
The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League: Redefining Women's History in Sports from 1943-1954

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Americans today all seemingly know the famously quoted line “there’s no crying in baseball.” This line, made famous from the 1992 movie, *A League of Their Own*, seems to be just about all American’s know of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. So why is it that this once wildly popular baseball league has seemingly disappeared into the past? Much like other women’s experiences in World War II, these new opportunities were thought of as temporary by society. After wartime, the women were expected to return to their previous roles. Did the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League fall victim to this same expectation? The answer is no; these women went on to make their experience a more permanent one. How were these women perceived in these new athletic roles? In what way did the role these women have as professional athletes affect these women but also women in general? What norms were being broken for these girls to play? Were women frowned upon for playing? Or seen as masculine? From looking to newspaper articles from the era of the league as well as evaluating players’ testimonies, it becomes clear that these women were not respected for their athletic ability initially, but their ability to maintain womanly-ness while playing. These women as athletes still had to conform to societies’ gender norms. However, it ended up being their athleticism that caused the AAGPBL to last past the war years.

The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League was created in 1943 and “was born out of fear that during World War II the United States government’s manpower needs for its military forces would decimate the numbers of men playing baseball in the major leagues.”⁹⁵ Over 1,000 major league baseball players would be enlisted in the war effort between 1942 and 1946.⁹⁶ “During World War II, baseball became particularly vital to the American spirit, being viewed by many, including President Roosevelt, as important for sustaining the nation’s moral.”⁹⁷ Phillip Wrigley, who was the owner of the Chicago Cubs, devised an alternative for the 1943 baseball season—believing it would be good for the community, country, and the war effort.⁹⁸ A newspaper article from the Chicago Daily Tribune, titled “If The Cubs Give Up The Park, The Girls May Take Over,” was written on January 8, 1943, discussing the possibility of a girls’ baseball league. The article discusses the league as an option solely to keep up attendance at the park and quotes the Cubs’ general manger saying “It is impossible to make any statement on a softball league at this time because there may not be a league.”⁹⁹ The manager’s tone clearly does not sound enthralled about the idea of a women’s league. Another interesting note about the article is that it refers to the game as softball and not baseball. Softball is typically considered to be a female sport, and specially back then, as less intense version of baseball. The title of the article itself gives off a negative connotation to the idea

⁹⁵ Sargent, Jim. We Were the All-American Girls: Interviews with Players of the AAGPBL, 1943-1954, 8.

⁹⁶ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954: Gender Conflict in Sports?" 289.

⁹⁷ Weiller and Higgs, "Fandom in the 40's: The integrating functions of All American Girls Professional Baseball League," 212.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 212.

⁹⁹ "IF CUBS GIVE UP PARK, THE GIRLS MAY TAKE OVER." 1943.Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963), Jan 08, 21.

of a girls' league, as if the girls "taking over" would not be a good thing.

Luckily, Mr. Wrigley pressed forward with his idea, and a women's baseball league was to be formed. These women that Wrigley fanaticized of playing were going to be risking a lot to play ball: "Prior to the World War II era (1939-1945) the dominant American value system prescribed for women their duties and loyalties to family. Their sphere of influence was to be within the home as wives and mothers."¹⁰⁰ However, the sudden onset of WWII gave way to a dramatic change in social structure in American society—labor shortages were resulting in women being drafted to the workplace. Women at the time did participate in sports, but as a hobby, and by no means professionally.¹⁰¹ Their opportunities were limited until Mr. Wrigley set his plan into action: "In May of 1943, over 100 of the country's best women softball players registered in Chicago to try out for the new women's league. At the end of the initial training camp, 60 players were selected by Wrigley's managers and divided into four teams."¹⁰² These women came from all different walks of life. Many were Midwesterners, however there were some girls from the costs as well as provinces in Canada. One player, Annastasia Batikis, who played outfield for Racine, said of the girls in the league: "We have such varied backgrounds. There were teachers and farm girls and secretaries and models and nuns, and we sure did open up the doors for the gals today."¹⁰³

The tryouts were a tough affair, not only athletically, but also a tough judgment on the physical appearance of players. Some players would be dismissed from tryouts or let go from teams for behavior that was considered too masculine or sexually suspect.¹⁰⁴ Society had long withheld sports as an occupation for women, trying out for the teams themselves was "in violation of the standards of beauty and behavior set for white middle-class females of the era..."¹⁰⁵ To keep from upsetting the public opinion, the mission statement of the league read as follows: "The All-American Girls Softball League is created with the highest ideals of womanhood in mind. The natural appeal of women in every walk of life will be brought out in this venture."¹⁰⁶ The leagues efforts to create a perfect example of femininity were not subtle by any means; the league's entire marketing efforts were centered on the process of shaping baseball around femininity.¹⁰⁷

The whole league was sent charm school before starting the regular season. Betsy Jochum, who played for South Bend, commented on charm school in 1948, stating: "We had our sessions at the hotel in the evenings...They demonstrated how to put on makeup, and how to go down stairs, gracefully, one step at a time, and how to sit down and cross your legs properly, all things like that, and we were given make-up kits."¹⁰⁸ Another player, Vivian Kellogg, who played for Fort Wayne, said of charm school: "...they did show us how to apply make-up and how to sit and how to come down stairs. I thought it was a neat thing, because most of the girls came from farms, and not having the opportunity to learn about the style of the day and make-up, they didn't know those things."¹⁰⁹ Not all of the women saw charm school as a bad or discriminating thing they were being made to do. Like Vivian Kellogg, some players saw the benefit in charm school, "They taught the largely rural and working-class athletes how to survive in a new social class."¹¹⁰ Karen H. Weiller and Catorina T. Higgs conducted a survey of players who were still alive in 1994 in their article "The All-

¹⁰⁰ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 289.

¹⁰¹ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 70.

¹⁰² Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 290.

¹⁰³ Sargent, *We Were the All-American Girls*, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 70.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰⁶ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 68.

¹⁰⁷ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 71.

¹⁰⁸ Sargent, *We Were the All-American Girls*, 48.

¹⁰⁹ Sargent, *We Were the All-American Girls*, 57.

¹¹⁰ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 75.

American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943-1954: Gender Conflict in Sport?" Of the players who responded to their questionnaire, 70% of them felt that the charm school and feminine expectations placed on them were necessary to maintain a good image.¹¹¹ Of those women, 54% said that they felt respected as females, 20% of the subjects however, felt that as women they were discriminated against in this way.¹¹² There are negatives associated with the fact that these women were sent to charm school and held to certain expectations, although they may not have seen it: "Without question, gender ideology does symbolic harm to females who aspire to live independently of the beauty system and its trivializing practices. Indeed, many have ideology forced violently on them."¹¹³

When asked by girls today as to why the girls had to play in skirts, Vivian Kellogg states that "Mr. Wrigley designed the uniforms, and they wanted us to look and act like ladies. That's why we had charm school for personal grooming and social behavior."¹¹⁴ Mr. Wrigley had many expectations for the women in his league. Wrigley believed image was a vital selling point for the league and judged women's beauty as much as their baseball abilities.¹¹⁵ "Baseball was perceived to be male-dominated sport and not a gender-neutral one. Wrigley imparted his own beliefs and those of the time period by insisting that players balance their participation in baseball by displaying the utmost femininity."¹¹⁶ The uniforms were made short-skirted to convey a dramatized female image. Despite exposing the players to serious slide burns and injuries, the uniforms were a public display of femininity that distinguished the AAGPBL players as "real women."¹¹⁷ Conduct rules to be carried out by the girls included a hair, make-up, and dress code, as well as no drinking, no smoking, no use of foul language, and a curfew.¹¹⁸ All of these were imposed in hopes of removing the tomboy or lesbian stereotype from female athletics.¹¹⁹ These rules for femininity unfortunately discounted their athletic abilities and over emphasized their gender.

The American public was kept well informed of the process which these women went through to remove the stigma of playing in a "man's game." The league focused most of its attention on this aspect: "In league publicity, the AAGPBL promoted its players not only as outstanding athletes but as 'real' ladies, on and off the field..."¹²⁰ In June of 1943, at the start of the league, a news-paper article entitled "BEAUTY GOES TO BAT UNDER BIG TENT," is mostly a collection of photos from the Chicago Daily Tribune that showcase the new AAGPBL teams. Under the main photo in the article the caption reads "Tough, he-man baseball will give way to the brand offered by the All-American Softball league in Wrigley field next Sunday."¹²¹ What can be picked up by this caption is that the printers are unsure of their attitude towards the women, like many were at the beginning of the league, by referring to "tough, he-man baseball." Another photo in this selection, a pitcher named Gloria is featured, and the caption of her photo is commenting on the fact that she was a second place runner up in a beauty contest in California. They are being sure to comment on the feminism of the player, and not her ability to pitch. This article demonstrates the initial resistance to women as professional athletes.

Another article, from May of 1944, entitled "120 GIRLS START SOFTBALL DRILL,"

¹¹¹ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 294.

¹¹² Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 294.

¹¹³ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 76.

¹¹⁴ Sargent, *We Were the All-American Girls*, 57.

¹¹⁵ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 291.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 291

¹¹⁷ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 72.

¹¹⁸ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 294.

¹¹⁹ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 73.

¹²⁰ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 291.

¹²¹ "BEAUTY GOES TO BAT UNDER BIG TENT." Chicago Daily Tribune, 1943, Jun 06, 1. 6

demonstrates a lot more understanding and excitement for the season to start up just a year later. A notable quote from this Chicago Daily Tribune article comments directly on the leagues goal of displaying the utmost femininity: “The idea behind the league... is to combine feminine attractiveness and athletic skill. The muscular, boyish type is out, no matter if she’s a potential Babe Ruth or Bob Feller.”¹²² The article also discusses how the girls attend personality classes. This article demonstrates that just a year after the first, more skeptical article, there is an acceptance for the league. However, this acceptance comes at the cost of extreme feminine expectations with no regard to their athletic skills whatsoever. “Doris of Des Plaines is Only 17 but She’s a Veteran Baseball Player,” is another Chicago Daily Tribune article from 1949. The article highlights Doris Carlson for being a star athlete. Instead of focusing on their athleticism, as the title implies, the article actually focuses on her as “A honey blonde with blue eyes and a pixie smile.”¹²³ The article actually makes next to no mention of her athletic capabilities as it shows images of her doing her make-up before a game and making cake in the kitchen. The article, still six years after the league’s beginning, is focusing on her in the “women’s sphere,” taking away from her athletic abilities. Although the women who played in this league were given an extremely unique opportunity to enter the athletic sphere, they had many restrictions imposed upon them. These strict feminine expectations were placed upon these women to accept them as athletes congruent to the gender norms of society during this era.

Despite the limitations set upon these women’s gender identities, they were still incredible athletes and sparked much attention for it; even if the media chose not to show it. “Never before in the history of the United States has there been a professional women’s team sport group that has been as successful as the All American Girls Baseball League.”¹²⁴ What truly makes the AAGPBL so unique was its ability to outlive the war years. Vivian Kellogg, the previously mentioned Fort Wayne player, is quoted as saying: “The league was supposed to take the place of the men who were away in the service in the war, so we were entertaining the home front, but by 1946, the war was over. We took a lot of ribbing and criticism at first, but when we got the fans out, we had them.”¹²⁵ At first many fans had only looked upon the league as a substitute for men’s baseball, however, it was the high level of play that continued to draw fans in after the war’s end. The league was able to sustain its popularity for nine additional seasons after the war.¹²⁶ The popular film, *A League of Their Own* gives the impression that women’s baseball died off after the war years, but this was far from the case as the league was on a gradual incline until its peak in the 1948 season.¹²⁷ “In 1948, the league drew close to one million paid admissions.”¹²⁸ When the AAGPBL started in 1943, it would have only four teams. At the height of the league, there were as many as ten teams.¹²⁹ In a poll of former fans of the AAGPBL, conducted by Karen H. Weiller, fans stated the cause for the leagues success all those years was because of a high caliber of play: “...when specifically asked why the AAGPBL lasted beyond the World War II years, the vast majority (85%) indicated the quality of play, the entertainment value, and identification fans had with local teams as crucial reasons.”¹³⁰

On average, these women were making \$45 to \$85 dollars per week, including having their traveling expenses and lodging expenses paid for.¹³¹ This was not as much as the men in major

¹²² Prell, "120 GIRLS START SOFTBALL DRILL," Chicago Daily Tribune, May 16, 1944.

¹²³ "Doris of Des Plaines is Only 17 but She's a Veteran Baseball Player," 1949, Chicago Daily Tribune, Jul 10, 1.

¹²⁴ Weiller and Higgs, "Fandom in the 40's," 211.

¹²⁵ Sargent, *We Were the All-American Girls*, 57.

¹²⁶ Weiller and Higgs, "Fandom in the 40's," 221.

¹²⁷ Pierman, "Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood," 68.

¹²⁸ Weiller and Higgs, "Fandom in the 40's," 211.

¹²⁹ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 290.

¹³⁰ Weiller and Higgs, "Fandom in the 40's," 222

¹³¹ Weiller and Higgs, "The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954," 293.

leagues, but still much more than most of their husbands or parents were making. A lot of the girls were not only able to send money home to their families, but also save money to plan for a life after baseball.¹³² Several players used the money that they saved to attend college following their time in the AAGPBL.¹³³ “While an average of 8.2 percent of women of their generation were earning college degrees, 35 percent of AAGPBL players did (including the 14 percent who earned graduate degrees—five physicians and two dentists included).”¹³⁴ These women were able to demonstrate the links between sports and education and social mobility at a time when this was largely only afforded to men. Betsy Jochum, the previously mentioned AAGPBL player commented on her education during a 2012 interview: “My career as a professional baseball player helped me save money so that later I could attend college. I earned my college degree and became a physical education teacher in South Bend. Later, I received my master’s degree at Indiana University.”¹³⁵ Not only did the league see success past the war years, but the players themselves did too. They were able to take the opportunities afforded to them and make them an even greater experience.

The AAGPBL filled the void of major league baseball during World War II, however, it was the athletes’ skill and high level of play that appealed to fans and kept the league going long after the war’s end. More than 600 women would end up playing in the league.¹³⁶ The decline of the league came in 1954. With a boom in the post-war economy, there was an increase in incomes, giving people the ability to travel to major league games as well as watch games on their televisions.¹³⁷ Karen H. Weiller’s tally of responses as to why fans felt the league came to an end show the same trend: “responses to why fans believed the league ended included the popularity of television and men’s baseball returning following World War II (55%).”¹³⁸ A very unique set of circumstances, both historically and socially, led to the initial success of the AAGPBL. The roles and behaviors that were previously assigned to women were temporarily cast aside in the wake of World War II, allowing these women a great opportunity.¹³⁹ These women used this opportunity to provide society with a glimpse into the capabilities, determination, and strength of women.¹⁴⁰ “By challenging the norms of sexuality and femininity even to the extent that they did, AAGPBL players, like other women who were the first to toil in occupations usually designated male, offered women a new set of role models and feasibilities. Rather than abandon the game, they took to the field and competed.”¹⁴¹ These women took the opportunities they were given and ran with them. They fought all odds that were against them, including gender stereotypes. As one player commented, “We played long before it was acceptable.”¹⁴²

¹³² Weiller and Higgs, “The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954,” 294.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹³⁴ Pierman, “Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood,” 69.

¹³⁵ Sargent, *We Were the All-American Girls*, 52.

¹³⁶ Pierman, “Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood,” 68.

¹³⁷ Weiller and Higgs, “The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954,” 291.

¹³⁸ Weiller and Higgs, “Fandom in the 40’s,” 224.

¹³⁹ Weiller and Higgs, “The All American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1943- 1954,” 295.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 296

¹⁴¹ Pierman, “Baseball Conduct, and True Womanhood,” 70

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 69.