

## Character Study



### *Softball's Iron Fist*



Rich Ritchie runs a softball league in Queens, calls its balls and strikes, and enforces its rules. [Credit](#)...Julie Glassberg for The New York Times

**By Corey Kilgannon**

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Rich Ritchie, 61, has been organizing ballgames since he was a kid.

“My friend Ray used to say I could organize a game in the Sahara,” said Mr. Ritchie, of Maspeth, Queens, who runs the [Queens Lighted Softball Association](#).

Its 25 teams include local powerhouses like the Flushing 46ers, the Astoria Clippers and the Kings of Corona. Mr. Ritchie is the league founder and commissioner, but most important, the umpire in chief. He officiates games — often three in a row — nearly every weeknight in the warm months, and he boasts that his adult league is the “most organized” in the city, with the strictest set of rules.

“The reason is, to keep games moving along — we only have the field lights until 10 o’clock,” he said.

The games go seven innings, and pitchers are allowed only two warm-up pitches between innings. Every batter comes to the plate with a ball and a strike logged against him, to reduce extra pitches.

Propriety is also a sticking point. If a player is not wearing the proper team jersey, he automatically incurs two strikes at each at-bat. To keep teams from sneaking ringers into their lineups during the playoffs, Mr. Ritchie snaps his own player headshots early in the season, which runs from mid-April through the end of August.

Also, teams must supply the bases for each game; the home team must bring home plate and first, and visitors supply second and third. Forgetting them costs a team \$15.

Mr. Ritchie has worked in bank branches since he was 17. The hours allow him to rush to his fields after it rains to hand-pump puddles off the infield, he said on Wednesday night before umpiring a game between the Kings of Corona and the Chelsea Syndicate, at a field next to the East River.

The game was near the Ravenswood Houses, the public housing complex where Mr. Ritchie grew up, and where he used to organize neighborhood baseball games on a grassy circular patch down the block from the Ivy Room bar, which was co-owned by Whitey Ford’s father. Before the games, the boys would check the bar to see if Whitey was visiting, and check the area for the housing police.

“They’d chase us off the grass and we’d jump from rooftop to rooftop to get away,” Mr. Ritchie recalled. “They finally paved the circle over, to get rid of us, but then we just made it our roller hockey rink.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/nyregion/100000002245147/running-a-league-from-behind-the-plate.html?action=click&gtype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs&region=title-area&cvview=true&t=17> **CLICK ABOVE LINK TO ENJOY A SHORT VIDEO**

Rich Ritchie is the commissioner of the Queens Lighted Softball Association, a nighttime league of which he is also the chief umpire.

The roller hockey was played on steel-wheeled quad skates, and included games against such New York City roller hockey legends as the Mullen Brothers and Nick Fotiu, who all achieved National Hockey League fame. Mr. Ritchie went on to establish the Queens Roller Hockey Association, which he ran for more than 20 years.

Predictably, Mr. Ritchie, who charges league fees of \$1,200 per team, is widely known by the nickname Richie Rich, but he says, “The irony is that I’m broke because of this league. I lose money.”

Mr. Ritchie said he formed his first softball league 25 years ago, in a paved schoolyard in Woodside.

“Guys actually liked playing on the asphalt because it gave a truer hop and it was better for sliding,” he said. “I’m serious, they would tape pads to their legs, to slide.”

While umpiring Wednesday night's games, he kept taking cellphone calls between innings to adjudicate disputes at other games.

He directed one team manager to read Rule 16 on the league's Web site, which indicated that his team must forfeit the game because it was more than 30 minutes late to the field.

"Read the rules, it's clear as a bell," Mr. Ritchie said into the phone. "Listen to me, this is an argument you're not going to win."

A jingling Mister Softee truck pulled up near the field, and the driver automatically sent a bottle of water out to Mr. Ritchie.

When a batter complained about his umpiring, Mr. Ritchie settled behind the catcher and said, "Now let's see if you can hit."

The batter popped up and as the ball was caught, Mr. Ritchie jubilantly called, "Out!"

As the batter trotted back to the sidelines, Mr. Ritchie explained that one must run a tight ship to keep the most organized softball league in the city.

"This team is new to the league," he said. "You have to set them straight."