There's No Crying in Baseball: Feminization, Sport, and Spectacle in the All American Girls’ Professional Baseball League

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There’s No Crying in Baseball: Feminization, Sport, and Spectacle in the All American Girls’ Professional Baseball League

Flipping through the television channels or browsing on the internet, people more and more are coming across advertisements for a new sports attraction: The Lingerie Football League (LFL). This women’s league began as a Super bowl halftime side show but has exploded in popularity and viewership. The LFL features all-female athletes, who wear helmets, shoulder pads, lingerie, and little else. The League’s Mission Statement sets out the image it would like to create for itself: “The Lingerie Football League has become the ultimate fan-driven live sports phenomenon—blending action, impact, and beauty.”¹ To obtain viewers, the league posts advertisements that exploit the sexuality of its players, sometimes having them pose with no clothes on at all. With this in mind, one may wonder how this type of attraction could come into existence. Why did the LFL owners decide that this is how women should play football?

Interestingly enough, the origins of the LFL may have come from another women’s league from sixty years earlier.

When many people hear about the All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), they think of the 1992 film, *A League of Their Own*. While this film does give a general depiction of the creation and life inside the AAGPBL, it omits many of the important personal stories, reactions, and reasons for the league’s creation. Obviously it would be difficult to encapsulate the AAGPBL into one feature film. Penny Marshall, the film’s director, focuses

¹ Lingerie Football League.
on players and their struggles to make the league a success, while glossing over some of the more negative realities of the AAGPBL. Marshall does not focus on what drove Philip Wrigley, the creator of the AAGPBL, to start an all girls’ baseball league or how some women struggled to adapt to the league’s rules and regulations. Ultimately, Marshall does not delve into the questions that this essay will focus on: What did femininity mean to Philip Wrigley and the other creators of the AAGPBL and how did that affect the league’s image and the players themselves?

I will examine what femininity meant to Wrigley and the other league owners, and show how and why the league emphasized femininity. I will also show how the media presented the league to the American people. Finally, I will also examine how players reacted to the rules and aspects of the AAGPBL regarding femininity. An analysis of these ideas will show how members of the media and fans actually perceived the league compared to how the league wanted the league to be perceived. This analysis will also demonstrate the realities of playing in the AAGPBL, a league that offered a unique opportunity, but also pressured a player into meeting difficult standards.

Starting a New League

Philip Wrigley created the AAGPBL in 1943, as a safety net in the midst of World War Two. Wrigley was the owner of the Chicago Cubs, and he had begun to worry how the war might affect baseball. Historian Merrie Fidler writes that Major League Baseball (MLB) players had been enlisting to fight in the war, including some of the biggest stars, so MLB owners began to worry about the future of baseball. When MLB commissioner Judge Kennesaw Landis considered suspending baseball to allow players to enlist or take up more essential occupations,
Philip Wrigley went to work. Historian Jennifer Hightower states that Wrigley and two other MLB representatives decided to begin a women’s league after visiting a semi-professional girls’ softball game. The men were pleasantly surprised by two factors of the softball game: the caliber of talent on the field as well as the level of enthusiasm in the stands. Wrigley marketed the AAGPBL as a patriotic opportunity for women to play baseball professionally, “pinch-hitting” for their male counterparts overseas. Wrigley believed though, that in order for his league to be successful, he would have to tread a fine line with the female athletes.

The AAGPBL is most remembered for giving women an unprecedented opportunity to play professional baseball and also for the way that players in the league were made to dress and act. Wrigley wanted his teams and the players to not only entice their fans with talent, but also to charm them with their femininity. This however, only begins to explain all of the rules and standards that Wrigley set when he went about creating the AAGPBL. He imagined a league that was very different than other women’s softball leagues. Hightower writes that when Philip Wrigley decided to create the AAGPBL, he was adamant about three things: first, his teams would be all female; second, the players would not be allowed to wear either slacks or skin-tight skirts; and finally, they would have good old-fashioned baseball names. In this statement, one can see the origins of what the AAGPBL would become.

Philip Wrigley had an ideal in his mind of what the feminine athlete looked like, and he began to build that model in reality through his players. When this essay discusses femininity, it will be referring to Wrigley’s ideal of femininity, which consisted of being physically attractive,

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2 Fidler, 30.
3 Hightower, 4.
4 Cohen, 45.
5 Hightower, 4.
white, heterosexual, and well mannered. With few exceptions, Wrigley demanded that his players fit into all four of these categories, or at least appear to do so. He wanted his players to be wholesome, yet striking women that could play baseball with great skill and as Marilyn Cohen states, “remind America what it was fighting for.”\(^6\) He made strict rules, and pressured his players to maintain a feminine image. Wrigley set out to alter the image of the female athlete and how that athlete could be marketed.

Wrigley pressured his players to meet his standards of femininity in a number of different ways. He assigned chaperones to each team, and told the chaperones, “This league is feminine, and it has to be kept feminine. The girls are out there to play baseball, not to be chorus girls, but they must be feminine all the time. We can’t have chippies, but we can’t have amazons either. No Freaks.”\(^7\) The league sent the players to charm school for the first few seasons in order to help them learn how to look and act appropriately in Wrigley’s eyes. At the beginning of each season, players were given guidebooks that featured numerous regulations and tips regarding how a player should look, act, and dress. Wrigley also made sure that the players that were chosen at tryouts fit the bill of a feminine athlete. Additionally Philip Wrigley hired chaperones to make sure his regulations were being met, and finally, the league’s “code of silence” regarding homosexuality barred the subject from ever being mentioned. These are just some of the different rules and aspects of the game that Philip Wrigley and subsequent league owners used to mold the AAGPBL players into feminine women. All of these rules helped the players to meet a tenet of Wrigley’s definition of femininity.

\(^6\) Cohen, 45.
\(^7\) Hightower, 7.
The league tryouts acted as the first step in choosing which women would play in the AAGPBL. As Hightower describes, the league made no mystery of the fact that image was important at the tryouts. Hightower writes, “A slim figure was as important as an outstanding batting average, and good legs were preferred to good arms.” That’s not to say that the tryouts were purely beauty contests. As one of Wrigley’s executives stated, league organizers worked to make ballplayers beautiful, not turn beautiful women into baseball players. The league wanted to showcase attractive women, but believed that actual baseball talent was the key factor when choosing a player. One player, Patricia Brown, describes her own tryout in her memoir, *A League of My Own*. She writes about her two tryouts, which as she describes pit her against hundreds of other women in workouts that tested mainly baseball skill. However, she also states that she had to send a picture of herself to the league, not knowing at the time that the picture would be used as a part of the league’s screening process, helping the league representatives to choose which players fit the mold of femininity. Indeed, Philip Wrigley did exercise his ability to cut players because they did not live up to the aesthetic necessities of an All-American Girl. He admitted cutting some women who he saw as “too uncouth” or “too masculine,” though this was probably very rare for women who showed an immense level of skill. Once the players were chosen, the league went to great lengths to preserve and highlight the feminine qualities of its players.

One of the most highly publicized aspects of the AAGPBL, was the league’s charm school. Although the league only contracted Helena Rubenstein’s Gold Coast Beauty Salon and

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8 Hightower, 5-6
9 Johnson, 144.
10 Brown, 21
11 Hightower, 6.
other subsequent charm schools for the first few seasons, its relationship with the league left an indelible mark on the AAGPBL’s image. While some fans and players saw it as a gratuitous ploy to bring national attention to the league, others saw it as a necessary step in turning tomboys into feminine athletes. One local paper writes that the players were not only taught how to apply products, but they were also subtly instructed in how to attract a man.\textsuperscript{12} The league used the charm school in order to show members of the public that although the players were very talented, they also were still women who might be moving to their communities. Only women who played in the first few seasons attended some form of charm school or beauty training, but all of the players in league received a beauty kit and the league’s rulebook, which, among other things, instructed players in how to apply their beauty products.

The rulebook, “A Guide for All American Girls: How to… Look Better, Feel Better, Be More Popular,” is rather shocking to the modern eye. Even the title seems to suggest that the owners felt that these women had low self-esteem and did not believe they were as attractive as other girls. A great deal of the guidebook deals with the proper etiquette, makeup, and dress of an AAGPBL player. The guidebook’s tone treated its reader as if she has never worn make up before or been taught how to interact in social situations. It stressed the importance of appearance and positive interactions with fans, but kept an overtly paternalistic tone throughout. In the first half of this guidebook, the author talked about the important features of an All-American girl. In the section entitled “Hair: ‘Woman’s Crowning Glory,’” the author explained the importance of washing and taking care of one’s hair, writing, “No matter the features, the clothes, the inner charm or personality – they can all suffer beneath a sloppy or stringy

\textsuperscript{12} Graffis, 50.
coiffure.”\textsuperscript{13} The author spoke to the players not as athletes, but as young girls who had little idea of how to take care of their hair. The guide had similar sections on the mouth, teeth, eyes, body, deodorants, hands, and face. The author spoke with a patronizing tone that must have bothered some of the players who wanted to play baseball and not have to follow a beauty regiment.

The second half of the guidebook relates to player etiquette on and off the field. In the section entitled “Speech,” the author immediately stressed the importance of femininity warning the players, “You know she is a lady as soon as she opens her mouth.”\textsuperscript{14} The author then advised against using slang and foul language. Besides the “Speech” section, there were areas of the guide dedicated to making good introductions, behavior in public places, practicing good sportsmanship, treatment baseball fans, and dealing with the general public. This guidebook must have related to the players the importance of femininity in the AAGPBL. The league representatives left no doubts about how important they felt their players’ appearance was. Some players must have been annoyed by this aspect of the league, and undoubtedly some questioned whether their male counterparts had to be trained on how to dress properly or how the hair is a person’s “crowning glory.”\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, one must wonder whether the league felt that the players were so inept about their appearance that they needed these tips. Since Philip Wrigley said that one reason he started the league was to prove that a masculine sport would not masculinize a female athlete, was he trying to prove this to himself as well? In issuing a guidebook to every player, the league owners acted like they felt that the players needed training and guidance in eradicating or at least masking their inner-masculinity.

\textsuperscript{13} Sherman, 3.
\textsuperscript{14} Sherman, 8.
\textsuperscript{15} Sherman, 3.
The guidebook laid out the beauty and etiquette tips, but team chaperones helped to enforce these regulations on the players. Philip Wrigley hired chaperones to not only help players adjust to life in the league, but also to make sure that each player lived up to the AAGPBL’s appearance guidelines and followed league rules. One infamous example of a chaperone exercising her power occurred when former player Shirley Jameson was about to bat in a tense situation during a game when her chaperone stopped her and said, “Oh my dear, you don’t have your lipstick on!”16 This example seems humorous now, but it also reveals the priorities that the chaperones had. They did help the players adjust to the life changes that came with joining a professional baseball league, but Philip Wrigley entrusted these chaperones to make sure his standards of femininity were met.

In addition to the standards that players would have to meet mentioned above, Philip Wrigley also knew, but never publicly mentioned one other important point when creating the AAGPBL. Many female athletes already faced a stigma of being too masculine and there was a definite stereotype that female athletes were often homosexual, and so, not “real” women. Sociologist Michael Messner has written about the challenges and critics that female athletes face. He gives an example of a caller to a radio show, where the caller and jockey discuss the merits of women in sports. After concluding that women’s sports are not worth watching at all, the caller states that he did find one softball pitcher impressive—a woman who reportedly pitched a no hitter while also striking out all 27 batters who she faced. Upon hearing this, the radio jockey retorted, “What was her life partner’s name?”17 This small example of homosexual stereotyping resonates today, and it applied when Philip Wrigley wanted to start his league. He

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16 All American Girls
17 Messner, 108.
was aware of the stigma that athletes faced, and even stated that he wanted to start this league to prove that playing a masculine sport would not drain women of their femininity.\textsuperscript{18} Wrigley did not address homosexuality directly when talking about the league, but some authors have written about the AAGPBL’s “code of silence” regarding homosexuality.\textsuperscript{19} Susan Johnson writes that there was such a stigma surrounding homosexuality that some younger players did not know what lesbianism meant when they first came to the AAGPBL.\textsuperscript{20} Whether or not he meant to prove that the players could remain heterosexual while playing a masculine sport, Wrigley did not want his players to be grouped together with other female athletes who did not meet his standards of femininity.

The AAGPBL went to great pains to ensure that its players would have to be viewed as feminine, but that was not the only problem that the league faced. At a time when women were entering traditionally male spheres all across the country, Philip Wrigley knew that there would be those in the public who would be upset by seeing women playing baseball at all. Professional baseball always had been a strictly male venture, as women could play amateur softball but really could not go any higher than that. Some fans and critics of the national pastime were not ready to see baseball invaded by women. Wrigley faced this problem indirectly—by marketing the game as different than traditional men’s baseball. In addition to presenting the players as overtly feminine, he also tinkered with the rules, so that the public would see not see the players as a replacement for men, but rather as playing a game that was similar to baseball, but not quite the same.

\textsuperscript{18} Hightower, 4.
\textsuperscript{19} Ardell, 113.
\textsuperscript{20} Johnson, 114
Some of the game play changes that the AAGPBL made were permanent while others evolved over time. The most obvious difference between Major League Baseball game play and that of the AAGPBL was the size of the ball. Although in *A League of Their Own*, it appears players use what looks like a standard regulation baseball, the AAGPBL representatives did not institute a ball that size until the very end of the league’s tenure.\(^{21}\) At the opening of the first season, the league was actually called the All-American Girls’ Softball League, which was fitting because the women played with a softball instead of a baseball.\(^ {22}\) The name changed to the All-American Girls’ Professional Baseball League by the end of the first season, and the size of the ball changed as well, getting smaller and smaller as seasons passed. (see Appendix i) This was not the only difference between the MLB and the AAGPBL. Wrigley and other representatives took other steps to assuage critical fans who feared the AAGPBL’s possible effect on baseball.

Kenneth Griswold elaborates on some of the other fundamental differences that the AAGPBL owners installed. He writes that the size of the baseball diamond was shortened, so that there was 65 feet between bases and 40 feet between the pitchers mound and home plate as compared to 90 feet and 60 feet and six inches respectively in the Major Leagues.\(^ {23}\) He also writes that pitchers threw the ball underhand rather than overhand or sidearm, but other scholars and players themselves have disproved this. Jean Ardell, for instance, states that while pitchers began throwing strictly underhand, over time many began experimenting with throwing the ball sidearm and even overhand.\(^ {24}\) This, like the size of the ball, was a change that evolved over time

\(^{21}\) Griswold, 69.  
\(^{22}\) Ardell, 114.  
\(^{23}\) Griswold, 69.  
\(^{24}\) Ardell, 114.
Murphy, 11

as fans became more comfortable with the fact that women could play baseball. Nevertheless, all of these changes helped to differentiate the AAGPBL from men’s baseball, and worked to ensure that the AAPGBL would always be seen as a women’s league.

Even with these changes it is difficult to know whether the league would have satisfied disgruntled fans without the influence of the media. From local newspapers to national magazines, journalists across the country printed articles about the spectacle of the AAGPBL. The influx of articles about the league helped to develop national publicity, even though not every journalist took the same approach when writing about the AAGPBL. Members of the national media and journalists from local newspapers in cities helped to inform the nation about the AAGPBL and to give the impression that the AAGPBL was not going to intrude on men’s baseball.

Media Reaction to the AAGPBL

National magazines like *Life* and *Time* printed their own articles about the AAGPBL when the league first arose. Jennifer Hightower quotes a *Life Magazine* article in which the author states outright, “girls’ professional baseball is something less than regulation professional baseball, something more than softball.” The journalist assured potential critics that the game they will be watching will not impede on baseball, but will be better than softball. B.A. Bridgewater, a sports editor in Oklahoma City, provided another example of this, but from the point of view of a local journalist. As the AAGPBL would tour throughout the country before the season began, a writer like Bridgewater would use his articles to promote the league for the few nights that the players were in town. Bridgewater wrote about an AAGPBL tour visit in his

25 Hightower, 12.
weekly article in the *Ponca City News*. Bridgewater elaborated, “After seeing one game of the so-called ‘girls’ baseball,’ however, we cannot reconcile this colorful and fast moving sport with baseball. It’s topnotch girls’ softball attractively presented, interesting, fast—but not baseball.”

Both of the journalists encouraged fans to come watch AAGPBL games, while also making it seem that the girls would not intrude on Major League Baseball. The writers believed that as women, the AAGPBL did not possess the talent to compare to professional male baseball players. However, the AAGPBL would probably still approve of these articles because they both encouraged people to come watch the games, while also ensuring that the league will not intrude on baseball.

Journalists for national syndicates and small town newspapers that did not have teams of their own many also tended to write more and more about the accentuated sexual qualities of the players, especially as time passed. The *Texarkana Gazette* ran an article that exemplified this change in one of its articles. The author, Hardy Rowland, focused on the players’ feminine features rather than the skills they display on the baseball diamond or the game itself. Rowland began, “The Peaches (referring to the team, the Rockford Peaches) brought their lipstick to South Argenta… solely in the interest of professional research, I staggered out to Travelers Field to see how they stacked up… Most of them were stacked up pretty good.” Rowland immediately mentioned the player’s lipstick, showing that he only really saw them for their feminine qualities. He then took on a playful tone, joking with his male readers about his true reasons for going out to watch the women play. Rowland made a tongue-in-cheek comment, playing off the phrasing of “stacked up,” further insinuating that the reason to see an AAGPBL game would be to have

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26 Bridgewater
27 Rowland.
the opportunity to ogle the players on the field. Rowland then promoted the game that would be played in town the next evening, writing, “Carolyn Morris, of Phoenix Ariz., will do the pitching for the ‘Peaches’ and she is prettier than two deuces when you are trying to build four the hard way.” Rowland’s completely ignored any aspect of game play and shifted his focus completely on to the women as objects. His description of the players did not give the sense that the women were wholesome or well mannered. Rowland probably created interest in the league, but not the type of interest that Wrigley wanted.

Many newspapers also used articles and cartoons to promote, but also make statements about the players and the league itself. Many of the cartoons used sarcastic comments as a way to enforce a certain perception about the league. Some cartoons portrayed players with the suggestion that the games provided a place to watch sexy female athletes (Appendix ii). Often these cartoons went further, promoting the idea that the players were still typical women at heart, often showing them living up to female stereotypes (See Appendix iii). The latter illustration came from a hometown newspaper in 1945, when they league was still relatively new. The cartoons often belittled the women as athletes, and their goal was to give a male audience a way to exert dominance over the players. Males could read the cartoons and know that even if the women were extremely talented, they did not have the concentration and drive of male athletes. This type of commentary went beyond hinting that fans could ogle women at AAGPBL games. This type of media representation altered the league’s perception in a way that Wrigley may not have expected, and probably did not like.

28 ibid.
This type of commentary extended beyond cartoons and into some articles. Two writers, Adie Suesdorf and Wilton Garrison provide examples. Suesdorf’s article in the *Atlanta Journal* shows how he looked at the players from a paternalistic point of view and encouraged others to do the same. Throughout his article, Suesdorf spoke about the players as fragile women more than as professional athletes. He cited how the fans cared for their players, and he stated that, “Even on the rare occasions when they are irked by a sloppy performance, they never stoop to raucous personal comments.” Suesdorf spoke about the players as if they need constant positive reinforcement and would not be able withstand criticism for playing badly. Suesdorf then closed this piece by quoting many players who state that they can play until they are around twenty-six, which is the age where they claim to start putting on weight. Addressing the future of the league, Suesdorf concluded, “In the next few years, a steady stream of young players will be coming up to the big league to replace the stars who marry, have children, or just get matronly.” Suesdorf’s conclusion leaves little doubt of how he viewed the players. He did not say that the women would retire; rather, he looked to the events in a woman’s life that would force her to leave baseball, or at least leave the AAGPBL. Also, by quoting players who stated that the women tend to gain weight around the age of twenty-six, Suesdorf attempted to conclude in the voice of one of the players. Suesdorf gave the impression that the players agreed that they should stop playing once they gained weight, got married, or had a child. Suesdorf was one of several journalists who would write as if he represented the voice of the players to act as if the all of the players agree with his point of view.

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29 Suesdorf, 5.
30 ibid, 8.
Wilton Garrison of the *Charlotte Observer* provides another example of this type of journalism. He wrote his article in 1947, during the fifth season of the AAGPBL, and he used this method of writing, except he did not even quote a player. When Garrison spoke for the players, he made them seem weaker and not as dedicated because of their sex alone. At one point, Garrison stated flatly, “They’d rather be out at the plate than out of fashion in the hairdo department.” Without referencing a single player, Garrison reduced these professional athletes to attractive women half-heartedly attempting to play baseball. His usage of “rather” gives the impression that the girls did not want to play baseball as much as they want to be spectacles and objects to be watched. Philip Wrigley and other league owners could not control this type of journalism, even though it became very prevalent during the AAGPBL’s tenure. It is difficult to know how the majority of Americans perceived the league, but these articles and others like them must have affected the way some people viewed the AAGPBL players.

All of the newspaper articles and cartoons referenced so far have come from either national sources or local newspapers in cities that did not have their own teams. It is interesting to note though, that the pattern of writing about players while focusing completely on feminized aspects and not athletic ability did not extend to the cities that had their own teams. There were negative articles and cartoons written in these towns as well, but they were not as prevalent after the first few seasons. As Susan Johnson points out, when reading an article from the *Racine Journal Times* or *Rockford Morning Star*, home of the Belles and Peaches respectively, one may forget that the players are women. The hometown journalists witnessed games nearly every night during the summer, and as Johnson points out the *Morning Star* describes the games without

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31 Garrison.
“gimmicks or flourishes” and without, “condescending sexism.” The journalists would only write about the action on the field, and when they lauded players it was usually for their athletic abilities and not their appearance.

The sportswriters for the *Racine Journal Times* also did not participate in the sexualized form of writing. One writer, Jim O’Brien even railed against the aspects of femininity in the AAGPBL writing that these things “result in smug ridicule by big-time sportswriters who never saw a girls ball game.” O’Brien continued, “It could spend the money laid out for these ventures in an attempt to get more and better players for the towns that appreciated the league for what it was worth.” O’Brien clearly had an affinity and a connection for his hometown team and he disliked the negative press involved with the AAGPBL. Its difficult to know whether the league could survive by bringing in more talent and spending less on making the league appear feminine, as O’Brien suggested, but its clear that he and the writers in other newspapers located in cities with teams saw the league in a different light. They had a connection with the players and pride in their teams, so their priorities as journalists were different.

Reviewing the way that different journalists wrote about the league provides a more complete picture of how Americans viewed women who played baseball. Looking back, one can appreciate the struggle the players must have endured to obtain respect for their talents. While there surely were some fans and writers who saw the league as an important step towards equality for female athletes, there were also many who saw the players as sex objects alone and others who saw them as stereotypical women whose hearts were not really in the game. Only in hometown newspapers where writers would witness enough games to be able to see through the

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32 Johnson, 7.
33 O’Brien.
feminine covering, did journalists show an appreciation of the women as athletes. The AAGPBL players dealt with criticism as well as played under Wrigley’s rules and femininity requirements. While some of the journalists mentioned above painted the players as happy to be apart of the league and in favor of showing off their femininity, not all were. Many AAGPBL players did grow tired of their overly feminine portrayals. However, it seems that many players were willing to put up with the league’s regulations regarding femininity and their portrayals in the media in order to fulfill a greater goal, playing baseball professionally.

**The Players’ Perspectives**

Various historians have written about the AAGPBL players’ feelings towards the league and have come up with different results. While some players attempted to fight against rules, it seems that many begrudgingly accepted the rules because the AAGPBL offered them the chance to fulfill a lifelong goal. Some former AAGPBL players even claim that they did not mind the emphasis put on femininity and they were just happy to be apart of the patriotic movement of the time and the historic league. Others have said that they agreed that emphasizing femininity helped the league to gain publicity and stay around for as long as it did. Although players did not all agree about how they felt about the league, many were willing to live with the league’s rules because they were not going to get a better opportunity to play baseball anywhere else.

The AAGPBL did anger some players with its overbearing regulations. Both Mary Rountree and Dottie Schroeder have looked back on the Charm School and have talked about how they found it annoying and unnecessary. Rountree came to the league after it had already done away with the Charm School but stated, “I’m sorry I missed that. I think I could have
benefitted from it. In fact major-league players could use a little more charm themselves.”

Dottie Schroeder, who did attend Charm School, saw that the Charm School would not be able to do much good because it did not last very long. She added sarcastically, “We were charming after that one week.” Both of these players probably understood the Charm School as a way to create publicity, but as players, they found it annoying. Rountree raises the issue of inequality. Most of the AAGPBL’s rules regarding femininity had nothing to do with perfecting a player’s skill, but focuses solely on creating a womanly image. The players though, had no choice but to accept the rules if they wanted to stay in the league.

Not many former players have come out and said that they agreed with all of the league rules and regulations, but many have given reasons for why they liked the AAGPBL or were willing to play, regardless of the rules. In an extensive interview with a former player and in Susan Johnson’s various interviews one can highlight a number of reasons for why a player would stay in the AAGPBL for as long as she could. Many players were willing to endure the league’s policies and sometimes negative portrayals in the media because the AAGPBL offered them the chance to be role models and leaders in the women’s movement. Others have said that that salary gave them independence and was higher than they could earn in most other jobs. Often though, players have cited the opportunity to play the game that they loved as their reason for not only staying in the league, but also for defending and siding with the AAGPBL decisions on a number of controversial issues.

In an interview entitled Departing from the Traditional Pattern, a former player called only “Marie” throughout talks about many different topics including why playing in the league

34 Johnson, 145.
was so important to her. One of the main reasons that she cites is that the league offered her the opportunity to be a role model and important figure. Marie talks about how she considers a landmark organization for women. She focuses on the barriers that the AAGPBL helped to break down for female athletes stating, “By the jobs that we had after playing, it gave women the sense they could accomplish something that they weren’t supposed to do.” Maries saw and still sees the AAGPBL as a positive force for herself and for women in general. As Marie continues to talk, she mentions some of the aspects of femininity but she frames them in a different light. She refers to the league’s uniform and appearance policies; but she states that they were in place to help the players become better role models for younger girls. Marie and other players often mention being a role model as one of the best parts of playing in the AAGPBL. As a player, Marie could ignore some of the more irritating policies because she valued the leadership role that the league gave her.

Marie is not the only player who cites being a role model as an important aspect of playing in the AAGPBL. Many of the former players that Johnson interviews mention that playing in front of young female fans drew them to stay in the league. While just their passion for baseball was enough to keep them in the league, the added perk of becoming a heroine for hundreds of young female fans came to be a beloved aspect of playing in the AAGPBL for many of these women. Some of these fans like the “Coke girls,” in Rockford, Illinois who would wait for their favorite players after the game and hand them a bottle of soda as they entered the locker room, developed a bond with the players. Many former players mention that they simply

36 Hensley, 28.
37 Ibid, 27.
38 Johnson, 154.
appreciated having loyal fans who would flood the stadiums each day. It seems that the opportunity to play for loyal fans gave some players enough reason to stay in the AAGPBL, despite its drawbacks.

One other factor that kept many players in the league was the salary that a player could make. In no other league, could a female play baseball and earn enough money to live comfortably. One player describes how she left a job at a department store where she earned less than thirteen dollars a week for the AAGPBL where she earned eighty-five dollars a week. The financial opportunities that the AAGPBL offered matched or bettered most salaries that a woman could earn, especially if that woman wanted to play baseball or softball professionally. The AAGPBL would only pay players while the season took place, but the league also did not allow players to work other jobs during the season, so it gave out considerably reasonable salaries. Playing professional baseball for a better salary than one could make working another job would give many players reason enough to stay in the league.

Probably the most obvious reason for a girl to stay in the league was that the women tried out for the AAGPBL loved playing baseball. As Susan Johnson writes, “The source of pleasure for them in their careers was actually playing the game they loved.” The AAGPBL players appreciated what the league offered to them, regardless of the drawbacks that came with the opportunity to play baseball. Dottie Collins exemplifies this point when she described the league uniforms that she despised wearing: “It was a dress! ... But it was put to us that either you play in

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40 Ibid, 39.
41 Ibid, 38-39.
42 Ibid, 30
‘em or we’ll give you a train ticket home. Well, we weren’t about to go home.”

Playing in the AAGPBL had many drawbacks, but the opportunity it offered was unequal by any other profession. One can see why players would defend the league when discussing policies that made the league popular. Some were willing to defend the league’s policies and even believed the policies were right because these women wanted the league to survive. Many players believed that they had to have faith in the league rules so that they could continue to play.

Many AAGPBL players have spoken about how they agree that some aspects of femininity that the league promoted were important to the league’s survival. Johnson mentions one newspaper story about a catcher in the league, Ruth Lessing. Next to the story, there was a picture of Lessing putting on makeup, and the caption under the picture read, “Applying make-up is important to Ruth Lessing, Grand Rapids Chicks catcher.” Johnson asked one of Lessing’s teammates if this was true, and the teammate laughed off the proposition, stating, “It was all just publicity.” Lessing’s teammate went on to say that Lessing was one of the most intense players in the league—once fined one hundred dollars for striking an umpire. However, players were willing to put up with these portrayals, even when they were not true because the publicity helped to keep the league alive. This applied to the skirts the players wore as well. Johnson writes that former players complained most about the skirts given that sliding in them often led to gruesome bruising. However, as a former manager once noted about one of his players, “When she slid and those skirts went flying up over her head, you should have heard the fans.

43 Ibid, 151.
44 Ibid, 148.
They just roared.” Some of the AAGPBL players felt that the league’s feminine image helped to bring in fans and keep the league successful.

One controversial aspect that came with Philip Wrigley’s definition of femininity was that the league largely remained all white. At no point was an African American woman admitted to play, even after Jackie Robinson had integrated the Major Leagues in 1947. When the interviewee, Marie, addresses this point, she states, “I think I was aware of the ‘feelings’ of the time and felt that the AAGPBL had a better image.” Marie’s curt statement does not provide much about why she felt the AAGPBL did not integrate, other than that she thought it would be bad for the league’s image. Former player Sis Waddell also attempts to justify the segregation, saying, “Look what the fans did to Jackie Robinson. What would they have done to some woman tryin’ to play ball.” Both of these players suggest that the league’s image would be hampered by integration. Waddell offers that it would have been difficult for an African American to adjust to playing, pointing to the racism that Jackie Robinson had to endure during his tenure in the MLB. The points that the two players raise also point to the fact that the AAGPBL was about more than just talent. The league representatives probably feared fan reaction to integration, and the players defended the policies if it meant keeping the league around.

Susan Johnson says that the biggest issue in the AAGPBL was homosexuality. Marie takes a similarly standoffish stance towards homosexuality as she does towards race. When asked about the pressure put on players to maintain a feminine image, Marie mentions another softball league. Marie shows that the stigma of homosexuality was very strong, as she does not

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46 Ibid, 149.  
47 Hensley, Appendix A.  
48 Johnson, 113.  
49 Ibid, 114.
even associate homosexuality with the AAPGBL. Marie states about the other softball league, “I
didn’t know the girls in that league well enough to say they were ‘that way.’”\textsuperscript{50} The stigma
surrounding homosexuality however did not cloud the league representatives to the fact that
there were homosexuals in the AAGPBL. As Johnson describes, the league eventually adopted a
policy that as long as a player was discreet about her sexuality the league would not intervene
nor would it try to hunt homosexual players out. As one former manager stated, “If I had said to
the girls on my team ‘Don’t be gay,’ they could all have quit and gone home, leaving me
stranded there.”\textsuperscript{51} This policy certainly did not offer a friendly atmosphere for homosexuals; it
still allowed many women who identified as homosexual to play baseball.

Many of the players who provide insight into life in the AAGPBL talk about the
adjustments they had to make to live under the league’s strict rules. While many do talk about
small rebellions such as breaking curfew or not wearing a skirt in public, none say that they felt
these restrictions would have stopped them from playing. Johnson quotes a former player, Kate
Vonderau. Vonderau speaks about the league policies and came to the conclusion that, “In order
for people to accept women playing baseball… it was important not to emulate men in how we
looked and acted.” Vonderau continues, “I didn’t feel it was all that important really, but from
the point of view of the fan it might have been.”\textsuperscript{52} Vonderau’s weak endorsement of the league’s
policy does seem representative of the player’s overall. She, like many players, probably grew
annoyed with the constant attention paid to how the player’s looked, but she relished in the
opportunity to play professional baseball, and was willing to satisfy fans in order to play. In most

\textsuperscript{50} Hensley., Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{51} Johnson, 115.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 151.
of the players’ minds the opportunity to play professionally and be a positive female role model trumped the drawbacks like playing in a skirt or having to attend Charm school.

Conclusion

When looking at the AAGPBL from three different perspectives, those of the league owners, the media, and the fans, one can see that it meant something different to each group. It does not appear that Philip Wrigley wanted to force the players into becoming sex objects; rather he may have genuinely felt that the American public would only accept female baseball players that had an air of femininity about them. Many members of the media ignored how Wrigley saw femininity, and instead wrote about the players in a much more sexualized way, and in some cases attempted to denigrate the players because of their femininity. The players themselves often looked at the league as an unprecedented opportunity and were willing to put up with the rules because they wanted to be apart of the organization. Its hard to justify the lengths that the league took in feminizing these athletes, but one has to wonder if Philip Wrigley was wrong in assuming that the public would only accept female baseball players who met his definition of femininity.

Looking at the reactions to the league, one sees that only in hometown newspapers where fans were able to see AAGPBL nearly every night for months at a time, did journalists eventually write about the players as athletes instead of as female athletes. Other than in these cases, most journalists and other members of the media focused on the AAGPBL because of the novelty that it offered. During the time period of the AAGPBL, no other women’s league drew nearly as many fans as it did. Also, many of the players themselves agreed with Wrigley’s methods or at least accepted them as a necessary means in order to continue to playing baseball.
in the league. Additionally, many if not most of the former players look back on the league with pride, even if they did not always agree with league policies. One former player, Lavonne Paire summed up her feelings for the league saying, “We put our hearts and souls into the league. We thought it was our job to do our best because we were the All-American girls.” Paire does not have ill will towards the league because it gave her, like many other women, a chance to showcase her talent and passion for baseball.

It’s difficult to blame Philip Wrigley and the other owners for creating the regulations regarding femininity when the league did offer such an unprecedented opportunity for women to play baseball. In the end, the more important questions may center on the American public. Since the owners never got rid of the rules regarding femininity, we do not know if the league could have survived with them. However, we can ask why the league thrived with these rules in place. Did the public only accept female athletes who in their actions and appearances reminded them of their femininity? Is there a different standard for female athletes than for males? The AAGPBL only lasted for eleven years, but perhaps its most important legacy is that it showed Americans that we only allow female athletes to succeed when they prove to us that they are not “amazons” or “freaks.”

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**Additional Source**


**Appendix**

Caption: “I dunno – the catcher went out to tell the pitcher something, but they’ve been gabbing for 15 minutes now.”

Murphy, 30