

by JAY FELDMAN

ALL BUT FORGOTTEN NOW, A WOMEN'S BASEBALL LEAGUE ONCE FLOURISHED

In the fall of 1942, faced with the possible cancellation of major league baseball for the duration of World War II, Chicago Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley came up with a way of keeping the ball parks open: He would establish a women's professional league.

Acting swiftly, Wrigley enlisted Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey and Cubs attorney Paul V. Harper as fellow trustees. Arthur Meyerhoff, the Wrigley Company's principal advertising agent, was also among the first people who Wrigley brought in to help organize the league. "Mr. Wrigley was the kind of a guy who always tried to get ready for some contingency in his businesses," recalls Meyerhoff, now 90. "It appeared as though the ball parks would be empty for a while because of the manpower situation. His primary interest was not necessarily in innovating a new sport, but in providing wartime entertainment and home-front morale. He did it to continue some form of baseball during the war."

Jim Hamilton, the Cubs' chief scout, was dispatched to organize tryout camps throughout the U.S. and Canada in order to recruit players, and in May 1943, after an abbreviated spring training at Wrigley Field, the All-American Girls Softball League, as it was originally called, began play with four teams—the Rockford (Ill.) Peaches, South Bend (Ind.) Blue Sox, Kenosha (Wis.) Comets and Racine (Wis.) Belles. "It was put into those cities to road test it, to nurture it," explains Meyerhoff, "while Mr. Wrigley was getting it ready

for the big ball parks, hoping to eventually have teams in the major league system."

The game they played that first season was essentially a modified version of softball as played at the time: The ball was 12 inches in circumference, softball-sized, but the diamond was expanded (65-foot base paths, 40-foot pitching distance), there were only three outfielders, and base runners were allowed to take a lead before the pitch was delivered. From

paths and a 60-foot pitching distance.

Players were expected to embody "the highest ideals of womanhood" and were required to "dress, act and carry themselves as befits the feminine sex." There were strict rules for off-the-field dress and conduct, and during the early years players were closely supervised by chaperones, all of whom wore stewardess-style uniforms. The ballplayers' uniforms—designed by Mrs. Wrigley, Wrigley Company poster artist Otis Sheperd and Ann Harnett, the first woman signed as a player—were one-piece dresses featuring a short, flared skirt. And instructors from the Helena Rubenstein beauty salon were brought in to train the players in deportment and grooming.

From the perspective of the mid-'80s, this emphasis on femininity and glamour seems preposterously outdated, but given the social climate of the times and the public-relations image Wrigley sought to project, it was a stroke of marketing brilliance: Without it, the league probably would have never gotten off the ground.

Wrigley was determined to create a very different image from the "masculine" one conveyed by contemporary women's softball. The league administrators believed—and rightly so, it appears—that the stringent dress and behavior codes, together with the chaperones' strict supervision, would lend a certain moral respectability to the players' reputations and thus help ensure the public's acceptance of the league. This was pro-

fessional ball, after all, with a four-month season, and for parents who might otherwise be reluctant to allow a teenage daughter to be away from home for that length of time, such standards were reassuring.

"I'd have to say that a lot of the women's softball teams did dress and look mannish," says Pepper Paire, who played

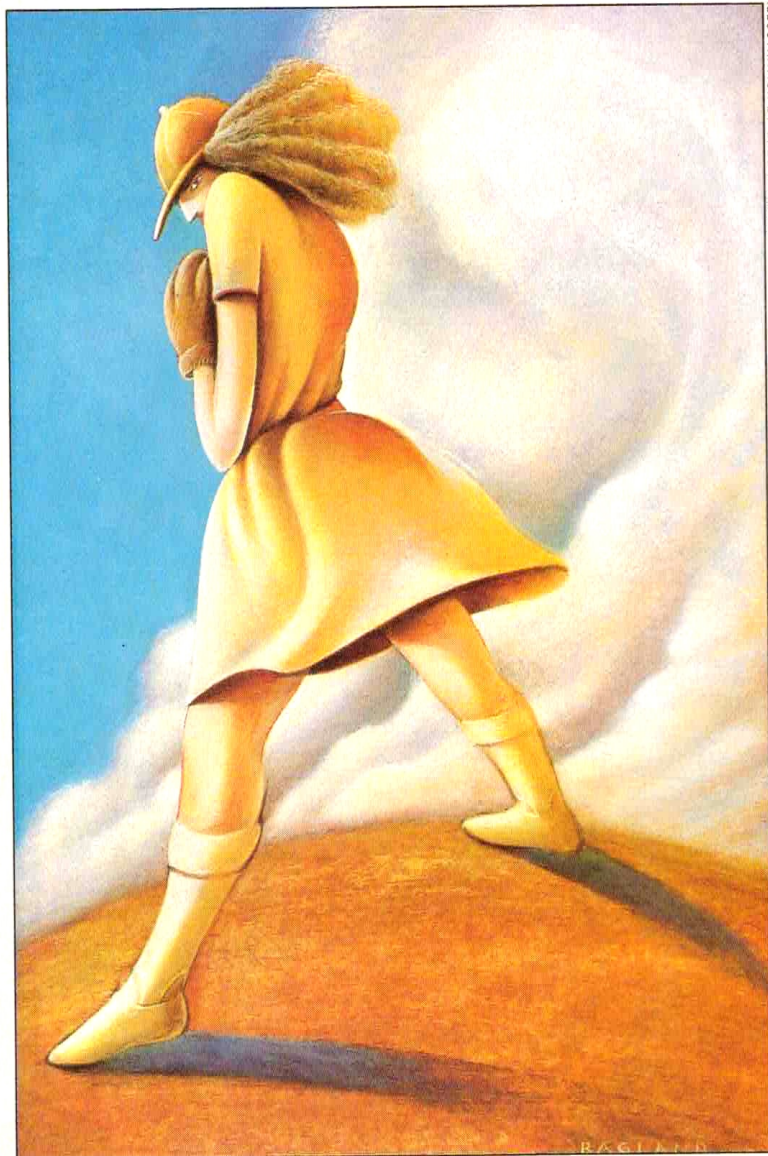


ILLUSTRATION BY GREG RAGLAND

here, though, the game evolved steadily and rapidly, becoming more like baseball: Full sidearm pitching appeared in 1947, and by '48 overhand pitching was in effect. In 1954, when the All-American Girls Baseball League (that name was adopted in 1945) folded, the sport was being played with a near-regulation hardball on a diamond with 85-foot base

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in the league from 1944 to '53, missing only the first and last seasons. "Some girls didn't make the league, not because they weren't good ballplayers, but because they looked too masculine. Mr. Wrigley didn't want any part of that image. So we went to charm school—and I'm here to tell you that some of the girls arrived with their shoes over their shoulders. We had to wear high heels, all dressed up, and carry a book on top of our heads and say, 'Bounce the ball.' This was in the evenings at spring training, after 10 grueling hours on the ball field.

"But you have to understand that we'd rather play ball than eat, and where else could we go and get paid \$100 a week to play ball? So, if some of the girls liked to wear their hair a little bit short, or liked to run around in jeans, they bent with the rules. You wore your hair below your shoulders; you wore skirts and dresses in public. You never wore shorts or slacks in public, and you never smoked or drank in public. We could only date with a chaperone's permission, and we had to be in bed two hours after the ball game. Of course, there were a few little ways of getting around the rules, as long as you were discreet and didn't flaunt it. I've gone down and up many a fire escape, with the coaches sitting right there in the lobby."

Shirley Jameson, the second player signed, agrees that the concept of femininity was crucial to the overall success of the AAGBL but also remembers occasions when it got out of hand. "As far as charm school went, it was fine for what it was, but the women didn't seem to be tuned in to what we had to do," she says. "Some of it was apropos, but a lot of it you just couldn't use playing baseball. We had one chaperone who really went overboard, and when someone was running up to bat, she would say, 'You don't have any lipstick on!' Well, you know, that's the last thing in the world someone in a ball game is thinking about. She said it to me once when I was coming up to the plate in a game-winning situation! I don't know whether I had lipstick on or not, but at that point, I could have cared less. I was playing the game."

And this raises the issue of the second principle on which the AAGBL was founded, and without which the first concept would have been meaningless: The women played baseball like men, not like girls. "We had to get out there," says Paire, "and prove—wearing dresses and

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with a name like the Fort Wayne Daisies—that we could play baseball. It wasn't easy, but we did it. People may have come out the first time just for laughs and to see the legs, but they kept coming back—and that was because we played good baseball.

"I remember 'Ziggy' Ziegler—she was a truly great ballplayer. She was like the Pete Rose of our league. She could beat you with the stick or the mouth or the brains or the hustle. She'd beat you any way that she could. She played second base and was also a darn good winning pitcher—many of us had to play more than one position like that. When Ziggy made the double play, you'd better get out of the way fast, or you'd get the ball right between the eyes. You'd better hit the dirt."

To help the women—most of whom had previously played only softball—learn to play baseball "like men," former major and minor league ballplayers were recruited as managers. Jimmie Foxx, Dave Bancroft, Josh Billings, Marty McManus, Leo Murphy, Bill Wambsganss, Max Carey (who also served as league president from 1945 to '49) and Johnny Rawlings were some of the ex-big-leaguers who managed in the AAGBL.

Baseball it was, even though the league never used balls that were of regulation size or construction. "Our ball was a modified version that had a plastic center," says Paire. "If you looked at it, felt it, threw it, you thought it was a hardball, but it didn't have the customary cork center, so it didn't carry. When Jimmie Foxx managed Fort Wayne in 1952, he occasionally used to pick up a bat and hit a few. All he had to do was hit one of our balls once. It would whistle, and when it got out to the outfield, we saw it was flat. What a powerful man! He just crushed the ball."

While attempting to "look like women and play like men," the players often found their uniforms to be something of a hindrance. "I had ambivalent feelings about the uniforms," recalls Jameson. "They were attractive and appealing, and many of the girls looked great in them. They were very feminine, and you could do the job—most of the time. But because I did attempt to steal bases, I did a lot of sliding, and the uniform didn't offer that much protection. I spent most of the season with strawberries on both legs. And, believe me, you never thought

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twice about sliding—you were being paid to play."

"We had satin boxer-type shorts underneath those skirts," adds Paire, "and they were equipped with pads for sliding, which weren't at all functional. They were very loose, and when you hit the dirt, they would just ride up. And they looked terrible. They hung down about eight or 10 inches below and, I mean, it looked like something foreign, like some kind of an afterthought hanging out down there on the side of your leg. That may sound vain, but if they'd done any good, that would have been one thing. But since they looked terrible *and* didn't protect you, very few ballplayers wore them."

Then there were the schedules. Playing between 110 and 126 games a season (depending on the year) meant eight games a week—six nights and a double-header on Sundays—with only four or five days off in the whole season. "The one real hardship was that we traveled by bus," says Paire. "Many's the Saturday night that we'd play our ball game, get something to eat, board the bus at 12 midnight, ride all night, get in just in time to go to the hotel, put on our uniforms—some ball parks didn't have dressing rooms—and go out on the field for a double header."

Since they "played like men," it was inevitable that AAGBL teams would play occasional exhibition games against men's teams. "We used to play semipro teams in Fort Wayne," Paire recalls. "We exchanged batteries; they wouldn't allow their pitchers to pitch to us—we weren't afraid, but they were. I don't ever remember losing, and that's the truth, but we had a lot of problems. One guy I was going with, we broke up because of a game we played against his team—because we'd won. Oh, he was mad! They resented us very deeply, I'll tell you that. We played the world champion Zollner Pistons' softball team, and defeated them, too. They hated our guts, because they were charging 50 cents and many times giving away their tickets, and we charged 75 cents and consistently outdrew them. And we played for keeps. One time Ziggy managed to drill one of the men right between the eyes on a double play throw. He took her out of the play pretty good, but I'll tell you what, none of the rest of them did. After that, they came into second base *low*."

In addition to Ziegler, the AAGBL

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produced quite a few other outstanding talents: Sophie Kurys, whose single-season and lifetime stolen-base marks (201 and 1,097) are remarkable; two-time ('47 and '49) Player of the Year Doris Sams; Betty Weaver Foss, who won two straight batting titles (.346 in her rookie season of 1950, .368 in '51); her sister, Joanne Weaver, who followed with three consecutive batting crowns of her own (.346 in '52, .346 again in '53 and .430 in '54); Dorothy Kamenshek, regarded by many as the AAGBL's best all-around player (six straight All-Star awards), was recruited by a Florida minor league team after former N.Y. Yankee first baseman Wally Pipp described her as the "fanciest-fielding first baseman I've ever seen, man or woman;" Connie (Iron-Woman) Wisniewski, the premier pitcher of the underhand era (she had an 88-30 won-lost record from 1944 to '46), who, like Smokey Joe Wood, went on to become an outfielder after the league adopted overhand pitching; Jean Faut, who similarly dominated the overhand era (lifetime 132-61 W-L record and 1.24 ERA for six of her seven seasons, with two perfect games) and was a two-time Player of the Year ('51 and '53).

After the 1944 season, Wrigley sold the league to Meyerhoff. As it became clear that major league baseball would continue and the war was beginning to wind down, Wrigley's interest in the girls' baseball venture waned. But under Meyerhoff's guidance, the AAGBL flourished. In 1948, when the league expanded to 10 teams, attendance topped one million as Meyerhoff continued the vigorous publicity campaign and promotional activities that were begun by Wrigley: media blitzes, exhibition games, spring training in Havana and Latin American barnstorming tours. "I bought the league primarily to take it off Mr. Wrigley's hands and see what I could do to continue it, rather than just abandon it," Meyerhoff says. "If I hadn't been involved very deeply in the advertising agency, I believe I could have built it into a national spectacle, a continuous game. But it got to be too much for me, and I sold it back to businessmen in the various cities in 1950."

And so began the decline of the AAGBL. "If it had been picked up by a smart sports promoter, it might have grown," adds Meyerhoff, "but it got into the hands of local businessmen who didn't have Philip Wrigley's promotional

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know-how. They were primarily in it for civic purposes—they had fun managing local girls baseball teams, rather than looking at it from a promotional standpoint and building it."

Other factors contributing to the league's demise were an inadequate talent pool because of the lack of a farm system, an increasingly mobile American society that was no longer dependent solely on local entertainment and the rise of TV (although a few AAGBL games were televised, and Meyerhoff claims the league was a natural for television). In August 1954 the league's last games were played.

Thirty-one years later, Pepper Paire reflects on the experience of playing in the AAGBL: "You've got to remember that this was a time when it was not a popular idea for a woman to be playing baseball. We didn't realize what pioneers we were, but we were really out there as forerunners, as far as women's sports are concerned. We constantly bucked public opinion. You know, they looked at you kind of funny and thought maybe you should be in the kitchen, or you should be at home sewing curtains, but you certainly shouldn't be out there running the bases.

"Actually, I stopped talking about our league for a long time, because whenever people would be talking about baseball, someone would ask me how I knew so much about the game, and I'd say, 'Well, I played girls' professional baseball years ago.' And they'd say, 'You mean softball?' I'd say, 'No, I mean baseball.' And they'd do a double take and say, 'You mean softball.' And I'd say again, 'No, I mean baseball.' And after I'd say it about the fourth or fifth time, they'd say, 'You mean . . . *baseball*? Like *men's* baseball? Like with a hardball?' And from the look in their eyes, I could see that they still didn't believe me. You can look 'em right in the eye and say 'baseball,' and they'll look you right back and say 'softball.' Well, you get tired of doing that, and I can't carry my scrapbooks around on my back.

"But, you see, this really happened, and now, since we've started talking about it again, people are becoming aware that it happened. And one of the things we, as a league, really want badly right now, is to be inducted into the Hall of Fame. We feel we have a right to be there."

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