

A Review and Comparison of the Film and Series Versions of "A League of Their Own"

By

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Many readers are familiar with Rosie the Riveter and her symbolic importance during World War II. Rosie represented the women who entered the American workforce as replacements for the men who joined the armed services and whose absence created high demand for new sources of labor. Fewer may be familiar with the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (the AAGPBL), an organization originally assembled to serve Americans' desire to attend professional baseball games when so many male professional baseball players were drawn into military service during the war. The league was founded in 1943 by chewing-gum magnate, Philip Wrigley, and hung on until 1954, after it had become unprofitable. The league changed in organizational structure (from a centralized to a decentralized entity), its number of teams, and even its name over the years of its existence.

The AAGPBL, however, was the forerunner for all women's professional sports leagues in America (Fidler 2011).

If you do know about the AAGPBL, chances are that it is thanks to a 1992 film, "A League of Their Own," starring Geena Davis and Tom Hanks. The film's director, Penny Marshall was inspired by a AAGPBL documentary created by Kelly Candaele, whose mother and aunt played in the league, and his co-producer Kim Wilson (de Nicola, 2022). The documentary included archival footage of games, historical documents and interviews with surviving players.

Marshall's film tells the story of two sisters, "Dottie" Hinson (played by Davis) and Kit Keller (played by Lori Petty), as they enact a sibling rivalry while they also deal with issues of getting into and succeeding in the League. It also highlights (or lowlights) their struggle against the widespread prejudice that existed in the 1940s against women in professional sports—perhaps

best personified by the reluctance of team manager, Jimmy Dugan (played by Tom Hanks) to take them seriously. By the end of the film, the women's skill, love of the game and crowd appeal, win over Dugan and the reluctant league founder, Walter Harvey. In this respect, the film version of "A League of Their Own" is a liberal feminist comedy, amusingly demonstrating that women, while perhaps biologically different from men in certain ways, can do men's work (or play) and do it well. This is a view popularized as early as 1963 by Betty Friedan's **The Feminine Mystique**.

Thirty years later, in the summer of 2022, Amazon Prime introduced the series, also entitled "A League of Their Own." The co-creators, Abbi Jacobson (who is also an actor in the series) and Will Graham, played team sports when younger and were lifelong fans of the Penny Marshall movie. With Marshall's blessing, they turned the narrative into an eight-part series using extensive research and interviews with surviving players to tell new, more in-depth stories about the league and its times (Cogan 2022). Graham described how they used a big "research bible" that co-executive producer Liz Koe had put together which covered the history of Rockford Peaches and the AAGPBL (White 2022).

Among the differences between the film and series is that the series seems to be guided by a different kind of feminist view, one that takes seriously a perspective that was only just emerging in academic circles at the time the film was made. It is a view that while women generally experience unusual discrimination and even oppression, one needs to understand different women's oppression differently, depending on their desires, racial and ethnic and class backgrounds. This is a view espoused by bell hooks in her (1984) **Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center** Deborah King's (1988) article, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness."

In this essay we compare the presentation of the AAGPBL in the film and series versions of “A League of Their Own,” with special attention to women’s “multiple jeopardies.”

Race

In the film, racial diversity is noted in only one scene. A foul ball is hit while some Black observers watch the Peaches practice. DeLisa Chinn-Tyler, a Black competitive softball player who auditioned for the film was told she *could not* be part of the League cast but was hired to play one of the observers (McFarland 2022). After a foul ball is hit near the observers, Chinn-Tyler throws it back with such force that when Dottie, the team’s catcher, catches it, she acknowledges the thrower’s force and skill by shaking out her wrist. After the two women nod to each other, the film returns to its White focus. This scene indicates that while there were talented Black players, the League did *not* allow them to try out.

In contrast, there is much more diversity in the series. Abbi Jacobson, one of the show’s creators wanted the series “to tell a lot more of the stories that were overlooked in the movie. . . [and to open] up the lens a little bit to the full generation of women who wanted to play baseball” (Trainor 2022). The result is a series portraying a more inclusive world than the movie made room for with multiple Black characters.

With a focus on her life in sports and the wider world, Maxine Chapman (Chanté Adams) is the most significant Black character. She is an ambitious young pitcher determined to play professional baseball rather than working in her mother’s hair salon. Maxine is based on three real women: Toni Stone, Mamie Johnson, and Connie Morgan, a trio who played in the Negro Leagues in the 1950s after being turned away from the AAGLBL (Davis 2016). In the series, when Max shows up to try out, she is told “It’s an All-American League” and that “colored girls [won’t be] playing with our girls.” Other episodes show a range of Black characters, including her family, her friends, the men in their lives and all male baseball factory team. Max’s best friend Clance, her would-be suitor Gary, Esther, one of her lovers who is also a pitcher (and the only woman) on Red Wright’s team in the All-Stars Negro League, and members of her family including her mother, father and uncle among others represent a diverse community that both supports and critiques Max.

In addition, *The Defender*, the nation’s most influential black weekly at the time (Defender 2023)

plays a role in the narrative. In one episode, there is a story in the paper about Max making it in baseball which acknowledges the importance of *The Defender* to the Black community.

Ethnicity

While the film does not identify the ethnicity of any of the players, the series does. One of the show’s major characters is Lupe Garcia, a Mexican American pitcher. She allows the press to call her the “Spanish striker” despite wanting to be seen as a good ball player not just a good Latin ball player. The character Esti Gonzalez is Cuban and the youngest player on the team. Taken under their wings, other players teach her English. Garcia and Gonzales are nods to the considerable number of Latinas (particularly Cuban) who were attracted to (and participated in) the AAGLBL as a result of post season exhibition tours taken by the women’s teams from 1947 on (Fidler 2011: 111 ff.). Lastly, there is Jewish Shirley Cohen, whose ethnicity is presented in a stereotypical way and whose story line is played mostly for laughs.

Sexuality and Gender

One culture writer (Gates 2022) asserts that the film version of “A League” had a “queer subtext,” but it is a text so “sub” that one really has to dig to find it. Almost all the visible sexual tension is between women and men. There’s the clear attraction between Dottie Hinson and her husband, Bob, with whom she is reunited after he has been wounded and discharged from the Army. There’s the sexual tension that eventually emerges between Dottie and Jimmy Dugan, the alcoholic team manager whom she helps sober up by initially offering him a Coco Cola instead of letting him drink from his flask on a team bus ride.

There’s the attraction between second baseperson Marla Hooch and the guy she meets at a roadhouse outing, leading her to leave the team for marriage. There’s the scene in the locker room in which all the women wait anxiously as Jimmy opens a telegram that will inform one of them that her husband has been killed in the war. And then there’s the promiscuous “All the Way” May (played by Madonna) who doesn’t plan to keep her dress on long when she goes out to meet anonymous men. Yes, we occasionally see women sharing locker rooms and rooms in boarding houses in partial dress. But, if that counts as a subtext of, say, same-sex attraction, then any image of any team locker room anytime, anywhere does that as well.

But, if we grant that the wish of the women ballplayers to play ball is somewhat "queer," or subversive of heterosexual norms, then both the film and the series share that much of a queer subtext. But many of the characters in the series version challenge heterosexual norms in more profound ways. A large percentage of the show's main characters are lesbian, bi-sexual or bi-curious. From Greta and Carson's composition of a clarifying dear-Charlie letter to Carson's husband, whose announced return from the war has been Carson's main motivation for going to league tryouts, to the stunning scene in which Carson and Greta kiss for the first time, to a scene in which Maxine and Mrs. Turner, the minister's wife, get it on, to the scene in which Carson is surprised by variations of sexuality and dress being explored by teammates and to others at a gay bar and the scene in which Max is similarly surprised at a party at her (transgender) uncle's house, we are constantly reminded of the sexual tensions that exist between women on the team and off. The ongoing lesbian relationships between Carson and Greta, on the one hand, and the complicated relationships of Maxine with Mrs. Turner and pitcher Esther, on the other, are both instances of relatively long-term partnerships and completely central to the series' story. This, even while both Carson and Maxine have or entertain sexual relationships with men (Carson with her husband, Charlie; Maxine with Gary, with whom she has disappointing sex one evening).

There probably *was not* a credible role for a transgender character on the Rockford Peaches team, but the writers of the TV series find a way to introduce one anyway. Max is surprised in the 5th episode to discover that her aunt Bertie is living as a man and is married to her new coworker Gracie. Maxine experiences shame at Bertie's identity and isn't comfortable in the man's suit that Bertie makes for her. Still, despite Maxine's hesitancy about Bertie's gender identity, Bertie is able to maintain enough sympathy for Maxine to urge Maxine's mother to let Max live her own life. Later in the series, Maxine calls Bertie her uncle.

A Concluding Comment

A central tenet of liberal feminism is its belief that women should have access to a satisfying working life outside the home, just as men (presumably) have had (e.g., Friedan 1963). In this respect, both the film and the Amazon Prime series versions of "A League of Their Own" can be viewed as liberal feminist texts, emphasizing the rewards that accrue to women in

playing a sport for pay. In one way, in fact, the series version might even be a clearer model: only in it does a woman (Carson) take over the team's managerial role and retain it through the World Series, when the male manager deserts them.

The series version also focuses on other barriers to women's fulfillment as one of its main characters, Max, is barred from playing in the AAGLBL explicitly because "colored girls" aren't "our girls." Race is just one of the "jeopardies" explored in the series. Prejudices against gay and lesbian sexual preferences are highlighted by the raid of the gay bar in episode six, but the prejudices are constantly in the air as women, white and black, struggle in various ways with their attraction to other women. Social biases against women who identify as men also play a role in the series as well. The series, then, more than the film, seems to recognize that women do not all share a common experience: that race, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender identity, and any combination of these, can create special hardships for particular individuals.

One of the great achievements of both the film and the series is that both also highlight the satisfactions that can be had by figuring out how to deal with problems created by hardships. In this way they both provide role models for girls who want to be athletes. The series also provides girls with ways of thinking about personal identity. As an example, we'll give the final words of journalist Katie Heaney.

The queer and Black stories here aren't supplemental to the story; they are the story. . . This isn't a show with one queer character, or even one queer couple, standing in for a fuller community: The gang is truly all *here*. And because there are so many distinct embodiments of queerness represented, it feels thrillingly probable that young queer people will watch *A League of Their Own* and see someone who looks like them, or someone they want to be more like, or just someone they're drawn to for reasons they don't yet understand. Had this version of the story been around when I was a little gay kid who loved baseball, I think I would have figured myself out sooner; Jacobson, despite growing up in a Philadelphia suburb in what she describes as a "liberal, Jewish, Democratic family," feels similarly (Heaney 2022).

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