

LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

# Formed as a place for her daughter to play, all-girls baseball league expanding across Canada

Dana Bookman's daughter loves baseball, but she was less enthusiastic about being the only girl out of 400 kids in her age division. Sensing a need, Bookman founded Toronto Girls Baseball in 2016, the only all-girls baseball league in Canada. Bookman's since expanded to Manitoba and Nova Scotia

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0 COMMENTS



Samantha Sanchez practices hitting during tryouts for Toronto Girls Baseball.

CHRIS DONOVAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

When Noa Rae O'Neill showed an interest in playing baseball, her mother enthusiastically registered the then-six-year-old with a league in Toronto. Noa Rae was the only girl among the 400 kids in her age division.

"She loved baseball, and she was amazing at it, but when it came time to sign up again, she said 'I'm not doing it,'" her mom, Dana Bookman, said. She acknowledged the team dynamic was "off," with boys being reluctant to throw the ball to her daughter.

Bookman searched for an all-girls league in Toronto and discovered that none existed for younger girls. In fact, while there are all-girls leagues in Canada for sports like hockey and soccer, girls baseball leagues are a rarity. "Baseball feels like the last frontier," Bookman said, adding that girls have traditionally been limited in baseball and pushed into softball, which uses a bigger and softer ball.

"Baseball powers think that girls have softball and boys have baseball, and they think that's the equivalent, but baseball and softball are as different as hockey and ringette," said Bookman.

So the mom of two decided to start her own league and founded Toronto Girls Baseball in 2016.

Through word of mouth and social media, she recruited 42 girls and created four teams. Just one year later, the league ballooned to 350 girls, with 32 teams playing in four parks across the Greater Toronto Area. This year, she's expecting around 400 players. The league's success inspired Bookman to launch all-girls leagues in Manitoba and Nova Scotia this year, each operating out of two separate locations.



Shira Levine wears a helmet that reads TGB for "Toronto Girls Baseball" during tryouts.

CHRIS DONOVAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

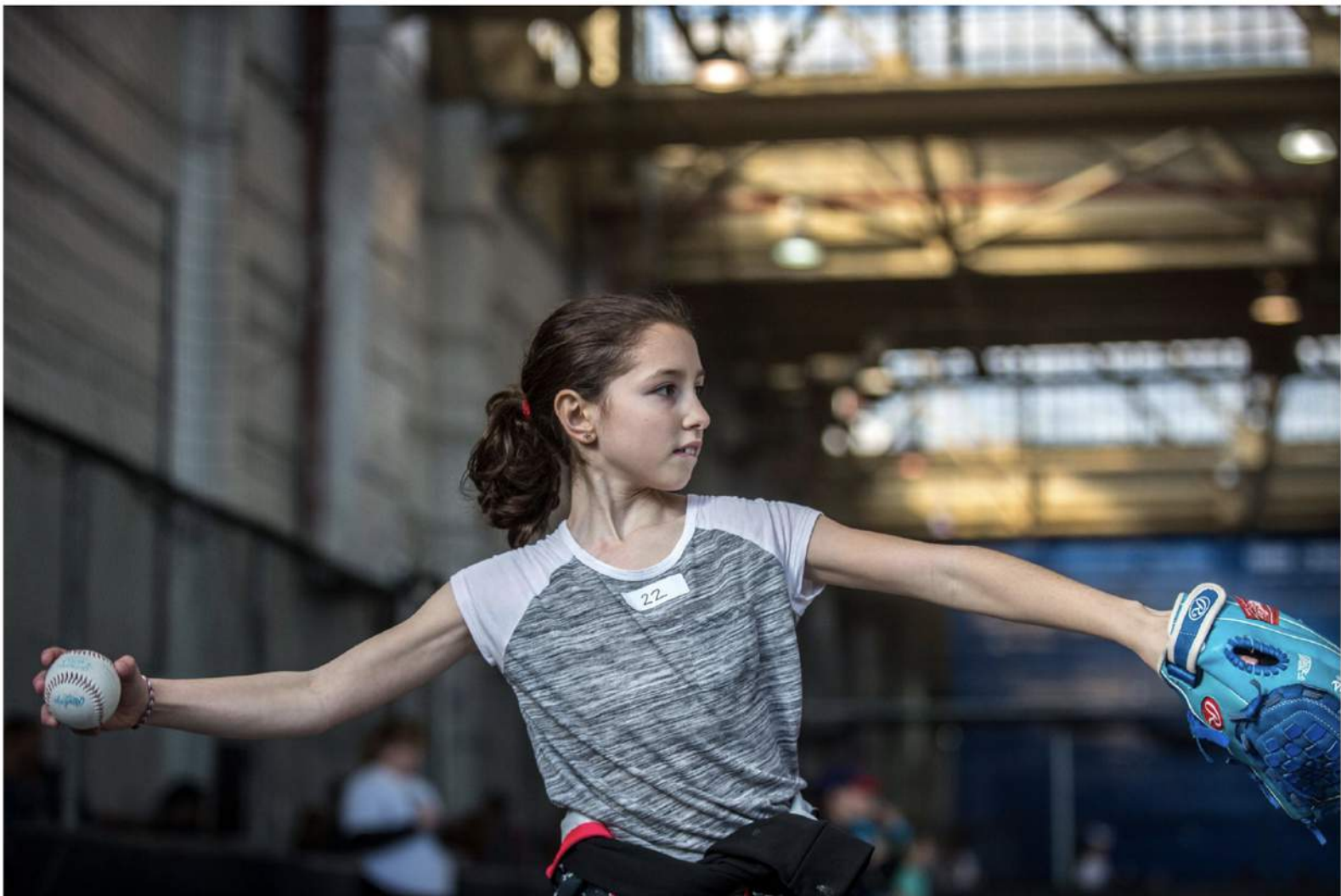
"My goal is to bring this program for girls baseball to every city in every province across the country," said Bookman. To that end, she has also created the Canadian Women's Baseball Association.





Sienna Baron, left, and Kate Rames practice throwing during tryouts for Toronto Girls Baseball.

CHRIS DONOVAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Players practice throwing and catching during tryouts for Toronto Girls Baseball.

CHRIS DONOVAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Bookman is fighting against declining participation rates for girls in sports. In Canada, 41 per cent of girls aged three to 17 do not participate in sport, and only 22 per cent participate in team sports, according to a 2016 report on the status of female sport participation in Canada. There's a drop-off in that figure as girls enter adolescence, with overall participation rates falling by 22 per cent.

The consequences are far-reaching: aside from the physical, social and psychological benefits of sport participation, studies show that girls who play sports are more likely to graduate from college, find a job and be employed in male-dominated industries. Research from Ernst & Young also shows that among senior businesswomen in the C-suite, 94 per cent played sports and over half played at a university level, pointing to a correlation between female participation in sports and success in business.

So if the benefits are obvious, why are girls staying away from the country's rinks, fields and courts, especially as they approach their teen years? The reasons are manifold and complex.

"Weight and body commentary sends them out the door and parents are at the top, along with teammates, peers and coaches," said Jennifer Fenton, a physical activity education consultant based in Vancouver. Fenton serves on the board of directors of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) and is also the organization's former chair.

Fenton said there needs to be a "no-tolerance policy" when it comes to body-shaming and negative talk on the field, and emphasized the importance of fostering a safe, positive environment for girls of all ages.

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— Dana Bookman, founder of Toronto Girls Baseball

Another important piece is having women in leadership roles, both at the decision-making level as well as on the field, as coaches and mentors for young girls.

"The dominant culture excludes the majority of women, so even if you want to make changes, as just one woman around the table, it's hard to speak up," said Fenton. "At the club level, there will be seven guys who put their hands up to coach or run the league and the women are like, 'I'm not doing this because I don't feel comfortable.'"



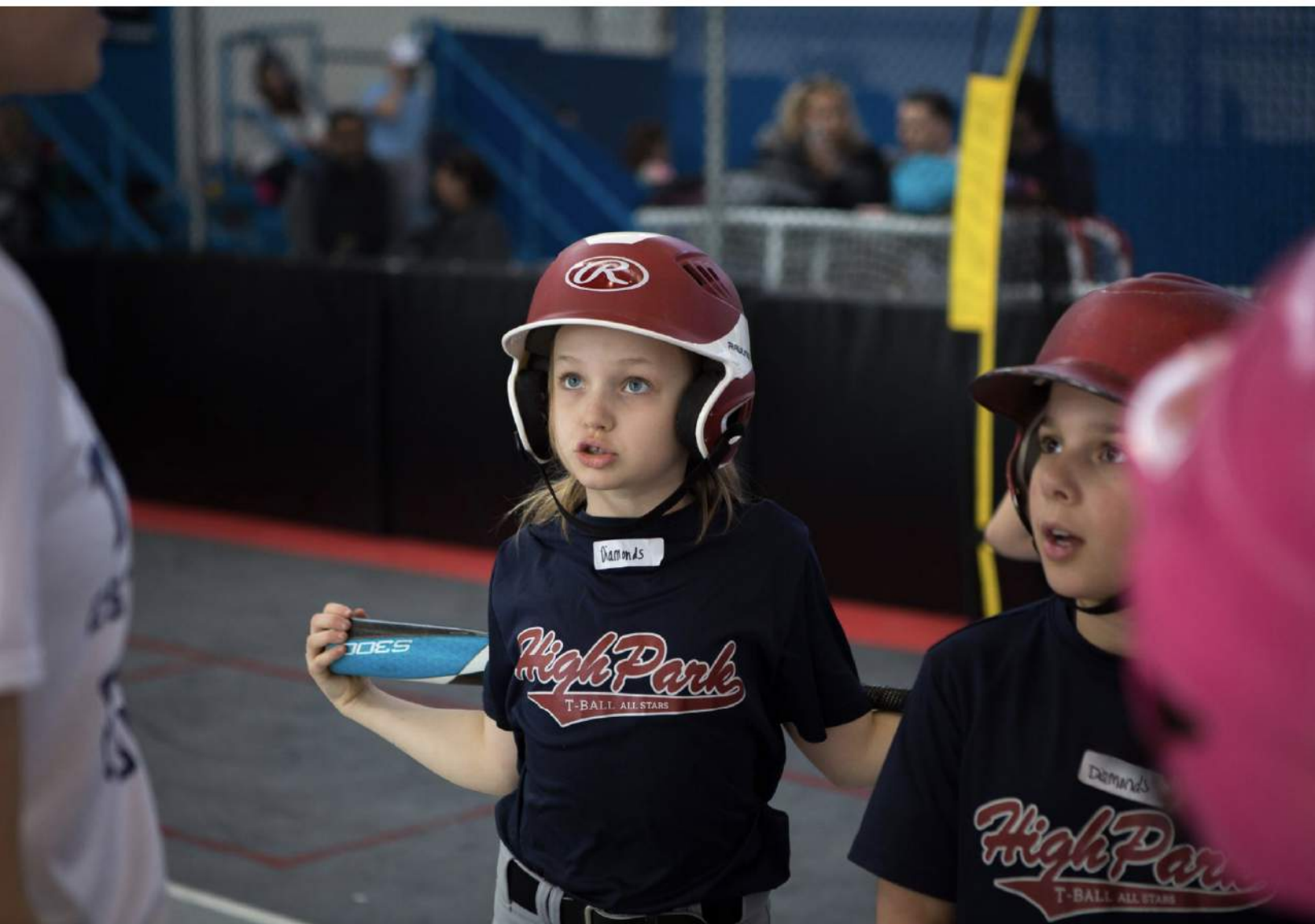
All-girls sports teams and leagues are important for girls who may not feel comfortable playing with boys, Fenton said, adding this support is needed early on.

Bookman's league includes divisions for girls aged four to 16 – capturing those crucial teen years – and the coaches include members of the provincial and national women's baseball teams.

Even the umpires on the field are all female.

Emma Carr, the programming director for Toronto Girls Baseball and one of the league's coaches, grew up playing baseball as the only girl on an all-boys team. She said that playing baseball on an all-boys team became harder as she got older.

"The boys were bigger and stronger, and sometimes when I faced other teams, I would get the whole, 'It's a girl playing,'" said Carr, a second-year Ryerson University student who plays on the Canadian national team and the Ontario provincial team. "They wouldn't appreciate the skill I had. It was kind of degrading."



Players listen to a coach during tryouts for Toronto Girls Baseball.





CHRIS DONOVAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Carr conceded she was a little skeptical when she first learned about Bookman's start-up league for girls, having witnessed a similar effort fail when she was younger.

But her mind was "blown" when more than 40 girls signed up for the first season. "It's unbelievable how much this has spread and how successful it has been," she said.

Nine-year-old Sydona Litman only began playing when she joined Toronto Girls Baseball in 2016. She wrote about the league and the importance of girls in sport for a public-speaking school assignment.

"All of the girls make me feel comfortable, and it's really fun, and it gives me confidence – it's just amazing," said Sydona.