defense scores. Every out is worth a run, so throwing becomes as much an offensive threat as speed, while hitters do better with accuracy than with power. There's no such thing as a foul ball, and there's no telling where one will end up if you line it into the corner. If someone plays the bounce you could be thrown out at first from deepest right field. If they miss the bounce you could end up with an extra base or two.

Since there's no fence to drive one over, home runs are awarded if the ball hits a target mat suspended in the power alleys in left and right. There's also a safety-zone where a ball hit off the wall is an automatic single, but everything else is subject to being caught on the bounce for an out, or a quick pick-up and throw to first.

The first baseman is potentially involved in every play, and everyone has to be ready to react quickly to situations that seem to come out of nowhere.

On Sundays there are league games between 4:00 and 8:00, and weeknights offer a regular schedule of league games from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Games are kept on schedule by some unique rules, including a five-inning limit, but that doesn't stop scoring from running to 50 runs or more per team in a game.

And there is always a steady stream of players coming and going. Craig Fuentes, who was busy checking them in as they showed up for games, explained that Roseville Arena Softball is, "Growing very rapidly," with close to 100 teams going at it regularly, (with 1,500 players listed on the league website) and although things aren't quite as busy in the summer, they have leagues playing all year long.

One other neat thing about arena softball is that three outs don't have to mean the end of the world. There are 16 pitches in an inning, regardless of how many outs are recorded. Two strikes is an out, two balls is a walk, and a walk is half a run.

After a full inning, the Rug Burns are up



The infield is regulation size, but the rest of the field is modified to fit indoors. The net surrounds the field—there's no such thing as foul territory—and also keeps hitters from elevating. The outfielders seem to be right on top of the action, and they are. A ground ball to any part of the field can turn into an out at first, but hitters adept at driving the ball into the hard floor know anything can happen once it starts bouncing.

8.5-8. In the third, there is a 9-6-4 triple play. That 40 foot outfield makes things interesting on the bases. More than one sharp liner is turned into an out or two, but then again balls glance off the net behind the base lines and turn into singles and the ball is never dead. One red-shirted umpire stands at the plate judging whether pitches land within the legal line or on the target for strikes. The umpires use a headset wired to loudspeakers to make calls. They also keep track of ricocheting throws, advancing runners (base stealing is allowed) and maneuvering infielders moving at a pace five-year veteran, Todd Bean described as, "A combination of softball and racquetball."

Many players end up on more than one team. LB Young, who led the league with 180 RBI through December, had logged playing time with no less than 29 teams.

The league keeps detailed statistics on every player and during the game a flashy miniature scoreboard above home plate keeps track of score, players' names and pitch count.

But it's not all about numbers. "Everyone just has fun, we joke around," said Bean, who had just finished ten quick innings. He likes to play in the Sunday league because it's more relaxed, but for players in the mood for more serious competition, he says some of the weeknight leagues can "get intense."

With modified scoring rules, the games are usually close, and there's always potential to pick up a few quick runs on defense, but just as in the outdoor game, Bean said, "Sometimes it can get a little lopsided." Also, since the defense can score, there is always a bottom of the fifth innings, and everybody gets their money's worth.

Besides league games, Roseville Arena offers pickup games on Monday and Tuesday nights, where anyone can get into a game for a modest \$3 fee. "It's a real good way to get your feet wet in here," said Fuentes, who was enthusiastic about the quality of play. He points out a "phenomenal co-ed team" taking the field not far from the front desk. "A lot of good teams don't even play outdoor anymore," he said. "Once they've had a taste of the faster, higher-scoring, variety going on here."

Although some forms of indoor softball are played in places as far away as South Africa and Ireland, Fuentes explained that Roseville is playing a unique form of the game. "We have the only thing like this in the world right now." Rule variations are refined to suit the configuration of the field as well as the taste of the players, and this form is obviously working in Roseville.

The Rug Burns were ahead 42.5-23.5 in the top of the fifth, and ended up winning 50.5-31.5.