

AAGPBL Script

Welcome to History from Room 213, a 5 minute history podcast. I'm your host, Beccah.

Today we're going back to the Homefront of WWII. Rosie the Riveter symbolized the strength of the millions of women who left the home, entered the workforce, and filled the shoes of the men who were off fighting in the war. They kept the military supplied and the economy moving. At the same time, the "girls" of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League stepped up to the plate and into the cleats of the ballplayers sent overseas, to keep baseball, America's favorite past-time, alive.

As the economy of the 1920s boomed, and radio brought the game of baseball into the living rooms of millions of Americans, so did the popularity of the game itself. With the 1930s came the Great Depression. The financial stability of the American economy crumbled, and Major League Baseball felt the effects. On December 7, 1941 Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and America became involved in the Second World War. Many players were drafted to fight, including stars like Joe Dimaggio and Ted Williams. Two years into the war minor league teams across the country began to fold. The future of baseball looked grim.

Fearing that the MLB would suffer the same fate as many minor league teams, Chicago Cubs owner, Philip Wrigley, formed a committee to devise a plan to save Major League Baseball. That plan became the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League.

Wrigley deployed scouts to all regions of the country in search of the best female players to join the league. Out of all of the prospects, 280 were invited to participate in the final leg of tryouts held at Wrigley Field in Chicago. There, the participants endured tests to determine their abilities on offense and defense. For defense they were drilled on throwing and catching the ball. On offense they were tested on their ability to hit the ball and run the bases.

But for Wrigley, that wasn't enough. He believed that to draw a crowd, not only must the players be All-American Athletes, they must also be "All-American Girls." Each full day of tryouts concluded with classes at Helena Rubenstein's Beauty School. Here, they were trained on how to walk, sit, and speak like a lady. They received lessons on selecting clothing, applying makeup, and styling their hair.

Ultimately players were chosen based on two criteria. First: that they were the model of the all-American girl next door: feminine, attractive, and white. Second: the women were chosen based on their athletic abilities. Sixty lucky players were then divided into 4 teams: the South Bend Blue Sox in Indiana, the Racine Belles AND the Key-no-sha Comets in Wisconsin, and the Rockford Peaches in Illinois.

May 30, 1943 opening day of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. Never before had America seriously considered the notion of women playing Professional Baseball.

Attendance was bleak. Those who did show up were there not to watch baseball, but simply for the novelty, And, let's be real here, to take in "the view."

Much to their surprise, what those in attendance found was that these "girls", as they called themselves, were exceptional athletes, performing at an astonishingly high level of play. The league quickly developed a loyal fan base, and soon attendance rivaled that of its male contemporaries. All while playing in a skirt.

The image of the All-American girl was important to league administrators. The US was in the midst of a war and Wrigley wanted to cash in on the patriotic fervor sweeping the nation. That's not to say that the patriotism within the league was disingenuous. In fact, in the first year of play, the teams were subsidized by businessmen in war-production cities as entertainment for the workers who spent their days working in munitions factories, worrying about family members fighting abroad, and rationing things like sugar and gas. Being able to attend games and support their home team offered a sense of relief and a break from their daily troubles.

Many of the girls had boyfriends, husbands, and brothers fighting in the war. At the start of each game during the singing of the Star Spangled Banner, players from each team lined up from home plate forming a "V" for victory. Players visited wounded soldiers and played exhibition games to support the Red Cross. The war was always in the back of their minds.

The league remained popular for many years, until encountering financial trouble in the early 1950s. There were several contributing factors to the setback: American Society was moving backwards in its acceptance of women in nontraditional roles. Women were being forced out of the workforce and back into the kitchen; Rosie the Riveter was replaced with June Cleaver. Attendance fell and the league in general was mismanaged. In 1954, the league disbanded for good.

Although they didn't see themselves in this way, the players of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League were pioneers in Women's sport. Most felt lucky to make a living doing the thing that they loved: Playing baseball and bringing joy to their community.

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