

Women's baseball 'big draw'

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Team Canada celebrates an 8-3 win for over Australia in the bronze medal game of the Women's World Cup of Baseball at Telus Field in Edmonton in this 2009 file photo. (QMI Agency)

EDMONTON - Ron Hayter has seen first-hand how far women's baseball has come. The chairman of the Edmonton International Baseball Federation helped bring the inaugural World Cup Women's Baseball tournament to the city in 2004 and is once again the driving force behind this year's event.

The tournament gets underway Aug. 10 with a lavish opening ceremony at Telus Field.

On Tuesday, organizers of the eight-team tournament gave the local media a sneak preview of the types of costumes that will be on display, representing each country, on opening day.

“I think it’s going to be a big draw,” Hayter said. “The last time we had this tournament here, people came here with a lot of skeptical views. But after they saw the women play, then the crowds came out.

“The message has gotten out, because women’s baseball has swept the world now. So I expect there is going to be a big turnout, because these women can play baseball.”

The eight-team tournament features two-time defending champions Japan, Australia, Chinese Taipei, Venezuela, Cuba, Japan, Netherlands, U.S.A, and Canada. The eight teams will play a round-robin tournament, with the top four advancing to the playoff round. The top two teams will meet in the championship game on Aug. 19.

Hayter expects this edition of the tournament to run smoother than the first one did eight years ago. “The last time we held it we ran into a bunch of problems,” Hayter said. “First of all, three of the teams couldn’t get out of their country, one due to finances and two due to political issues and we had to go with five teams.

“Then the first couple of games there were very few people there. But the message got out and it turned out to be a heck of a good tournament. What we did is make them make the teams play each other twice. It worked out well and since then, people have kept asking me why don’t we bring them back again.”

Women’s baseball has grown since that inaugural tournament and Hayter expects the calibre of play this year to be exponentially higher than the last time around. “Right in our own area we have women playing on men’s baseball teams and that’s unusual,” he said. “Women’s baseball is spread out all over the world now. In 2010 in Venezuela, they had 16 countries at the tournament. Now some of the countries weren’t up to the calibre that we would want here, that’s why we’ve limited the tournament to eight countries.

“The difference in calibre from when we had the tournament the first time and now, has really increased. They have some strong pitching now and that’s the key, you have to have good pitching to be successful.”

Japan will be the favourites coming into the event, but Hayter expects them to receive strong challenges from the United States and Canada. “Canada has been working really hard on their team,” Hayter said. “I think Canada will be a very good threat. “But Japan has won the last two. I’ve watched them. They’re very diligent. They take the game seriously. After one of their prior tournaments, one of the pitchers on the women’s team was asked to play on a men’s team. Japan has to be a favourite, they’ll be tough.”

The opening game of the tournament will feature the United States against the Netherlands. Canada will take on Chinese Taipei in their opening game following the opening ceremony.

“These women will show they can play baseball,” Hayter said. “And now with the Capitals not playing ball here, fans will get an opportunity to see some international baseball. I think this will draw a lot of fans. We just have to depend on the weatherman to co-operate.”

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