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DENVER MAGAZINE / JULY 2010 / KICKIN' IT

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Kickin' It

Denver's latest sports fad is a game you probably played in third-grade gym class — but this time, there's beer.

ILAN BARIL



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB HAMMER

On a recent night in Denver, a grandmother and her grandson hit one of the city's parks together. But they weren't taking a quiet evening stroll; they were there to compete. The game: kickball, the retro recess sport that's ridden a wave back into our cultural landscape for its simple rules, relaxed players, and acceptance of a six pack (or two). And with TK local co-ed adult leagues made up of hundreds of teams and thousands of players who storm the city's green spaces almost nightly from May through August, it's clear that Denverites both young and old are embracing the trend.

"If you strike out in competitive softball, you're letting the team down," says Patrick Brown, who founded Denver's Kick for a Cause league in 2002 and points to the sport's laid-back ethos as a reason for its resurgence. "But if you strike out in kickball, it's funny." The 21-and-up organization, which holds games

in City Park, includes more than 70 teams and 700 players who shell out \$70 for a seven-week season, in spring, summer, or fall. Part of the fee goes to the Challenged Athletes Foundation, a charity for active individuals with disabilities.

Good vibes are the point of kickball, agrees Nate Baldwin, founder of the Western Alternative Sports Association, which started in 2002 with four teams and has grown to include almost 5,000 players. "We like being a league where everyone can participate," he says, adding that WASA pulls

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players from all walks of life and all over the city.

The cardinal rules of one local league: don't "get out of control, bitch excessively, or act like an ass."

Originally called kick baseball, kickball dates back to 1917 — when a Cincinnati, Ohio park supervisor introduced the game to kids on the playground — Denver's leagues model themselves on a more modern institution: the World Adult Kickball Association. Started in Washington, D.C. in 1998, WAKA — the largest U.S. league and the first to turn the game into an organized sport — represented a way for harried nine-to-fivers to get outside, drink some beer, and meet some girls. Their relaxed attitude still pervades: The teams are mostly groups of friends with the occasional free agent thrown in. No practices, no playoffs, and only a few rules level the playing field for today's adult kickball. These rules include the "do-over," a foul line, and a beer-in-hand stipulation, which dictates that players must have a drink at all times — even when batting and running the bases. (If a first baseman drops his cup, for example, the runner is automatically safe.) Kick for a Cause has fun rules as well. It's cardinal law: don't "get out of control, bitch excessively, or act like an ass."

One local league, however, promotes tough athleticism: the Denver Kickball Coalition, a 200-member group that started in 2002. Base stealing is legal; pitches are fast; and confrontations are serious — there have even been bench-clearing fights. Still, DKC players have a sense of humor. With nods to the style of the musicians, artists, and designers who make up much of the membership, games are replete with boomboxes, cigarettes, and costumes, including a luchador and a Larry Bird-style shorts, tube socks, and sweatband ensemble. "It sounds corny," says a team member. "But this is more of a community thing than anything else."

Denver-based writer Ilan Baril doesn't have much kickball experience — he's played a few pickup games — but he's well-versed in many other pursuits, including graphic design, copywriting, wine-pouring (he's a sommelier), and landscaping.



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