

**Women in Baseball:  
Feminine in Appearance, Masculine in Performance**

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History 310  
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In the winter of 1943, the male labor shortages created by World War II led to the shutting down of many minor league baseball teams while threatening to shut down the major leagues.<sup>1</sup> Philip K. Wrigley, the owner of the Chicago Cubs and a pioneer softball patron, saw that threat and proposed the idea of starting a professional girls' softball league. He also saw that a new form of sports entertainment would help war workers' morale. This idea soon turned into the All American Girls Professional Baseball League, commonly called the AAGPBL.<sup>2</sup> It began as a non-profit organization consisting of four teams, but reached its peak of ten teams in the 1948 season. The League even produced attendance records of a million people for a season showing that women's baseball had acceptance in the world of sports entertainment.<sup>3</sup> The popularity of the AAGPBL came from the ability of its players to combine feminine appearance and masculine performance, which brought new light to the stereotypes of female athletes.

Wrigley wanted to change the image of women athletes in a game that would be a hybrid of baseball and softball.<sup>4</sup> Softball players generally appeared as masculine, physical freaks, or lesbians. They tended to wear pants, have short hair, and swear like a sailor. Only the level of play mattered.<sup>5</sup> Given these assumptions about typical women softball players, spectators generally viewed the umpire as the weakest person on the field, which did not impress anyone. But when women athletes whom men considered gorgeous showed aptitude at sports, it offered something new and surprising. Wrigley wanted to change the image of players to attractive and feminine while maintaining the

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne Winter, "The History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League," League Publication, Baseball Hall of Fame : 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Ladies of Little Diamond," *Time*, June 1943, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Winter, 8-12.

<sup>4</sup> "Ladies of Little Diamond," 73.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Wiles, "Let's Play, Too," *League Championship Series* (New York: 2000), 56.

same masculine athletic ability.<sup>6</sup> The first step was employing the use of a proper uniform, which, to him, was a short skirt and cute blouse. He made them as dignified as field hockey uniforms, but, at the same time, as provocative as figure skating costumes. He felt that a combination of sex and sports appeal would boost popularity. The whole idea of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League and the popularity it would eventually attract started when Wrigley was formulating ideas for this professional women's sport.<sup>7</sup>

Although the League started with softball, it eventually combined both softball and baseball to form a unique hybrid that merged the best of both sports, including their levels of play. At that time, softball leagues played with the bases sixty feet apart and the distance from home to the pitching circle thirty-five feet. In baseball, though, the bases are 90 feet apart with the mound sixty feet from home plate. The balls also differed in size: a softball measures roughly twelve inches in circumference, while a baseball is nine. The AAGPBL, however, played with distances and circumferences in between those for baseball and softball. The League played with the bases seventy-two feet apart, the distance from home plate to the mound fifty-five feet, and the ball's circumference ten inches.<sup>8</sup> In addition to altering the field and equipment, some of the rules also changed. Most significantly, the rules permitted the players to lead, steal bases, and slide—all of which softball prohibited.<sup>9</sup>

To find ideal women for the AAGPBL, the scouts only had to look at the youthful generation. Players tended to be young, single, and provincial, ranging in age from

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<sup>6</sup> Gai Berlage, *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History*, (Connecticut: Praeger, 1994), 134.

<sup>7</sup> "Ladies of Little Diamond, 74; Berlage, 134; "Ladies of Little Diamond, 74.

<sup>8</sup> "Baseball...As Played by Our Girls," League Publication, Baseball Hall of Fame, 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Girl's Baseball," *Life*, June 1945, 63.

sixteen to twenty-seven.<sup>10</sup> But these scouts could not take all superb athletes; the players had to show a combination of femininity, good behavior, and athletic ability.<sup>11</sup> The League would not accept women who were too uncouth, hard-boiled or masculine, as was common in softball.<sup>12</sup> These requirements paid off, so to speak, with wages better than average, even with wartime salaries high because of the demand for workers. Players earned on average \$45-\$85 a week, and the top-paid players earned over \$100 per week. Many earned more than men who played on minor league baseball teams.<sup>13</sup>

The salaries, however, came at a price. Once on the team, League regulations and team chaperones constantly micro-managed the players' lives.<sup>14</sup> Even though a couple of the rules were as simple as not smoking or drinking in public, and even keeping the uniform skirts within six inches of the knee, many limited the players' freedom. For example, social engagements, eating places, and living quarters all needed approval by the team chaperone. Even worse, players could not drive their cars beyond city boundaries without permission, and could not fraternize with players from other teams. To add to these inconveniences, dates and relationships with men needed careful screening, including chaperone authorization for the locations of dates and the men attending. These rules signified the control of players, and if they were broken, heavy fines resulted.<sup>15</sup>

As the rules mentioned above limited the players' freedom, other rules and requirements controlled the appearance of the players. Femininity was the most important

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<sup>10</sup> Berlage, 143; "Girl's Baseball," 63.

<sup>11</sup> Dean A. Sullivan, *Middle Innings: A Documentary History of Baseball, 1900-1948* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 205.

<sup>12</sup> Wiles, 59.

<sup>13</sup> David Young, "Seasons in the Sun," *Women's Sports* 4, no.10 (October 1982), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Hastings Ardell, *Breaking into Baseball: Women and the National Pastime* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 116.

<sup>15</sup> "Girls Baseball," 63; Winter, 9; Berlage, 139; Winter, 9.

element. Both on and off the field, the women had to wear skirts. The only times that they were allowed to wear pants was at the beach, during a picnic, or on the team bus. For a part of spring training, players had to attend Helena Rubenstein's Gold Coast beauty school where they learned the proper way to sit, walk, and say certain phrases when talking to the media. Preceding a game, players had to run their fingers through a bar of soap to prevent dirt from getting under nails. And during the game, the girls always had to wear makeup and reapply it when necessary in between innings. Chaperones incessantly reminded the players of their appearances regardless of whether the game was a nail-biter or a blowout.<sup>16</sup> Even when not playing ball, these girls constantly visited beauty salons for different hairstyles and facials, keeping their appearance a top priority.<sup>17</sup> Anytime players from the AAGPBL were visible to the public, their image needed to display a high level of femininity.

To maintain good etiquette along with their feminine image on and off the field, players had to be in possession of certain items and approach people in a certain way. It was necessary for the women to possess a "Beauty Kit" containing cleansing cream, lipstick, medium rouge, cream deodorant, mild astringent, face powder for brunettes, hand lotion, and hair remover. All of these things helped the players resist the dirt and grime likely to accumulate on their body during a game, and remove it afterwards. Also, the competitive nature of the sport made injuries common. Whether they were minor scratches or broken bones, team trainers had to take care of them immediately. Players needed to prevent those injuries from disfiguring their images, let alone handicapping their playing ability. While keeping their looks attractive, their behavior needed to be

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<sup>16</sup> Winter, 9; "Ladies of Little Diamond," 73; Wiles, 56; Young, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Simons, "Cherchez La Femme," *Baseball Magazine* (March 1944), 360.

nothing short of courteous, kind, and proper. When in public the girls had to avoid raucous talk and behavior, and, on the field, they could not let their frustration overcome them. Both would draw attention to poor manners. No matter what, though, players needed to display presentable attitudes and attractive appearances for the sake of themselves, the team, and the League's public relations. How the players looked and expressed themselves in public was not only important for keeping fans, but also for maintaining endorsements that this non-profit league needed to receive.<sup>18</sup>

An effective way of keeping the funds flowing and upholding optimism about the war were the displays of patriotism that the All American Girls Professional Baseball League always presented. Many of the cities with franchises contained major war production factories, so the girls provided entertainment to boost worker morale. Preceding games, both teams lined up on the baselines to form the letter "V" for victory in the war. Besides playing at their home fields, they also traveled to military bases to play. Off the field as well, the players contributed to morale by visiting military hospitals, raising money for war bonds, and developing youth programs to help aid mothers who had to spend their days working<sup>19</sup>.

After the war ended, people still supported the AAGPBL and kept coming back to watch the displays of toughness, which compared with those in men's baseball. A pitcher showed no mercy, throwing at batters when they crowded the plate or frustrated her, and neither did any other player when spiking girls who got in the way of sliding into a base.<sup>20</sup> The games resulting from this hybrid contained many stolen bases, both popular

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<sup>18</sup> Esther Sherman, "A Guide for All American Girls," League Publication, Baseball Hall of Fame, 1-8.

<sup>19</sup> Berlage, 135.

<sup>20</sup> Young, 57.

and necessary in order to win games. Stealing the bases, however, posed a problem to these skirt-wearing ball-players: they had no form of protection under their skirts to prevent injury. As a result, legs became victim to “strawberries,” which were abrasions from the dirt fields that often contained cinders and coats of burned gasoline used to dry them. No pain was too great or rules too strict for the players who put up with everything. If they did not, they would not have had a chance to play—and they loved to play.<sup>21</sup>

For the twelve years that the AAGPBL existed, its popularity among fans was always strong. War production and travel restrictions helped keep people local, opening a spectators market for a new and different form of sports entertainment. Spectators enjoyed watching the base stealing, the inside-the-park homeruns, the continual pressure, and the constant movement. Often these aspects of the game were lacking in lower grades of baseball and even in the major leagues. Some of them prominently existed in fast pitch softball, but the way the players looked, dressed, and acted was much different. They were feminine and not masculine; therefore appealing in both the way they appeared and played.<sup>22</sup> “Short skirts and winning smiles may have attracted the league’s first audiences,” said David Young, “but what kept people coming back was the caliber of play. These women played for keeps.”<sup>23</sup>

Although the League held strong in the years following World War II, the effects brought by the end of the war slowly ate away at its existence. The post-war era saw the removal of wartime travel restrictions, new forms of outdoor recreation, and a wave of inflation that forced people to spend money on other things than women’s baseball.

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<sup>21</sup> Barbara Gregorich, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993), 87.

<sup>22</sup> Winter, 5-10.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Young, 52.

Women's roles also shifted back into the household when the men came home and reclaimed their previous positions, giving women no time to play baseball.<sup>24</sup>

The All American Girls Professional Baseball League folded in 1954, but the vision of female athletes being feminine in appearance continued to influence the growing world of women's sports. The dual show of sex appeal and outstanding athletic performance is important today, especially in the individual sports of golf, tennis, and figure skating, but also in team sports, such as volleyball, basketball, and softball. Tennis player, Serena Williams, and softball player, Jennie Finch spend their time modeling fashionable athletic wear while displaying phenomenal athletic skills. Women cannot have one without the other. Along with the new stereotypes, the old ones disappeared: girl athletes no longer appeared as masculine. The success of women's sports, however, still has a long way to go. For instance, the highly competitive games found in the Olympics or World Championships tend to draw large crowds, but in general, professional women's sports lack strong attendance records. Women have become excellent athletes and well-known celebrities, but the sports in which they participate do not have the same support as the individual athletes. As a whole, women's athletics has yet to reach the same popularity level found in men's sports.

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<sup>24</sup> Winter, 12; Young, 74.

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