

SPORT

Club aims to be a big hit

Sports reporter **Alex Hill** is put through his paces while training with the Herts Falcons

IT was with trepidation and excitement that I crossed the playing field for my induction into little known baseball team the Herts Falcons.

Established more than ten years the British Baseball Federation side can boast being the only club in Hertfordshire.

And each Wednesday a group of players meet at Grovehill Playing Fields to practice for fun and in readiness for league games in the club's two Sunday sides.

With visions of Babe Ruth and the game glorified in numerous Hollywood films, a chilly midweek evening was not how I dreamed my initiation into one of the most popular American sports would be.

However, the welcome I received for my training session at the Hemel Hempstead base – which includes a marked out pitch complete with bases – could not have been warmer.

I had played a version of rounders with a few mates in the park last summer and seemed to have no trouble tonking the nicely lofted tennis ball, so how difficult would this be?

Before I could get to wield the bat however, I was put through a warm up by club secretary Aspi Dimitrov.

The football agent, who originally hails from Bulgaria (there is a real international flavour to the club) took up the sport after his interest was sparked by Channel Five coverage.

The club, which has around 30 regular members is looking to recruit more. There are plans to go into schools in and around the Watford area to set up a program for the summer with a view to starting a children's league.

Aspi said: "Although baseball is not



Field of dreams: Fantasies of hitting the ball out of the ground were quickly quashed for our reporter Alex Hill after facing the pitcher for the Herts Falcons. Picture 20B2321: RYO HAYASHIDA

the most popular sport in the UK it is growing and it is a fantastic sport with rich history and tradition around the world, including the UK."

After catching a few in my snug feeling mitt I could already feel the satisfaction from the sound of the ball hitting and staying in the glove and realised that fielding could be fun too.

Aspi said: "It is a great feeling to be able to hit the ball hard, but also to turn a great fielding play or to steal a base."

"This is a sport which can satisfy both the serious sports enthusiast, looking to master the finer aspects of the game, as well as the casual sports fans looking to play a great game and maybe enjoying a picnic with cold drinks on a hot Sunday with their family and friends."

It was to Bruce Dullea, the Falcons 1 manager I turned to put me through my paces on the art of batting.

Having been told the difference between a "strike" and a "ball" and shown the correct stance and advised to keep my eye on the ball, I was ready to hit my first home run.

As I waited with expectation for the sweet sound of aluminium (apparently illegal for matches) on ball, all I heard was the swishing of my bat as increasingly wild swings failed to make contact with the elusive spherical piece of leather.

It was not the dream of hitting the ball out of the park I had imagined.

Eventually I got hold of one and made it to first base, with plenty of encouraging shouts of "run, run" from all con-

cerned.

Later I managed to grab a word with my chief tormentor, 16-year-old pitcher Peter Kikel – originally from Serbia.

His father Zeljko is a catcher (the equivalent of back stop in rounders or wicket keeper in cricket).

Asked what it was he was throwing at me that caused such a lot of thrashing at fresh air, Peter said: "There are lots of different types of pitching."

"First I just threw a fast pitch and then a curve ball, so it looks like it is coming towards you but moves away at the last minute but still stays over the plate."

"Mainly I do not look at the batter and try and focus on what I am

doing."

He added: "I like the adrenalin during the game, and all the different aspects of the game like fielding and batting."

The club was formed as the Bushey Falcons in 1996 by Dominic Black and David Hibbert, before moving to Hemel Hempstead.

The adult sides range in age from 14 years upwards and the club encourages girls to join, but so far only has one female playing member.

Chantal Gerrard became involved after returning from America, where she was on an internship at an art gallery in Washington DC.

The 24-year-old of Bellham Road, Kings Langley, said: "I have always played a lot of sport."



Gloved up: Reporter Alex Hill meets the Herts Falcons secretary (left) Aspi Dimitrov before training starts. Picture 20B2307: RYO HAYASHIDA

"I used to play rounders and thought I would give this a go."

"I was aiming for softball and Googled it and it came up with the Hertfordshire Falcons."

"I thought baseball may be slightly ambitious but I went along and everyone was very encouraging."

The health care assistant has only been playing a few months but enjoys the Wednesday evening training sessions and matches.

She used to play a lot of sports as a youngster going to both Kings Langley schools, but that tailed off after university.

"It gets me outside and I missed playing team sports and this was a good opportunity, she said."

"I am slightly competitive, but not that fussed if I lose. It is good fun. Everyone is so friendly and it makes it much easier."

"Playing netball can be quite bitchy and so I prefer the company of lads."

"They are a lot more easy going and take the Mickey out of each other."

Encouraging other girls, and anyone else to give it a go, she said: "No one is going to judge your ability. It is not as if it is our national sport."

"You have nothing to lose, other than a bit of dignity, but who cares about that?"

And as I walked back to my car having hit a couple of balls – in the end – as well as making a few catches, having a good laugh and getting some fresh air, I could not have agreed more.

Any individuals, schools or clubs interested in finding out more can contact the club via its website: www.hertsfalcons.co.uk.



To see a video of our reporter in action with the Herts Falcons visit www.watfordobserver.co.uk