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Kickballers: not exactly cut-throat competition

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By Diane Bartz

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - On a patch of scrubby grass between the Washington Monument and the White House on a recent Sunday, the Deflated Balls fought their way to a 0-0 tie with Happy Fun Balls.

The 20- and 30-something kickball players -- mostly young professionals -- are out for some less-than-serious athletics, post-game drinking and a social connection in a city full of people moving and out.

The U.S. kickball craze began in 1998 when three friends sitting in a bar were trying to figure out how young, single professionals could make friends in notoriously transient Washington.

What they formed in Washington became the World Adult Kickball Association, or WAKA, which now has teams in 26 states. It has also spawned smaller offshoots like a league called No, Adult Kickball Isn't Dumb, or NAKID.

WAKA has about 25,000 players nationwide, with 5,000 in the Washington area, the U.S. city with the most members, said Tiffany Ficklin, WAKA director of public relations.

Christopher Noxon, author of "Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up," said adults were also playing tag and dodge ball, two other games long popular with American children.

"There are probably dozens of kid games being rediscovered," he said, pointing to other signs of a generation that has refused to leave childhood behind: "20-somethings who move home, 50-somethings who go to Disney or 40-year-old skate rats."

"Kickball is the greatest manifestation of that," he said.

Back on the field, a slightly manic Justin Warner is cheering on his team. "We love kickball! Kickball is our life!" shouted Warner, 24, a porn Web designer and the catcher for the Deflated Balls.

Kickball teams require both men and women. Teams have a pitcher, catcher and base-runners much like baseball. But to get on base, instead of hitting the ball with a bat, players give it a good boot.

Since the ball is slightly bigger than a soccer ball, though with a softer rubber cover, humiliating strikeouts are rare. Because of wind resistance, the balls don't fly too far, so outfielders rarely play more than a few feet (one meter) past second base.

RELAX, IT'S JUST KICKBALL

"It's social. It's an elementary school game. A do-over is OK. It may not be in the rule book but if both teams agree, it's OK," says Gena Zak, 31, who works for Starwood Hotels and plays for the Deflated Balls.

The game is so laid-back that "do-overs" are easily allowed -- a refreshingly different attitude in a city where cut-

throat ambition is more the norm.

On Sunday, a jocular debate over a disputed play came to a halt when one player yelled "C'mon, it's kickball" in a 'Who cares' tone.

Both teams agreed to redo the play.

Tourist Nick Law, 35, who stopped briefly to watch a game, said he much preferred that to the attitude of the usual adult softball and soccer teams, which were dominated by "two or three egomaniacs who never pass the ball."

Those games are like "what you get in the office but with cleats on," he said. But kickball "looks like fun."

After the game, the Deflated Balls and other teams gathered at Kelly's Irish Times, near the Capitol, where losing teams try to wreak their revenge by winning a relay drinking game called "flip cup." In true Washington fashion, it's a drinking game with rather complicated regulations.

"We can redeem ourselves at the bar," said Andrea Williams, 28, an event planner who plays with Take It Outside.

"People have different skills," she added, with no trace of irony.

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