



Runs, Hits Connections

| By Michael Austin

Lawyer Softball League Focuses on Collegiality, Well-Being

Bill Miner, partner-in-charge of Davis Wright Tremaine's Portland office, intently stares at the names and numbers on the sheet in his hands. He's figuring out the perfect combination of people and skills to help his firm achieve the goal in front of them – win.

But Miner isn't sporting the traditional suit you'd expect from the head of one of the larger firms in Portland. He's in shorts, and wearing sunglasses to filter out the sun-soaked day that is starting to turn to evening. The sheet in his hands doesn't contain the names of potential experts or witnesses, but a lineup card of lawyers, colleagues and family members that he has to formulate into a winning combination of softball positions and just the right batting order for the firm to maximize its potential in the Lawyer Softball League.

Across the diamond, the players representing Smith Foster King (last season's champions) already have a game under their belts in this playoff round, having knocked off Lane Powell earlier on this late-July Tuesday night at Columbia Park and Annex in North Portland. Classic rock is blaring in the background as Smith Foster King's squad (with the team name "Ballable Hours" this season) enjoy the earlier victory and prepare for the upcoming game against DWT.

Photo Above: The Lawyer Softball League in Portland brings together firm attorneys, colleagues and family members with the dream of a title but, more importantly, of building relationships outside the office. Smith Foster King's squad, Ballable Hours, poses for a team photo.



Regardless of the final outcome, every game ends in a friendly handshake line.



The Lawyer Softball League in Portland runs for seven weeks every summer. Its roots most likely date back to the 1980s, although those participating in this current iteration aren't certain as to the actual formation of the league. What they do know is playing is something they look forward to as the cold Oregon spring turns to summer. It's a way for these attorneys, who typically pour long hours into their careers, to step back and hang out with their professional peers in a much more relaxed setting.

For a newer firm like Smith Foster King, being a part of this league was a no-brainer.

"We joined the league about three months after launching our firm last year," says Jaimee King, managing partner of Smith Foster King. "Playing softball has not only been really fun, but it has been a wonderful way to build more collegiality within our profession."

Photo on the Left: Of the many softball-league benefits, Jaimee King (second from left) appreciates the extra outside time with family.



Some teams go for legal puns and bright-colored team shirts. Sam Smith, a partner with Smith Foster King, shows off just some of the various jerseys he's had over the past decade, along with the multiple league trophies handed out to the league champs.

League Roots

All teams pay an annual participation fee to join the league. The money goes toward field reservations, hiring umpires, insurance and permits. All of this runs through the league's director, Missy Smith, ... who is not an attorney, doesn't even work in a law-related field but who sees the value of the league to everyone who participates.

"I enjoy seeing the families gather, the grills going and the camaraderie that sports brings. Being a long-time athletic director, I understand what positive things sports can do for a community, whether that is a school community or law-firm community. The outcome can be magical," says Smith, who is the former associate director of athletics at Oregon Episcopal School (where the league originally started sometime in the 1980s according to Smith) and currently is an associate director with the Oregon School Activities Association.

It's a testament to the attorneys playing in the league that Smith still remains involved. She was the head softball coach at Lewis & Clark in the mid-1990s when the league played its games on campus. Smith then served as an umpire. The school eventually decided they didn't want the wear and tear on its fields, which forced the move to Columbia Annex in 2004-05, when Smith took over as commissioner.

"I was about to get out of it after COVID but no one wanted to take on the role, and I have it down to a science, so I decided to keep it going as it is a real benefit to the firms," she says.

Building Community

Sam Smith, a partner at Smith Foster King and the firm's softball coach, agrees about the league's benefit to all the firms involved. He's personally been a part of the league since joining the Dunn Carney team when he was a summer clerk in 2007.

"This is a natural community-networking event. Legal professionals, staff members, family — we all interact in a much more relaxed environment," Smith says. "Being an introverted person and being dropped into this softball environment helped me with networking. Most firms have a rigid top-down structure. Senior partners may not get to know their staff members in a personal way. My entire experience is that this league brings everyone together. There is networking among the legal community but you also get to know the people you work with."

After serving as a summer clerk, Smith got a job at Dunn Carney. But in his second year of practice, the firm withdrew from the league. After jumping onto Stoel Rives' team at the time (players sometimes move to another team if theirs folds), Smith knew how important it was for a firm to field a team. He asked the managing partner at Dunn Carney if he could restart the team.

"He let me do it. Then I asked for money for shirts. He said yes and he trusted me," Smith recalls. "I'm usually so quiet in the office, he didn't know what he greenlit. The first year, I went with a highlighter yellow shirt with pink lettering. We were called 'The Attractive Nuisances.' My goal was always to make the most garish and ugly shirt. Everyone complained. We're lawyers, so we're generally more reserved."

But, despite the complaints, Smith turned this into a positive and yet another way to bring the firm together on something other than legal work. He started having the firm vote on shirt colors and team names.

10 Teams, 1 Party

The Lawyer Softball League always is looking for new teams to join. It usually ranges from 10 to 16 teams during any given season. The 2023 campaign included 10 teams: Miller Nash, Hart Wagner, Multnomah County DA's, Lane Powell, Schwabe, Tonkon-Bullivant, Davis Wright Tremaine, Smith Foster King, Brownstein Rask and Markowitz Herbold.

For the first time ever, Smith Foster King hosted a pre-season kickoff party. Jaimee King, managing partner, says she wants to make this an annual tradition while adding (with a smile) that her firm was in charge of it this year as they were last season's champions. Hart Wagner won the title this year.

The event took place in the outdoor area of the Satellite Tavern in Portland and featured all types of ballpark foods, such as hot dogs and nachos. King says about 50 people showed up and she expects the event to grow from year to year.

"This is just one more way for us to get out of our offices and connect with people outside our individual firms," King says. "And, we got to show off the championship trophy with our name on it."

Smith has played for teams named “Tortal Kombat,” “Carney-Vores,” “Semi-Pro Bono” and for Smith Foster King’s first foray into the league last year, “Stranger Swings” (complete with a similar font to the *Stranger Things* Netflix show). The shirts have been neon pink, bright orange and turquoise, although much to his chagrin, this season the firm went with the name “Ballable Hours” on a traditional Dodger Blue shirt.

Some teams in the league simply go with firm name. Others have a bit more fun with it. The Multnomah County District Attorneys team has the ORS statute for hit-and-run on the back of their jerseys.

All Are Welcome

While it is technically the Lawyer Softball League, teams are filled out with friends and family members too. In the aforementioned night of games, Lane Powell had someone’s child playing catcher for a couple innings. King’s son, daughter, brother, husband and nephew all were playing for Smith Foster King the same night. Having family members involved allows for professional colleagues to see more of a personal side of their peers.

“It’s great having family out here playing. My dad plays,” says Matt Berry, an associate with Schwabe. “With everything remote for so long, it’s good to grow these personal relationships again.”

Andy McStay, a partner at Davis Wright Tremaine, sees the softball league as way to build those social connections that area lawyers used to have.

“I love reconnecting with old colleagues and people at other firms during the games,” McStay says. “It’s also good for our summer associates to see what we are all about. There used to be more socializing a while ago, this gets us back to that.”

Teams regularly show up with snacks, pizza or things to grill, creating a company-picnic atmosphere. But instead of a picnic occurring once a year, this is six or seven times during the summer.

The professional connections made through a relaxed atmosphere definitely grow as well.

“I have a national practice, so this helps me connect locally,” adds Alli Condra, an associate at DWT.

“There have been multiple times this summer when I’ve reached out to someone in the league about help or a favor I need,” King says. “I never would have been able to do that without first meeting them at a game.”

“You see the same people you are litigating against here on the softball field, so you get to see them as people outside the office or courtroom,” Miner says. “It make things more collegial.” ■

Michael Austin is the editor of the Bulletin. He recently wrote about out-of-state Oregon State Bar members in the May issue.

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