



# The Racine Belles: The Rise and Fall of the Stars of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League



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**Abstract:** This research project surveys 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 World War II, creating a fear that the loss of these men could lead to the end of the sport. This project studies why the popular and victorious Belles were disbanded sooner than other AAGPBL teams. The triumphant event in women's history and the effects of the Racine Belles and other AAGPBL teams 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 multiple primary sources from the A. Bartlett Giamatti Library at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

**Hypothesis:** The demise of the Racine Belles and the AAGPBL was caused by the return of MLB players from war.



The All-American Girls Professional Baseball league was created by chewing gum executive and Chicago Cubs owner, Philip K. Wrigley, in 1943 after both minor league and major league baseball were suspended due to the loss of many players to the war raging in Europe and the Pacific.

Wrigley, AAGPBL managers and professional baseball scouts had 280 women brought to Chicago for tryouts in the Spring of 1943. Of the 280 women, 64 women were chosen for four teams: the South Bend Blue Sox, the Rockford Peaches, the Kenosha Comets, and the **Racine Belles**.

#### Game Play

- Season ran from mid-May through September
- 108 games per season, six games per week with double headers on Sundays
- Teams consisted of 15 players, one manager, one business manager and one female chaperone
- League began with the use of regulation softballs. Balls were whittled down over the years until they were the size of regulation baseballs.
- Shorter distances between bases (AAGPBL: 65-85, MLB: 90)
- Shorter distance between pitcher's mound and home plate
- Major difference: stealing

#### "Lady-like" Ballplayers

- Required etiquette, hygiene and fashion classes at the beginning of every season
- Required charm school lessons
- Hair was to be long, bobbed hair was banned
- Lipstick wearing was enforced
- Pants were not to be worn in public during the season
- Uniforms, although they were already very short, were not to come up any higher on the leg than six-inches from the top of the knee

#### More Rules

- No smoking or drinking in public
- 12:30 a.m. curfews
- Chaperone had to review and approve all outings with the opposite sex
- Team was required to travel as a unit
- Baseballs were not to be given out as souvenirs without manager's approval
- Socializing between teams was forbidden
- \$5 for first offense, \$10 for second offense, suspension for third offense

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### The Belles of the Ballgame

The Racine Belles played on Horlick Field in Racine, Wisconsin. Players came from all over the United States and Canada, and some lucky Belles came from Racine itself. Many of the players began playing softball or baseball as children or in high school.

Racine Belles player Sophie Kurys played with the team from 1943 and continued to play for the team after the team moved to Battle Creek, Michigan in 1951. Kurys held the all-time AAGPBL record for runs scored and the all-time record for stolen bases in all of professional baseball until 1994 when MLB player Rickey Henderson surpassed her. Kurys had the ability to steal home and in one season she stole 201 times out of 203 attempts.



### Sophie Kurys' Career Stats



### Success and Demise

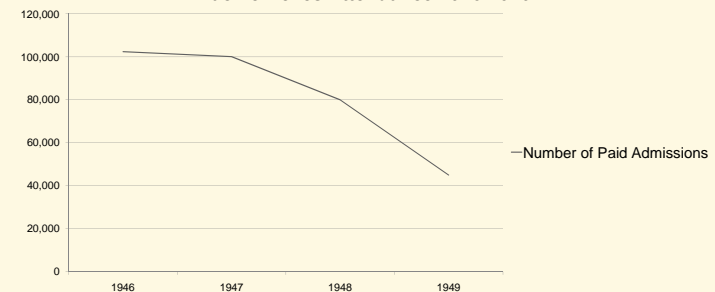
The Belles had many all-star players, and Sophie Kurys was named "Player of the Year" in 1945. The talented team won AAGPBL championship pennants in 1943, 1946, and 1948.

One year after the conclusion of World War II, the Racine Belles had their most successful year on the field and in the ticket booths. It wasn't until 1948 that the team and the league began to see significant dips in admissions and finances.

By 1949, the Racine Belles' attendance fell 44% over four seasons. In more successful years, the Belles management offered struggling clubs with their finances, but were not afforded the same goodwill in their own time of need.

After a dismal 1950 season, the Racine Belles withdrew from the AAGPBL and the team was bought and moved to Battle Creek, Michigan before the beginning of the 1951 season.

### Racine Belles Attendance 1946-1949



The AAGPBL continued after the withdrawal of one of its oldest and most successful teams, but came to a close after the 1954 season. Research proves that after Major League Baseball games began being broadcasted over television airwaves, dips were seen in MLB attendance, but this caused significant damage to the only successful women's professional baseball league in American history.