

"Pittsburgh Spirit"

Fastpitch Softball Tournament Brings Local Talent and National Attention to Homeplate

Christopher Cussal

When one thinks of the "Pittsburgh Spirit," this city's long-standing tradition of professional sports may immediately come to mind. But, in addition to the timelessness of the Steelers, Bucs, and Pens, there is a new homegrown and winning "Pittsburgh Spirit" blazing its way into the history and hearts of the city. The "Pittsburgh Spirit," Pittsburgh's quintessential, all-girl, fastpitch softball team is in a division all its own. Like their namesake, the "Pittsburgh Spirit" represents all of the talent, athleticism, and ambition the 'Burgh and its youth have to offer.

Now in its sixth year, the "Spirit" is a leader in girls, competitive, fastpitch softball in the Tri-State Area. Players of all ages have the opportunity to play for several local teams in tournament competitions. Age ranges are broken down into the following five levels: 10, 12, 14, 16, and 19 & under, consecutively. The opportunity to play additional teams outside the high school circuit allows members to strengthen and diversify their athletic abilities. In addition, "Spirit" coaches train these girls in techniques that are specifically sought and recommended by college softball coaches.

The average pitch-speed in fastpitch softball is 65 mph from 40 feet. "That is equivalent to a 120 mph pitch from regular, mound to plate distance," says Paul Spurney, the public relations director and a board member of the "Pittsburgh Spirit." The esteem and pride heard in Mr. Spurney's voice as he discusses his teams are well earned and deserved. Even after taking fourteen state titles, the "Spirit" is much more than a top-notch, local, sports team, as evidenced in their well-rounded academic and athletic excellence. "Spirit" players average a 3.8 GPA. In addition, 60% of members perform on all-star teams and every "Spirit" who goes on to an institution of higher education receives a free ride from their prospective college or university (based on various factors).

On the weekend of July 7-9, the "Pittsburgh Spirit" showcased its talent with its annual "Spirit Tournament." More than 65 teams from 11 states and Canada traveled

to Pittsburgh and assembled at various local ballfields, like Vincentian Academy's McCandless Field and La Roche College, to compete among some of the best fastpitch teams and players in the country. "This is one of the highest quality fastpitch tournaments held in the United States," beams Spurney, "and the competition level here is so high that we use them as a tune up for the Amateur Softball Association and National Softball Association tournaments." With 4000 people coming to the North Hills for this tournament, the non-profit, Spirit Organization is truly an outstanding opportunity to promote the youth of the area.

In addition to spectators and participants of the tournament itself, more than 40 colleges were present to view and scout possible recruits. Also, the "Spirit" orchestrates an Annual College Coaches Showcase, which draws more than 200 college softball coaches from all around the country. The "Spirit's" commitment to Pittsburgh is an outstanding example of concern, promotion, and care for our community.

Dana Pecanis, an 18 year old North Hills native, has been a member of the "Pittsburgh Spirit" since it began 5 years ago. A graduate of North Hills High School, Pecanis will be attending Washington and Jefferson College under a softball scholarship as starting pitcher. While playing with the "Spirit," she was named Player of the Year by the North Hills News Record in 1998 and 2000, and Player of the Year by the Tribune North and Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in 2000. This year, her age-level team was also the WPIAL Triple AAA Champions and she was named Offensive MVP of the World Cup Tournament in Lyon, France.

Playing with the "Pittsburgh Spirit" has helped Pecanis grow tremendously as a player. "I have developed so much during my time with the 'Spirit,' as a result of playing with so many other talented team-mates," Pecanis assures, "travel softball gives many opportunities to gain experience by playing more games with more teams that provide new and diverse challenges." For example,



Louanne Weigand
12-U Spirit, 2000



Dana Pecanis

this year, for the first time, the oldest age-level is 19 and under, which means, Pecanis and her teammates have already played against girls who currently compete in Division 1 College Softball during their freshman year. She adds, "I play in triple the games I normally would than if I only played in high school, and this year I can come back during my first year of college and play once more with the 'Spirit.'" Although she did not play in this year's "Spirit Tournament" due to a late season injury, she is recovering and getting ready to help bestow titles and championships upon W & J's own softball program.

Spirit teams are selected based upon yearly competitive tryouts. The tryouts are open to all girls in the Western Pennsylvania Area. Players' skills (including game skills, game knowledge, versatility, developmental potential, coachability, hustle, and attitude) are judged by team managers and an impartial panel selected by the Board of Directors. If you would like to tryout for the "Pittsburgh Spirit," or have further questions about this fine organization, please contact them directly at 724-453-0905 or view their website at www.Pittsburghspirit.com. Pittsburgh Spirit, 129 Cherrington Drive, Cranberry Twp., PA 16066, E-mail : PGspirit@aol.com. ▲

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