

# THE FAST-PITCH SEASON

By John Cavanaugh

• Aug. 8, 1982

STRATFORD - IN the 1930's, 40's and 50's it was the "summer game" in Connecticut, as it was in most other parts of the country. Baseball was the National Pastime, but as a participant sport, softball had far more adherents.

But in the 1960's softball - the original, fast-pitch variety - gradually fell on hard times, victimized in a sense by the dominance of the game's pitchers, firing in 90-mile-an-hour fastballs from a distance of 46 feet.

These days the biggest participatory summer game in the state is slow-pitch softball, a variant of the original game, in which pitchers lob in their throws in a slow, parabolic arc, virtually inviting a batter to pound the stuffing out of the ball.

Yet here in Stratford the summer game is still fast-pitch softball, as it has been for almost four decades, with the women's Raybestos Brakettes and the men's Franklin (formerly the Raybestos) Cardinals still striving to preserve a tradition in what local residents consider the "softball (fast-pitch, that is) capital of the world."

Mainly because of the legendary pitching star Joan Joyce and her successors, Barbara Reinalda and Kathy Arendsen, the Cardinals have always been overshadowed by the Brakettes, who have won 16 national titles and two world championships. When a decision was made to drop a team after the 1979 season, the sponsor of both clubs, Raybestos-Manhattan Inc., which manufactures brake linings, surprised no one by dropping the Cardinals, even though the men's team had captured six national titles.

Fortunately for the Cardinal players - and for the dwindling number of fast-pitch fans in the state - the sponsorship was picked up by George Franklin, the owner of a computer company in Melrose, Mass., who for years had backed a fast-pitch club in that Boston suburb.

"We used to come down here and usually get beaten badly by the Cardinals, and when I learned the team was available I jumped at the chance," Franklin said recently while watching his team win a double-header from the Allentown (Pa.) Patriots at Memorial Field, where the Cardinals have played their home games since 1948.

The Cardinals still field one of the strongest men's fast-pitch teams in the world. But over the last decade the team has become perhaps the best-kept sports secret in the state, playing in nearprivacy at Memorial Field, close by the Connecticut Turnpike. In the late 1940's and the 1950's crowds would average 1,500 to 2,000.

Now the Cardinals play their home games before about 250 spectators, although their out-of-state games draw as many as 5,000 people. Rivalries with teams such as Columbus Auto Body of New Haven and the Derby Clippers have long since ended as those clubs, with most other fast-pitch teams in Connecticut, succumbed to the popularity of slow-pitch softball.

Even so, the Cardinals schedule some of the best men's fast-pitch clubs in the country, as will be the case next weekend when they play the Midland (Mich.) Explorers in double-headers Friday and Saturday nights.

"Fast-pitch softball is still very popular in the Midwest and the Far West, but it's been going steadily downhill for the last 15 years in the Northeast," said John Anquillare, the Cardinals' manager and third baseman. "There's no doubt that the popularity of slow-pitch has hurt us, both in the development of players from within the state and in attendance. Still, it's hard to understand why more people don't come to the games since the games are exciting, the ball park is one of the best in the country and the fans get to see some of the greatest players in the game."

Because of a dearth of home-grown talent, owing largely to the fact that there are only about 20 fast-pitch teams left in the state, compared with hundreds two decades ago, the Cardinals in recent years have had to rely more on out-of-state players. This year's team, which through last weekend had won 33 games and lost six, includes six players from Connecticut, six from Massachusetts and five from the New York metropolitan area.

Underscoring the difficulty in obtaining quality players is the composition of the Cardinals' pitching staff, which includes Al Lewis, 37 years old and in his 16th year with the club, and Owen Walford and Mark Goldsmith, two former butchers from Hastings, New Zealand.

"It's become harder and harder to get good pitchers, and that's why we went after Owen and Mark," said Franklin, who provides a house in Melrose for Walford, his wife and their two children, and Goldsmith. Franklin said it cost him about \$50,000 a year to sponsor the Cardinals. "More and more of the better fast-pitch pitchers are coming from New Zealand, where they start playing the game at the age of 5 and where there is no baseball or slow pitch."

Experts regard Walford, 33 years old, as one of the best pitchers in the game. In 1976 he led his New Zealand team to a share of the quadrennial world title and then four years later pitched the Midland, Mich., club to the world championship.

Walford was besieged with offers from American fast-pitch teams after a 52-game tour of the United States by the New Zealand national team in 1975. After spending the 1976 season with a team in Prescott, Ariz., Walford pitched two seasons each with the Saginaw (Mich.) Bolters, where in 1978 he posted a remarkable 62-10 record, and the Midland club, which folded after capturing the world title in 1980.

"It was a great thrill to sign with the Cardinals, because in many ways the team is synonymous with softball," said Walford, 6 feet 2 inches tall and 185 pounds, whose fastball has been clocked at 103 miles an hour.

Going into this weekend, Walford, who is in his second season with the Cardinals, had won 16 games and lost only three, while Goldsmith, 21 years old, had a record of 12-3 during his first year with the club.

Besides his great speed, Walford, one of about 20 New Zealanders pitching for American teams, has outstanding control and rarely walks a batter. "Speed alone isn't enough," said Walford. "If you threw nothing but fastballs you'd get slaughtered." His pitches include a "rise," which is a fastball that shoots upward as it nears the plate, and a screwball, which slants in on a right-hand batter.

Playing with the Cardinals requires not only talent, but also, for most of the players, understanding wives. The schedule keeps the team away from home about 12 weekends each summer. For one of them, Tom Penders, a Cardinal outfielder for 11 years and the only Stratford native on the team, some road trips have benefited him as a basketball coach. Penders, who coached at Tufts and Columbia universities before becoming the head coach at Fordham University, often checks out basketball prospects playing in summer leagues while on the road with the Cardinals.

"A lot of people involved in fast-pitch are also involved in basketball," Penders said. "And quite often they'll come up to me and suggest that I check out a kid. I think it's helped me get four or five outstanding prospects in both Columbia and Fordham."