

BEYOND THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE

with Claire Reitmann-Grout

Girl's Day in Switzerland



At 10 years old, I stood on the mound for the first time in the Half Moon Bay Girls Softball League. I remember the pigtail braids in my hair and being really excited about my pitching debut. After managing to get the first two outs of the inning, a third batter came up. She hit a lineshot right back at me. I stuck my glove out just as a reaction. Curious, I looked in the pocket of my glove, and I was thrilled to see the bright yellow ball. I was so excited I jumped up and down and celebrated my first inning like a proud 10-year-old should. As I skipped off the field with my teammates I thought, "Ok, I can do this. I am a real pitcher."

Thousands of American girls grow up playing rec league softball in their hometowns. Saturday mornings are filled with pigtails, cheers, softball moms and dads, and learning what it is like to be on a team. Some of my happiest childhood memories come from pitching for the Half Moon Bay Scorpions. We wore purple and teal and were coached by our fathers.

In Switzerland girls cannot join a softball club until they are 16. There is no league just for girls so if they are interested in playing they have to join the boys baseball club. Joining the boys team with 10 to 15 year old boys takes a little extra bravery from the girls in Switzerland. It is not a common sport, even for boys, so they really have to want to learn to play baseball and try something completely new. Baseball is not shown on TV in Switzerland so before joining the club, most kids have never seen it played.



Last year when I played for the Wil Devils softball club there was only one girl on the kids team. Her name was Nadine and from what I could tell, she was better than a lot of the boys. Last year I would take her aside from her practice with a baseball and work on her throwing and defensive fundamentals with the bigger ball. I even showed her how to pitch and she picked up how to spin the ball correctly really fast. When I worked with Nadine, I felt like I had the future of Devil softball in my own hands. I wanted to make sure she had a solid softball foundation to build on for her benefit, and the club's.

This year, when I went to the kids practice Nadine is still on the team (and doing incredibly well), and there are four more girls! Seeing more girls play is very exciting and it is great to see the Wil Devils growing.

My friend Christina Saenz who played for Cal State, Northridge, is also playing on the Devils this summer and the both of us have decided to take the five little girls under our wings and coach them. Christina is incredibly knowledgeable about hitting and is a fabulous demonstrator of softball

fundamentals. We hope to spend the summer being role models of what strong and well-trained female athletes can be, even though they think we are a little bit loud and crazy.

The Devil kids practice twice a week and every Friday, Christina and I pull the five girls out of their practice to have "girl's day" with softballs. Most of the girls are too young to have learned English in school so we spend the majority of the time demonstrating and using visuals

because our Swiss German is very limited. It always surprises me how well they follow along and can imitate us. A few of the girls are really athletic and pick up the fundamentals quickly. They could be excellent ball players in a few years.

What is the most fun about girls practice is that it makes the boys who are in their regular practice jealous. We shower the girls with praise (shona gsi) and high fives. I didn't realize giving high fives is a VERY American gesture, and the girls think it is cool and funny. I love seeing the girls



smiling and having fun when they practice.

During one of the practices we were working on the fundamentals of fielding a ground ball with a backhand. One girl named Salina had been struggling with this move. The balls were constantly rolling under her glove, and I could tell she was getting frustrated. Christina and I showed her the correct position for a backhand, knees bent deep and palm of the glove open. All of a sudden Salina had what I would like to call and "ah-ah" moment. She crossed her feet over, got low to the ground, and the ball rolled right into her glove and she brought it up to her ear. Her eyes got big. She knew she had done a good job and made a step in the direction of mastering the skill. With a little more practice Salina will be an excellent shortstop someday, fielding ball after ball in the 5-6 hole.

There really isn't a softball rec league culture here in Switzerland like I grew up in at home, but this summer Christina and I are trying to give the girls a taste of that. There are no dads sitting on buckets catching for their daughters or assigned team moms to bring snacks after practice. Many of the parents have never played baseball or softball so the kids rely on the two coaches, and now us, for instruction and modeling. We are planning to bake snicker doodle cookies for the team (Switzerland is not a cookie society, more cakes and pastries, which I enjoy!). The girls are learning softball, but I hope they will also take other things away from their time with the crazy American softball players. I hope they learn that through a fun and supportive community and league around them they can be good at a sport, take pride in themselves, and grow up to be confident women.



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