

# Synergy in San Diego

San Diego  
League Director  
John Grondona.



## Grondona unites mission of directors, managers, players, umpires

Story by Don Cameron

**J**ohn Grondona is San Diego's softball multitasker. Pitcher. Manager. Umpire. League director. Tournament fundraiser. Coach. Statistician. Webmaster. The man with a plan.

"John loves what he does. That's obviously why he is the best," said longtime San Diego softball manager and player George Kanoff.

For four decades, Grondona has been making a profoundly positive impact on the San Diego diamonds. After a 28-year playing career, Grondona has spent the past 25 years dedicating himself to the organizational branch of the sport, and his Softball San Diego program currently boasts admirable adult softball participation numbers.

"Working with a great group of people is humbling," Grondona said in a recent phone interview. "To sit in front of 60 managers in a meeting where there's no complaints is overwhelming. I'm grateful. I profusely thank everybody who participates in the programs. I tell the managers, 'You guys are the program, not me, and you need to thank your teams on behalf of me and my staff, because you guys are making the program.'"

Twice a year, Softball San Diego registers more than 100 adult softball teams in men's and coed play. Seasons begin in March and September, with breaks in mid-summer to avoid vacations and again from Thanksgiving through January for family holidays and parties. Softball San Diego runs 10 men's leagues — including a Sunday league — with B, C, D and rec divisions. He also runs eight coed slow-pitch and 3-pitch leagues. Games are at Miramar College (Hourglass Community Park), Mira Mesa Recreation Center and Rancho Penasquitos Recreation Center.

Grondona's administrative efficiency and passion for the game have helped his leagues evolve to maximize playing time, competitiveness and sportsmanship. Most game durations are 1 hour, 15 minutes, with no new inning after 1:10 and a hard kill time of 1:15. A liberal pickup rule allows teams to avoid forfeits. And a well-devised prize system prevents teams from stacking talent at playoff time to reap the benefits. The winner of the regular season gets 50 percent of the prize purse, and the winner of the playoffs gets 50 percent if that is a different team. If the same team wins both, the split is 65 percent for the winner and 35 percent to the second-place team in the playoffs.

"Every rule we've invoked lessens the complaints and increases the fairness and quality of the game. We've come a long ways in 25 years," Grondona said.

Softball San Diego's 3-pitch coed league plays nine-inning ballgames and caters to batters' varying levels of playing ability and experience. Pitchers pitch to their own teams and the degree of arc, location and speed can vary depending on the batters' hitting abilities and preferences.

"It allows people that don't have a lot of softball experience to not have to hit a 12-foot arc ball," Grondona explained. "Pitchers can pitch slow or fast, inside, outside, and in the

better leagues, the pitcher will pitch a little faster on the outside, forcing a ball down the right-field line for example. The batter communicates to the pitcher in the upper leagues what they want. In the lower leagues, the pitcher finds out what the batter's skill is and tries to throw an appropriate pitch. Your pitcher pitches to you. You've got three pitches to get on base. After three pitches, if you're not on base, it's an out."

Grondona has embraced the technology of the Web to communicate league policies and updates. He runs a comprehensive Web site — [www.softballsd.com](http://www.softballsd.com) — with full standings, schedules, rules, registration forms and a terrific message board to assist players in finding teams and teams in filling roster spots. The message board proves useful not just for his program but for softball throughout the city and county of San Diego and adjacent cities, for both league and tourney play.

For 13 years, Grondona served as president of the Bob Barlow Memorial Softball Tournament, a charity event honoring the former highly respected municipal athletic director in San Diego. For five years, he's coached girls fastpitch softball. For seven years, he's coached boys youth baseball. For a whopping 30 years, he's been involved with the San Diego County Softball Umpires Association, serving as president for the past decade.

"We have been able to create a mutually respectful relationship between umpires, league directors, managers and players that has taken the game of softball to a unique level, where the fun of the game is emphasized along with good sportsmanlike conduct," Grondona stressed.

The SDCSUA provides officials for the cities of Chula Vista, El Cajon and San Diego, several house leagues and Grondona's own Softball San Diego.

"It's mutual respect," he said. "We have respect from the programs and when there's an issue, we all have an opportunity to put our best options in the ring and come up with a mutually beneficial perspective or decision."

A Vietnam War veteran and graduate of San Diego State College, Grondona has owned a business — a chain of auto tuneup shops. He has toiled at the corporate level — at Pacific Telephone. He completed a 20-year career in computer graphics. He has devoted a chunk of time to Make-A-Wish Foundation. And he has immersed himself in the world of sport fishing, chasing albacore and yellowfin tuna 100 miles off the San Diego coast.

After 25 years in the Scripps Ranch inland region, Grondona recently sold his 46-foot fishing vessel and moved back to his Point Loma roots, just a few blocks from his 91-year-old father, close to properties that he owns and manages, yet still in the heart of ballplaying country, where he belongs.

"Just a tremendous amount of friendship and camaraderie over the years with softball," Grondona said. "It's a pleasure working with these people. Lots of good feelings. It's a pleasure to be able to make continued contributions to the sport."