

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

THE RACINE BELLES: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE STARS OF THE ALL-AMERICAN  
GIRLS PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL LEAGUE

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BY  
JACQUELINE E. DUPONT

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will survey the rise and fall of the Racine Belles, an All-American Girls Professional Baseball team that was created to save professional baseball during the 1940s and 1950s. During this time, Major League Baseball's leading players joined the war effort to combat the Axis powers during the Second World War, creating a fear that the loss of these men could lead to the end of the sport. This thesis questions why the popular and victorious Belles were disbanded sooner than other AAGPBL teams. This triumphant event in women's history and the effects of the Racine Belles and other AAGPBL teams' success on the future of women's sports still lingers. The research for this paper consisted of studying multiple secondary sources such as historical monographs and scholarly journals. More importantly, the research includes the use of primary sources from the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

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I would also like to thank my father, Roger DuPont. My father has helped me become the person I am today through his support and guidance, and without him, my interest in baseball, or any sport at all, would have never began. Thanks for being my soccer coach, softball coach, friend, father and number one fan.

## **Introduction**

I remember it clearly. It was a warm, summer afternoon and the sun was slowly setting behind the backdrop of the familiar suburban homes in my neighborhood, and I was holding a strange, heavy stick in my hands. My father and grandfather were calling it a 'bat', but the only bats I had seen were black, ugly, flying animals at the local zoo. My grandfather crouched in front of me, trying to explain the concepts of batting. I was four-years old and not much taller than the tee that one of my father's dirty softballs rested upon. It took a while to get the hang of it, and although I was not an all-star ballplayer from birth, I was hooked on the sports of softball and baseball from that point on.

For years, my father, Roger DuPont, and my grandfather, William DuPont, continued to encourage my involvement in softball. My father coached me in a mixed-gender softball league offered through the local YMCA. When I became too old to play 'Y-ball', I asked my father if I could play Little League. I was disheartened when he told me Little League was for boys only, and that girls had to play softball. I continued to play the sport throughout middle school and high school, until a knee injury stopped me altogether. I've been a sports fan all of my life. I'm a Green Bay Packers fan and a die-hard Milwaukee Brewers fan. I support my teams through thick and thin and embrace the competitiveness, although I can no longer participate in the sports I love.

My father's statement that Little League, and really the official sport of baseball in general, was for boys only bothered me for many years. When I played high school softball in Arkansas, there were always more fans at the boy's baseball games than at ours. The baseball field was nicer and my school even built an elevated press box just behind home plate. The saddest part was, our Lady Cougar softball team had a better record than the Cougar baseball

team. This seems to happen in most sports though. Women's National Basketball Association games never seem to have as many viewers or attendees at their games as games of the men's National Basketball Association. The same can be said about most college sports in which a sport has a team for both men and women. There is a definite gender bias in fan preference of sports, but it does not seem like that bias can keep women from playing sports, and throughout history, some women have been able to break the mold.

“During the nineteenth century, prevailing ‘correct’ codes of behavior for women were severely restrictive, enjoining them to pursue a life of moral domesticity and delicate submissiveness,” wrote author Debra Shattuck of female athleticism before the Civil War. She also states that the traditional dress codes for women during this era was not supportive of females participation in sports.<sup>1</sup> It was in 1882 that the first athletic games for women were held.<sup>2</sup> Leading into the twentieth century, women began to enjoy athletic recreation, such as riding bicycles. Sports such as basketball, volleyball and golf were introduced to women shortly before 1900.

According to author Jennifer Ring, women tried to break into the sport of baseball as early as 1866, and Shattuck claims that baseball was the first sport that was adopted by respectable women. “There is no mention of the fact that women played professional baseball on all-women and mixed teams, against all-women’s teams, men’s teams, and mixed teams in the nineteenth century,” Ring says in her book *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don’t Play Baseball*. Ring also states that it was during the 1880s when a group of women from Pennsylvania organized the first professional women’s baseball team in the United States, the

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<sup>1</sup> Debra Shattuck, “Playing a Man’s Game: Women and Baseball in the United States, 1866-1954,” in *Baseball History from Outside the Lines: A Reader*, ed. John E. Dreifort (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 195.

<sup>2</sup> Jean O’Reilly and Susan S. Cahn, eds. *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007), xxiii.

African American Dolly Vardens; although Leslie A. Heaphy, of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, disputes that it was in 1867 that the team was formed.<sup>3</sup> “Just as women gradually broke into previously all-male occupational bastions, they also began to force changes on the sporting scene,” said Shattuck of the females who were pioneers in introducing women to baseball. She also states that these women were not only trying to break into the sport, but also attempted to change sexist social mores in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

The mixed-leagues and all-women leagues of the nineteenth century eventually died out, but other women played baseball recreationally as well. It was not until the 1890s that softball was recognized as a separate sport than baseball, and before then, women played regulation baseball for a whole three decades until the distinction was made.<sup>5</sup> Women played in pickup games around town, but those who went onto college had the opportunity to play on college teams at schools such as Vassar, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Wellesley as early as the 1860s and well into the twentieth century.

By 1920 another version of semi-pro women’s baseball began to spring up around the country. These female ballplayers were called “Bloomer Girls,” and they played against both men and women. “Bloomer Girl” teams were organized in Texas, Chicago, New York, Kansas City, Boston and elsewhere that had women interested in the sport.<sup>6</sup> The All-Star Bloomer girls

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<sup>3</sup> Baseball in Pennsylvania, “More than a Man’s Game: Pennsylvania Women Play Ball,” The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, <http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=997> (accessed April 20, 2010). Jennifer Ring, *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don’t Play Baseball* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Shattuck, “Playing a Man’s Game,” 196.

<sup>5</sup> Ring, *Stolen Bases*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Shattuck, “Playing a Man’s Game,” 203.



team consisted of 16 people: 12 women and three men who managed, pitched, and caught.<sup>7</sup> Although no formal league was established, the “Bloomer Girl” teams were the first female baseball players to play the game for profit.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1 Vassar Resolutes, 1876



Source: Vassar College, Vassar College Resolutes, 1876, [http://education.baseballhalloffame.org/experience/thematic\\_units/womens\\_history/vassar\\_college.html](http://education.baseballhalloffame.org/experience/thematic_units/womens_history/vassar_college.html) (accessed April 20, 2010).

It wasn't until 1942, after many Major League Baseball (MLB) players had to ship off to war, that professional women's baseball found a place in American history. It was during this time that the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) was founded by Philip K. Wrigley. Wrigley formed four teams in Rockford, Illinois; Kenosha, Wisconsin; South

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<sup>7</sup> Leslie A. Heaphy and Mel Anthony May, eds., *Encyclopedia of Women and Baseball* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Shattuck, “Playing a Man’s Game,” 203.

Bend, Indiana; and Racine, Wisconsin. The four teams became wildly popular during the era of the AAGPBL, but one team was more victorious than the others. My hometown is about 20 miles north of Racine, Wisconsin, home of the AAGPBL team, the Racine Belles. The Belles were truly the “belles of the ballgame,” winning multiple AAGPBL championships and having one of the best players in the league. Despite these accomplishments, the team had to close up shop and move to another city after the 1950 season. The success of the teams the league, both statistically and financially, bring upon questions as to why the popular Racine Belles left town, and what caused the demise of the AAGPBL.

### **Review of Secondary Literature**

The Racine Belles do not have much literature devoted specifically to them, but there are many sources available about World War II, the history of baseball and the AAGPBL. By analyzing relevant secondary work, it is easier to understand the reasons for the creation of women’s professional baseball and also how it ended. Secondary sources can provide both a general context of the time and also a more focused story that helps historians make sense of historical issues.

### **While the boys are away...**

World War II had been raging in Europe for a few years by the time America entered. With American men having to leave their homes and head to the front lines in Europe and the Pacific, President Roosevelt knew that the morale of his country would begin to suffer. In January of 1942, Baseball Commissioner Kennesaw Landis wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking what his opinion was over the continuance of Major League Baseball during

wartime. Landis argued that fewer people would be left working in America, and he expected that people would be working harder and need recreation as an escape from the hectic work week. Roosevelt responded by giving his “unofficial” ruling that the baseball season should continue as usual in order to provide a morale booster for the American public. Shattuck reveals that, “Roosevelt refused the exempt players from the draft, pointing out that baseball would retain its popularity even if older or less skilled players were used.”<sup>9</sup> The letter between Landis and Roosevelt became known as the “greenlight letter”, allowing for the continuation of baseball.<sup>10</sup>

The war didn’t only affect the working-class men and women of America. Steven R. Bullock says, “...over 90 percent of all players active in 1941 eventually served.”<sup>11</sup> Bullock’s monograph *Playing For Their Nation: Baseball and the American Military During World War II* provides an overview of how the war affected baseball during the 1940s and also how it affected both the soldiers and the players on the front lines.

World War II took place in a time when baseball was just exiting the “Golden Age”, a time when the heavy hitters and baseball legends such as Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb had recently hung up their cleats and handed the game off to new heroes, such as Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams.<sup>12</sup> According to Bullock, “the War Department identified baseball as the favorite of soldiers and sailors and attempted to ensure whenever possible that the nation’s troops had an

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<sup>9</sup> Shattuck, “Playing a Man’s Game,” 211.

<sup>10</sup> James A. Percoco, “Primarily, It’s Serendipity,” *Social Education* 67, no. 7 (November/December 2003): 401-403, <http://www.indyintheclassroom.com/resources/docs/documents6.pdf> (accessed October 22, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Steven R. Bullock, *Playing for Their Nation: Baseball and the American Military during World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 126.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

adequate supply of baseball gear as well as updates on Major League standings and statistics.”<sup>13</sup> Military leaders used baseball to fulfill the void in athletics that soldiers felt at war.<sup>14</sup> Just as Roosevelt had allowed the continuance of baseball for the morale of the American people, the United States’ military was using baseball as a morale booster in the field.

Figure 2 Ted Williams, Marine Corps Pilot



*Source:* Unknown, Ted Williams, Marine Corps Pilot, [http://mdd2403.files.wordpress.com/2007/07/ted\\_williams\\_pilot.jpg](http://mdd2403.files.wordpress.com/2007/07/ted_williams_pilot.jpg) (accessed April 20, 2010).

What truly affected the creation of the AAGPBL was the exit of MLB players from the ballparks. World War II saw the likes of Bob Feller and Hank Greenberg in the early years, but by the time of the AAGPBL’s introduction to society, Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, Stan Musial and Warren Spahn had entered the ranks as well “as every other Major Leaguer, not to mention most minor leaguers.”<sup>15</sup> By the end of the war, approximately 5,400 to 5,800 professional

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 97.

baseball players in the United States had served in a branch of the military, yet not a single MLB player died during combat.<sup>16</sup>

When men from all over America are leaving their lives to go fight in a war in which many military personnel lost their lives, why send the best players in the MLB only to keep them off the front lines?<sup>17</sup> Bullock argues that the administration that did not want to put baseball heroes in harm's way, for they, or their commanding officers, could be blamed for the death of DiMaggio or Williams in Europe or the Pacific.<sup>18</sup> The soldiers were more excited to be serving with the stars of the majors and playing or training with them on base. After realizing that not a single MLB player died in combat, it is obvious to see that baseball was still being used as a morale booster for the soldiers later in the war, but in a different way than Roosevelt had probably imagined.

### **The Women Back Home**

While the men were fighting the good fight, it was the women who had to stay behind and continue to make life seem as normal as they possibly could for themselves and their families. Women at this time were able to do things that most women had very rarely been allowed to do in the past. Women were working in large factories for the defense industry and were able to reach new heights in the professional realm as politicians, journalists and doctors. In Emily Yellin's book, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front During*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 98.

*World War II*, she delineates how women contributed to society in the 1940s by examining the letters her mother wrote during her time as a Red Cross worker in the Pacific Theater.<sup>19</sup>

Life changed considerably for all Americans during World War II, but life changed even more dramatically for the women who went off to work for the defense industry and those who gained success in professional fields. During the Great Depression, women were discouraged from working outside of the home because of the lack of jobs.<sup>20</sup> But during wartime, women were needed to fill the orders the government put in for large numbers of bombs, guns, ships, and planes in factories, shipyards, and steel mills. The needs for these goods took more than six million women into the labor workforce during World War II. The first women to enter were women already working in similar industrial jobs, but most women worked in lower paying jobs such as waitressing, cleaning, or as secretaries. These women earned an average of \$14 per week, but women who worked in the shipyards could earn an average of about \$37 per week. With the sole breadwinners of the family leaving home to fight, it was up to the women to earn money to take care of their family and home. Despite losing time at home, the rise in pay made life easier for women, despite the prejudice of employers against women.<sup>21</sup>

By August of 1945, women in the American war industry had produced 296,429 airplanes, 102,351 tanks and guns, 87,620 warships, 47 tons of artillery ammunition, and 44 billion rounds of smaller ammunition.<sup>22</sup> When soldiers returned home, they expected to get their jobs back, and they did. The women who had contributed their time and energy into the war

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<sup>19</sup> Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), VIII.

<sup>20</sup> Yellin, *Our Mothers' War*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

effort knew that their jobs were only temporary until the men came back home.<sup>23</sup> As one woman states in Yellin's book, "...as soon as it's curtains for the Axis, it's going to be lace curtains for me."<sup>24</sup>

Besides industry jobs, women were also able to work in fields that many women had never worked in before. Women went to Washington D.C. for government work, but they often found themselves without Friday night dates, decent housing or equal wages. Women also began to push their way into journalism by working in editorial and reporting jobs for newspapers and magazines. Between 1940 and 1944, the number of accredited, female reporters covering the House and Senate proceedings in Washington D.C. rose from 33 to 98. Women were not allowed into privileged journalism societies like the National Press Club, which didn't allow women in until 1971. These female pioneers had to work around a sea of men, but were expected to be cutthroat, but with all of the graces of a woman, simultaneously. It was photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White who plunged into the trenches to photograph the war as it was happening. She became the first accredited female photographer after photographing a nighttime Nazi bombing attack on the Kremlin in Moscow. It was also she who marched with General Patton and his army into Germany and took the first photos of Buchenwald, the first liberated Nazi concentration camp. It is these pictures that are often shown as the first visual evidence of the American's discovery of the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup>

Yellin states something that Bullock did not. She states, "In the fall of 1942, minor league baseball suspended play because the young male players were needed in the war," and soon the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 292-296.

draft hit the majors too.<sup>26</sup> It was this that created the opportunity for women to become entertainers, specifically in the sporting realm.

### **The Origins of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League**

Figure 3 All-American Girls Professional Baseball League Logo



*Source:* Dave Jordano, AAGPBL Logo, 1990, [http://education.baseballhalloffame.org/experience/thematic\\_units/womens\\_history/assets/AAGPBL\\_logo.jpg](http://education.baseballhalloffame.org/experience/thematic_units/womens_history/assets/AAGPBL_logo.jpg) (accessed April 20, 2010).

#### **Creation**

It was after the suspension of minor league baseball in 1942 that caused Philip K. Wrigley, chewing gum executive and owner of the Chicago Cubs, to come up with the idea to use women in a replacement league.<sup>27</sup> Wrigley and his scouts selected 280 finalists from around the country and Canada and invited them to Wrigley Field in Chicago for try-outs for the All-American Girls Softball League. From the 280 finalists, 64 women were chosen for four teams:

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



the Racine Belles, the Kenosha Comets, the Rockford Peaches, and the South Bend Blue Sox.<sup>28</sup>

Wrigley's original intention was to have the women play in professional ball parks, especially his own, in order to save MLB profits.

Wrigley wanted women who not only had the skill required to play ball, but they had to have beauty as well. Yellin wrote about the beauty expectations the league had:

Wrigley contacted a high-fashion beauty salon to counsel the players after spring training in Chicago. After a daily practice, players had to attend night classes in etiquette, personal hygiene, and how to dress correctly. They were issued a charm school guide with tips on beauty routines, clothes, and rules of behavior. It advised women that they were representing the league and needed to act with great propriety. 'Study your own beauty culture possibilities,' it said, 'and without overdoing your beauty treatment at the risk of attaining gaudiness, practice the little measure that will reflect well on your appearance and personality as a real All American girl.'<sup>29</sup>

With such focus on beauty and lady-like behavior, it's enough to make one forget that these women were professional ball players. Racine Belle Irene Hickson, the oldest player in the history of the league, began her baseball career in 1946 and took part in the beauty and etiquette classes. Hickson said in an interview later in life:

Oh yeah, we did go to charm school, it was sickening. How could you wear all that make-up and your hair up the way they wanted you to and get out there and play ball? Some of us didn't look any better if we had make-up on! It was silly, it really was. But everybody felt there was somethin' wrong with you because you could play ball. You were masculine and all that stuff, you know...<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> W.C. Madden, *The Women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League: A Bibliographic Dictionary* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Yellin, *Our Mothers' War*, 300.

<sup>30</sup> Sharon L Roepke, "Diamond Gals: The story of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League," A.A.G.P.B.L. Cards, 1986. A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

By 1944, Wrigley grew bored with the league and sold it to the financial advisor of the league, Arthur Meyerhoff, despite the league's surprise popularity. In 1943, the league recorded an attendance of over 176,000 patrons.<sup>31</sup> After the league's ownership change, it was renamed the All-American Girls Ball League.<sup>32</sup> According to author Barbara Gregorich, Wrigley did not aim to promote the game of baseball for women, "he simply believed they could not play."<sup>33</sup> Sports journalists disagreed, and many began to devote more time to the league after the suspension of minor baseball; this evidence is overwhelmingly supported by newspaper archives. The Racine Belles were the only team that were fortunate to have live play-by-play game coverage on the radio.<sup>34</sup>

### **For the Love of the Game**

AAGPBL season began in mid-May and ran through September, with about 108 games within a season. Teams played six games a week and double headers on Sundays with little rest in between.<sup>35</sup> Each team came with 15 players, a manager, a business manager and one female chaperone. Managers were ex-professional baseball players including legends like Max Carey, Jimmy Foxx and Dan Bancroft. The female chaperones were brought into the league in order to

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<sup>31</sup> Shattuck, "Playing a Man's Game," 212.

<sup>32</sup> Madden, *The Women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 3; Barbara Gregorich, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 84.

<sup>33</sup> Gregorich, *Women at Play*, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Shattuck, "Playing a Man's Game," 212.

<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Hightower, *Media Coverage and Depiction of the Sporting Woman in the All-American Girls' Baseball League, 1943-1954*: Typescript, 1992-2000. A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

act as a team's personal policewomen, nurse, business manager, surrogate mother and best friend.<sup>36</sup>

The game was a modified version that incorporated aspects of both softball and baseball, and from the first season in 1943 and on, the league used a regulation sized softball during game play. Over the years the game balls became smaller, eventually reaching the size of a regulation baseball.<sup>37</sup> The years leading up to the smaller, more baseball-like balls are known as the "dead ball era," because of the power that was needed to hit home runs.<sup>38</sup> Besides the ball size, two other differences set AAGPBL play apart from both softball and baseball: the distance from the pitchers mound to home plate and the distances between the bases were shorter, averaging between 65 and 85 feet, depending on the ball park, compared to the 90 feet standard in the MLB.<sup>39</sup> Although the game was much more like softball than baseball, one significant difference set AAGPBL ball from softball: base stealing.<sup>40</sup> In 1947, underhand pitching was banned and pitchers had to learn to throw either overhand or sideways, causing many pitchers to quit or abandon the league for the newly developed rival Chicago National League.

One other difference was the manner of dress on the field. Typical male players donned pants, high socks, and a jersey. AAGPBL uniforms were dresses, which a player would wear silk shorts underneath, silk socks, and a belt. The skirts were short, said to be modeled after figure skating outfits, but according to AAGPBL rules, uniforms shorter than six inches above the knee

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<sup>36</sup> Shattuck, "Playing a Man's Game," 212.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>38</sup> Madden, *The Women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Jackel, "Kurys still steals the spotlight," *Racine Journal Times*, August 4, 1991.

<sup>40</sup> Gregorich, *Women at Play*, 84.

cap were strictly forbidden.<sup>41</sup> Due to the non-existence of padding or protection for sliding into a base, the players often hurt themselves and had to endure painful bruises, strawberries and cuts on their legs, thighs and buttocks. Just like in regular baseball, playing in the AAGPBL could cause women to have all sorts of injuries. Racine Belles player Betty Russell says in her 1946 diary that soon after practice began for the season, she hurt her ankle and then hurt herself again soon after. “I crippled myself when I went back on a fly ball and stepped off a slope in the outfield and pulled some muscles in my stomach. Sure was a painful darn thing.” The next day, on the bus trip across Tennessee, “I really spent an uncomfortable day on that darn bus. Every time we hit a bump, I nearly died,” Russell said.<sup>42</sup>

Figure 4 AAGPBL Uniform



*Source:* Kenosha Men’s Senior Softball League, Kenosha Comets Uniform, <http://www.msblkenosha.com/Comets%20uniform.jpg> (accessed April 20, 2010).

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<sup>41</sup> Cahn and O’Reilly, eds., *Women and Sports in the United States*, 60. Yellin; *Our Mothers’ War*, 301.

<sup>42</sup> Betty Russell. *Diary of an AAGPBL Player, 1946*, pg. 9. A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

## Rules

Although the players in the AAGPBL were serious athletes, they were more than expected to act and look like acceptable young women. According to the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League Rules of Conduct, the players were expected to follow high standards. When not in practice or play, the women were expected to appear in feminine attire, and that excluded pants of any sort.<sup>43</sup> Long hair was preferred to “boyish bobs”, and it was a must that it be groomed at all times. The feminine look also included the requirement that a lipstick must always be worn. Also, no jewelry was allowed to be worn during practice or game play.<sup>44</sup>

Smoking and drinking were prohibited in public places, as was obscene language. While on the road, the players had curfews that extended to no later than 12:30 a.m., although Betty Russell’s diary indicates that this rule and the drinking rule were broken quite often.<sup>45</sup> Living quarters and eating places while on the road were to be approved by the team’s chaperone, in addition to all social engagements. All requests for dates with the opposite sex required approval by the chaperone as well, and notice of a team member’s whereabouts were to be left, including a home phone number in case of an emergency. Teams were required to travel as a unit, therefore driving oneself to the ballpark was forbidden, as was driving a car outside of the city limits without the manager’s permission.

While on the field, players were not allowed to give baseballs out as souvenirs, especially without the permission of the management, due to financial constraints. Friends, relatives and

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<sup>43</sup> Cahn and O’Reilly, eds., *Women and Sports in the United States*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>45</sup> Diary of an AAGPBL Player, 1946, pgs. 4, 8.

visitors were forbidden from the team's bench, and socializing with the other teams was banned as well. The league attempted to encourage spirited rivalries between teams, and if players did anything more than have a friendly chat in a hotel lobby with a rival team member, heavy penalties could be levied on the players. A first offense could cost a player could be fined for five dollars. The second offense resulted in a 10 dollar fine, and a third offense resulted in suspension. Despite the many rules, injuries, and demanding management, most sources indicate that the players enjoyed their time in the league. Compared to the \$37 a week that a woman in a shipyard could make, these talented ballplayers could earn between \$45 and \$85 in the same amount of time.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Belles of the Ballgame**

Figure 5 Racine Belles Team Photo, 1945



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<sup>46</sup> Yellin, *Our Mothers' War*, 300.

*Source:* All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, 1945 Racine Belles, 1945, Racine, Wisconsin, <http://baseballisms.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Racine-Belles.jpg> (accessed April 20, 2010).

### Welcome to Horlick Field

In the first year, the four teams (Belles, Comets, Peaches, and Blue Sox), travelled to each other's stadiums, but it was Horlick Field that the Belles called home. Although Betty Russell did not join the Belles until 1946, she wrote, "Well today we saw a little of 'Racine' and the ball park where [we] will play. It is 'Horlick Athletic Field.' Really a swell field."<sup>47</sup> Instead of providing the women with their own residences, the league set them up with Racine families who would keep them as boarders. Betty Russell and her bunkmate moved in with Ginny and Larry Wilson and their two young boys, not far from the ball field. Mike Corona, a past bat boy for the Belles, told the *Racine Journal Times* in 2003 that, "It meant a lot to the Racine community due to the fact that all of our guys were in the Army and defending our country and there was nothing going on with sports around here."<sup>48</sup>

Figure 6 Horlick Field



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<sup>47</sup> Diary of an AAGPBL Player, 1946, pg. 14.

<sup>48</sup> Sports, "Racine: 'They were all ladies,' *Racine Journal Times*, October 19, 2003.

Source: June Peppas, Horlick Athletic Field, Racine, Wisconsin,  
[http://www.aagpbl.org/gallery/misc.cfm?ID=Horlick\\_Field](http://www.aagpbl.org/gallery/misc.cfm?ID=Horlick_Field) (accessed April 21, 2010).

## The Players

More than 700 women played in the AAGPBL.<sup>49</sup> The Belles players came from many different places and some even hailed from Racine itself. Many of the players were children of immigrant parents, most of whom were born in Europe, indicating that many of the early Racine Belles were first or second generation Americans.<sup>50</sup> Some players played for only one season with the Belles, others came from other teams, and some stayed until the team's departure from Racine. Each player was unique with distinctive qualities that brought them into the league.

One of the Belles most prominent and famous players was Sophie Kurys from Flint, Michigan. Kurys, nicknamed "Tina Cobb", for her superior playing ability, and "Flint Flash", for her all-time record for stolen bases and runs scored in the AAGPBL.<sup>51</sup> For many years, Kurys' stolen bases record remained unbeaten in all of professional baseball, until MLB player Rickey Henderson surpassed the record in 2004.<sup>52</sup> Her nickname was well earned; in one season she stole 201 times out of 203 attempts. Kurys stole 80 percent of the time she spent on base, and even had the ability to steal home. On the field she played second base and sometimes in the outfield or on the mound.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Madden, *The Women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> AAGPBL Questionnaires: Typescript, 1944-1945. A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

<sup>51</sup> Shattuck, "Playing a Man's Game: Women and Baseball in the United States, 1866-1954," in *Baseball History from Outside the Line*, ed. Dreifort, 213.

<sup>52</sup> Madden, *The Women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, 139.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



Kurys' career began years before the scouts came to her hometown to give her a tryout. In 1939, she and her high school softball team made it to the Michigan State Championship, making her a hot commodity for the AAGPBL, and she was recruited early after the founding of the league. The scout held her tryout outdoors in the snow. He was impressed enough that he sent the 17-year-old's parents a contract, which her mother secretly signed because her father did not approve of women playing baseball professionally. Kurys played for the Belles from 1943 and through the move from Racine to Battle Creek, Michigan, and quit after the league was disbanded in 1954. By the end of her professional career, Kurys had 3298 at bats, 859 hits, 22 home runs, 1114 stolen bases, 278 runs batted in, and a .260 batting average. Her outstanding sportsmanship won her the coveted Player of the Year Award in 1945.<sup>54</sup>

Figure 7 Sophie "Flint Flash" Kurys



Source: All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, Sophie Steals Another, [http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2145/2386616725\\_627f1f5799.jpg?v=0](http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2145/2386616725_627f1f5799.jpg?v=0) (accessed April 21, 2010).

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Most players joined the league as teenagers, fresh out of high school, except for Irene Hickson. Players like Eleanor “Slugger” Dapkus (Wolf), of Chicago, Illinois, was recruited in 1943 at the age of 19 after being spotted by a Chicago Cubs scout. She was selected as an All-Star in her first season after leading the league with 10 home runs. Dapkus’s career was cut short in 1948 after receiving a knee injury due to the lack of protective gear.<sup>55</sup> A similar misfortune happened to Betty Emry, who could only play for two seasons after seriously injuring both knees.<sup>56</sup>

### **Success**

In 1943, the Belles exceeded people’s expectations. The club scored big when they signed Edythie “Edie” Perlick (Keating), a female baseball phenom who was used to market the league to potential players. She had one of the highest batting averages in the history of the league. In the first season Dapkus was named an All-Star, and with the leadership of seasoned athlete Irene Hickson, the Belles took home the AAGPBL’s very first pennant. With the addition of two teams in 1944 and another four in 1945, the Belles experienced a dry spell, but they acquired key players like Betty “Moe” Trezza and Madeline English.<sup>57</sup>

Between 1944 and 1945, the AAGPBL sent each player a questionnaire asking about the players’ hobbies, family origin and what their favorite memories were from their time in the league. The majority of the Belles listed that winning the AAGPBL’s first pennant was the greatest thrill in their experience with sports. Many of the women also wrote about the fan letters they received after their very successful first year, many of which included proposals from

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>57</sup> Shattuck, “Playing a Man’s Game,” 212.

perfect strangers. One player who excelled after the pitching changes in 1947, Anna Mae Hutchison, listed that she collected cigarettes, and Madeline English wrote down her superstitions and her game play rituals such as touching third base when running out onto the field, or always saying a Hail Mary in the batter's box.<sup>58</sup>

Championship series were played by the leading team in the first half of the season and the team that led in the second half of the season. The team's most successful, and most well-known year, was 1946. The team, yet again, took the pennant, but with the loss of players after and the pitching changes in 1947, the Belles had to forgo the championship, yet Kurys, Perlick and Hutchison made the 1947 All-Star team.<sup>59</sup> The team took the pennant again in 1948, the year the league expanded to 10 teams.<sup>60</sup> The next two years, before the move to Battle Creek, proved to be too much for the fading stars.

## **Demise**

Most sources indicate that the Belles' demise occurred due to financial misfortune and low attendance. Over the years, the Belles' management raised the prices of attendance, and in 1949 the business manager had to bargain with the many mistakes he made over the years. Unlike most teams, the Belles were privately owned, and the owners could no longer pay to keep the Belles in Racine with near empty stands. The team was bought and moved to Battle Creek, Michigan. Many of the players that stuck with the Belles, from the time that they had begun their

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<sup>58</sup> AAGPBL Questionnaires: Typescript, 1944-1945. A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

<sup>59</sup> The Racine Belle 1, no. 1 (April 1948). A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

professional careers, quit the league. Madeline English, one of the players who quit the AAGPBL, said, “To me, the league was over.”

A random newspaper article in a collection of Racine Belles artifacts at the A. Bartlett Giamatti Library delineates what happened to the team. The article, headlined: “Racine Belles withdraw from girls’ league,” states that “...a number of reasons for having reached this decision, after careful consideration and discussion, the main reason, of course, being a lack of interest and attendance on the part of a sufficient number of person to warrant the severe financial losses suffered by the club over the last three seasons.” The article also says that many other teams had been feeling financial burdens and that the Belles were carrying the league for many years, causing strain on their finances, and ruining them in the end.<sup>61</sup>

Racine Belles attendance began to drop after Major League Baseball resumed normal play. The aforementioned article also states that the Belles’ attendance hit an all-time high in 1946 at 102,413, about 2,000 visitors per game, and dropped to 100,130 visitors in 1947. By 1948, the Belles’ only drew in 79,994 admissions, and in 1949, attendance took an even sharper dip down to 44,912 for the season.<sup>62</sup> Another major cause of the Belles’, and the entire AAGPBL’s, demise was introduction of live-televised MLB games.<sup>63</sup> Tim Wiles, an archivist at the A. Bartlett Giamatti Library in the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum said that there is some literature that claims that the introduction of air conditioning began to affect MLB game attendance, but it killed the AAGPBL.<sup>64</sup> Debra Shattuck says that a change in the management

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<sup>61</sup> “Racine Belles withdraw from girls’ league,” Unknown newspaper, unknown date, Racine Belles-General Collection, A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Yellin, *Our Mothers’ War*, 301.

<sup>64</sup> Tim Wiles, interview by author, Cooperstown, NY, March 30, 2010.

system of league also played a part in the AAGPBL's demise. The change allowed the owners of AAGPBL clubs to take over the league, and the drastic cuts to publicity and recruiting budget seriously harmed the league.<sup>65</sup>

Although the league ended, one manager attempted to hang on to it by organizing a group of select former AAGPBL players into a cross-country barnstorming team. The team toured the country playing mostly men's teams. In the first season the group played 107 games in 90 days, and eventually the players grew tired of the hectic schedule, bad hotels and little fame.<sup>66</sup> It was after this that professional baseball was closed to women.

## **Conclusion**

Although women had been playing baseball and softball for decades, it really wasn't until the 1940s when the AAGPBL was formed that women had the opportunity to play a sport professionally. It was while many American men left to fight the Axis powers during the Second World War that the existence of baseball in America was threatened, but Philip K. Wrigley's idea for a women's replacement league kept professional baseball in America going. Similar to the idea of using female industrial workers only on a temporary basis until the men returned from war, the replacement league was only temporary as well. The players moved on to play in other semi-professional leagues, but many returned to their homes and took on jobs or stayed at home and raised families. Margaret Danhauser (Brown), a member of all three Racine Belles

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<sup>65</sup> Shattuck, "Playing a Man's Game," 213.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 213-214.

championship teams, began working for the same company that produced *The Racine Belle*, the Racine Belle's official newsletter, after her time in the AAGPBL.

In 1988, the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York recognized the AAGPBL and made a space for the team in the museum and in the archives. A statue was erected in honor of this event and can still be seen on the grounds today.

Figure 8 Commemorative AAGPBL Statue at the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum



*Source:* Jacqueline DuPont, AAGPBL Statue, 2010, Cooperstown, New York.

The women of the AAGPBL had many songs and poems they sang and recited throughout their professional baseball playing years, but after the league was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Pepper Paire Davis wrote this tune:

Move over boys – in baseball's hall of fame,  
Make room for the girls – who played –the all American game,  
While you men were out – win-ing – World War II,  
Hey- we swung the Bats – and we ran the paths!  
And yes, we could hit that dirt!  
We played baseball – we did it all!  
What's more – we even did it – in a skirt!  
So thank you Cooperstown – for making a space,  
And putting us in – our rightful place,  
Come on let's hear,  
A might cheer,  
Cause- the All American Girls Professional Baseball League,

Is finally here!<sup>67</sup>

Belles player Anna Mae Hutchison and chaperone Virginia Carrigg wrote a poem that sums up the feeling of many of the Racine Belles after the end of the league. In an “Ode to the Racine Belles”, Hutchison and Carrigg wrote phrases such as, “The forty years have since rolled by, and my memory not so clear, but every one of the Racine Belles, in my heart I recall most dear...As I sit and I dream, I am satisfied, that life has treated me well, for the greatest of honors that I could attain, was to have been a Racine Belle.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Pepper Paire Davis “All American Cooperstown Song,” Lyrics. AAGPBL Collection: 1943-1954, A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

<sup>68</sup>Anna Mae Hutchison, “An Ode to the Racine Belles,” Poem. Written by Virginia Carrigg. AAGPBL Collection: 1943-1954, A. Bartlett Giamatti Research Center, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York.

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