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Breaking Barriers

The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League and the battle for gender equality

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Abstract

In 1942, many American heroes went from the baseball field to the battlefield. As women were taking jobs in many different sectors (factories, farms, etc.), it was time to test whether women could also fill the shoes of the men on the diamond. Originally named the All-American Girls Softball League, it only took half a season to be renamed the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGPBL). The women played mostly baseball rules and were named to distinguish them from softball leagues at the time. The league ran from 1943 until 1954 throughout the Midwest, with up to ten teams in one season. At the time, there was great controversy over the legitimacy of their gameplay, and still, to this day, there are discussions over whether the women really played baseball.

After all this time, the question remains: Did the women of the AAGPBL truly play baseball and help set the foundation for women to be seen as equals in the athletic world? The expectations, both on and off the field, and successes in attendance and the sport itself are all considered in this paper in order to answer the question. This research came from the AAGPBL archives, news clippings, Major League Baseball archives, and contemporary articles on the league. Much of the work was analyzing language, images, and specific expectations laid out for the women. By comparing the experiences of male baseball players at the time to the experiences of these women, the gender roles and inconsistencies within the cultural context can be found, without displacing them into modern-day values and expectations.

Expectations

In the early years, the women used underhand pitching and 12-inch softballs. However, they used longer basepaths like those in baseball and allowed the stealing of bases. The league also had nine players versus softball's ten. Of the 300 that tried out, 60 women were rostered on four teams: the Racine Belles, the Kenosha Comets, the Rockford Peaches, and the South Bend Blue Sox (Bowen 2023). Some team names, such as the Belles or Peaches, insinuated a more delicately natured sport. It both appealed to audiences' images of women and set expectations for the differences in the game.

Even the AAGPBL admits that while the replication of baseball was the goal, "femininity was a high priority" (AAGPBL 2017). Players attended Helena Rubenstein's evening charm school classes after practices. In addition to being taught proper mannerisms, personal hygiene, etiquette, and an assigned dress code, players received beauty kits. The Charm school guide stated, "Your actions and appearance both on and off the field reflect on the whole profession. It is not only your duty to do your best to hold up the standard of this profession but to do your level best to keep others in line" (AAGPBL 2017). They were given instructions for daily beauty routines and their hair, mouths, eyes, hands, face, body, and teeth (AAGPBL 2017).

While the league may have been put in place to replace men's baseball, a woman's place in the entertainment industry was to please the male gaze. At the time, there were different pressures for women who were in the spotlight. The greats in sports were unique because of their focus and sole commitment to their game and position, but the women of the AAGPBL were not held to this same standard. They could not just be "ballplayers." They had to be feminine as well. Anne Madarasz, director of the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, told WESA,

“There was a sense of, ‘Yes, we want them on the field of play to be great athletes, but we also want them to be women first and athletes later’” (Blackley 2022). The traditional gender roles still had too large of an influence to treat them as equals to their male counterparts.

Their clothing was carefully selected. The AAGPBL guide stated, “The uniforms adopted by the league have been designed for style and appeal, and there is a tremendous advantage to the girl and the team which makes the best of its equipment” (AAGPBL 2017). They felt the crowd would respond better to the women on the field if they customarily presented themselves. To consider this an “advantage” to the women means that the goals of this league were different. If women were to play a man’s sport, they must still act like women. Just as Jackie Robinson could not be vocal while breaking the color barrier a few years later because it would deter fans, these women had to limit the change they brought to the sport. They were told to “Keep your uniform as clean and neat as possible” (AAGPBL 2017). How can it be expected to do so and still play your best in a sport played in the dirt? The uniforms were short skirts that appealed to men but were not functional. Stealing bases often resulted in large bruises or wounds.

The expectations included how to accept or decline invitations, how to greet fans, how to address the media, and even how to speak. Expectations were summed up with the statement, “Be neat and presentable in your appearance and dress, be clean and wholesome in appearance, be polite and considerate in your daily contacts, avoid noisy, rough and raucous talk and actions and be in all respects a truly All-American girl” (AAGPBL 2017). The “All-American Girl” was polite, loyal to her country, and feminine above all else.

Success

When the league first began in 1943, there were 176,612 fans for the four teams (AAGPBL 2017). This popularity led to an expansion of the league. The cities hosting the first four teams agreed to finance the teams fully, and Wrigley created two more teams, the Milwaukee Chicks and the Minneapolis Millerettes (AAGPBL 2017). The teams’ fan bases continued to grow, and in 1948, the league set an attendance record of 910,000 fans for ten teams (AAGPBL 2017). The AAGPBL created a minor

league in Chicago, the Chicago Girls Baseball League (CGBL). They also made Junior Leagues for young girls, inspiring another generation to carry the legacy these women built. On the 4th of July in 1946, a doubleheader attracted 10,000 fans alone (AAGPBL 2017).

Unfortunately, a few years later, the attendance dwindled, and eventually, the league closed its doors in 1954 with only five teams left.

The evolution of their pitching styles and rules of play also indicated athletic success. In 1946, the players began to use side-arm pitching and overhand pitching two years later. The pitching distance grew from 40 to 60 feet, and the length of the base paths from 65 to 85 feet. This is compared to 60 feet 6 inches and 90 feet, respectively, for the MLB. They also used, on average, a slightly lighter bat (AAGPBL 2017). Arguably, the most significant change was from the 12-inch ball to the nine-inch ball, the official baseball size, by the last season (AAGPBL 2017). Those few inches make a big difference in the gameplay and help with the baseball argument. The league batting champions’ averages typically ranged from .270 to .340 (AAGPBL 2017). By comparison, the MLB’s highest batting averages in those times were higher, all above .300 (ESPN). This difference can change the game’s pace; with fewer hits come fewer runs and lower scores.

They also did not get the same respect, even considering the distinction of “girls” instead of “women.” This type of sexism makes it hard for them to be taken seriously and be viewed through a heroic lens the way the male baseball players were. They were also at a disadvantage in media coverage. As shown below in a 1950 AAGPBL ad, they were advertised with pretty girls in skirts having “fun.” The ads depicted the women as novelty acts. Anne Madarasz told WESA, “It was really seen as substitute entertainment” (Blackley 2022). Just as women were substituting factory workers, the AAGPBL was to be temporary.

From the feminist outlook, one could argue that they did not play baseball because they were not given the same goals as men. The sport they played involved looking their best, being polite, charming the media, putting on their makeup, and abiding by the rules of the chaperone. From the media perspective, they quickly created a large fan base, but it lasted only a short time. Was this due to the increased attention in the MLB with the color barrier broken? Was this because there was no more risk of losing the MLB players to the war? Or was it simply because

female athletes playing baseball were more of an attraction than the actual skill of the players? It could be a mix of all. This era was still the time of the nuclear family. Maybe for a few years, they could have some fun in the league, but nowhere near the length of an MLB career.

With all of these factors considered, they did prove that there could be a future for women in Baseball. In some ways, the women played more than baseball since they were trained to have professional etiquette, media skills, and other qualities that emphasized their femininity on the field. Helen Smith, an AAGPBL player in the '50s, recounted, "When Mr. Philip Wrigley created the All-American Girls League in 1943, he wanted the girls to conduct themselves as ladies at all times, but to play like men" (AAGPBL 2017). If our society trained more women to play the sport rigorously from a young age, we could see an increase in their contribution to Baseball teams. The women of the AAGPBL did not play baseball, but not because of a lack of ability or talent. The women of the AAGPBL broke a barrier in baseball too early. The country was not prepared for women to wear baseball uniforms, to forget their traditional gender roles, or to be given the same opportunity for success in Major League Baseball.

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