



Photos by TAMMY LECHNER / For The Times

"You rise to the occasion, or you don't," says Christina Paine, who was in a riding accident years ago. Above, she chats with members of her Arizona Firebirds.



# Playing Hardball

Christina Paine, a fan since her girlhood days in O.C., has combined her love for the national pastime with a serious opportunity for women ballplayers.

It's a major league endeavor.

By TAMMY LECHNER  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

**Y**ou might spot her cheering from the Angels dugout at Anaheim Stadium, or in a box seat next to the Padres dugout at San Diego Jack Murphy Stadium.

You might spot her chatting with scouts behind home plate at Arizona Fall League games or at Cactus League spring training contests. You also might spot her at recreational baseball fields around Arizona, Nevada and California, suited up in a baseball cap and jersey, cheering on women playing amateur hardball.

A self-described "baseball addict," Christina Paine has recently taken her lifelong avocation a serious step forward. She is co-founder and CEO of the National Women's Baseball Assn.

## THE SUNDAY PROFILE



A growing venture in the exploding realm of women's amateur and professional sports, the NWBA is the first national baseball organization devoted entirely to women participants since the All-American Girls Baseball League existed during the 1940s.

"Everyone from students to mothers and women who own their own companies are playing hardball," says Paine, who is also sponsor and general manager of the NWBA's Arizona Firebirds. "We're attracting women from softball because it's a faster game... more exciting."

Never a baseball player herself, Paine discovered a "fan's love" for the game as a child growing up in Tustin and Newport Beach when she would frequent Chavez Ravine and Anaheim Stadium. At the same time, she developed a reputation as an athlete.

Please see BASEBALL, E2

# BASEBALL: Trying to Ensure That Women Get Their Turn at Bat

Continued from E1

for horseback riding that followed her to adulthood and places her today as a world-class "cutting horse" rider and breeder.

"The common threads throughout my life have always been horses and baseball," Paine says. Though a near-fatal horseback accident left her with an ambulatory disability about 20 years ago, Paine reveals an undaunted spirit that has always known when and where to find a window of opportunity.

"You have two choices in life," she says. "You rise to the occasion, or you don't, and if you don't, you're out of life. And that goes for anything, not just disabilities."

After her accident, which occurred in her early 20s, Paine continued with an acting-modeling career begun in her teens. Her TV credits include roles in "The Wild, Wild West," "Big Valley," "Kojak" and "Barnaby Jones." She has appeared in commercials and advertisements for Coca-Cola, Hanes Hosiery, Revlon and Restol/Stetson Hats. Now she's in Lincoln-Mercury commercials and is spokeswoman for Wheeling Free, a Costa Mesa-based company producing a three-wheel, personal-mobility machine.

As she pursued her career, Paine also stayed involved with horseback riding and breeding. Her Spanish-style home in Scottsdale, Ariz., fronts a five-acre horse ranch she has owned and operated since 1986. Paine has been active in charity-celebrity rodeos for nearly two decades, and one of her stock was named Arizona Cutting Horse Assn.'s 1994 champion.

Paine, who also maintains a home in Coronado, Calif., is an avid collector of memorabilia from Hollywood, the Old West and, of course, the Grand Old Game.

In 1994, Paine made the decision to become involved in baseball as more than a spectator. She began investigating the possibilities of owning and managing a minor league baseball franchise—specifically in the Class A, California League.

Back Rodgers, the former California Angels player and manager, was in Paine's corner and joined her efforts to scout for available franchises.

Her research into the minor leagues at the time had her spotting attendance figures, stadium costs and franchise price tags like an encyclopedia.

"She's a real avid baseball fan," says Rodgers, who met Paine through her close friendship with Angels majority owners Gene and Jackie Autry.

"Every time we talk baseball, she surprises me with her insight, not only about the game itself but also about the business of baseball," Rodgers says. "She's always been a merchandiser and marketing person, and I believe she has a great mind for that end of it."

But as the effort to acquire a minor league franchise stalled, Paine acted on an opportunity last fall to sponsor the Arizona Firebirds, a Scottsdale entry in a women's hardball league in Phoenix.

As she traveled to watch her Firebirds in action, Paine was struck by the poor quality of the playing fields.

"I was extremely disappointed with the venues the women had available to them," she says, recalling that some fields were littered with trash and broken glass



The National Women's Baseball Assn. is "ready to provide an organized forum," says Christina Paine, at an Angels game in Anaheim.

that and others had gaping holes beneath the bases where the dirt had fallen away.

"They were rundown at best," she says. "I couldn't believe someone wasn't going to kill themselves on a slide; it was very sad to me that these women, as excited as they were to be playing baseball, had to deal with such inadequate fields and facilities. They were barely accommodated."

Paine, searching for a way to change the outlook for women ballplayers, decided to pick up the reins of a fledgling movement aimed at creating a baseball organization exclusively for women. She co-founded the NWBA along with Lecee Emineth, commissioner of the women's Arizona League and Jim Glennie, commissioner of the women's Michigan League. Both leagues were independent before becoming the NWBA's initial membership.

"Play hardball" is now the call women are hearing from the NWBA and its board—Paine is chief executive officer, Emineth president and Glennie vice president.

As spring play kicks off across the country this month, the organization hopes to tap into a membership roster of more than 2,000 women—about 100 teams—currently playing regulation hardball, largely through independent leagues. The association also hopes to draw top talent from the thousands of women's softball teams across the nation.

The NWBA would like to become the umbrella group that organizes a full lineup of sponsored regional and national tournaments for women ballplayers.

Last fall, the NWBA participated in a Los Angeles tournament, which fielded teams from Phoenix, Los Angeles and Orange County.

The association also sponsored a charity contest between the NWBA Arizona League All-Stars and Major League Baseball Players Alumni All-Stars at Scottsdale Stadium in November.

Southern California supports about a dozen organized women's hardball teams, with five in Los Angeles belonging to an independent league, one in Orange County belonging to the National Adult Baseball Assn., a men's regulation hardball organization that now has a women's division, and about six in San Diego also affiliated with the NABA.

Besides the NWBA's Arizona and Michigan leagues, the association recently added a women's league in Florida and created a new division known as the women's Midwest League, which has received administrative support from USA Baseball, an oversight arm of amateur baseball in the United States.

In fact, the NWBA's Midwest League is organizing a '96 season and tournament schedule stretching from June through August. Among those watching to gauge interest and level of play will be the U.S. Olympic Committee.

Recruitment for the Midwest League will come from NWBA affiliates, whose players 18 and over range from complete novices to former college softball stars.

"We receive calls every day from independent leagues all over the country wanting to know more about what we're doing," Emineth says. "We also hear from people who want to learn how to set up leagues. Our whole intention is to create a structure through which these independent leagues can develop, network and bind together."

The NWBA logo, an All-American design of a baseball set into a sweeping red "W" on a royal blue background, was conceived

by Paine to create recognition for the association and is offered on T-shirts, with caps soon to follow through the largest mail-order retailer of minor league apparel in the nation, Minor Leagues, Major Dreams of Anaheim.

Recently adding the NWBA merchandise to their Internet site, Minor Leagues, Major Dreams owners Barbara Durrell and Jon Peterson believe there is a growing interest among sports fans for apparel off the mainstream.

"The demand for minor league logos skyrocketed after 1993," says Durrell, adding that it was due largely to the licensing of these logos by Major League Baseball.

"But now we're seeing demand for really offbeat sports, like Russian hockey teams. Women's sports might be the next wave, especially if they develop to professional levels."

There is only one women's professional baseball team in the country—the Silver Bullets—and it had performed more as an exhibition squad, playing against men's minor league and men's top amateur teams.

To bring exposure to women players across the country, the Silver Bullets have begun encouraging the teams they play to recruit a top female player from the area for the game. And the team suggests the local team look to the NWBA as a potential "farm system" from which to recruit that player. This new twist comes on the heels of the NWBA sending a selection of players to a recent Silver Bullets tryout, one of whom—pitcher Dawn Bergeson of the NWBA Arizona League—made the team.

"Right now, becoming a Silver Bullet is the only goal our women have for professional advancement," Paine says, "and we are thrilled to be considered a farm system of talent for them."

But Paine looks forward to a day

when the NWBA can offer a professional division of women playing against women.

Becky Heidesch, editor of the Huntington Beach-based Women's Sports Wire, contends that women's sports are on the threshold of a virtual revolution and that

sponsorship potential is tremendous within the industry for women's sporting events.

"It's a real grass-roots effort with a lot of folks out there like Christina trying to do whatever they can with meager budgets to make something happen," Heidesch says. "But the need to provide women athletes continued opportunity in their respective sports is apparent, and opportunities are surfacing everywhere."

Heidesch, a former women's softball coach at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, created the Women's Sports Wire to provide a focal point for communications and news about women's sports. As a bi-monthly newsletter, WSW offers a national networking forum for organizers, sponsors and participants in the women's sports industry.

Heidesch also co-hosts a weekly talk radio show about women's sports in conjunction with Prime Sports Radio. It recently featured an interview with the NWBA's Emineth in a show focusing on the growing interest in women's baseball.

Paine and others are hoping to use that boom in interest to attract national sponsors to the NWBA.

"Our immediate goal," Paine says, "is to gain sponsorship support to provide decent venues for women's baseball nationwide. We wanted to try our first season in a small manner and see how it went, but now we are ready to provide an organized forum of networking and competition between independent leagues in different states."

A formidable, but not unrealistic, task, she says.

"We know the players are out there; we know the desire is out there; and we know the time is right."

For more information about the National Women's Baseball Assn., write: NWBA, 4730 E. Indian School Road, Suite 120, Phoenix, AZ 85018; call (602) 947-5095; or e-mail: Emineth@Netzone.com

TAMMY LOEWNER / For The Times