

High drama on the kickball field

By **RYAN PEARSON ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER**

LOS ANGELES - The Southern California regional World Adult Kickball Association finals had everything an all-grown-up version of the venerable recess sport should.

There were 20-somethings channeling their inner 8-year-olds with spats over base running. There were silly team names. San Diego's Blue Ballerz were pitted off against the Hollywood team, Drinkers with a Kickball Problem.

And silly traditions: San Diego captain Mark Hernandez donned a Rick James-style "rally wig."

Yet the teams deployed real strategy.

With the bases loaded in the sixth, a Drinkers player slid into home, but the catcher blocked the plate. Earlier, Hollywood's pitcher bounced four balls toward home plate to intentionally walk San Diego slugger Vince Truong — a Marine platoon leader in real life.

And there were high stakes. On the line was a spot in the Presidents Cup Championship on Washington, D.C.'s National Mall.

Players would have to pay their own way to Washington. But once there, they'd be taking on the best in the kickball universe, like the capital's Team Scoregasm and Whoa Bundy of Long Island, N.Y. They would be the elite of a seven-year-old nationwide league that this season boasted 20,000 fee-paying players

The game's seventh inning ended with the score knotted at 1-1. And that's where the real drama began.

STRICT GUIDELINES

Players began suggesting tiebreakers. "How about a dance-off?" one asked. "Flip cup!" was another suggestion.

A chant from the five or so fans in the bleachers: "Let them play!"

Rumors rushed around that official WAKA representative Orion Walker was on his cell talking to league headquarters about playing extra innings (or a drinking game).

But no.

Walker yelled through the backstop: "Every team, every week has played by this set of rules, of guidelines. I



A runner for the Hollywood "Drinkers with a Kickball Problem" team is called out at home after sliding to avoid the tag in the sixth inning of the regional kickball finals. A player (below) for the San Diego "Blue Ballerz" kickball team prepares to deliver a pitch during the Southern California regional finals in L.A.

don't have the authority" to modify them.

Referee Chris Hutchings yelled out the tie-break rules.

"There's three people on each side. Everyone throws," Hutchings said. "When somebody gets two out of three in one game, you win one game. When a team has won two games, that's the winner."

So six players lined up for the official, league-sanctioned tiebreaker: A game of rock, paper, scissors.

Hutchings counted down from three and there were a flurry of fists and palms. San Diego won the first round. In the second, two players offset each other. But Hollywood's Ross Kohn threw early.

A sudden-death faceoff was held between Kohn and San Diego's pitcher. Kohn, 25, threw paper, the pitcher threw scissors. It was over.

The Blue Ballerz were going to Washington.

IT'S NOT THE SCHOOLYARD

"Not the way you wanna lose a game," Kohn said. "We played well."

Truong told Kohn, "You guys are a great team. Best team we played all season."

"That's because we're sober," replied Kohn, who typically drank Crown Royal and ginger ale before games. "We're usually drunk."

"Yeah, same here," Truong said.

On his way off the field, Truong and his teammates remembered when they started playing kickball, in second grade.

"I think I've progressed just a little bit since then," he said.

Now, his WAKA division president is a CPA, and his team is led by Hernandez, a Navy flight instructor.

"It's just like second grade, except we're not getting picked on now," Hernandez said.

The trio, along with other teammates, piled into a big white van and headed to Big Wangs, a bar offering free shots.

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