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Local

Annual Por la Gente softball tournament celebrates 25 years

By Michael Burke

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RACINE - With the Chicago Cubs in a pennant race and the Milwaukee Brewers coming off a 10-game winning streak, this weekend's Cubs-Brewers series is drawing a fair amount of attention in the region.

Locally, however, the hottest sporting event may be the big softball tournament going on in the heart of this city, Por la Gente. The annual event, which is marking its 25th anniversary, drew 30 men's and six women's teams from this part of the state this year.

The tournament began at Island and Lincoln parks Friday night and, barring rain, will conclude by tonight.

Por la Gente means "for the people" in Spanish, and its longevity is a testament to the commitment of a group of guys who wanted to promote sportsmanship among Hispanics.

"After 26 years together, we still have the same nucleus," said Herman Guzman, one of the 16 members of the Por la Gente Association.

Guzman, now 48, was one of those young teammates on a crackerjack softball team. He recalled how that team, its season finished, each threw in \$5 so they could enter a tournament.

They named their team Por la Gente.

"We said, 'We don't have a sponsor, so let's play for the people in the stands,'" Guzman said.

They hooked up with the city of Racine for a new tournament for a couple of years, then took it over.

The annual event has grown a couple of new arms and legs over the years. Por la Gente now includes about a 10-week golf league, in which each foursome is comprised of family members, and a spring basketball

tournament.

Through the events, the nonprofit Por la Gente Association donates to certain Hispanic causes. Over

the years, the Por la Gente scholarship has grown from a single, \$100 prize to two \$1,000 scholarships.

The original idea for the tournament, Guzman said, was that "Hispanics should be able to get together, play fair and have a good time."

They have stuck with the initial premise: no team is allowed to have more than three nonHispanics on the roster of 15 players. And one does have to be able to prove one's heritage, if

challenged.

"You're required to have some I.D. to prove it," Guzman said. A Spanish surname will do. Otherwise, come with a birth

certificate.

"We don't get too many challenges," he said, but it does happen occasionally.

Racine has many people of Mexican descent, but Por la Gente also draws players of Puerto Rican, Cuban and Dominican ancestry, Guzman said.

Except for the city doing the initial field preparation, the organizers and their family members run the whole tournament. When the games end around 11 p.m., the work is just beginning.

"First, we let the little kids runs around the field for about a half-hour," Guzman said. Then they drag the fields flat again and rechalk the lines, and empty the trash barrels. They don't finish their chores until about 2 a.m.

Guzman's mother, Rosa, has been doing her part in another area - food - for about 15 years.

"My mother used to cook and sell tacos 'til she ran out," Herman said. But there was no way she could meet the demand. So this year, the association is trying outside food vendors for the first time.

Rosa Guzman will still be at Por la Gente today, though, Herman said: She's making menudo, a tripe soup. Herman said it's a sure-fire hangover cure.

Even if nonlocal teams lose, he said, "they stick around for the menudo."

"It does work. I can attest to that."

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