

## SOFTBALL

# Facing the world's best — just not in London

Four locals show off their skills in National Pro Fastpitch league

By GREG RIDDLE  
Staff Writer  
griddle@dallasnews.com

As a teenager, Meagan Denry White dreamed of being an Olympian.

Now 26 and married, the former Crowley High School and University of Texas star is getting her chance to compete against the best softball players in the world.

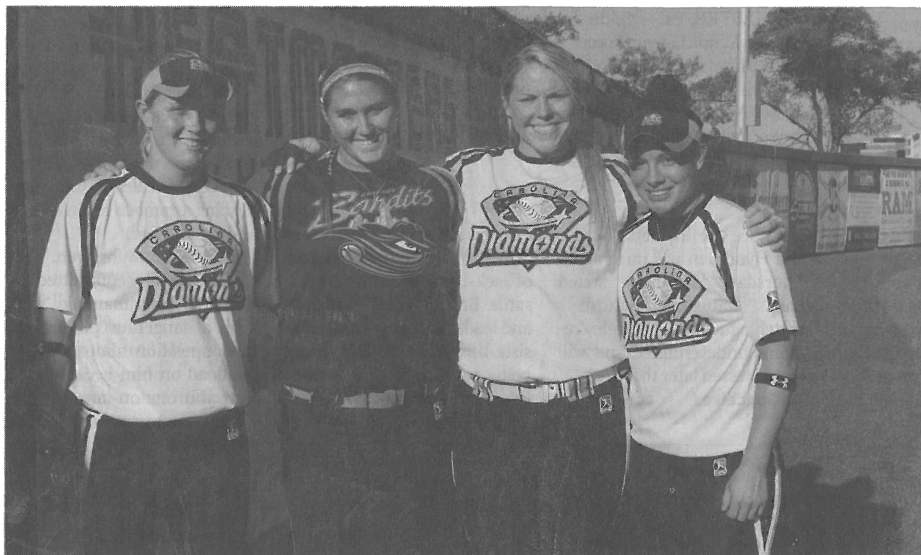
But White's not at the London Games. She's halfway around the globe.

Softball was voted out of the Summer Games in 2005, with 2008 being the last Olympics for the sport until at least 2020, and possibly forever. So White found a different way to play world-class softball — in National Pro Fastpitch.

The four-team professional league, composed of teams in Illinois, the Carolinas, Ohio and Florida, features 12 former Olympians (nine from the United States and three from Canada). Every former U.S. Olympian still playing softball is in NPF. That includes 2004 gold medalists Cat Osterman, Jessica Mendoza, Kelly Kretschman and Natasha Watley and nine members of the 2008 silver medal team.

"This is the best softball in the world," said White, who pitches for the Chicago Bandits and is a teammate of '08 Olympians Monica Abbott and Vicky Galindo.

"My goal when I was a freshman in high school, I wanted to be on the Olympic team. Then after 2008, just as I graduated from college, they booted it out, so I had a new dream. I wanted



Dina Kwit/Chicago Bandits

## National Pro Fastpitch

**History:** NPF is a spinoff of a league that was launched in 1997 as Women's Pro Fastpitch and was renamed the Women's Pro Softball League in 1998. Play was suspended in 2002 as the league restructured, and it relaunched in 2004 as National Pro Fastpitch with a six-team league that included a franchise in Houston. The league now has four teams — the Akron Racers, Chicago Bandits, Carolina Diamonds and the Florida-based USSSA Pride.

**The season:** Started in early June and ends Aug. 26

**Average attendance:** About 1,000 per game

**Average player salary:** About \$5,000 to \$6,000 for the three-month season

to play professionally. Hopefully I can do my part to make it available for someone else to live their dream."

White, a UT-Arlington softball assistant coach, is one of four NPF rookies who played in the Dallas area in high school. North Mesquite-ex Amanda Locke, who helped Alabama win a national championship this spring, plays for the Carolina Diamonds. So does former North Mesquite and Texas standout Amy Hooks and Fris-

co High and Texas A&M product Natalie Villarreal.

"It's small, but it's up-and-coming," said Hooks, a 23-year-old catcher who is a Northwest-ern State softball assistant coach. "It's hard when you only have four teams. We're on the East Coast, and softball is really big in Texas and California, and they don't have teams. That's what they're working on, getting more teams in the league. ... Maybe if the league takes off, the Olympics will take [soft-

ball] back."

When baseball and softball were eliminated from the Games in 2005, with softball falling one vote short, some International Olympic Committee members confused the sports. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, they voted against softball when they thought they were voting against baseball — a sport that has dealt with doping problems and hasn't allowed major league players to compete in the Games.

Now, with one spot available on the 2020 Olympic program, baseball and softball have agreed to merge into a single international federation to make a joint bid for reinstatement to the Games, according to *The Associated Press*.

The competition? Karate, roller sports, squash, sports climbing, wakeboard and wushu (a martial art).

"MLB is the key. If they do not commit their players, there is no chance, according to IOC sources," International Softball Federation president Don Porter wrote in an e-mail.

While the NHL and WNBA have taken breaks in their seasons so their players could participate in the Olympics, Major League Baseball hasn't been willing to do that.

"We have talked with the organizers, we have talked about including our professionals, but not stopping the season," MLB spokesman Pat Courtney said. "It would be players in the minors."

Softball's critics say it lacks world-wide appeal, and is a sport dominated by the United States, but Villarreal says "I think it deserves to be in the Olympics. People love watching it." In the last Olympic softball game, a 10,000-seat stadium was packed as Japan upset

**Former Dallas-area high school stars (from left)** Amy Hooks, Meagan Denry White, Amanda Locke and Natalie Villarreal play professionally in the National Pro Fastpitch league. White plays for the Chicago Bandits, and the others play for the Carolina Diamonds.

the U.S., 3-1, in the 2008 gold medal game.

National Pro Fastpitch has gone the extra mile to expand softball's fan base. NPF has played many games at neutral sites (including Grand Prairie, Round Rock, Corpus Christi and Lubbock) and made a lot of long bus trips (Carolina drove about 14 hours to LSU) to advertise its product. In the fall, an All-Star squad tours the nation to play exhibitions against colleges.

"We're trying to promote it as well as we can, to keep the interest in softball going," said Locke, whose Carolina team is playing in 11 cities and six states this season.

The final game of NPF's championship series on Aug. 26 will be on ESPN2, and three to four games will have been on ESPN3 by the end of the three-month season. But NPF needs more.

"Our product is fabulous. It is the most talented women that the sport has to offer," NPF president/commissioner Cheri Kempf said. "But we sit in a precarious position right now that so many women's sports sit in, and that's the ability to sustain and survive at the professional level. That will not happen until you have corporate support and television."

NPF does have one edge on the Olympics.

"When softball is in the Olympics, that's what it's all focused on," White said. "Just 15 women out of the whole United States get to be on the Olympic team. This way, [80] girls get to live their dream of playing professionally and getting to play after college. It's growing, and it's going to give all the younger girls that are 10, 11 and 12 something to look forward to."