

# Ball One

Baseball provides a key to youth transformation in the Ukraine

by Chris Kajtor

**A**s a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine, I have witnessed firsthand the powerful effects of sports on a community and its young generation. Sports have always been a passion of mine, especially for their ability to reach different types of students, to forge stronger relationships with others, and as I learned in Ukraine, to serve as a link and bridge between languages and cultures. All too often though, sports are sidelined in areas where people's focus is mainly on survival. Living in a Ukrainian city and teaching at a university, I have seen these struggles firsthand.

"I don't have time to chase a ball around, Chris."

That is the response I got when I invited one of my first-year students to the local baseball camp. On another occasion one of my high performing female students quipped, "Oh no, Chris, that is for boys. Sports are not for girls."

I was in shock. My young, naïve self, thought that the whole world shared my values, especially when it came to sports. Growing up in the United States, I saw sports as providing a context in which to teach boys how to become men, and to help young women increase their self-esteem and confidence. I could not understand how such extremely intelligent, forward thinking and highly motivated students could make such statements. I later learned that there were multiple social barriers that kept people, especially women, from achieving their dreams in Ukraine.

For men in Ukraine, playing sports are often viewed as childish or a waste of one's time. The common mentality is that a man who is not working is lazy and irresponsible. I wanted to teach my male students that sports could offer

them real benefits.

Women often see sports as something that men do, not something that could enrich their own lives. Many women believe fulfillment will come from

following society's expectations—namely getting married, raising children and mastering domestic skills. I wanted to use sports as a vehicle to help my female students gain confidence and

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## Sports

break through these artificial and suppressive social boundaries.

I knew that once they stepped on the field they would feel the instant benefits to their physical, intellectual, and social well-being, and perhaps develop the courage to lead the lives they dreamed of, not the ones forced on them. I knew not to push too hard, though. As Joseph Campbell once said, "Preachers err by trying to talk people into belief; better they reveal the radiance of their own discovery."

So, my baseball practices began as lazy gatherings in the afternoons with a few students from the university. A couple months later, through word of mouth, some local kids joined us. The casual practices grew in size and frequency.

To build off of this interest, I invited these students to the local baseball camp that was started by past Peace Corps Volunteers. The camp taught kids the basics and stoked their interest in being active and playing sports, especially the American game of baseball, which was seen as "cool."

The first year was rough and tough, with supplies minimal. I have memories of 12 kids sharing five broken gloves held together with sticks and tape, a ball sewn by the local village *babushka*, and one dilapidated bat that looked like it was straight from the New York Knickerbockers circa 1845. In my second summer I received major help from friends and family back home, especially from Greg Francois, Pat Brown (a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer) and the Santa Barbara Peace Corps Association, who generously helped supply the kids with new baseball equipment through the Peace Corps partnership grant.

Baseball started catching on in a big way; the local news crew even did stories on us. The camp had almost as many female campers as male campers, and the girls were competing at a high level. A year later, the university added a full-time baseball team to its sports program—the first in our city's history!



Chris Keller

Taking a break during baseball camp.



Natalia Novakovic

With the university baseball team.

As I sat on the grass watching the students play baseball one fall day, I felt humbled and gratified. These young athletes had confirmed my ideas about the positive effects of sports. I now know that sports are a great way to build community, teach life lessons and values, and provide an alternative to unhealthy lifestyles. Sports also provide structure for young boys and girls, and help to build up their self-esteem. Increased confidence can help them to achieve their dreams, even if their society and community members doubt the validity or feasibility of those dreams.

This is the potential of sports. Peace Corps gave me a great opportunity, as

well as the freedom to work toward change in the way my community partners and I saw fit. We found that sports were as effective as any other vehicle for developing our community. Even after we part ways, I hope we all keep striving for excellence, one swing at a time.

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*Chris Kajtor served as a TEFL volunteer at Khmelnytsky National University in Ukraine from 2010-2013. Chris is originally from Los Angeles, California and believes that sports and education can work together to improve lives and provide our future generation with valuable skills and life lessons.*