

# Saskatoon Sr. Women's Softball - A Long History of Success

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With the outstanding international reputation men's softball in this city has acquired, women's softball in Saskatoon does not always get its due attention. The men's games have been well supported here as Saskatoon is the only city in the world to play host to three men's world championships. It is where Canada won its only men's world title on home soil. It has been home to 5 Sr. men's national champions and countless national teamers and hall of famers.

However, this community also has a strong tradition of women's softball. Saskatoon has been home to 5 Sr. women's national champions, and numerous national teamers and hall of famers. Our city has hosted one world women's championship, and 12 female national championships to go along with 5 westerns. Women's softball is alive and well here as demonstrated by the four national Junior titles in the past 9 years and the 4-time national champion U of S ladies team. We must go a while back however, to be able to find success for our local women at the senior level.



The last local powerhouse was Saskatoon DBJ Leasing. They were a staple at women's nationals for a decade in the late 1990's and early 2000's, winning a pair of bronze medals and the 2000 Sr. Ladies National Championship. They broke a 20-year drought for Saskatoon Sr. women's teams at nationals. The program featured players such as

(although not all at the same time) 2000 Olympic Team Captain Jacki Nichol, two-time Olympian Erin Cumpstone and 2008 Olympian Dione Meir.

Saskatoon's Sr. women softball teams suffered through the 80's and 90's but were very well respected in the 60's and 70's. Formed in 1976 under manager-coach Bob Stayner and with the sponsorship of Bill and Ron Boklaschuk; Saskatoon Harmony Centre won the Saskatchewan championship in 1976, won the provincials again in 1977, and then was primed for the

1978 run. They won three and lost one in the round-robin, beating Milverton, Ont. and New Westminster, B.C. to win the A side. In the A-B final, they faced Milverton again, winning 1-0 on a strong pitching effort by rookie Brenda Staniforth. They finished the season playing 78 games, winning 61 and losing 15. By winning in 1978, they qualified to represent Canada at the 1979 Pan-American Games at Puerto Rico. They won eight games and lost three and finished in fourth place. Stayner's crew were around at the same time as the famed Vancouver Doc Blues and thus were unable to repeat in 1979 but did record their 2<sup>nd</sup> national title in 1980. They continued and won a silver medal in 1983 and a bronze medal in 1984.

The program featured numerous outstanding players, many of which didn't get a chance to play for their country as Canada sent club teams to the world championships up until 1978, as seen by the Vancouver Doc Blues winning a silver medal in 1978. They had many stars on the national scene and internationally after 1980, when Canada's national team program began. These included pitchers; Irene Wallace, Shan McDonald and Brenda Staniforth as well as players; Darlene Solie, Donna Veale, Pat Wegner and Noreen Murphy.



1980 CANADIAN SENIOR LADIES' CHAMPION  
SASKATOON HARMONY CENTRES

*BACK, from left:* Bob Stayner (manager/coach), Patti Rowley, Diane Lynn, Darlene Solie, Sharon Kleckner, Ann Tkachuck, Kim Cudmore, Pat Wegner, Peter Loubardias (statistician), Clayton Wall (coach)

*FRONT:* Marilyn Donald, Nancy Brentnell, Jay Kost, Bonnie McAskill, Shan McDonald, Sherry Loubardias (batgirl), Irene Wallace, Noreen Murphy, Sheryl Kleckner, Brenda Staniforth

*MISSING:* Carol Friesen



### 1969 Canadian Sr. Ladies Champions Saskatoon Imperials

Left to Right: Front Row: Tanya Clarke, Vera Pezer, Joan Duprey, 2nd Row: Marlene Ackerman, Val Fawcett, Illa Shore, Val Jensen, Judy Garman, 3rd Row: Gail Hopkins (coach), Myrna Lewis, Judy Jenkin, Ann Hopkins, Sheila Rowan, Joan Drummond, Brenda Will, Joy Barrie, Judy Knoll, Bob Stayner (coach) Missing: Carolyn Debnam

The very first Sr. ladies program to enjoy success at the national level were the Saskatoon Imperials. They became a growing threat starting in 1963, under Coach Gail Hopkin, 2 years before the first ever senior. ladies nationals. The team travelled to the Canadian championships for five successive years and pioneered excellence in softball in Saskatchewan throughout that era. In 1967 and 1968 they were runner-up in the Canadian championships. In 1969, they won all 25 games in their league schedule and also beat previously unbeaten, Queen and Her Maids, 4-2 using entirely local talent. They earned their second Canadian championship the next year. Although they were tight as a team, the Imperials also had many of the best individual players in Canada They had 8 eight players on the team that represented Canada at the 1970 World Women's Softball Championship in Osaka Japan.

The Imperials had to push themselves every day to get better. Unlike the grueling pre-national route taken by some teams, they did not have top caliber competition in league play every day and had no provincial play-off, as no one challenged them to the right to represent the province. In 1969 they were also Saskatchewan's representative to the Canadian Summer Games in Halifax, and in the round robin placed third. In the play-offs they unfortunately lost to Toronto. In an interview from Jenni Mortin's book *Safe at Home*, Head Coach Bob Stayner, who had replaced Hopkins for what was to be a short time, commented "We went

to Halifax for a week and half and they didn't give us a medal they gave us a pencil."

After the Games, they flew directly from Halifax to the Canadian championships in Port Erie. Playing many of the same teams they saw in Halifax, they rode the hot arms of Vera Pezer and Joan Duprey. In the 10-team tournament, they defeated the 2-time defending champions from Toronto to win the Canadian Championship. They had been forced down to the B side and had to win three games in a row. But after being runners up for the previous two years, they were not going to be denied. Pitcher Joan Duprey was named All-Star pitcher and was awarded the most valuable player award in Canada after earning 3 wins on the final day. She was quoted later as saying "Everything seemed to be going my way all day, and everyone played well behind me". Also selected to the All-Star Teams were Joan Drummond, third base; Joy Barrie, second base; Val Jensen, centre field; and Ann Hopkins, catcher. Beating out every team in the nation also had another perk as they earned the right to travel to the world championships in Osaka, Japan in 1970, where they placed 7<sup>th</sup>.

Coach Bob Stayner, whose involvement with the team was to end after they won nationals, had his assessment of the team in an interview with Debbie Johnson for a U of S paper. He rated Pezer and Duprey among the best pitchers in the country but had even kinder words for another pair, Valerie Jensen and Gail Hopkins. "Valerie Jensen was a superb center fielder with an excellent throwing arm and a strong batter. She was so fast in centre field that when a ground ball was hit through the pitcher past second base she could race up, field the ball and throw the runner out at first base". Jensen showed her speed in the '69 Nationals when she raced in to pick up a line drive off her boot tops, continued forward to outrun the runners, and double her off at second. According to Stayner,

"catcher Ann Hopkins wiped any thought of stealing from opposing runner's minds. She was the only woman to officially hit the ball over the Gordie Howe Park fence".

In all, the Imperials stacked up 8 provincial and 2 national titles. They owed their success to hard work and desire, not high-priced imports. For Mortin's book, Coach and Manger Gail Hopkins said "I was strict as far as discipline was concerned. Some of my players left practises red-faced and mad, but they would be back the next day. There were 8 regulars for 6 or 7 years and one girl was there for 12 years. I wasn't a coach who just showed up, I worked as hard as the players and I think they saw that and appreciated it".