

Interview of Cheri Kempf, commissioner of National Pro Fastpitch.

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The current championship celebrates its tenth anniversary. How is the NPF?

We just finished our 11th season of NPF action. The NPF has 4 strong owners. Our priorities at this point are expansion, securing solid ownership for more teams. The NPF is optimistic in continuing to move forward and position ourselves as a legitimate sports entertainment option both in-venue and on television.

What are the strengths that enable the success of the league?

#1 The talent is second to none. The NPF is the most competitive level of fastpitch softball in the world. #2 The sport itself is extremely popular in the United States. NCAA has proven the overwhelming success of the sport on television. At times, NCAA Softball has come in 3rd in all sports for television ratings...with only NCAA football and men's basketball in front. So, popularity is there. #3 The aforementioned positions television networks to have an interest in the sport at the professional level.

What challenges do you still?

The biggest challenge right now, is the non-engagement of corporate America in women's sports overall. There are a lot of opportunities for the NPF and a lot of opportunities for the NPF to be able to contribute positively to ROI of corporate partners. However, those potential partners are still opting to invest in men's sports - of ANY kind - rather than to invest in women's sports.

What are the current or future plans for the organization?

Continued growth in the areas of corporate partnership, team expansion, and television

Is it not too hard to move in the shadow of the MLB and professional baseball in general?

The challenge is not just MLB, but the mindset of corporate America to continue to do what they've always done and invest in men's sports. MLB will usher in a new commissioner in 2015 and we hope to broaden our relationship as an Official Developmental Partner with MLB in the near future. A closer relationship with MLB could contribute greatly to the challenges mentioned above.

What do you say to baseball fans, especially MLB fans, to convince them to come see the professional women's softball?

Baseball fans typically like and appreciate the NPF for the talent of the athletes and the overall pace of the game. I don't think there is a problem of any kind in getting baseball fans to appreciate the sport of fastpitch softball. The challenge is to get it in front of them so they can see it on a regular basis and invest in the outcome of the games.

How is it that women's professional softball is always struggled to grow and exist over time?

I disagree with the statement that women's softball has struggled to grow. To the contrary, the sport of fastpitch softball was wildly popular in each of the 4 Olympics it participated in, with sold out venues and much attention. That was a big step. NCAA softball, as previously mentioned has enjoyed opportunity and consequent growth in coverage and exposure. I believe our problems with NPF growth, as mentioned above, are the general support mindset of corporate America and that is a hurdle we will eventually overcome and when that happens, fastpitch softball as a professional sport will make bounding strides overnight.

NPF teams have relied on many Olympic players like Jennie Finch and Cat Osterman. The return of softball in the Olympics it is essential to the development of NPF and softball high level in general?

Although the return of softball to the Olympics would be great for the sport, it does not affect the success of the NPF if it does not happen. To the contrary, especially in light of the estranged relationship between NPF and USA Softball with USA Softball demanding exclusivity with players, the sport going back into the Olympics causes more difficulties with overall player development and decisions.

The Olympics Games they could still help to popularize NPF in the world and find new partnerships? How to harmonize the return of the Olympics softball games and the development of pro softball ?

No question the Olympic Games are a positive to the overall growth of the sport. When softball was added as a full medal sport in 1996, it changed the sport around the globe, but exponentially in the United States. For the sport to be included once again, on the Olympic platform, will without question, be a plus to softball worldwide.

Like the WNBA or WNSL, NPF demonstrates that women can play at the highest level athlete. Do you consider the NPF as a model or a militant act in the cause of women and women's sport?

A model.

Unlike most sports, softball allows women to compete with men (as Jennie Finch who strikes out Major Leaguers) and play on the same field as co-ed. Do you think that performances of the NPF players have improved the image of women in sport or you still suffer prejudice?

I think anyone who watches fastpitch softball at a high level has a deep and sincere appreciation for the athletes and the game itself. I do not feel that we suffer prejudice under fan scrutiny at all. I believe fans appreciate talent regardless of the sport or gender. However, there is no question that prejudice exists in sponsorship alliances, or lack of. Corporate partners who need to reach a female demographic are doing so through men's sports, rather than women's sports.

An NPF european tour or clinics in the coming years, a dream ?

Would love to do it. We have plenty of time in the off-season. However, finding the funding will be the challenge.

Finally, how do you see the future of the league and softball?

Softball will eventually take its place as a leading sports entertainment option both on television and in-venue.

Thank Cheri !