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Softball and Charity on the Brain

By MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

It doesn't take a brain surgeon to hit a softball. But for a charity tournament this Saturday in Central Park, all of the players are neurosurgeons.

The 8th annual Neurosurgery Charity Softball Tournament brings together over 300 of the country's best neurosurgeons to raise money for brain-tumor research. Over the years, the tournament has raised more than \$300,000. This year's goal is \$100,000 and the money raised will primarily fund research grants from the Neurosurgery Research and Education Foundation of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons.



RICARDO J. KOMOTAR

The event is the brainchild of Ricardo J. Komotar, a neurosurgery fellow at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. He launched the event while an intern at Columbia University Medical Center's Department of Neurological Surgery and says it was initially just a friendly game between four of the city's neurosurgery programs. The inaugural tournament was such a success that in the second year the number of teams doubled. That's when a light bulb went off and Dr. Komotar decided to make the tournament a charity event. A friend suggested he call the Yankees to ask for sponsorship, which turned out to be the pivotal moment in the tournament's growth.

"I got transferred about a thousand times and was on the phone for three hours and eventually I got on the phone and George Steinbrenner agreed to sponsor the tournament," he says.

This year, there will be 24 teams coming from around the country and Toronto. "It's a real commitment and kind of a tribute to the fact that these teams are willing to spend so much time and money to come out here," says Dr. Komotar. "It reflects that camaraderie that's in neurosurgery and the charitable nature."

It also reflects some competitiveness. The surgeons take this game very seriously and there's always controversy over the rules and who is eligible, he says. The play is so hard, that there are always injuries—a torn ACL or a broken wrist, for example.

The teams to watch this Saturday are Harvard, Dr. Komotar's joint Weill Cornell and Memorial Sloan-Kettering team, and the team from Phoenix's Barrow Neurological Institute, who won the tournament last year. The Barrow team isn't giving up the trophy—a fake, empty skull with a gold-painted softball for a brain—easily. "They said they weren't even going to waste baggage space by bringing it," says Dr. Komotar.

The Barrow team's first baseman, Nicholas Theodore, says his team has been practicing all spring and has no injuries. In a bit of friendly pre-game, trash-talk, Dr. Theodore said: "I think that we may have to relocate the entire tournament to Phoenix since the trophy will not be leaving there for quite some time."

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