

## Olympic Softball Still Fighting Back



*Olympian Michele Smith and Jessica Mendoza*

### *Olympians Meet To Educate, Support 2016 Vote*

Two-time Olympian Michele Smith and several Back Softball Athlete Ambassadors were in Plant City over the weekend for the first time with a workshop in support of the program.

Olympians Saskia Kosterink of the Netherlands, Danielle Stewart of Australia, Jessica Mendoza of Team USA and other athletes along with two-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer Donna de Varona and North American Vice President Dale McMann of Canada discussed the progress of the program's goals, which is to encourage the International Olympic Committee to reinstate women's softball to the Olympics, starting with the 2016 Games.

The IOC will vote this year in October in Switzerland on the 2016 program. Other sports looking to get in include rugby, baseball, karate, squash, roller sports and golf.

When the vote came down in 2005 in Singapore in July, knocking out softball and baseball, Smith, who is the chair of the Back Softball athlete advisory committee, felt like she was knocked off her feet.

"It was like someone punched me in the gut," she said. "It was very surreal, especially when the sport had done so well in the Olympics. Unfortunately there was a lot of misinformation out there."

Smith said one of the weaknesses the IOC pointed out about women's fastpitch softball was its lack of universality.

It became the rallying cry for the Back Softball campaign.

"We've humbly listened to the IOC and their opinions and made the changes they said were needed,"

Smith said.

A 10-point program to get women's fastpitch softball back into the games was created.

It includes:

Increasing the number of worldwide softball participants from 8.4 million to 10.5 million, focusing on the youth.

Increasing the number of Softball Federations from 128 to 150 by October 1st, 2009 with an emphasis on the Middle East.

Developing further programs and opportunities for people with disabilities to play softball on a regular basis

Providing equipment to regions of the world who are suffering.

And increasing the amount of worldwide TV coverage the sport receives.

Smith retired from playing last year and is concentrating on the Back Softball campaign.

"A lot of my time now is spent on education outside of the sport and growing the sport," she said.

It's not easy. Many associate softball with baseball.

"To us it's so obvious," Smith said. "We're not (the same). The fundamentals are completely different. A lot of people just see the diamond."

Over the weekend Smith, who has taken a leadership role in the campaign as a former player and media representative (with NBC) and someone with a keen interest in what goes on with the game, helped educate other Olympic athletes so they can educate IOC members about the game.

"We want to show them that softball embodies the IOC values," Smith said. "It's clean. There's never been a positive drug test in softball. It's a sport that empowers women and it's a developing sport."

Michele knows the numbers.

Over the past three years the number of softball federations has grown to 127 federations and will soon be 130 strong.

Forty-one of those federations are in Europe.

The International Softball Federation has also spent \$2.5 million in softball gear and given it to countries who are developing the game.

"The IOC looks at what national federations are doing," Smith said. "I would hope this is an example of what they want."

The campaign Ambassadors have been attending IOC events to get the word out that softball is indeed an Olympic sport.

They held a media presentation in front of the IOC in November in Switzerland, without a lot of pomp and circumstance.

"I softball has done a good job of really doing the right thing and not lavishly throwing money around," Smith said. "We are a good wholesome sport. We are everything you want in an Olympic sport and we should be in the program."

Her heart is in the core of the game.

"We care about 10 to 12-year-old kids whose dreams are shattered," Smith said. "For me it's about passing that torch. Isn't that what the IOC wants?"

It might have even helped that Japan won the gold medal in the Beijing games.

"It lends credence to our sport," Smith said. "It shows there is a great talent pool."

Fans can help the cause by visiting [www.Internationalsoftball.com](http://www.Internationalsoftball.com).