

Stealers have a blast

By PETE DELMOE Chronicle Sports Writer

If the fourth annual Bozeman Blast softball tournament is any indication as to how the sport is faring locally, the future looks bright.

The tournament, which started on Friday and concluded on Sunday, included 47 teams (all from Montana) broken into five age groups n U18, U16, U14, U12 and U10. Just two years ago there were roughly 28 teams competing.

The Bozeman Stealers were able to field a team for each age group except U18 this year, the first time the Stealers had four teams in the tournament.

After struggling for years, softball is starting to gain some momentum in Bozeman and no one is happier about that than Tom Schultz, the Stealers' president.

"Billings, Great Falls, Helena and all these teams are just so far ahead of us," Schultz said. "Three years ago I was sitting, watching my kid and we were losing like 30-2 and playing three innings. It was just miserable and now there is not a team in (our bracket) that we can't beat."

Schultz said there is still a long way to go before Bozeman is up to par with other programs around the state, but he was thrilled to see three Stealer teams (U10, U12 and U14) still in the tournament on Sunday.

The U10 Stealers - which played at Bozeman High; the rest of the tourney was held at the Bozeman Softball Complex - won their first game Sunday 19-12 over the Great Falls Selects Gold. They lost their following game 8-6 to the Great Falls Selects Green, but ended the tournament in third place after defeating the Electric City Heat 11-7.

The U12 Stealers lost 14-1 to the Great Falls Heat in the second round after receiving a bye.

The U14 Stealers won their first game of the day with an 11-0 rout of the Butte Bullets. In their second game, the Stealers were down 7-0 to the Electric City Heat in the bottom of the seventh inning with two outs before they mounted a comeback.

The Stealers rallied for six runs and had the tying run on third base, but the Heat recorded a strikeout to end the game. Even with the loss, most of the Stealers were still upbeat about their success in the tournament and the rally that almost tied the game.

Jay Morton, who manages the U14 Stealers, said a couple of years ago that comeback never would have happened and the deficit probably would have been greater.

Even the players are starting to see the improvement.



ERIK PETERSEN/CHRONICLE Bozeman Stealers' Andee Morton slides safely under the tag as Electric City Heat third baseman Brooklyn Wilson tries to make the tag Sunday morning during the Bozeman Blast Memorial Tournament.

“It has been getting better,” said Callie Christiansen, who plays second base for the U14 Stealers. “It seems like every year we keep getting better. It makes you feel a lot better than just losing and not putting up a fight.”

With most teams playing in about seven tournaments per summer, it gives players a chance to gain valuable experience that will only help them as they get older.

John Storud, an assistant coach for the U14 Billings Bulldogs Orange team, said last year his team played about 65 games. He said that kind of experience is crucial if you want to succeed at higher levels.

“These kids just get a ton of playing time,” Storud said. “If these high schools are going to compete they need these tournaments. If a kid is going to play in high school they need to play now. Anymore, nothing fazes these kids because they’ve seen it all playing so many games.”

For Bozeman, the toughest challenge is still just attracting enough girls to field teams. Schultz said it was a struggle this year to field a U16 team, but he was still proud of how they were able to scrape together a team.

The U14 team includes three girls from Ennis because that town doesn’t have softball and Bozeman needed the players. Morton, who lives in Ennis and has girls on the U12 and U14 teams, has to come to Bozeman at least twice a week for practice, and with rising gas prices, it makes things that much more difficult.

Even with the challenges, everyone from the parents to the kids are happy to help out.

“You do what you do for your kids, not to say I don’t enjoy it.” Morton said.

Schultz said that the effort put in by a lot of the parents is remarkable. The Blast tournament committee has been working on the tournament since January and traveling to other tournaments is time consuming and costly for the parents.

“You’ve got to be passionate about summer ball, you really do.” Schultz said.