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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on women's baseball prior to the establishment of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League by P. K. Wrigley in 1943. Around the turn of the century, women had fewer opportunities for participation in sports and long standing stereotypes permeated the thoughts and ideals of society with respect to women in sport. One limitation was the stereotype of the delicate, sickly, passive female; a second restraint was the common belief that women's primary goals were of marriage and motherhood; a third limiting factor was the belief that women should behave in a "genteel" manner. It was also commonly believed that participation in sport could result in women becoming infertile, coarse, unfeminine, and possibly immoral. The only place for women to be involved in sports was within the confines of women's colleges and clubs. The growth in popularity of baseball was fostered by the idea of participation, collegiality, and the overall ideal of "sport for sports sake." Competition, however, was viewed with alarm. Baseball clubs were formed to allow women not attending college to participate. Such clubs were often unfortunately exploited for their spectacle value. Women, however, tended not to view their involvement with baseball as a matter of women's rights but simply enjoyed the game. Many women interested in baseball felt the opposition towards their participation in baseball was too great, and concentrated their efforts in non-participant roles including those of spectators, journalists, scouts, and, eventually, owners. (Contains 36 references.) (LL)

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Women's Baseball in Colleges and Clubs Prior to 1940

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When reviewing the literature on women's baseball prior to the establishment of the A.A.G.P.B.L. (All-American Girls Professional Baseball League), founded by P.K. Wrigley in 1943¹, many themes come to the forefront. There were two distinct experiences for women in baseball, the first being the college experience², and the second being the club experience³. Whether women experienced baseball through a college setting or a club setting their experiences had similarities and distinct differences.

Before discussing the literature as it pertains to women's experiences in baseball it is important to have an

¹ Loise Browne, Girls of Summer (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 1992), 8.

² On the college baseball experience of women, see Debra Shattuck, "Bats, Balls, and Books: Baseball and Higher Education for Women at Three Eastern Women's Colleges, 1866-1891," Journal of Sport History 2 (Summer, 1992): 91-109. Allen Guttman, Women's Sports: A History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 112-115. Barbara Gregorich, Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), 1-5. Harold Seymour, Baseball: The People's Game (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 443-527. Debra Shattuck, "Playing a Man's Game: Women and Baseball in the United States, 1866-1954," in Baseball History 2: An Annual of Original Baseball Research, ed. Peter Levine (Westport, CT.: Meckler Books, 1989), 57-77. Philip Von Borries, "Requiem for a Gladiator," Baseball Research Journal 12 (1983): 147-161.

³ The use of the term club is in reference to the many small baseball teams that developed throughout the United States around the turn of the century. This gave women who did not or where no longer attending college an opportunity to participate in baseball. For specific examples, see (Guttman 1991, 103, 127, 146). (Gregorich 1993, 1-82). (Seymour 1990, 443-527). (Shattuck 1989, 57-77). (Von Borries 1983, 147-161).

understanding of the beliefs, thoughts, and ideals of society around the turn of the century.

There are long standing stereotypes that permeated the beliefs of society around the turn of the century in regards to women in sport, and as a result inhibited their involvement in sport. One limitation was the stereotype of the delicate, sickly, passive female, with their fashionable diseases worsened by harmful and even brutal treatments inflicted on them by male physicians⁴. A second restraint was the obsessive belief of society that women's primary goals were of marriage and motherhood. A third, literally, limiting factor was that women should behave in a "genteel" manner, placed on a pedestal where they would be loaded down with some thirty pounds of un-functional clothing.⁵

The writings of Catherine Beecher⁶ were still very influential in society around the late 1800's. Catherine Beecher, although for physical activity, physical activity

⁴ See Patricia Vertinsky, "Exercise, Physical Capability, and the Eternally Wounded Woman in Late Nineteenth Century North America," Journal of Sport History 14 (Summer 1987), 7-27.

⁵ (Seymour 1990, 443)

⁶ Catherine Beecher, A Course of Calisthenics for Young Ladies (1832). Beecher, Treatise on Domestic Economy (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon and Webb, 1841). Beecher, Letters to the People on Health and Happiness (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855). See also Linda J. Borish, "The Robust Woman and the Muscular Christian: Catherine Beecher, Thomas Higginson, and their Vision of American Society, Health and Physical Activities," International Journal of the History of Sport 4 (September 1987), 139-154.

was seen as an avenue for women to become healthier, harder working, mothers and wives.⁷ When considering women's role in society during the turn of the century Professor Gerda Lerner has stated, "By indoctrination, training, and practical experience women [had] learned to accept and internalize the beliefs which would keep them 'adjusted' to living in a subordinate status in a patriarchal world."⁸ Women of the day even suffered from a disease known as "neurasthenia", caused by a women's preoccupation with their inability to follow men's way of life. It is very obvious that women were less than equal when compared to men, and had fewer opportunities for sport.

It seemed that the only "safe" place for women to be involved in physical activity was within the protected⁹ confines of women's colleges and universities, but at times this even came under attack. E.H. Clarke, a retired Harvard professor of medicine at the time, in his book Sex in Education (1873)¹⁰, used "research" based on seven Vassar students to conclude that American methods of education

⁷ Catherine Beecher by no means supported the idea of women in sport for the pure enjoyment of the activity. Physical activity was a means to an end.

⁸ (Seymour 1990, 443).

⁹ Protected from the restraints of societies beliefs about women in sport.

¹⁰ Edward H. Clarke, Sex in Education or A Fair Chance for the Girls, 2d ed. (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873).

contributed to female weakness and that the regimen of college would make it worse.¹¹ Women's colleges met Clarke's "research" with great opposition stating that if young women were too weak to bear the rigors of college study, all the more reason to make them fit by providing gymnasiums, appointing instructors, and requiring calisthenics and gymnastics.¹²

By the 1890's calisthenics and gymnastics would become intricate parts of the education of women in colleges and universities, but not without opposition. The greatest concern over women's involvement in calisthenics and gymnastics or any "rigorous" physical education curriculum stemmed from health concerns. The stereotypes of women engaged in physical activity was still very prevalent in society regardless of specific examples of women commonly engaged in physical activity and not being harmed. Some common beliefs were, woman would become infertile, coarse, unfeminine, and quite possibly were in moral danger.¹³

Despite opposition women's colleges continued to require students to participate in some type of physical exercise. This point is well illustrated in a catalogue distributed to incoming students of Vassar College: "a

¹¹ (Seymour 1990, 445).

¹² (Seymour 1991, 445). (Shattuck 1992, 95-98).

¹³ Ibid.

suitable portion of each day is set aside for physical exercise and every young lady is required to observe it as one of her college duties".¹⁴

Students soon found a preference for extracurricular activities (sport) much to the opposition of physical educators and the administration. Just as physical educators had met opposition, based on misbelief, for requiring the regular physical activity of women, some physical educators would be in opposition to students partaking in sport for similar misbelief. This misbelief stems from the misconception that women were jeopardizing their health when involved in rigorous activity. The idea of rigorous activity being harmful to women's health is discussed at length in the literature. Without doubt it is the understanding of scholars that the idea of "health" was a major issue in women's involvement in physical activity and sport.¹⁵

Although basketball was the most popular sport in women's colleges baseball was a close second. Baseball was

¹⁴ Vassar Catalogue: quoted in Margery A. Bulger, "American Sportswomen in the 19th Century," Journal of Popular Culture 16 (1981): 11.

¹⁵ (Guttman 1991, 85-105). (Borish 1987, 139-154). (Vertinsky 1987, 7-27).

played in numerous women's¹⁶, and coed¹⁷ colleges and universities throughout the United States. Both indoor and outdoor versions were played¹⁸, and met with great opposition, just like any other sport for women during this period.

Scholars recognize the growth in popularity of sport among the students of women's colleges was most likely fostered by the ideas of greater participation, friendship among students, college unity, and an overall idea of "sport for sports sake". These ideas would be found in baseball from its beginnings in the 1860's to its end in 1954. Found in the archives of women's colleges are numerous accounts to give validity to the idea of "sport for sports sake". The "playful" attitude of the games, encouraging all to play, playing for the love of the activity, and playing regardless

¹⁶ Women's baseball was played at the following women's colleges and universities as early as the 1860's: Vassar College, Smith College, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, Mills College, Newcomb College, Simmons College, Radcliffe, Barnard, Miss Porter's School at Farmington, Trinity College, Nashville Femal Academy, Agnes Scott College, and Randolph-Macon Women's College. (Shattuck 1989, 57-63). (Shattuck 1992, 91-109). (Gregorich 1993, 1-5). (Seymour 1990, 443-467). (Guttmann 1991, 112-116).

¹⁷ Women's baseball was played at the following coed colleges and universities as early as the 1880's: University of Pennsylvania, University of Illinois, University of California at Berkeley, University of Iowa, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin, Oberlin College, University of Indiana, Ohio State University, Cornell, University of Missouri, and University of Cincinnati. (Seymour 1990, 468-474).

¹⁸ Gladys E. Palmer, Baseball for Girls and Women (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1929), 101-138.

of fierce opposition gave rise to the idea of "sport for sports sake". It is truly pleasurable to know that so many people can truly be involved in a sport for the pure pleasure they derive from participation. The following quote gives an excellent example of women just having fun playing baseball:

"one 'vicious batter' drove a ball 'into the belt line of an opponent' and, had it not been for 'the rigid steel corset clasp worn in those days, she would have been knocked out completely. When the game resumed, the second nine, all 'more intelligent since they all wore galsses, which was then a sure test of brain power,' tried again, 'only to have their glasses knocked off'. The result was 'hysterics,' and the game was over 'for the time being'." ¹⁹

How could anyone consider these players to be partaking in any type of "serious" competition.

Scholars have noted that the idea of competition is a theme prevalent in the literature regarding women's baseball in colleges and universities. Many college and university administrators, physical educators, alumni, and parents became increasingly alarmed by what they viewed as fierce competition in baseball. The fiercer the competition the more rigorous the activity, and again women will be faced with health concerns (misbelief). Not all believed competition was bad because of health concerns, many were opposed to competition because it discouraged participation

¹⁹ (Seymour 1990, 449).

by many. The literature acknowledges the National Amateur Athletic Federation, Women's Division (N.A.A.F.) as a forerunner against intercollegiate athletic competition. The N.A.A.F. believed that competition only produced experts instead of encouraging participation of students generally, and the N.A.A.F.'s motto was "A sport for every girl and every girl in a sport".²⁰

Another theme that is prevalent in the literature on women's baseball is femininity/sexuality. Although women were competing in a "men's" sport it was still very important to them to keep their femininity and sexuality. There are countless sports articles of the period that tell of the stories of women's baseball, and it is very apparent that all the articles gave significant attention to what the women ballplayers were wearing.²¹ When reading a men's baseball articles during this period such things as the score, number of hits, significant plays, etc. are illustrated in great detail by the newspaper journalist. Articles on women's baseball illustrate their uniforms

²⁰ "Athletics for the Girls and Women of America," Playground 17 (May 1923): 116. (Seymour 1990, 512-513). (Guttmann 1991, 138).

²¹ Frank J. Taylor, "Fast and Pretty," Colliers 38 (August 20, 1938): 22-23. "Ladies of the Little Diamond," Time 41 (June 14, 1943): 73-74. "Girl's Baseball: A Feminine Midwest League Opens Its Third Professional Season," Life (June 4, 1945): 63, 66. "Baseball: Babette Ruths," Newsweek (July 29, 1946): 68-69. Bill Fay, "Belles of the Ball Game," Colliers (August 13, 1949): 44.

(right down to the lace on their skirt), their abilities compared to men, and sometimes the score if space permits. Scholars acknowledge this aspect of reporting women's baseball events, but also note that many women valued their femininity a great deal. Most women ballplayers only submitted to wearing bloomers because they were more functional, but as soon as they were off the field it was back to the Victorian style of dress.

The public was also very critical in regards to women ballplayers sexuality. It was important to be attractive on the field and some what skilled, but playing to much like a man lead to criticism. Psychologist Richard Krafft-Ebing felt that athletics for women would destroy their femininity, lead them to male traits, and a woman having a preference for playing boys' games was the first symptom of perversion (i.e., lesbianism).²² Women not only had their sexuality questioned because of their great athletic skills, but many women ballplayers were considered to be traveling prostitutes.²³

²² (Guttman 1990, 475). Susan Cahn, "Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport, 1900-1960" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1990), 301-392.

²³ (Guttman 1991, 103-104). (Seymour 1990, 456).

Players such as Mildred "Babe" Didrickson²⁴ became the center of the controversy over whether women in sports lacked femininity. Because her appearance did not conform to the current ideal of feminine beauty, and because she excelled in sports not generally considered women's, some condemned her as a "muscle moll".²⁵

Around the turn of the century women's baseball was not unique to women's colleges. Many women's club teams formed throughout the United States, and allowed women who were not attending college or who were no longer attending college to participate in baseball.²⁶ Scholars recognize many of the same themes within the club experience of women's baseball as were found in women's college baseball. The themes of health, participation for all, the unity of the participants, "sport for sports sake", femininity, and competition were all found in the club experience of women involved in baseball outside of college.

²⁴ Babe Didrickson was considered the best all around athlete up to this time in history, and only Jim Thorpe rivaled her. (Seymour 1990, 503-504). (Guttman 1991, 144-148, 153, 170, 199). (Gregorich 1993, 73-78).

²⁵ (Gregorich 1993, 73-78). On femininity in women's baseball, see Kathleen Laughlin, "Glamour as Usual: Femininity and the Status of Women During World War II," Unpublished paper, University of Iowa Department of Physical Education and Sport Studies (1987): 1-28.

²⁶ (Seymour 1990, 475-511). (Shattuck 1989, 57-70). (Gregorich 1993, 1-82). (Guttman 1991, 103).

Competition was found in the club teams, but was interpreted somewhat differently than had been interpreted within the atmosphere of college. There were still health concerns of women participating in activities involving competition, but the club teams were not restricted or controlled in the same manner as the college teams. This allowed for a greater freedom and thus greater competition among women and club teams. Although the public viewed the "competition" of women's baseball to be laughable women enjoyed the competition as long as it did not detract from participation for all, and "sport for sports sake".²⁷

One theme that is unique to the club experience of women in baseball is exploitation. It is very apparent from the literature, and media accounts of the period that women were extremely exploited within baseball.²⁸ Women's baseball games became an oddity and a definite "must see" for spectators.²⁹ Promoters of women's baseball clubs set up elaborate schemes to promote the "unusual". Everyone wanted to see how small, fraile, weak women could play a "mans" game. Barnstorming was that best way for promoters to capitalize on the money making potential of their new

²⁷ (Seymour 1990, 512-527). (Shattuck 1989, 64-67). On women in competition, see (Cahn 1990, 233-275).

²⁸ (Seymour 1990, 501-502). (Shattuck 1989, 60-70). (Gregorich 1993, 37-41).

²⁹ (Shattuck 1989, 64).

found fortune. Baseball games resembled circus acts more the baseball. The following is an example of such circus acts within baseball and the exploitation of women for profit:

With Lizzie Arlington heralded as the 'most famous lady pitcher in the world,' as a special attraction, over 1000 persons wended their way to the ball grounds Tuesday afternoon, including 200 ladies. But she was apparently brought there to show the audience what she looks like and how she dresses, for she appeared only a few minutes in practice and twirled the last inning. Reading won from Allentown by 5 to 0 in an exceedingly pretty game, but the victory was due to Garvin's masterful pitching and his excellent support.

Miss Arlington with several other persons drove on the grounds in a stylish carriage drawn by two white horses. To the applause that greeted her she lifted her cap. The spectators beheld a plump young woman with attractive face and rosy cheeks. She wore a gray uniform with skirt coming to the kneew, black stockings and a jaunty cap. Her hair was not cropped short, but was done up in the latest fashion.³⁰

Although women were compensated for their galant "efforts" it was still degrading, and did nothing to promote women's baseball as a viable active endeavor. When the women who played in women's baseball are asked today why they continued to play under such conditions their responses tend to be similiar to that of Mayme Dwyer: "We tried hard and stuck with it largely because so many were against us."³¹

³⁰ (Von Borries 1983, 158).

³¹ (Seymour 1990, 494).

Many women felt the opposition towards participating in baseball was too great, and concentrated their efforts to be envolved in baseball into other areas. They found those areas of involvement on a non-participant level. Women played an intrical part in men's professinal baseball as spectators, journalists, scouts, and eventually owners. Women spectators were encouraged to attend men's professional baseball games by promotors because promotors soon found that women were a rich ticket sales resource.³²

Women's involvement in men's professional baseball as journalists, announcers, and scouts was conducted in a secretive mannor.³³ The public generally had no idea of women's involvement behind the scenes of men's professional baseball. The public saw women's involvement as unsatisfactory and would not be tolerated: "Women may vote, hold office, and go to war if they want to, but baseball is one thing they'd better keep their noses out of. No team ever did well with a female monkeying with it".³⁴

Helene Robison Britton became the owner of the St. Louis Cardinals with the passing of her father in 1905 and her uncle in 1911. She ran the club with sparse success for a few years, but eventually sold the club. Mrs. Harry

³² (Seymour 1990, 506, 477). (Von Borries 1983, 158-161).

³³ (Seymour 1990, 507-511). (Gregorich 1993, 52-59).

³⁴ (Seymour 1990, 485).

Hempstead inherited the New York Giants in 1912, but gave up the leadership of the club to her husband. Many women would inherit teams, but none would ever run the teams during this period in baseball history.³⁵

In summary it should be noted that the women involved in baseball during this period did not view this as a women's rights movement. Many people today feel women's baseball evolved around the ideas of women's rights and equality. The literature clearly indicates this was not the case. Players such as Alta Weiss had ample opportunity in the press to speak out on behalf of women's rights but never did. They were truly involved in baseball just for the chance to participate.³⁶

³⁵ Florence Killilea 1929 American Association Milwaukee Club, Mrs. Florence Wolfe Dreyfuss 1932 Pittsburgh Pirates, Mrs. William Wrigley, Jr. 1932 was elected to membership of the Chicago Cubs' executive board, and Mrs. J. Louis Comiskey 1932 Chicago White Sox's. (Symour 1990, 509-510).

³⁶ (Shattuck 1989, 66-68). (Gregorich 1993, 22-26).