No Freaks, No Amazons, No Boyish Bobs

by Susan M. Cahn

Worried that baseball’s status as the national pastime would not survive World War II, Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley devised a new spectacle to insure that it did. The All-American Girls Baseball League entertained a war-weary public with its calculated combination of feminine charm and masculine athletic ability.

In 1943 Chicago Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley launched a bold new baseball enterprise. Fearful that major league baseball might collapse under wartime manpower shortages, he proposed a professional women’s baseball league. The All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBL), as it came to be called, served a dual purpose for Wrigley. He promoted the league as a form of entertainment for a war-weary public in need of wholesome, outdoor recreation. At the same time, he used women’s baseball as a temporary replacement for the men’s game, keeping stadiums occupied and fan interest alive.

The AAGBL celebrated women’s strength and energy, but it also kindled anxieties about traditional gender arrangements in American society. Since the early twentieth century, critics of women sports enthusiasts had cast them in the negative image of “mannish athletes,” an image that questioned their femininity and raised the specter of lesbianism. Sport was considered a male activity, the domain of traditional masculine virtues of aggressiveness, competition, physical prowess, and virility. Women athletes were seen as intruders into this male realm.

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The AAGBL used the gender issue in sports to its advantage as an ingenious way to market its brand of baseball to the public. By demanding that its players combine “masculine” athletic skill with very feminine appearance, the AAGBL maintained a clear distinction between male and female roles while providing the fans with skillfully played and exciting baseball. The league thus avoided the mannish image that plagued other women’s sports.

League managers could assure audiences, amazed at seeing a woman play a “man’s game,” that the players were feminine and “normal” in every other respect. Although the AAGBL did not fundamentally challenge existing concepts of masculinity and femininity, it gave a group of gifted women athletes a unique opportunity to compete with the best players in the nation in a game they loved.

The league opened in four midwestern cities: Kenosha and Racine, Wisconsin; South Bend, Indiana; and Rockford, Illinois. After a slow start, attendance climbed steadily, and Wrigley’s experiment gained a foothold in the professional sports world. The AAGBL later expanded to include teams in Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and Muskegon, Michigan; Fort Wayne, Indiana; and Peoria, Illinois, with short-lived attempts in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis; Battle Creek, Michigan; and Springfield, Illinois. It became much more than a wartime surrogate—spanning the years 1943 to 1954—and at its peak operated in ten cities and drew nearly a million fans.

As it became clear that the major league men’s game would survive the war, Wrigley lost interest and sold his share of the AAGBL to Arthur Meyerhoff, his close associate and advertising agent. Meyerhoff created the Management Corp. to publicize and coordinate league teams, which typically were owned by businessmen from the sponsoring city. From 1944 through 1956, Meyerhoff’s Chicago-based office managed the league with assistance from a board of directors and a league commissioner. In 1951 disgruntled team owners bought out Meyerhoff and decentralized the league’s organization during its last four seasons.

The AAGBL’s eventual collapse in 1951 should not obscure its remarkable accomplishments. For twelve seasons the league played a four-month schedule of 120 games plus a championship series. Attendance during peak years ranged from 500,000 to one million as fans eagerly turned out to root for local teams named the Daisies, Lassies, Peaches, Blue Sox, and Comets. The league recruited women from nearly every state and several Canadian provinces. Often championship athletes in several sports, players received $10 to $80 per week in the league’s early years and up to $125 per week in later years. They grabbed at the chance to play ball professionally, seeing it, as did Fort Wayne player Jean Haydosh, “like a dream . . . to get paid for doing something you liked so well.” For credibility and name recognition, the AAGBL hired ex-major league baseball managers. Among them were Jimmie Foxx, Marty McManus, and Max Carey (who also served as commissioner for several years). Though constantly beset by financial problems, high manager turnover, and franchise failure, league teams that survived the initial trial period drew well and commanded tremendous loyalty from hometown fans. For instance, the Racine Belles attracted more spectators than any local male sports team had ever drawn. And when the Rockford Peaches threatened to go under in the 1950s, fans raised the money to keep the team

Like other teams in the AAGBL, the Racine Belles strove to project a carefully groomed, attractive, and very feminine image to the public.
No other women's team sport before or since created such a viable professional organization. Even tennis and golf, the most successful women's professional sports, were still primarily amateur without professional tours or association. In order to succeed, a women's professional sports enterprise had to overcome the cultural perception of sport as a masculine activity. Since the development of organized sport in late nineteenth-century America, men had dominated virtually all athletic events and associations, except for brief periods when women's tennis and swimming commanded a share of the limelight. College football, professional baseball, men's and field, and boxing enjoyed large popular followings, while administrative bodies like the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Amateur Athletic Union, and the National and American baseball leagues were led by men with little interest in women's athletics.

Americans saw sport as a male activity, and they associated athletics with masculine ideals of aggressiveness, competitiveness, physical strength, and virility. Virtues for men, such traits raised the specter of "manliness" in women. Doctors, scientists, and exercise specialists cautioned that sport posed grave emotional and physical dangers to women, issuing ominous warnings about female hysteria and damaged maternal capacity. However, some women braved the criticism and enthusiastically engaged in sports—from the 1890s bicycle craze to gymnastics classes, swimming, track and field, basketball, and especially softball in the 1930s and 1940s. Advocates viewed sport as a step toward emancipation that granted them physical freedom and competitive experience denied under restrictive Victorian notions of femininity.
teams that occasionally featured women players competing against men, the AAGBL needed to sustain interest after the initial effect wore off. Meyerhoff again linked success to the combination of feminine charm and masculine activity. He believed that "the sight of girls playing baseball remains a constant source of amusement and wonder to most fans," and "the fact that the All-American players are 'nice girls' would give women's baseball an edge over men's in winning fan interest and sympathy.

The management did not consider athletic ability within the boundaries of femininity; they described baseball as a masculine activity and the girls' league as a spectacle. The principal logic behind the league was to find women who played ball "like men," not "like girls," and who looked like "nice girls," not like men. Why did Wrigley, Meyerhoff, and the team owners insist on this distinction? The answer lies in the broader history of sport as a male arena and, specifically, in the tarnished image of women's softball.

Invented in the early 1900s as a derivative of baseball for indoor play or in restricted outdoor space, softball came into its own as a game in the 1930s. The Amateur Softball Association (ASA) was organized in 1934, and after only one year 950,000 men, women, and children participated in ASA-sanctioned leagues. New Deal programs like the Works Progress Administration poured money and workers into facility construction projects and community recreation programs. The depression-era boom caused the Christian Science Monitor to note that softball was fast "becoming a national recreation for the masses."

When the war came, softball's popularity continued to soar so that by the mid-1940s the New York Times estimated the sport had grown to include nine million players, 600,000 teams, and 150 million spectators in the United States. Though popular nationwide, softball's strongest roots lay in the Midwest. Chicagoans showed a special zeal for the sport. The city hosted several of the first ASA national tournaments and catered to all ages and abilities through park, YMCA, church, business, industrial, and athletic association leagues.

Girls and women eagerly joined the throng. Unlike baseball, softball had no masculine stigma at first. If anything, the use of a softer ball, the smaller field dimensions, and early names like "kitten ball" and "mush ball" cast softball in a
slightly feminine light as a game appropriate for women, youngsters, and men not rugged enough to excel in baseball.

On the local level, any criticism of female athletes usually paled next to the popular support given to teams by neighbors, family members, friends, and co-workers. Softball thrived in rural areas and urban working-class neighborhoods. In both settings, notions of femininity were expansive and flexible enough to encompass the broad range of women's physically demanding domestic work and wage labor. Unlike middle-class culture, rural and working-class cultures had traditionally defined womanhood more in terms of family and community roles than prescribed feminine attributes and activities. Such flexible definitions allowed for the "outdoor girl" or "tomboy" with an avid interest in softball. In addition, by organizing leagues through neighborhood parks, churches, service organizations, and businesses, supporters of softball built upon existing community institutions. During the depression and wartime eras, when money, gas, and leisure hours were in short supply, people flocked to their local playing field for an inexpensive evening's entertainment. When women's teams met success, winning in their leagues and advancing to city, state, regional, and national competitions, they continued to excite loyalty and enthusiasm among hometown fans who were more concerned about players' batting averages than femininity quotients.

However, by the late 1930s, good women's teams began to attract attention as much for their "masculine appearance" as for their superior ability. Within a decade women's skill levels had increased dramatically with the best teams often defeating men's teams in fundraisers and exhibition games. Skilled women players demonstrated speed, power, and competitive zest previously associated only with male athletes. In addition, as women developed physically through training, the size, weight, and musculature of some players evoked negative images of "mannish athletes." During the depression these stereotypes were fueled by cultural anxieties about female intrusion into male realms. High male unemployment and the resulting family disruptions caused many Americans to fear that working women were supplanting men in jobs and in the role of family provider.

Media accounts of women's softball took a more critical approach by 1940, labeling softball a masculine sport and evening skilled women players with suspicion. In their book Softball! So What, Lowell Thomas and Ted Shane took an apparently positive view, applauding the women's game as an activity that didn't "bunch muscles, give girls a weight lifter's figure, develop varsity-club leg, the usual penalty of fiendish exercise. . . ." Yet the authors also observed that women failed to exhibit ladylike manners on the field and resisted "anything effeminate" in the rules, letting out "such a holler as could be heard from Sappho to Amazonia" when men tried to modify the rules for women. In this case, the authors defended the sport as compatible with
femininity. Yet at the same time they introduced an element of ridicule by referring to general prohibitions against women athletes and intimating an association between softball and lesbianism through allusions to Sappho and Amazons.

Robert Yoder barely contained his scorn in a 1942 Saturday Evening Post feature on women's softball, which described Olympia and Frieda Savona, star players on the national championship team, the New Orleans Jax. "Olympia runs like a man, slides like a man and catches like a man," but "though built like a football halfback, looks like Miss Frieda." Revealing a sense of threatened manhood, he contrasted women players who "may occasionally play like men, and occasionally even look like men" with "the frailest creature on the field [who] is frequently that undeveloped shrimp, the male umpire."

Wrigley sensed that to make women's baseball attractive to a mass audience beyond the neighborhood appeal of softball, he would have to overcome such negative portrayals and circumvent charges that, as a "male sport," baseball would masculinize women. He devised a strategy that served as the guiding principle of the AAGBL long after his own involvement ended. By insisting that the women play baseball, not softball, Wrigley hoped to sustain interest in baseball as a spectator sport. And by demanding that players combine masculine skill with femininity and attractiveness, he kept the ideal of feminine womanhood constant before the public eye. In this way the league would try to establish itself as a cut above women's softball, avoiding its mannish image and reputation for rougher, tougher players with less audience appeal.

In 1944 the founding of the National Girls Baseball League (NGBL) in Chicago challenged the AAGBL's preeminence and undermined its unique status as the only professional baseball league for women. The NGBL initially consisted of four semipro teams that had dominated women's softball in the Chicago area. Anchored by mainstays like the Parichy Bloomer Girls, the Music Maids, the Rockola Chicks, and the Match Corp. Queens, the league expanded to six teams and attracted 500,000 annual spectators by the late 1940s. Like the AAGBL, it faded out in the early 1950s, but in the meantime the NGBL acted as a constant thorn in the side of its rival. Competition between them for publicity and for players led to salary wars, talent raiding, and eventual lawsuit. The NGBL remained closely tied to softball, keeping the underhand pitch and shorter base paths of softball as well as the traditional softball uniforms of shorts or knickers. It placed no special emphasis on femininity, though it did not refrain from using sexual appeals in advertising.

The existence of a rival deepened the AAGBL's commitment to its unique brand of feminine baseball. The league had used the underhand pitch in 1943 but quickly legalized a side-arm delivery and eventually switched completely to overhand pitching. Meyerhoff's Management Corp. sought a competitive advantage by continuing to stress femininity and a unique style of ball to contrast with the rough, masculine image of softball. A beauty consultant hired for spring training in 1944 captured the spirit when she substituted the feminine nickname "marygirl" for the more masculine "tomboy" moniker to
describe "the type of young womanhood" desired by the AAGBL.

By associating masculinity with athletic skill and femininity with appearance, the AAGBL maintained a clear sense of appropriate divisions between male and female, even as it gave women an unprecedented opportunity to enter a male sports preserve. The AAGBL adhered to this principle both in the concrete daily operations of the league and in the ideology of women's sport it promoted. The league's dress and conduct codes, its public relations campaigns, and its playing rules all reflect this overarching philosophy.

In the AAGBL handbook, Meyerhoff's Management Corp. spelled out the logic behind the accentuated contrast of feminine charm with masculine athletic ability. The section called "Femininity with Skill" instructed recruiters to weigh both ability and femininity in prospective players because it was "more dramatic to see a feminine-type girl throw, run and bat than to see a man or boy or masculine-type girl do the same things. The more feminine the appearance of the performer, the more dramatic the performance." The guide further explained that the league's rules must go hand in hand with players' own efforts to project the desired image. The manual continued:

For the benefit of self and game every player devotes himself to cultivation of both skill and femininity. Management reinforces this standard faithfully. It is for the purpose of keeping constantly before the spectator the feminine elements of the show that the Alleghenian girls are uniformed in tennis-type skirts. Conversely, boyish bobs and other imitations of masculine style and habit are taboo. Masculine appearance or mannerisms produce an impression either of a masculine girl or an effeminate boy, both effects prejudicial to the dramatic contrast of feminine aspect and masculine skill.
The carefully crafted impression of femininity included a sexual element. AAGBL officials absolutely forbade bawdiness or sexual antics reminiscent of barnstorming teams, often named "Boomer Girls," from an earlier era. Consistent with its "nice girl" image, the league boasted of the All-American Girls' "high moral tone," further safeguarded by the watchful eye of the chaplain. Nevertheless, Meyerhoff understood that his ideal feminine ball player would attract customers with her sex appeal as well as her slugging average. By insisting on short skirts, makeup, and physical attractiveness, he attempted to capitalize on an ideal of wholesome, feminine sexuality. A description of the league in the major league baseball Blue Book captured the essence of the ploy, explaining on the one hand that

The players did not reflect sex-consciousness. On the other hand, if by "sex" is meant the normal appeal of the feminine mode and attitude, then most certainly sex was an important source of interest and a legitimate element of the league's success.

To ensure that players did in fact embody the desired "feminine mode and attitude," the league's first few spring training sessions featured not only tryouts and preseason conditioning but an evening charm school as well. Led one year by beauticians from the Helena Rubenstein salon and another year by Chicago Tribune beauty editor Eleanora Mangle, the clinic coached players on makeup, posture, fashion, table manners, and "graceful social deportment at large." Guidelines on personal appearance accompanied the beauty tips. Management ordered players to keep their hair shoulder length or longer, to wear makeup and nail polish, and never to appear in public wearing shorts, slacks, or jeans.

The league dropped the charm school after its value as a public relations stunt ebbed. However, management's stress on feminine dress and manner never wavered. In fact, as the league's popularity declined after 1948, written dress codes took on a shrill, urgent tone. A 1950 directive from the main office announced: "This league has only two things to sell to the public, baseball and femininity." Stating that most players needed no prodding to appear feminine, the memo warned "others who will feel the sting of a shortened pay check if they don't comply..."

After buying out Meyerhoff in 1951, team owners adopted a new constitution that further elaborated dress guidelines, stating: "Always appear in feminine attire. This precludes the use of any wearing attire of masculine nature. MASCULINE HAIR STYLING? SHOES? COATS? SHIRTS? SOCKS, T-SHIRTS ARE BARRED AT ALL TIMES."

The league introduced several other measures to create the desired effect. The management rejected players it perceived as too masculine. Even after making a team, a player might be fined or released if she violated league rules. Infrctions included not only neglecting dress and hair requirements but "moral lapses" ranging from a bad attitude to negotiating with the NGBL to obvious lesbianism.

The AAGBL also had an unwritten policy against hiring minority women, although it did employ several Cuban players. Not until 1951 did the league openly discuss hiring black women, eventually deciding against the idea "unless they

"Thirst's inning"

This 1944 advertisement showing softball players relaxing after a hard game captures the calculated blend of feminine charm and masculine athletic ability promoters sought for the AAGBL.
disciplinary role, chaperones often forged strong alliances with players, serving as mediators, advisers, nurses, and player advocates as well as disciplinarians who enforced the strict player conduct code.

With these regulations, the league aimed to surround women's baseball with such safeguards as to warrant public confidence in its integrity and method. Public relations wizard Meyehoff developed several promotional schemes, varied spring training sites annually in order to increase media and audience exposure. In later years, the league established two traveling teams of young players not yet skilled enough for regular league play. The idea grew out of a failed expansion attempt in 1948. To thwart the NGBL's own expansion plans, the AAGBL established a Chicago team to occupy a stadium the NGBL had hoped to use. The team, the Colleens, failed immediately as did its expansion twin, the Springfield Sallies. To stave off embarrassment and further financial loss, the league used the team names and uniforms to form two traveling squads. The summer touring teams exhibited the AAGBL brand of ball to enthusiastic crowds in midwestern, northeastern, and southern states, functioning at the same time as a minor league program to hone the skills of potential league players.

Other publicity efforts aimed at gaining national media attention and at establishing good community relations in league cities. A film crew from Movietone News followed the league to its 1947 spring training in Havana, Cuba, to shoot a preseason game before a crowd of 25,000. Later released as a newsreel called "Diamond Girls," it exposed millions of moviegoers in theaters around the country to the spectacle of All-American Girls Baseball. Articles in national magazines like Colliers, Saturday Evening Post, and Holiday reported on the league's novel brand of baseball and growing popularity. Meyerhoff's office carefully orchestrated contacts with the media, providing glossy photos of the league's most beautiful players, issuing copies of the league's dress and conduct codes, and emphasizing the difference between baseball and soft ball. To stress the femininity of the league and quickly silence any suggestions of masculinity or lesbianism, AAGBL officials stressed to the media that league rules allowed "no freaks or Amazons." As proof, it proudly drew attention to the married
players and mothers in the league, though due to the young age of most players this group never comprised more than a tiny fraction of the AAGBL players.

While national feature stories highlighted the sex appeal and sensational quality of the league, local promotions stressed the team's contributions to community life and the players' "girl next door" image. Meyerhoff's Management Corp. was a profit-making enterprise, but individual teams incorporated as nonprofit organizations and returned a portion of their proceeds to the community by supporting local recreation programs and facility maintenance. Ownership by local businesses provided one source of civic backing, while teams gained additional support from local chapters of the Elks, the woman's club, and similar service organizations. Players made personal contact with community members by rooming with local families, giving clinics, attending banquets, and making public appearances at community events.

AAGBL teams fared best in medium-sized cities like Rockford and Fort Wayne, where such personal contacts could be cultivated. Unlike the larger cities of Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis where franchises failed, these small industrial centers combined a keen interest in baseball with the absence of other professional sports ventures to compete for the limited market. Daily newspapers in league towns provided excellent regular coverage, and local radio stations broadcast games in some league cities. In contrast to the national media, the local press rarely resorted to the femininity angle, employing it only in feature articles and preseason publicity spots. Once the season began, straightforward reporting prevailed without gendered headlines such as "Pretty Blonde Wins Again" or "Lady Blue Sox."

It is not clear whether the femininity concept advocated by the league was instrumental in a team's success or failure in a particular city. Many factors contributed to a team's fortunes, including financial backing, competition for the entertainment dollar, team strength, and management ability. While spectators may have responded positively to the feminine style and wholesome values projected by the league, skilled play, intense competition, and intercity rivalries also won the enthusiastic support of baseball fans.

The continued popularity of semipro and amateur softball teams suggests at least that alternative approaches, less concerned with expressions of femininity, could succeed alongside the AAGBL's intense focus on female image. In Peoria, for example, for several seasons the AAGBL Redwings struggled to stay afloat while the powerhouse women's softball team, the Peoria Diezettes, remained a popular favorite. And in Chicago, the NGBL offered a legitimate alternative to the Wrigley-Meyerhoff brand of baseball, though never reaching as wide an audience as the AAGBL.

Nevertheless, league officials remained firmly convinced that the contrast between feminine appearance and masculine skill formed the core of the league's appeal. While promotional efforts and dress and conduct codes guaranteed the feminine side of the equation, the impression of "masculine skill" rested on maintaining the distinction between baseball and softball. Management constantly adjusted the rules to more closely conform to the rules of men's baseball. Over the years the league increased the length between bases from 65 to 85 feet, shrunk the ball size, and introduced overhand pitching.

This strategy came back to haunt the AAGBL. The league wanted to highlight the fact that the women could play a man's game—baseball—at
the same time denying any resemblance between the All-American Girl and the "pants-wearing, tough-talking female softballer." Eventually this distinction caused the AAGBL to lose contact with its greatest source of talent, semipro and amateur softball players. After the early years the league fought a constant battle to find quality pitching and young talent. Many of the best softball pitchers were unable or even unwilling to make the transition to pitching overhand. Ironically, the very popularity of organized sport, with youth softball and baseball programs springing up everywhere, may have created unforeseen problems. Organized leagues, especially Little League baseball, tended toward strict gender segregation. By the 1950s fewer girls grew up playing neighborhood baseball on sandlot and playground teams. To compensate, the league hatched several player development schemes: summer and winter baseball schools, summer traveling teams, regional tryouts, and junior AAGBL teams in league cities. They did not produce the hoped-for results, causing league commissioner Fred Leo to lament, "We have too many oldtimers." Seeing rookies as "our salvation," the league introduced a rookie rule requiring each team to play at least one first-year player in order to develop recruits who otherwise could not break into the lineup.

Beyond the pitching shortage, the league faced a general problem competing for talent with the NGBL and top amateur softball teams. Though the AAGBL forbade jumping leagues, a few players did cross back and forth. Bidding wars for star players raised salaries and added to the bitterness between the two leagues. When league finances deteriorated in the 1950s, personnel shortages forced the league into a one-time "amnesty" offer to lure former players back to the AAGBL. Other women used the threat of jumping leagues to gain leverage in salary and trade negotiations, prompting the owner of the South Bend
No Froaks

Blue Sox to complain, "These girls have no idea of loyalty... They are sure a bunch of tough actors and will gouge you regardless..." The talent shortage may explain the heightened concern over dress and feminine image expressed in league communications during its last years. The league began signing very young players of fifteen and sixteen as well as courting softball veterans like the Savona sisters, noted in the media for both their "mannish" appearance and physical prowess. Forced to relax its standards of age and femininity in recruitment, management may have stepped up efforts to control player behavior and monitor appearance, hoping to reassure the parents of young recruits and to preserve the league's carefully cultivated feminine image.

Women joined the AAGBL from all over the United States and Canada, some heavily recruited, others traveling miles on the slim hope of getting a tryout. The young women shared a common childhood passion for sports and a particular excellence at softball or baseball. Interviews with former AAGBL members suggest that issues of femininity rarely concerned players, who overwhelmingly viewed the league as a fantastic opportunity to do something they really loved—play baseball. Yet looking back, opinion varies about the value of dress codes, rules of conduct, and the AAGBL's overarching femininity principle.

Some players found the league's concern with femininity ridiculous, while others believed it helped the league and improved the image of women athletes. Pragmatic rather than ideological considerations shaped players' views on the pastel-skirted uniforms. In a 1985 Sports Illustrated interview, Shirley Jameson, one of the first players ever signed, recalled her feelings as "ambivalent," noting that, "They were very feminine, and you could do the job—most of the time. But they offered little leg protection when sliding, thus Jameson recalls, "I spent most of the season with strawberries on both legs." Some players believed that if the uniforms created a good public impression, contributing to the league's survival, they benefited the players regardless of personal taste. Still others, like Kalamazoo player Nancy Mudge Cato, loved the sharp look of the uniform and spoke of it with pride. "I loved that uniform... When I'd see girls in the softball uniforms, jocks, running around, I didn't like it nearly as much. I was really thankful for the skirt. I thought they were just charming."

Players displayed a similar range of opinion about dress and conduct codes. Nancy Mudge Cato and Jean Havlish, who played in the 1950s and described themselves as more innocent than most, found the rules agreeable. Personally comfortable with the feminine style cultivated by the league, they also recognized that because of the discredited image of women athletes, "You had to be careful so you wouldn't give someone a bad impression, so you wouldn't hurt the gate... You had to do above reproach in everything so you wouldn't hurt the league."

Others chafed under the regulations but conformed out of a calculated estimation of the risks. Pepper Paire explained to Sports Illustrated reporter Jay Feldman, "You have to understand that we'd rather play ball than eat, and where else could we go and get paid $100 a week to play ball? So, if some of the girls liked to wear their hair a little bit short, or liked to run around in jeans, they bent with the rules." Yet Paire also remembered that "there were a few little ways of getting around the rules, as long as you were discreet and didn't flaunt it." And Faye Dancer, one of the league's more flamboyant players, regaled Sheldon Sunness of Z Magazine with her own approach to the rules. "I always respected the rules. I broke them all, but I respected them."

Shirley Jameson admitted that the charm training served a purpose but also found that the lessons often conflicted with the more important matter at hand—playing baseball. The charm teachers "didn't seem to be tuned in to what we had to do. Some of it was appropriate, but a lot of it you just couldn't use playing baseball." Dottie Schroeder saw charm training as "a joke, it was a promotional deal," while Irene Hickson rankled at the implied criticism of women ball players. Describing charm school as "sickening," she told historian Sharon Roepke, "It was silly, it really was. But everybody felt there was something wrong with you because you could play ball. You were masculine and all that..."

Players like Hickson had grown up in communities where baseball, basketball, and even fistfighting and football were unorthodox but still acceptable activities for girls. Physical strength, competitiveness, and personal toughness were
qualities admired in women and men alike. Moreover, in many working-class and rural areas, women's clothing styles were not as restrictive as dominant modes of fashion. To AAGBL players from such backgrounds, the league's dress code and concept of femininity may have appeared strange, irrelevant, or even offensive. Nevertheless, the practical tips on etiquette and social presentation could provide helpful instruction for players unfamiliar with formal dining or public speaking. And for players who wanted more than anything else to play ball, the league's philosophy made pragmatic sense. New Englanders Mary Pratt and Dotie Green admitted that they never questioned the rules at the time because "we were a little square, we were Puritans." But in hindsight, they still found the league's logic convincing, echoing management's reasoning that if fans "want to go out and see a bunch of tomboys play, they can go out to the park for nothing, but they have to pay 90 cents to get in here so they want to see girls with finesse."

Despite this range of opinion, former players seem not to have experienced sport as a masculine endeavor or to have personally felt a tension between sport and female identity. They regarded competitiveness, a love of sport, and the constant quest for improvement as integral aspects of their personalities, neither feminine nor masculine. Players did not express any sense of themselves as less womanly than nonathletes, even though they were aware that some baseball was a masculine game requiring masculine qualities. Their love of sport pushed questions of femininity into the background. Sport's masculine connotation presented problems only when it provoked negative responses from others or posed barriers to playing opportunities. In contrast to the Wrigley-McEerhoff concept of the AAGBL as a unique blend of masculinity and femininity, players did not see the league as a dramatic novelty of gender contrast. Rather, they found drama in the thrill of competition and novelty in the rare opportunity to work, travel, and meet people while pursuing their passion for baseball.

While the All-American Girls played tirelessly and enthusiastically over the long summer months, the management waged a constant battle against financial woes and franchise collapse. By the early 1950s even the most solid teams were in debt. Mainstays like Racine and South Bend withdrew from the league, which shrank to 14 teams in 1954. By the end of the season league directors conceded that they could not maintain even this skeleton structure. The board of directors cancelled the 1955 season, promising to reorganize the league in the future.

Many factors contributed to the AAGBL's decline. As urbanites joined the postwar suburban exodus and television took the entertainment world by storm, home recreation became the order of the day. Major spectator sports like football and baseball continued to draw large audiences, but attendance suffered at all other levels. Both local and national media expanded their coverage of major sports, nurturing a national sports culture that gradually supplanted small-town boosterism and local loyalties. Softball remained a popular sport, especially in the city and industrial leagues. However, as returning veterans replaced women in the work force, industrial sports as well as jobs once again became the province of men. Girls' and women's leagues continued to operate but as very minor programs. And while top-notch amateur and semipro women's softball teams never ceased providing skilled athletes a place to develop and compete, in most communities little League baseball, industrial softball, and minor league men's baseball commanded an overwhelming share of funds, facilities, and civic backing.

Finally, the novel combination of "feminizing attraction" and "masculine athletics" clashed with the conservative culture of the 1950s. In contrast to the giddy sense of workplace competence and freedom women experienced in the war years, the 1950s witnessed a swift turnabout that propelled women back into domesticity. The emphasis on home, family, and marriage was rooted in a return to older, restrictive definitions of femininity. Virulent homophobia—the fear and hatred of gays and lesbians—accompanied the change in gender roles. An upsurge of media interest in sexual crime and "perversion" intensified public hostility toward homosexuality. Police raids on gay bars, military purges, and the firing of homosexual government employees under Cold War "security" policies added to the homophobic atmosphere of the 1950s. Neither of these trends boded well for the AAGBL. With baseball firmly re-established as the national (men's) pastime,
and femininity once again defined in terms of domestic life, the league’s innovative effort to combine sport and femininity and its affirmation of female athletic ability were at odds with the dominant culture. Moreover, in an era of political, legal, and media attacks on homosexuals, the association of women’s sport with mannishness or lesbianism jeopardized any attempt to market women’s baseball as mass entertainment.

The legacy of the AAGBL lies less in its success or failure than in its fascinating approach to women’s sports. The AAGBL management chose to promote the league by accentuating the tension between masculine sport and feminine charm. By continuing to see athletic ability as masculine skill rather than incorporating athleticism within the range of feminine qualities, the league’s ideology posed no challenge to the fundamental precepts of gender in American society. In its concern with preserving the distinction between softball and baseball, the AAGBL disparaged women’s softball as unmanly. Yet it ultimately preserved baseball as a male realm by promoting “feminine baseball” as a spectacle.

Attempting to present an image of femininity consistent with popular and marketable ideals, the AAGBL nevertheless played a part in undermining these ideals. The league’s philosophy highlighted the contrast between masculine sport and feminine appearance. But the actual experience of playing and viewing AAGBL baseball challenged the idea that athletic skill belonged in the province of men. The league provided women a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to develop their skills and to pursue their passion for sport aided by financial backing, quality coaching, and appreciative fans. The players returned the favor. They offered eager crowds the chance to view highly skilled competitive baseball played by women. Whether “tomboys” or “marygirls,” the All-American Girls’ aggressive, superior play challenged social conventions, defied athletic tradition, and offered the public an exciting and expanded sense of women’s capabilities.

For Further Reading

Pennsylvania State University Libraries holds microfilm records of the All-American Girls Baseball League; these include records of individual teams as well as AAGBL handbooks, minutes of league board meetings, correspondence of the management, and related miscellaneous documents and publications. The Chicago Tribune profiled the AAGBL in a July 12, 1982 article, “The Girls of Summer.” For a more general treatment of women’s sport history and its association with masculinity, see Helen Lengskyj, Out of Bounds: Women, Sport, and Sexuality (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1980) and Reet Howell, ed., Her Story in Sport (West Point, NY: Leisure Press, 1982).

Illustrations