



Founding fathers: Tommy (c) and Robert (r) Fiala set up the Emirates Softball League in Dubai in August 2017.

Take your pitching to the next level with ESL

Emirates Softball League gives Dubai baseball fans a real chance to shine

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With the temperatures cooling down every so slightly, it's the time of the year again when UAE residents can enjoy playing sports outside.

The recently formed Emirates Softball League (ESL) offers the chance to enjoy a fun and competitive activity for players of all levels.

The non-profit community based league, which began in 2017, is a 10-a-side format with players of all nationalities taking part.

In fact, the 2019 ESL Spring Season has been a record year for the league with more than 300 players taking part in the competition, and a waiting list that continues to grow by the week.

One of the men at the helm of softball's rise in the Emirates is Tommy Fiala who set up the League with his brother Bobby Fiala in August 2017 and it has gone from strength to strength since.

Tommy and Bobby were born in Chicago and raised in the Miami/South Florida area but have been living in the UAE for nearly 10 years.

Since starting the league more than 18 months ago, it has expanded with six teams playing in the Men's League on Monday night and eight full teams competing in the Co-ed league on Thursday night.

"It's great to see the growth of the league and we still have people trying to get into this season," Tommy said.

"It started as a 'get together' in a park at Arabian Ranches and it went from there. Every week more and more people showed up to come out and play.

"Security wouldn't let people in then cause there was so many of us. It was then we went out to the Dubai American Academy school because of the bigger facilities.

"With our strong ties to the Dubai Little League we are now renting out the facilities there every Monday and Wednesday night, which gives our community a better softball experience."

During the ESL's 2018 Fall Ball Season, Ski Lab clinched victory after beating Deez by three runs in a thrilling final.

The defending champions have

showed no signs of slowing down for the 2019 Spring Season, starting off the new campaign with a commanding 20-3 victory over Scared Hitless in the opening game last weekend.

The Filipino side may be setting the bar at present, but it will only add to the strength of the sport in the city going forward.

When people think of softball they automatically think of baseball. The games are similar but with slowing pitching and smaller field dimensions, the rules are bit different.

"It's a slower game because of the pitching. Everything is similar to baseball. The outs, home-runs, innings, balls and strikes, it's all the same. It's an underhand slow pitch that has to go above 6 feet and below 12 feet, which makes hitting easier and more enjoyable for everyone playing," he said.

"In the Men's Competitive League the games are a bit faster and the talent is stronger but in the Co-ed League at least two females have to play the game at all times giving the games a more social feel and provides adults a much needed break from the busy Dubai lifestyle."

Initially, softball went through a golden wave of popularity back in 2010 but the venue at Metropolitan Hotel was demolished due to the Dubai Creek Project. And after a brief halt to the game, the revival is beginning again.

"It used to be huge. There was international tournaments, up to 15 teams flying in to Dubai to compete in the Middle East Championships, and after a short break, we are seeing signs of its demand again," Fiala said.

"With recent developments we could see a return of the championships soon. We already have been contacted by teams in the region and another big International Softball Tournament would be fantastic for the growth of the sport, not just in the UAE but the region as a whole."

"The Emirates Softball League is a non-profit organization dedicated to the development of slow pitch adult softball throughout the UAE for all skill levels while providing a social and leisure activity for the UAE Community. Head to Emirates Softball League Facebook page for more information about how you can get involved in the league."



On the rise: Softball is growing in popularity in the UAE.