

The patriotic pinch hitter: the AAGBL and how the American woman earned a permanent spot on the roster.

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The Patriotic Pinch Hitter

The AAGBL and How the American Woman Earned a Permanent Spot on the Roster

Patricia Vignola

During World War II, that lovely, patriotic pinch hitter "Rosie the Riveter" stepped up to bat, entering the workforce so her boyfriend, "Charlie," could take it for the team by going to war. Once she saw her MVP rounding third, Rosie happily slid into her warm, safe home, gratified by a job well done. However, contrary to popular belief, Rosie was no mere pinch hitter. Throughout the 1940s the American woman was capable of being more than a temporary hire. She was a professional musician, a war correspondent, and a member of the United States Congress as well as a professional baseball player. The All-American Girls' Baseball League (AAGBL) began as wartime entertainment; however, it would last nine years after World War II with its effects still reverberating today.

The image of Rosie the Riveter must be recognized for what it was—propaganda to fill labor shortages during the war. Rosie the Riveter did not reflect the experiences of every American woman. For example, African American and working-class women never had the luxury of being temporary hires. The female wartime labor boom empowered the American woman by expanding public acceptance of her presence in traditionally male dominated occupations, such as professional baseball. However, the idea of the "pinch hitter" enabled scholars to "normalize" the idea that women's wartime accomplishments were temporary.¹ Some scholars of earlier feminist literature have gone as far as to say that women received little, if any, long-term benefits from their accomplishments in wartime America. For feminist scholar Elaine Tyler May, "postwar Americans believed wholeheartedly that men should rule the roost."² Regardless of cultural norms many wartime and postwar women worked and played outside of their traditional gender roles, achieving success in professional fields of occupation.

By autumn 1942 many minor baseball leagues had closed down due to the **[End Page 102]** lack of wartime manpower. By 1943 only eleven leagues were operating, a thirty-one-team drop-off from two seasons earlier. It appeared that by 1944, Major League baseball might have to close its own ballpark gates.³ Diamond stars, such as Joe DiMaggio, were putting on military uniforms. Even if the government did not shut down professional baseball, team owners became concerned that the player quality would suffer and fans would lose interest.⁴

In late 1942 Philip K. Wrigley, owner of the Chicago Cubs, tapped Ken Sells, the assistant to the general manager of the club, to head up a task force to brainstorm on the issue. After exploring several options the committee recommended a professional softball league with female players. Softball was as popular as baseball at the time.⁵ However, it cannot be ignored that softball was a game dominated by women and that women were one of the few sectors of the American population, aside from children, the disabled, and the elderly, who were guaranteed exemption from the draft. Sells's commission led to the founding of the AAGBL in 1943; however, the league began its auspicious history as the All-American Girls' Softball League (AAGSL).⁶ And a girls' league it would be, as all of the players ranged in age from their teens to their twenties.⁷ However, a few were married and held professional careers as well as being mothers. It should be noted that these players took no offense at the moniker "girl." Today, in a post-NOW (National Organization for Women) era, these women still refer to themselves and their former teammates as "the girls."

A professional organized athletic league had never been successfully attempted with women to this point, so Wrigley called on the support and expertise of fellow Major League Baseball executives. Ken Sells was named president of the league.⁸ Wrigley also called on Cubs attorney Paul V. Harper...

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