

# The All-American Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL): A Review of Literature and Its Reflection of Gender Issues

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## Abstract

*The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) was the first, and to date, the only women's professional baseball league in United States history. Yet many people are unaware of the league's existence. The purposes of this paper are to (1) review the historical and research literature on the AAGPBL, (2) examine the reflections on gender issues within this literature, and (3) discuss how these issues contributed to the success and failure of the AAGPBL. The published historical documentation and archived artifacts of the AAGPBL are quite thorough; however, research on the league is limited. Gender issues, such as the female apologetic, marginalization, and feminist reconstruction of sport are evident throughout the league's existence. These issues enhanced the league's success, but also contributed to its demise. The pioneering efforts of the women of the AAGPBL created a new vision of opportunity for girls and women in sport that still resonates today.*

The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) was the first, and to date, the only women's professional baseball league in United States history. The women who played in the league were pioneers in women's sport participation, yet many people have never heard that a women's professional baseball league existed. The purposes of this paper are to (1) review the historical and research literature on the AAGPBL, (2) examine the reflections on gender issues within this literature, and (3) discuss how these issues contributed to the success and failure of the league.

## Brief Overview of the AAGPBL

The AAGPBL emerged in 1943 as the brainchild of Philip K. Wrigley in response to the threat of the Major League Baseball season being cancelled due to players being sent to fight in WWII. Although it started as a wartime replacement for major league

baseball, what many don't know is that the AAGPBL continued after the conclusion of the war until 1954, when the league folded due to economic difficulties. At the league's peak in 1948, there were 10 teams playing in the mid-sized Midwest cities of Rockford, Peoria, Chicago, and Springfield, IL; Racine and Kenosha, WI; South Bend and Fort Wayne, IN; and Grand Rapids and Muskegon, MI. The AAGPBL drew nearly one million fans during its 12-year run (Berlage, 1994), and gave over 500 women the opportunity to play professional baseball (Pratt, 2001).

## Historical Documentation of the AAGPBL

When the league folded in 1954, the players went their separate ways and the story of the league underwent a self-imposed silence for many years. Hensley (1995) suggested several reasons for the silence. Some players left the league and changed their life's direction and goals and therefore did not talk about their experience. Others returned to a support network that had little understanding for or familiarity with the league, so discussion did not occur. Yet others were influenced by the cultural expectations and traditional gender stereotypes that women should not boast about their athletic achievements. For whatever reason, the story of the AAGPBL briefly vanished.

The feminist movement of the 1970s increased interest in women's roles in sport and history, and with it interest in the AAGPBL. Fidler's (1976) master's thesis on the rise and decline of the AAGPBL was one of the first comprehensive historical accounts of the league. Roepke (1986) also produced an early work documenting the league's history that was shorter and less comprehensive, but no less accurate, than Fidler's thesis. Fidler (2006) expanded her thesis into book that currently provides the most thorough and accurate historical documentation of the league.

In the 1990s, several nonfiction books on the league were published. Browne (1992) and Johnson (1994) published books that provide a historical overview of the league mixed with numerous player stories and anecdotes. Gregorich (1993), Berlage (1994), and Ardell (2005) also included detailed historical accounts of the league within their books that address women's overall

participation in baseball. Browne (1996) contributed a chapter on the AAGPBL in a book focusing on Canadian baseball. Finally, Madden's (1997, 2000) two books provide a biographical compilation of playing histories on all the women in the league, as well as comprehensive statistics and records of the AAGPBL.

While these books were intended for adult audiences, several historical accounts of the league were written for younger audiences. Macy's (1993) more simplified history of the league is often marketed to school children, as is a similar book by Scott (2001). Several fictional children's books about the league have also been published reflecting very different perspectives. Adler (2003) presented a very patriarchal view of the league that conforms to the gender stereotypes of the time, while books by Rappaport and Callan (2000) and Corey (2003) celebrate the non-traditional roles assumed by women in the AAGPBL.

In addition to the written historical documentation of the league, three documentary films have been made on the AAGPBL. Wilson and Candaele (1987) and Taylor (1987) produced historical accounts of the league interspersed with player interviews conducted at the 1986 AAGPBL reunion. Taylor (1989) also produced a 20-minute documentary of the 1988 opening and dedication of the AAGPBL Hall of Fame exhibit at Cooperstown.

Perhaps the most well-known film record of the AAGPBL is the Hollywood film, *A League of Their Own* (Abbott, Greenhut, & Marshall, 1992). Although a fictional account of the league, the value of the film is in its broad entertainment appeal, thus exposing thousands of people to the existence of the league (Berlage, 1992). Fidler (2006) described how the film has become a cultural phenomenon evidenced by the ongoing use of the slogan "there's no crying in baseball". The movie probably did more for increasing public awareness of the AAGPBL than all other historical accounts combined.

Through the ongoing efforts of the AAGPBL Players Association, the history of the league is further preserved for public view through the permanent exhibit at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. Pictures, artifacts, equipment, and player statistics are on display, and the Hall of Fame archive maintains personal files on all players known to have participated in the league

(Fidler, 2006). Additionally, the formal AAGPBL archive located at the Northern Indiana Center for History in South Bend, IN, also has a permanent display of league artifacts and preserves all official records, documents, and equipment sent there by league members. Many recorded player interviews are stored there as well.

In addition to this broad history, biographies of former players, such as Pat Brown (Brown, 2003) and Dottie Wiltse Collins (Trombe, 2005), and many periodical articles, have more recently recorded individual accomplishments and reflections of some of the more prominent participants in the AAGPBL. Holway (2002) highlights Dorothy Kamenshek Roark, who was often described as the best fielding first baseperson in baseball. Bonar (1991) wrote about the base-stealing expertise of Sophie Kurys, who stole more bases in a single season (201) than any other baseball player in history. Sargent (2002) summarizes the contributions of June Peppas to the Kalamazoo Lassies championship run in 1954, and Dancer and Holway (2001) describe the playing experience and comical exploits of Faye Dancer, known as the biggest practical joker in the AAGPBL.

Fulton's (1999) article about Dorothy Kovalchick Roark highlights that the AAGPBL wasn't the answer for all elite female baseball players. Roark barnstormed with an all-male baseball team before signing with the Fort Wayne Daisies in 1945. However, she left the team before the end of the season when she realized that in the AAGPBL she was just another female baseball player versus being a celebrity when playing on an all-male team.

Although the history of the AAGPBL is well documented, distortion of the experiences of these women still persists today. Feminism in society seeks to correct the invisibility and distortion of the female experience (Henderson, 1996); however, the AAGPBL has not yet completely benefited from these feminist efforts. For example, when Wrigley Field was lit for a 1988 major league baseball game, it was touted as the first time a game was ever played under the lights at Wrigley. However, according to Berlage (1994), the AAGPBL played a doubleheader under the lights on Wrigley Field on July 1, 1943, and in 1944 the lights came on again for a Red Cross benefit game played by the AAGPBL. When the Cubs front office was informed of the mistake, their initial response was that the AAGPBL games

couldn't be confirmed or denied. Thus, it appears that while the history of the AAGPBL is well documented and preserved, ongoing work to preserve the integrity of the experience is still needed.

## Research on the AAGPBL

While there is a great deal of published history on the AAGPBL, very few research studies have been conducted. Weiller and Higgs (1992, 1994) twice surveyed former AAGPBL players on their impressions of the social, cultural, and economic factors that affected their experience in the league, as well as on their impact on women's sports today. Their studies were plagued by poor response rates making inferences beyond the sample data inappropriate; however, the researchers found that the most frequent reason cited for playing in the AAGPBL was the love of the game (54% in 1992, 36% in 1994). Players also cited their dream of playing pro baseball (28%) and the opportunities to meet people and travel (27%) as further incentives to participate. In both studies, the primary reason given for leaving the league was injury. Other common causes for termination included being cut, getting married, going to college, or returning to husbands who were back from war. When asked how they were treated by society, the majority of the respondents felt they were respected, but in both studies 20% felt they had faced discrimination because of their role as an athlete. Interestingly, in both studies 70% of the respondents stated that there were strict limitations placed on the players, but they felt these were consistent with societal expectations and were necessary to preserve a good public image.

Weiller and Higgs (1997) also conducted survey research investigating the profile of committed AAGPBL fans and fans' impressions of the AAGPBL's success. Their study found a high degree of variability in the attendance patterns of fans, ranging from zero games to more than 50 over a period of 3 to 12 seasons. Most of the fans attended games when they were between 10-25 years of age. Male fans cited parents (24%) as the greatest socializing factor in becoming a fan and attended games most frequently with family members (49%), while female fans cited friends or other players (34%) as the primary socializing factor, and most often attended games with friends (55%).

Fans most often attributed the league's success to the high quality of play (57%) followed by the unique entertainment it provided (28%). Respondents felt the league's demise resulted from the popularity of television (55%) and the fact that the novelty of women's baseball had worn off (23%). Weiller and Higgs (1997) concluded that the AAGPBL existed at a unique time in history that directly contributed to its success and fan appeal.

In a unique line of research, Wilson and Skipper (1990) also surveyed former AAGPBL players to investigate the presence of nicknames in the league. Their purpose was to investigate both the prevalence and types of nicknames used, and thereby gain a better understanding of how women used nicknames within this aspect of society. Respondents indicated that 35.6% of the players had nicknames during their pro career, which was similar to the prevalence of nicknames among male professional baseball players at that time. The majority of the nicknames in the AAGPBL (78.5%) did not relate to playing skills; however, 11.6% did. The authors concluded that contrary to previous research on nickname patterns in society at that time, male and female professional baseball players had a similar prevalence of nicknames. They further concluded that while most AAGPBL respondents did not receive their nicknames because of their baseball skills, their nicknames did originate because of their association with the league. The authors suggest that nicknames are given by those in power, and the study results may suggest that members of the AAGPBL felt empowered by their participation in the league.

Henderson (1996) stated that a goal of feminism is to change the powerlessness of women worldwide and suggested that women can feel empowered as a result of sport and leisure activities. She further suggested that women can gain a sense of freedom of choice, autonomy, self-control, and self-definition through sport participation. Wilson and Skipper's (1990) findings on the prevalence of nicknaming in the AAGPBL demonstrate that players discovered these qualities through league participation.

Hensley's (1995) doctoral dissertation investigated AAGPBL players' perceptions regarding how the league impacted their later life and provided further evidence of this empowerment. She interviewed eight former players with the purpose of determining what direction their life took after participation in the AAGPBL, the impact

league participation had on that direction, and how players felt and perceived themselves. The major theme that emerged was that league participation expanded players' vision of life possibilities and revealed options they hadn't previously considered. This theme was reflected in some players' pursuit of further education after playing; establishment of an uninterrupted, fulfilling career; choice to remain single; participation in community activities, and return to being a public figure after the release of *A League of Their Own* (Abbott et al., 1992).

These results were supported by Pierman (2005), who reported that 35% of the AAGPBL participants went on to earn a college degree, compared to 8.2% of women in that era and 15.8% of adult females in 1990. Furthermore, 14% of the AAGPBL participants went on to earn a graduate degree, with five becoming physicians and two becoming dentists. Hensley (1995) reported that the AAGPBL participants interviewed had more self-confidence, comfort with the dual image of an athletic female, a connection to and involvement with others, and an increased awareness of economic empowerment through their league participation, which may account for the pursuit of a higher education and a career.

These findings support Kane's (1995) contention that sport can be a site of resistance and transformation from male domination to a place where women can feel strong and powerful, and as Roth and Basow (2004) suggest, this strength and power can translate into other non-physical aspects of life. The women of the AAGPBL enjoyed more than playing a game they loved. They gained a sense of control, autonomy, and power from their participation, as evidenced by the high prevalence of educational and career success experienced by players after leaving the league (Hensley, 1995; Pierman, 2003).

## Reflections on Gender Issues in the AAGPBL

While formal research on the AAGPBL is limited to the above studies, examination of the historical literature provides rich connections to gender, race, and class issues—such as the female apologetic, marginalization, and feminist reconstruction of sport—and insight into how these issues contributed to the success and demise of the league.



## Administrative Structure of the AAGPBL

To understand the gender issues associated with the league, it is important to first understand the administrative structure of the AAGPBL. Fidler (2006) categorized the league's administrative structure into three phases: the trustee administration, the management corporation, and the independent ownership. According to Fidler, the league began under the trustee administration established in 1943 by Wrigley. He established the league as a non-profit organization with three trustees—himself, Cubs attorney Paul Harvey, and Branch Rickey. Wrigley basically used the Cubs' organizational structure to run the league. He appointed Jim Gallagher to formulate the rules, Arthur Meyerhoff (head of a major advertising agency for the Cubs) to oversee promotions and advertising, and Ken Sells (former general manager for the Cubs) to be the league president responsible for overall operations (Berlage, 1994). This administrative structure was in place through the 1944 season. At the conclusion of the 1944 season, Wrigley, no longer worried about his men's major league team, sold the AAGPBL to Meyerhoff for \$10,000 (Fidler, 1976, 2006).

Meyerhoff changed the organizational structure and entered the second administrative phase, the management corporation. He created a profit-generating corporation that exchanged publicity, scheduling, hiring personnel, and player recruitment and training for a percentage of team gate receipts (Berlage, 1994). The day-to-day operations were put under the local authority of team directors who backed the teams financially. This administrative structure lasted from 1944 to 1950 and was the most financially successful period of the league (Fidler, 1976).

By 1950, attendance and gate receipts were dropping and local managers balked at the percentage of gate receipts being sent to management (Peirman, 2003). Therefore, the individual teams bought out Meyerhoff and assumed local control of all aspects of league scheduling, publicity, marketing, and operation. This administrative arrangement lasted until the league's demise in 1954.

## Administrative Management in the AAGPBL

Under these various forms of administration, the league's operation at times conformed to the traditional structure of men's professional baseball; yet, in many

ways, the AAGPBL introduced a feminist reconstruction through their unique administrative ways of "doing pro baseball." Many of these administrative decisions reflect gender issues that are still pervasive in sport today.

AAGPBL players were recruited from all over the country and Canada through the Cubs' scouting network (Fidler, 2006). Players' hitting, catching, fielding, throwing, and running skills were thoroughly evaluated before players were invited to regional tryouts or to sign a contract. Forty-four percent of the players were recruited from championship American Softball Association (ASA) teams (Fidler) and the majority joined the league between the ages of 18-22.

Players were contracted for three- to four-month seasons during which they would play in 80-120 or more games (Pratt, 2001). Player contracts ranged from a low of \$40/week to a high of \$100/week (Fidler, 1976, 2006), although many players claim that additional money was frequently passed under the table to top players (Kurys, as quoted in Taylor, 1987). In 1951, team salary caps were initiated, thereby eliminating minimum and maximum individual salary limits (Fidler, 2006).

Team managers were recruited from the major-league baseball ranks. Twenty-one of the 34 male managers had major- or minor-league baseball experience (Fidler, 2006). As such, they were capable and knowledgeable about the game, and served as important drawing cards for fans as well. The administrative structure of the league was entirely male, and the managers recruited for the teams were male. Women were marginalized from power positions within the AAGPBL. Between 1948 and 1951, six women gained managerial experience, typically as interim replacements during the last few weeks of a season (Hensley, 1995); however, none were contracted beyond the conclusion of the season. In 1950, the AAGPBL administration voted to prohibit employment of female managers citing negative fan reaction and player disrespect as the rationale for their decision (Fidler). This reflects society's lack of readiness to accept women in power positions, and similar to female athletes of today (Wilson, 2007), AAGPBL players seemed to prefer male managers (Fidler).

Administration, particularly during the trustee and management corporation phases, aggressively courted

media coverage. Meyerhoff secured extensive radio, television, and newsreel coverage of the league during his tenure. Thirty-three of the 34 feature periodical articles on the AAGPBL appeared between 1943 and 1950 when Meyerhoff was responsible for publicity (Fidler, 2006). Meyerhoff also created a “farm system” for developing talent. In the post-war years, he established a four-team Chicago League that served as a minor league system for developing talent for the AAGPBL (Lesko, 2005). Junior league teams were also partially funded in the AAGPBL cities, which further developed the potential talent pool for the league.

While many of these administrative and marketing techniques were consistent with a male model of professional baseball, societal norms of the time required that the AAGPBL administration also engage in many unique administrative tactics to promote a positive public image for the league. Public acceptance was integral to the success of the AAGPBL, and during the 1940s, Wrigley and Meyerhoff focused on several unique marketing themes to achieve this.

## Marketing Femininity

The first and most prominent theme was femininity. The female apologetic suggests that female athletic participation is acceptable as long as traditional notions of femininity are present (Pierman, 2005; Roth & Basow, 2004). This theme is pervasive in Wrigley and Meyerhoff's beliefs that the success of the AAGPBL depended upon marketing the players' femininity as much as their athletic skill (Pierman, 2003). The AAGPBL employed several techniques to remind the public that the athletes participating in a traditionally masculine activity were truly feminine. The uniforms, charm and beauty school, codes of conduct, employment of chaperones, gender markings in team names, rule modifications, and media marketing all emphasized the athletes' visible conformity to traditional feminine stereotypes.

The AAGPBL uniforms were intended to separate the league from the “bloomer girl” look of the barnstorming teams and softball teams that wore shorts or pants. The one-piece, pastel tunic-like dress with a flared skirt that ended approximately 4-6 inches above the knee was fashioned after the traditional field hockey, figure skating, and tennis attire of that era. Beneath the

skirt, players wore satin shorts. Knee socks, caps, and official jackets completed the uniform. The overall look was intended to remind fans that they were not only watching real baseball, but real girls (Draeger, 1997). Consistent with the female apologetic, Wrigley and Meyerhoff felt it would be more dramatic and easily marketable to see a feminine-looking girl performing athletically than seeing a masculine-looking girl doing the same thing (Cahn, 1994).

The female apologetic was further apparent in the implementation of charm and beauty school for all league participants. The charm school was operated by Helena Rubinstein Salon in 1943 and the Ruth Tiffany School in 1944 (Hensley, 1995). Formal charm school was terminated after the 1944 season, and informal image molding was taken over by team chaperones and returning players. Players were issued an 11-page “Guide for All-American Girls: How to Look Better, Feel Better, Be More Popular” along with a beauty kit (Pierman, 2003). They were given instructions in how to put on makeup, get in and out of a car gracefully, enunciate correctly, and make proper conversation in social settings (Fincher, 1989). Clothing guidelines were issued, as well as a 10-step suggested beauty routine for after the games. While players voiced mixed reactions to the beauty school, the league openly publicized these policies as a program to transform the rural, working-class girls into classy middle-class women (Pierman, 2005). The intent was to help players conform to the traditional middle-class view of femininity.

Class issues in the AAGPBL increased the challenge of Wrigley and Meyerhoff's femininity principle. Most of the players in the league were from working-class or farming families (Fidler, 1976; Hensley, 1995). Working-class views of femininity did not deny women strength and physicality, which left room for the tomboy or outdoor girl. Working-class women saw softball as perfectly normal in their communities (Cahn, 1994; Gems, 1993) and played without concern for conforming to the socially-defined feminine image. For these athletes, the female apologetic philosophy was most challenging. While some chafed at the dress and make-up requirements, the majority saw them as job requirements that must be fulfilled (Cahn, 1994). Many players now insist that the league did help them learn how to survive in

an expanding world (Wilson & Candaele, 1987).

Players who did not fit the white, middle-class definition of femininity were marginalized from participation. Thus, many quality mannish-looking athletes were often cut or overlooked. For example, Josephine D'Angelo was cut from the Blue Sox roster in her second year in the league because her haircut was too short (Cahn, 1994) and the Savoy sisters, stars on the New Orleans Jax Brewing company softball team, were overlooked by the league for several years because of their large, masculine stature (Pierman, 2005). The exclusion of some athletes based on appearance raises the question of whether the quality of the league was compromised by this policy. The main difference in play cited between the AAGPBL and men's professional baseball was the lack of power in the women's game. Whether the exclusion of the "mannish-looking" athletes compromised the power statistics of the league will remain unknown.

Race was also an issue in the femininity principle, as African-American women faced marginalization from the AAGPBL. While two African-Americans did practice with the South Bend Blue Sox in 1951 (Pierman, 2005) and Toni Stone claimed to have requested a tryout with the Chicago Colleens in 1948 (Ardell, 2005), no African-American woman signed a contract with the AAGPBL. However, this was not unique to the AAGPBL, since men's professional baseball and Midwest softball teams were also segregated during that era (Fidler, 2006). Wrigley and Meyerhoff's view of femininity was based on the white, middle-class beliefs about the image of beauty (Cahn, 1994). African-American women playing baseball would have been a dual challenge to societal norms of femininity and may have affected the viability of the league (Ardell, 2005).

To further conform to the female image, the league established a code of conduct for all players (AAGPBL, 2007). The code provided rules regarding dress, smoking or drinking in public, social engagement approval, living quarters, eating establishments, skirt length, fraternization with other teams, and driving outside of city limits. The purpose of these rules was to maintain a positive public image. While the rules remained essentially the same throughout the league's duration, some modifications and clarifications over the years indicate that players did search for loopholes in the policies

(Fidler, 2006). Players who violated the code were fined or banished from the league (Vignola, 2004).

To further placate potential public concern regarding the non-traditional roles women in the AAGPBL were assuming, the league hired chaperones for the teams (Berlage, 1994; Fidler, 2006; Fincher, 1989). The social mores of the time frowned upon women traveling alone, and the young age of many of the players (some recruited as young as 14 or 15 years of age) necessitated some type of surrogate mother figure to reassure parents (Fidler, 2006). In addition to supervising the younger players, the chaperones were responsible for making hotel and bus reservations, disbursing checks and meal money, laundering and packing uniforms, monitoring curfew, approving players' social engagements, and treating injuries during the games (Berlage, 1994; Hensley, 1995; Pratt, 2001). Their roles were similar to those of the house mothers at the elite Eastern women's colleges and their presence provided reassurance to parents and the public alike.

Femininity was further stressed through the naming of league teams. Roth and Basow (2004) suggested that femininity is reinforced through gender marking in team names. Wrigley and Meyerhoff chose names that were "dignified" (Draeger, 1997, p. 18), but also perpetuated the image of femininity. Of the 12 team names used by the league, eight (Peaches, Chicks, Millerettes, Daisies, Lassies, Colleens, Sallies, Belles) emphasized cuteness and daintiness. Eitzen and Zinn (1989) suggested that such naming traditions promote the ideology of sex differences by stressing feminine qualities. Hence, the choice of team names played directly into Wrigley and Meyerhoff's marketing scheme of feminine women playing a masculine game.

The femininity principle continued in the AAGPBL relations with the media. Many of the media stories emphasized not only the athletic prowess of the players, but highlighted their domestic skills as well. Meyerhoff's aggressive publicity schemes ensured that the AAGPBL was in the national and local media. Similar to the media coverage of the 1999 U.S. Women's World Cup soccer team (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004), the AAGPBL coverage was broad and often focused equally on appearance and performance. Meyerhoff's publicity and promotional materials for the league provided the media with glossy photos of the most attractive players, as well as

copies of the league's dress and conduct codes (Cahn, 1994), which sexualized the female athletes. However, the media coverage of the actual games focused primarily on athletic ability (AAGPBL, 2008; Fidler, 2006).

Buysse and Embser-Herbert (2004), in their review of basketball media-guide covers, used a classification system to reflect on whether media representations of female athletes emphasized athletic competence, strength, and determination. Media photos were categorized based on whether female athletes were presented: (a) in vs. out of uniform, (b) on vs. off the court/field, and (c) in active vs. passive poses (e.g., live action vs. a staged photograph). Based on this classification system, Meyerhoff did utilize a substantial amount of publicity material that was in uniform, on the field, and active (AAGPBL, 2008), thus highlighting the athletic strength, competence, and determination of AAGPBL players. Considering the societal norms of the time, this was a bold and innovative publicity decision.

While Meyerhoff's publicity sexualized the players at times (AAGPBL, 2008), it played to the societal norms in order to combat the rampant suspicions of homosexuality prevalent in softball leagues of the time. Griffin (1992) suggested that the female apologetic is as much about conforming to social roles as it is a response to homophobia. She further stated that femininity is a code word for heterosexuality. Vignola (2004) stated, "In wartime America, the AAGSL would have met a premature end commercially if stereotyped as a transgressing lesbian league" (p. 104). The non-fraternization rule, hairstyle regulations, dress codes, and beauty tips were all intentioned to minimize public homophobic suspicions. Katie Horstman, pitcher and third baseman in the league stated, "It was a good time and yet bad time. A lot of people didn't expect women to play ball and thought there was something wrong with us...that's why we'd wear skirts and stuff like that...the femininity was that important" (cited in Taylor, 1987).

To further distance the AAGPBL from the highly masculinized, working-class image of softball teams of the 1940s, the AAGPBL administration modified traditional softball rules (Ardell, 2005; Berlage, 1994). The traditional 12" softball of 1943 decreased to 11" in 1946, 10" in 1952, and finally the traditional 9" baseball in 1954. The base paths increased in length from 65' in 1943 to 85'

by 1954. The pitching distance started at the traditional 40' softball distance, but gradually increased in length to 6" shy of traditional baseball length in 1954. The pitching style switched from the underhand softball motion to sidearm in 1946 and then overhand in 1948 (Fidler, 1976). While these changes created a hybrid version of the game that separated it from softball, they also created player recruitment challenges, as most women were not experienced at playing this brand of baseball.

## Marketing Excitement and Equity

Wrigley and Meyerhoff also felt the rule changes would contribute to increased excitement (Draeger, 1997), which was essential for the success of the league. Wrigley believed that close competitive games with lots of excitement would produce greater fan appeal (Berlage, 1994). Thus, another unique administrative technique employed by the AAGPBL during the trustee and management corporation phases was central ownership of player contracts. Rather than the traditional baseball player contract with an individual team, AAGPBL player contracts were issued by the league so that players could be allocated, traded, or loaned as needed to maintain league equity. Following central spring training camps, players were allocated based on their performance and previous statistics. To maintain community bonds, each team could retain eight or nine veterans, and star players or hometown favorites were seldom traded to create parity. Players were frequently loaned to other teams for up to two weeks to compensate for mid-season injuries and maintain league parity (Fidler, 2006). Players saw reallocation as a mixed blessing. While reallocated players had to adjust to a different team, coach, and community, the move often gave them increased playing time they otherwise would not have received.

This philosophy of equality and sharing seemed to permeate many aspects of the AAGPBL. Whitson (1994) suggested that feminist reconstruction of sport must move away from the presence of domination and power to personal pleasure and sharing of experience with others. The AAGPBL embraced this as evidenced in their motto, "We're all for one, we're one for all, we're All-Americans" (Paire Davis, 1988). This theme emanated in the trustee and management corporation phases of the league and placed emphasis on the entertainment



value of sport and league parity, not glorification of the best—a different way of “doing sport.” The administrative policy of central player reallocation to maintain balance and excitement supports this concept of feminist reconstruction. Additionally, during the league’s pursuit of recognition by the Baseball Hall of Fame, the intent was always for shared recognition of the entire league rather than of individual players.

It is possible that this view of equality and personal pleasure had a greater impact on the league’s success than given credit, since the loss of this perspective during the independent ownership phase was one factor contributing to the demise of the league. Central player ownership kept salary costs down, as players could not create bidding wars by pitting one team against another. Player reassignment was terminated during the independent ownership phase, and the resulting salary escalation and team inequities contributed to the league’s downfall (Berlage, 1994).

The concept of equality and shared experience was also seen in centralized spring training for all players and permeated Meyerhoff’s efforts to promote the AAGPBL internationally. Spring training in Cuba in 1947 and the exhibition tours in Central and South America were an attempt to globalize the prospect of women’s professional baseball. Yet, contrary to Rowe’s (2003) criticism that sport’s reliance on national pride is anti-global, members of the AAGPBL interspersed with the Cuban players during competition to promote the concept of equality and parity in competition. The Cuban tour and spring training camp resulted in several Cuban players joining the AAGPBL. Further, the emergence of similar women’s professional baseball leagues in Cuba and Japan (Ardell, 2005) suggests some success in international marketing; however, these leagues met with a similar fate as the AAGPBL and were terminated before 1960.

### Marketing Community and Country

In addition to complying with the female apologetic, a second theme marketed by the AAGPBL to promote public acceptance was civic duty and patriotism, particularly during the early years. Wrigley emphasized that patriotism rather than profit was the impetus for the league’s inception (Berlage, 1994). He desired to provide wholesome, family entertainment to boost the

morale of factory workers during the war. To this end, the AAGPBL teams were located in mid-size war production cities within 100 miles of Chicago. The smaller cities provided fewer forms of competing entertainment and greater opportunities for player bonding with the community. Additionally, gas and rubber rationing during the war necessitated close proximity of competition sites. Players lived with host families during the season, which further strengthened the community bond. During the 1940s the league returned portions of the gate receipts to the community to support youth recreation programs, and the players actively participated in community events (Cahn, 1994).

To further the patriotic image, the league played exhibition games at military bases; visited hospitals; raised money for war bonds; organized blood drives and other charitable events for war wives, widows, and veterans; and lined up in a v-formation for the national anthem before every game (Draeger, 1994, Lesko, 1995; Pierman, 2003). Through these activities, the players developed close ties with their host communities, and the league was perceived as providing a service to the country rather than as a money maker (Fidler, 2006).

### Success and Failure of the AAGPBL

The success of the AAGPBL can be attributed to both internal and external factors. Externally, WWII redefined acceptable social roles for women (Lesko, 2005). Gender is a “set of socially constructed relationships which are produced and reproduced through people’s actions” (Henderson, 1994, p. 121). Since gender is socially constructed, it is subject to change and transformation. During WWII, gender roles changed as women assumed more masculine roles in the war industry due to the labor shortage caused by men going off to war, and they changed again when the men returned home from the war. By 1950, women were expected to return to the stereotypical feminine roles of wife, mother, and homemaker. Within this social context, the AAGPBL attempted to foster public acceptance.

Women taking traditional masculine jobs in factories during war time made women playing professional baseball more palatable. Internally, the league’s initial emphasis on femininity, patriotism, and family-friendly

entertainment produced positive public response. The national and international marketing efforts of Arthur Meyerhoff and the league emphasis on parity through central player allocation further contributed to public enthusiasm for the AAGPBL (Fidler, 2006).

The initiation of the independent ownership phase of administration in 1950 coincided with a social shift to a more conservative view of women's gender roles (Ardell, 2005; Cahn, 1994). Companies were no longer hiring women for factory jobs as veterans returned from the war and rejoined the workforce (Pierman, 2003). Women were increasingly expected to resume more traditional roles emphasizing the home, marriage, and family. The shift in gender-role expectations was accompanied by virulent homophobia regarding women in masculine activities (Cahn, 1994). Women playing baseball became increasingly peculiar as the league was no longer seen as fulfilling a patriotic duty in post-war times. Additionally, the post-war lifting of gas and rubber rations allowed people to be more mobile in searching for entertainment options, and television's increased popularity brought many entertainment opportunities into the home. All these factors challenged the viability of the AAGPBL.

These societal changes also combined with many internal changes in the AAGPBL administrative policies. Under independent ownership, each team became responsible for publicity and promotion. Owners became more interested in promoting their own team than the league as a whole (Berlage, 1994), which made attendance and player recruitment suffer. Independent ownership also terminated the central player procurement, which resulted in league imbalance that further hurt attendance. Competition among teams for star players created bidding that increased salaries and bitterness between teams. As attendance declined, the resulting financial concerns led many players to defect to the National Girls Baseball League (NGBL), a Chicago-based professional softball league. By 1950, many of the original AAGPBL members were aging and looking to retire. The rule changes and ongoing player defection to the NGBL made finding quality replacements, especially pitchers, difficult, which decreased the quality of play. As these internal and external factors compounded, the league floundered financially and was forced to fold after the 1954 season.

Overall, the athletic ability of the women in the AAGPBL challenged and ultimately made a mockery of the socially constructed feminine roles of the time. Women in the AAGPBL did not accept and abide by the accepted gender ideology of the time, the masculine hegemonic described by Hargreaves (1994). Rather, they engaged in behaviors that seemed appropriate to them—playing baseball—even though society had defined it as traditionally masculine. Although they were told by society that they were the weaker sex, they proved that they were as strong and athletic as their major-league baseball brethren (Vignola, 2004).

As suggested by Whitson (1994), their success created a new model of athletic femininity that expanded the vision of opportunity for girls interested in sport. Power, strength, and determination were shown to be female attributes too. The AAGPBL offered the public an expanded view of female capabilities and demonstrated that athleticism and femininity need not be mutually exclusive terms. The role models of the AAGPBL encouraged young girls to explore their athleticism and follow their dreams.

However, the role modeling offered by players in the AAGPBL extended beyond just athletics. The educational and professional success of these players following their departure from the league further modeled that the traits developed and refined on the playing field could also benefit young girls in academic and professional pursuits. The AAGPBL revealed that being athletic could lead to the development of confidence, independence, and autonomy (Hensley, 1995), which could then be applied to multiple aspects of life.

It is important that we continue to honor the pioneering efforts of this group of women in sport history. We can first do this by keeping their story alive through educating new generations about the league's existence, the players' achievements, and their overall contributions to women's sport. The AAGPBL players' experiences and ongoing advocacy for similar team-sport opportunities for later generations laid the groundwork for many of the current sport opportunities enjoyed by females. Thus, we further honor them every time we invest our own efforts to create, defend, support, and sustain sport opportunities for girls and women today. Through these efforts, the legacy of the AAGPBL will live on. ■

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