

Twice Perfect

Jean Faut of the South Bend Blue Sox

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In his book *Perfect: The Inside Story of Sixteen Perfect Games*, James Buckley Jr. describes the rarity of the “perfect game”: since the founding of the National League in 1876 to 2002, opposing pitchers have had over 340,000 opportunities (170,000 games) to throw perfect games, but only sixteen had done so. That equates to approximately one in every 21,250 opportunities. No Major League pitcher has ever been perfect twice in his professional career, and many of the greatest have never done so even once. The feat is, indeed, one of the rarest of any athletic accomplishment.¹

The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) existed from 1943 through 1954. It was the highest level of professional baseball ever afforded women. In its twelve-year history, some six hundred of the greatest female athletes were paid to play a game once the exclusive domain of men. During that time, only five perfect games occurred out of 9,578 opportunities (or once in every 1,916 chances), three during the underhand pitching period (1943–47) and two during the period when overhand pitching was adopted throughout the League (1948–54). Incredibly, both of these latter games were pitched by one person, Jean Faut of the South Bend Blue Sox.²

This feisty righthander was one of the most dominant pitchers in the history of the AAGPBL. During her eight-year career with the Blue Sox (1946–53), she compiled a lifetime record of 140–64 with a mind-boggling 1.23 ERA. She never had a losing season or an ERA above 1.51. She was named the league’s player-of-the-year twice (1951 and 1953), was a four-time all-star, was second in the league in career wins, held the league record for single-season winning percentage with a .909 (20–2) in 1952, and led the Blue Sox to consecutive league championships in 1951 and 1952. When compared with Major League pitchers, she ranks first in ERA and fourth in winning percentage (.686).³

Comparing the level of play in the AAGPBL to that found in the Major Leagues is a little like comparing apples to oranges. Men are stronger, hit with

more power, have better overall batting averages, and field better than their female counterparts. For these reasons, some would argue that it is more difficult to pitch a perfect game in the Major Leagues than it was in the AAGPBL. However, considering the conditions under which the women played, Faut's two perfect games are all the more remarkable.

While the dimensions of the field were smaller and the hitters less powerful and skilled with the bat, equipment and rules changed continually throughout the existence of the league, often from year to year, sometimes even in midseason. When the league started in 1943, it was basically fast-pitch softball played under some of the rules of baseball. Runners, for example, could take a lead off base and steal, but the ball was a soft twelve inches in circumference. Basepaths were much shorter (sixty-five feet) and the pitching distance much closer (forty feet). Distances and ball dimensions evolved drastically, so that by the final season of the league in 1954, it was almost exactly like regulation baseball.

Pitching itself changed over the years: it began as underhand, graduated to sidearm in 1946-47, and moved fully to overhand in 1948. Many of the pitchers in the earlier period were experienced submariners who could not make the transition to the overhand style. Consequently, many teams converted their position players—especially outfielders—to pitchers since they were used to throwing the ball overhand with power. Batters, too, had to make adjustments, since underhand throws tend to rise, overhand to drop.⁴

All of these changes were designed to make the game more exciting and more like men's baseball. Fast-pitch underhand softball is generally a very pitcher-dominated game with low scores and correspondingly low batting averages. As the women's game evolved more toward baseball, more runs were produced. Batting averages and ERAs both increased as a consequence. In 1943 the top-ten batters in the league had averages ranging from a high of .332 to a low of .268. By 1950 the advantage began to shift toward the batter. That year, the top-ten averages ranged from .346 to .276. During the league's final season, batting averages skyrocketed, with the top-ten ranging from an incredible .429 to .317.⁵

Added to this increased offensive production, fielding was significantly inferior compared to the men, with errors much more an every-game occurrence. Fielding miscues, of course, can ruin a perfect game just as much as a hit or a walk. Indeed, probably every perfect game has been saved by at least one or two outstanding fielding plays. Good and bad fielding played crucial roles in both of Faut's perfect games.⁶

The fields themselves were decidedly inferior when compared to the Major League parks. The Blue Sox diamond at Playland Park was built on the site

of an auto racetrack. Home plate sat on top of the track itself with just a few inches of dirt spread over the asphalt-hard surface below. Most of the women's games were played at night under lighting conditions that made outfield play in particular a real challenge.⁷

Imagine how difficult it would be for a player—especially a pitcher—to keep adjusting to these constant changes in rules and equipment and to perform in often substandard playing conditions. When Faut began her career in 1946, sidearm delivery was permitted for the first time and the ball was a dead eleven inches, the basepaths seventy-two feet, and the pitching rubber forty-three feet from home plate. By her final season in 1953, only overhand pitching was allowed, the ball was a lively cork-centered ten inches, and the basepaths were seventy-five feet. More importantly from a pitching perspective, the pitching rubber was moved back to fifty-six feet, thirteen feet farther away than in 1946. At the same time, fences were moved in to allow for more home runs. One can only speculate on how the careers of the great Major Leaguers might have developed had they played in this environment.⁸

Faut, born in 1925, learned to throw overhand as a child growing up in East Greenville, Pennsylvania. She developed her pitching skills by spending countless hours throwing rocks at telephone poles. As she got older, she developed an intense interest in baseball and often spent hours watching and shagging flies for a local semi-pro team during team practice. The players noticed she had a great arm and allowed her to throw batting practice both at home and on the road. The second baseman taught her a variety of pitches, including a curve, a screwball, a change-of-pace, and a fastball. Not many girls of her era had the good fortune to receive such instruction.⁹

She was scouted by the South Bend Blue Sox and joined the team as a third baseman at age twenty-one in 1946. When midway through the season the league introduced sidearm pitching, Faut was given limited pitching duties. She used this opportunity to its fullest, compiling a record of 8-3 with an ERA of 1.33 in 12 starts. The following year she had a career high 44 starts, winning 19 and losing 13.¹⁰

While she had some zip on her fastball and a sharp-breaking curve, Faut's strength was her great control. Her over-the-top motion was very consistent, with her left foot always landing in the same spot with every pitch. "In fact, one of the scouts was amazed that I was always at the same spot," she said years later. "I think that had a lot to do with why I had very good control." This ability allowed her to adjust quickly as the ball grew smaller and the pitching distance lengthened. Her strong arm was also an asset. She never had a sore arm in spite of going the distance in most games, even pitching 24 innings in one game and 19 in another.¹¹

She was an intelligent, wily pitcher with a good, analytical mind that allowed her to remember pitching sequences from batter to batter and game to game. In pre-game team meetings, she would memorize the weakness of the best batters and during the game vary the rotation of pitches she used. "Part of my success," she once reflected, "was that in my mind I could record the pitches and the order of pitches I threw to each girl, so they never saw the same thing twice. I was a mathematical whiz in school. They'd never know what was coming, so they'd start guessing. When batters start guessing, they're never right." Contact hitters gave her the greatest trouble, while guess-hitters who swung from the heels were the easiest. "You've got them in your hip pocket once they did that," she added.¹²

Perennial all-star Dottie Kamenshek thought Faut and the Peaches' Lois Florreich were the two best pitchers in the All-American Girls. According to the league's greatest hitter, "Jean did not have any weaknesses, you only hoped she would be a little wild. Her style was overhand and she hid the ball well."¹³

By the time the 1951 season rolled around, Faut was a seasoned pitcher. It was to be a breakthrough year for the Blue Sox as well. While they had been in post-season play before (Faut was 1 and 3 in early-round losses in 1948 and 1949), the team had never won a championship. That was about to change—and in dramatic fashion—with Jean Faut in the middle of the excitement.

The season began inauspiciously enough. Faut's record in the first half was a good, but unremarkable, 8 and 5. Significantly, all five losses were by one run. So, when she took the mound on July 21, no one had an inkling about what was to unfold. Certainly the large crowd of nearly 1,500 that Saturday evening at Playland Park, the home field for the Blue Sox, had no idea as the game began that they were to witness an historic event.

Faut was in charge from the beginning. The "sturdy gal with a lot of heart," as the local paper described her, dominated the visiting Peaches with "a fast ball that hops and a curve that breaks off like a country road." It wasn't until the fifth inning that she even fell behind in the count to the first batter. She threw three balls to Peaches left-fielder Eleanor Callow before striking her out on the next three pitches. Only one other time did Faut go a full-count, and that duel ended in a ground-out. Just two balls left the infield, one a foul out to right fielder Betty Wagoner and the other a fly to center fielder Nancy Stoll.¹⁴

Fortunately for Faut, her teammates scratched out two runs in the bottom of the sixth, thanks mainly to the two errors committed by Rockford second baseman Bobbie Payne. Sox third baseman Audrey Bleiler led off the inning with a walk. She was sacrificed to second off the bat of second baseman Charlene Pryer. Bleiler moved to third when Payne committed her first error, mishandling a grounder from Betty Wagoner. Shortstop Senaida Wirth then

laid down a perfect bunt, scoring Bleiler from third with the first run. With one out, Sox batter Lib Mahon hit a rocket of a grounder to Peaches first baseman Dottie Kamenshek. The all-star infielder snagged the ball, stepped on first for the second out, and threw to second in an attempt to double up Wirth, who had rounded the base too far. Unfortunately for the visitors, second baseman Payne committed her second error of the inning when she allowed the throw to get away. Wagoner scored on this fielding mishap.¹⁵

That was all the scoring Faut was to need. She fanned five of the last nine batters, including Peaches starting pitcher Nickie Fox to end the game. Faut's teammates swarmed over her and carried her off the field at the conclusion of the contest.

The competition Faut faced that evening was among the best. Rockford would end the season battling South Bend for the league championship. The Peaches were the Yankees of the AAGPBL, a perennial powerhouse populated with great players and winner of four league championships. First baseman Dottie Kamenshek was a seven-time all-star, won the league batting title twice, was the career leader in hits with 1,090, and in 1951 led the team with a .345 batting average. Left fielder Eleanor Callow was a three-time all-star who holds the career record for home runs at 55 and triples at 60. In 1951 she had a team-high 84 RBIs. Catcher Ruth Richard was a six-time all-star who was second on the team in RBIs with 60 in 1951. This lineup would have been a challenge for any pitcher.¹⁶

Faut gives considerable credit for her perfect performance to the flawless fielding of her teammates. "I had an extremely good team behind me," she recalled years later. To this day she remembers the shoestrapping catch Betty Wagoner made on the right field foul. "That was the only real scare I had. That was a tremendous catch." Wagoner ran a long way on a dead run to snag it just off the ground.¹⁷

Faut was totally focused during the game, remaining unaware of what was unfolding until the final inning. In the tradition of teammates everywhere, no one spoke to her as the game progressed. In one of the all-time greatest understatement, she said, "I had a very good game."¹⁸

Dottie Kamenshek described the frustration, and exhilaration, she experienced facing Faut that night:

Everything was working. Curve, fastball, drop, you name it. I tried bunting, no soap, swung at the first pitch and no soap, worked deep into the count and no soap. That day she was beautiful to watch. I only struck out 81 times in my 10 years, she struck me out 2 times in that game. I walked up to her after the game and told her it was the best pitched game I ever played in and congratulated her.¹⁹

This historic victory set the tone for the rest of the season. While South Bend placed third in the first-half standings, the team finished first in the second half, thus giving them a playoff berth. Their complete season record of 75 and 36 was best in the league that year.

The 1951 Shaughnessy championship was played in two rounds. The first was the best of three with the championship being the best of five. In the first series, South Bend beat the Fort Wayne Daisies 2 games to 1. Faut won the first and third contests by identical scores of 2 to 1. In the first game, she went the full nine innings, surrendering just 6 hits, 3 walks, and 1 earned run. She repeated her complete game performance in the third meeting with another 2 to 1 pitching gem, this time in ten innings in Fort Wayne. In that game she struck out nine batters and gave up 8 hits.²⁰

Faut capped her unbelievable season with 2 wins in the last 3 games of the 5-game championship series against the Rockford Peaches. After the Blue Sox dropped the first two contests, she started the third game with her team facing elimination. "It's an old story with the South Bend Blue Sox but they're counting on Jean Faut to pull them out of another jam at Playland park tonight," wrote the *South Bend Tribune* sports reporter. And Faut did just that, winning it 3 to 2. She struck out 11 and walked 2, allowing 2 runs, one on a passed ball. Her opponent that evening was Rockford rookie Marie Mansfield, who walked 13, hit one batter, had a wild pitch, but allowed just 3 hits. Then in the fifth game, played two days later at home, Faut, starting at third base, was called to the mound in the third inning with 1 run in, 1 out, the bases loaded, and her team leading 6 to 2. On the first pitch, the batter bounced to Faut, who began an inning-ending double play. She would pitch the rest of the game, getting credit for a 10 to 2 drubbing of the Peaches. It gave the Blue Sox the first of their two consecutive league championships. At season's end, Faut was named the league's player-of-the-year.²¹

The following season was to see Jean Faut again lead the league in several pitching categories. She went 20 and 2 in 23 starts for a phenomenal .909 winning percentage, a league record. She gave up only 19 earned runs in those games, for a career-best 0.93 ERA. She also led all pitchers with 114 strikeouts.²²

Faut's winning ways continued into postseason play. South Bend faced the Grand Rapids Chicks in a best-of-three series. The Chicks were eliminated in two games. Faut was the winner of the first contest in a complete game 2 to 1 cliffhanger in which she got out of a no-outs, bases-loaded jam in the ninth, surrendering just one unearned run. The Blue Sox handily defeated their opponents in the second game 6 to 1 with Faut delivering 2 RBIs and relieving in the ninth to seal the victory.²³

The championship series was a repeat of the previous year with South Bend again facing Rockford. It was a contest rocked by controversy. Faut lost the first game, delivering a sub-par performance when she surrendered an uncharacteristic 7 runs on 13 hits. She was pulled in the seventh after giving up a 2-run homer. The second game ended in another Rockford victory and a South Bend protest. Because their playing field was being readied for football, the Peaches had moved the right field fence in to 190 feet, 20 feet shorter than the league minimum. Consequently, the league disallowed the victory and forced a replay of Game 2. South Bend won it in 12 innings with Faut getting the victory when she pitched a scoreless final four innings in relief.²⁴

As in 1951, Faut was the winning pitcher in the decisive Game 5, hitting 2 triples and driving in 2 while turning in a 6 to 3 complete game performance. It was South Bend's second league championship and the second time Faut pitched the deciding game.²⁵

In light of what was happening at a personal level, Faut's accomplishments in 1951 and 1952 were especially remarkable. In the spring of 1947, she married Karl Winsch, a former Phillies pitching prospect. Most women in the league were unmarried, making Faut odd-woman-out on her team. When in 1951 Winsch became manager of the Blue Sox, it made the situation even stickier and increased Faut's isolation from her teammates. Everything came to a head in 1952.

After his freshman year, Winsch became more demanding of his players. Some of the women bristled under his leadership, many refusing to speak to either the manager or their star pitcher. When toward the end of the 1952 season Winsch disciplined one of the players by suspending her, five other players walked out in protest. It is a testimony to the professionalism and commitment of the remaining twelve players—especially Jean Faut—that they were able to enter post-season down six and still win it all.²⁶

The next year was to be Faut's final season. The team was weakened considerably by the player losses at the end of the previous season, and Faut was worn down from all the dissension. South Bend would finish the 1953 season second from last, compiling a dismal 45 and 65 record. In spite of everything that had gone wrong, Faut still turned in an impressive 17 and 11 record. She tied for first in the league in wins and for the third consecutive season led all pitchers with her 1.51 ERA. She was the only Blue Sox pitcher to have a winning season.²⁷

Lightning struck the second time when Faut took the mound on the evening of September 3 in Kalamazoo. Rumors had been circulating that Faut planned to retire at the end of the season. So when she faced the home team Lassies in front of 668 of their fans, she was about to make baseball history on what would turn out to be her second-to-last pitching performance.

As in her first perfect game, she faced some of the best players in the league. Left fielder Doris Sams was a five-time all-star and a two-time player-of-the-year (she and Faut were the only two to ever be selected twice). She won the batting crown in 1949 with a .279 batting average and led the league in home runs in 1952 with 12. Curiously, she began her career as a pitcher and was one of only three hurlers to have perfect games during the league's underhand pitching era. Three-time all-star Dorothy Schroeder, the Lassies' slick-fielding shortstop, was the only one to play all twelve years of the League's existence. Consequently, she holds the career record in games played at 1,249, RBIs at 431, at bats with 4,129, walks with 696, and strikeouts at 566. She is second in hits with 870 and third in home runs with 42. She led all shortstops in fielding percentage three times. Third baseman Fern Shollenberger was a four-time all-star who led all third basemen in fielding percentage three years in a row, and her career .942 fielding average is best at that position.²⁸

As in her 1951 outing, Faut was completely dominant throughout the game. She struck out seven with only three fly-ball outs, one to right and two to center. And she was again aided by her teammates taking advantage of the opposition's poor fielding. South Bend scored all four of their runs at the top of the fifth inning. With one out, first baseman Irene Applegren laid down a bunt single. She moved to third on a double by right fielder Mary Froning. A rattled Ruth Williams then walked lead-off batter and second baseman Dolly Pearson to load the bases. When catcher Lois Youngen grounded to Terry Rukavina, the Lassies' second baseman froze momentarily, allowing Applegren to score and Youngen to reach first on an infield single. Froning scored the second run on an overthrow by Lassies catcher Jean Lovell. With the sacks still full, June Peppas booted a play at first allowing Pearson to score. With still only one out, the fourth and final run came when Youngen crossed home on a bases-loaded walk to Jean Faut, giving the pitcher an RBI.²⁹

The Blue Sox management and fans honored their longtime diamond ace with "Jean Faut Night" before the game on September 6, 1953. After collecting four hundred dollars in gifts, Faut ended her baseball career that evening with a 3 to 0, 9-hit loss to the visiting Grand Rapids Chicks. And in recognition of her incredible season, she was selected league player-of-the-year for a second time.

Jean Faut is unquestionably one of the greatest players in the history of the game. In addition to her stellar career, she accomplished what no other professional pitcher has ever done before or since, reached perfection twice. In the words of *South Bend Tribune* reporter Paul Neville, "Opponents actually cringe when they learn that Faut is going to pitch against them. She's the most feared tosser in the league and with reason." No greater tribute could be given to this remarkable athlete.³⁰

NOTES

1. James Buckley Jr, *Perfect: The Inside Story of Baseball's Sixteen Perfect Games* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2002), xv.

2. The AAGPBL was first called the All-American Girls Softball League (1943), but then was more commonly known as the All-American Girls Base Ball League (AAGBBL) for the rest of the league's existence.

3. For complete statistics of all teams and players, including post-season play, see W. C. Madden, *The All-American Girls Baseball League Record Book* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000).

4. This change to overhand pitching did not mean that a pitcher could not drop down in her delivery. Faut tells of occasionally delivering a pitch below sidearm. In one such game, the batter, thinking the ball was on a trajectory to hit her, jumped straight up in the air. When the ball broke over the heart of the plate for a called strike three, the batter stared in astonishment, turned slowly, and walked back to the bench without uttering a word. See Jean Faut Fantry in discussion with the author, Rock Hill, SC, January 18, 2005.

5. Madden, *AAGPBL Record Book*.

6. When comparing the highest career fielding averages by position, for example, the men consistently rank higher. See Madden, *AAGPBL Record Book*; The Baseball Almanac, "Fielding Average by Position," The Baseball Almanac, <http://www.baseball-almanac.com> (accessed March 2, 2005).

7. Faut had occasion to play the outfield at night but found it disconcerting because the poor lighting made it difficult to properly judge fly balls. See Fantry discussion, January 18, 2005.

8. For a discussion of equipment and facility changes, see Merric A. Fidler, "The Development and Decline of the All-American Girls Baseball League, 1943-1954" (master's thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1976), 109-14.

9. Fantry discussion, January 18, 2005; Jim Sargent, "Jean Faut: South Bend's All-American All-Star Pitcher," All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, <http://www.aagpbl.org/articles/biographies.cfm?ID=4> (accessed March 23, 2004).

10. Madden, *AAGPBL Record Book*.

11. She attributes her good fortune in avoiding arm trouble to running the next day after she pitched a game. Any tightness or soreness she had would disappear as she ran. See Fantry discussion, January 18, 2005.

12. Barbara Gregorich, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball*, (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1993), 144; Fantry discussion, January 18, 2005.

13. Dottie Kamenshek, e-mail to the author, February 12, 2005.

14. Paul Neville, "Jean Faut Hurls Perfect Game," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, July 22, 1951.

15. Neville, "Jean Faut."
16. Madden, *AAGPBL Record Book*.
17. Fantry discussion, January 18, 2005.
18. Fantry discussion, January 18, 2005.
19. Kamenshek e-mail, February 12, 2005.
20. "South Bend Wins Opening Playoff Game 2-1." *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 5, 1951; "Sox Advance to Playoff Finals," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 1, September 8, 1951.
21. In addition to clutch pitching, illness was on the side of the Blue Sox. A flu outbreak among the Peaches hampered play among seven of their players during the final three games of the series. See "Sox Eke Out 3-2 Win Over Rockford Nine," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 12, 1951; "South Bend Rockford Clash for Girls League Title," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 2, September 13, 1951; "South Bend Wins Girls League Pennant," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 14, 1951.
22. Madden, *AAGPBL Record Book*.
23. "Blue Sox One Game Away from Final Playoffs," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 3, 1952; "Blue Sox Sweep Playoff Series from Grand Rapids, 6-1," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 2, September 4, 1952.
24. The Blue Sox protest was sparked by a fifth-inning Peaches solo homer over the right-field fence, which turned out to be the margin of victory for the home team. See "Peaches Rock Blue Sox in Playoff Tilt," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 7, 1952; "Rockford Nips Blue Sox, 3-2," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 2, September 8, 1952; "Blue Sox Triumph on Field and at Conference Table," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 2, September 9, 1952.
25. According to Faut, her second triple could have been a home run, but she was exhausted and stopped at third. See Fantry interview, January 18, 2005; "Blue Sox Capture Second League Crown," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 12, 1952.
26. Fantry interview, January 18, 2005; Joe Doyle, "According to Doyle," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 2, September 2, 1952; "Blue Sox Open Playoffs Against Chicks," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 2, September 2, 1952.
27. Madden, *AAGPBL Record Book*.
28. Madden, *AAGPBL Record Book*.
29. "Faut Hurls Perfect Game Against Lassies," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 4, 1953; Jerry Hagan, "Jean Faut Retires 27 Batters in Row; Blanks Lassies, 4-0," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, September 4, 1953. Both newspapers reported Faut having delivered 8 strikeouts, but a reproduction of the game score sheet given to Faut years after the game shows 7 K's.
30. Paul Neville, "On the Level with Paul Neville," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 3, September 14, 1951.

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