

“The best baseball anyone’s ever seen,”:
The Women of the AAGPBL and Standards of the 1940s-50s

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ABSTRACT

The All-American Girl's Professional Baseball League, or AAGPBL existed from 1943-54 and was the first and only professional women's baseball league in the United States. Its existence was largely forgotten following the League's closure, but its memory was revived in the public consciousness when Penny Marshall's 1992 film, *A League of Their Own*, was released. One of the film's most memorable scenes is that of the charm and beauty school. The AAGPBL employed Helena Rubinstein's services to emphasize the femininity of its players in an effort to appeal to the general populace and show its players as women who acted like women but played like men. This paper utilizes interviews, fans accounts, and documents from the AAGPBL Players Association to illustrate the purpose of the league's standards in controlling player's images.

For years, the first and only professional women's baseball league in American history went unknown and unacknowledged by most Americans. The memory of the league lived on mostly in those who participated in it, or lived in the Midwest, where teams were located. The All-American Girl's Professional Baseball League, or AAGPBL, made its way back into public consciousness in 1988, when the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, unveiled a new exhibit entitled *Women in Baseball*.¹ Four years later, the league made its way into public consciousness again when in 1992 the film *A League of Their Own* directed by Penny Marshall, was released. One of the film's most memorable scenes features a recreation of the charm school program players went through during Spring Training. The implementation of strict standards based on social norms for women in the 1940s was an instrumental factor in the early success of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. The league and its managers and administrators relied on the femininity of its players as a selling point. Through control and standards of appearance and behavior, the women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League were marketed as the ideal female athletes. Their femininity served as a tool to bring in audiences and defy spectator's expectations while simultaneously upholding a gendered status quo.

In September of 1939, Germany, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, invaded Poland. The United States decided to stay neutral, and upheld a foreign policy that was, for the most part, isolationist in nature. That same year, at the end of the Great Depression, Major League Baseball began to free itself from the economic troubles of the 1930s. Players like Joe DiMaggio on the New York Yankees, or Carl Hubbell on the New York Giants came into the game with charisma

¹ From this point on, the terms "All-American Girls Professional Baseball League," "AAGPBL," and "league" will be used interchangeably.

and, in Hubbell's case, a relatively uncommon pitch, bringing a sense of novelty and excitement back to America's pastime. More people could afford to see games again, and the Major League's attendance was closing in on what it had been at its highest, before the depression.²

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese Imperial Navy's Air Service unleashed a surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at its base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, hitting several other nearby bases on the same day. On December 8, Roosevelt addressed congress, calling for war against primarily Japan. Four days later, Roosevelt declared war on Germany and its allies. In his address to the United States Congress that day, Roosevelt vowed that December 7, 1941, was "a date which will live in infamy."³ The event was the catalyst that finally pushed America past a state of neutrality and into war, with President Roosevelt's speech a call to action. The attack on Pearl Harbor was a national threat and tragedy, spurring many Americans into action and stoking the fire that was American patriotism. Men joined the United States armed forces as the U.S. government began drafting more extensively. As the men left to fight overseas, many of their jobs were left open, and women were often hired to fill positions and roles that were necessary for the nation to function as intended during wartime.

Many of the jobs that women took over were traditionally men's work. Women began to work as riveters and welders. They took over jobs in the factories and on build sites, operating heavy machinery, building massive weapons and airplanes, loading shells. Women also took on jobs in transportation as conductors and engineers. Women at the time appeared in nearly every aspect of the economy and were a driving force in the United States' victory at the end of the

² John P Rossi, *Baseball and American Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 156.

³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address of the President to the Congress of the United States," Transcript (December 8, 1941).

war. While these jobs opened many opportunities for women, many of them were still expected to fill in their roles as mothers, housekeepers, and wives just as they had before the war. For most women, there were no other people at home who could fill in those caretaking roles for them, especially not with the men overseas.

Similarly to other male-dominated industries, baseball lost much of its manpower to the war effort. American men joining the U.S. military after the attack on Pearl Harbor were not only limited to ordinary citizens but included major stars and athletes too. In the first few days following December 6, notable players enlisted in the military. Players like Hank Greenberg of the Detroit Tigers, or Bob Feller of the Cleveland Indians both had already been considering where they would land in the military. What happened at Pearl Harbor spurred them both into action, and Greenberg and Feller were quick to join their own respective branches of the military.⁴ Other famous players, like Joe DiMaggio also enlisted, setting aside their bats for bullets. The initial wave of players who enlisted left the major leagues hurting. The situation only got worse when wartime drafts began and increased. As more and more of the major league's most capable players left, the options for good ballplayers decreased. The majors started pulling younger, less experienced players up from the minor leagues and college teams. They also called on much older, former retired players, and even those who had been designated 4-F draft status. Receiving a 4-F draft status meant that they were unfit for the draft for mental, physical, or even moral reasons.⁵ The quality of play declined, causing average attendance to drop and more and more people to become concerned about the state of baseball during the war. There was concern,

⁴ Matt Rothenberg, "After Pearl Harbor, Baseball Played a Part in Fight for Freedom," baseballhall.org (Baseball Hall of Fame), accessed March 23, 2025.

⁵ National Park Service, "Unfit for Service: Physical Fitness and Civic Obligation in World War II (U.S. National Park Service)," www.nps.gov, October 5, 2023.

especially among executives and team owners, that due to the war, baseball would be shut down as it was not an essential industry. They continued to play despite this concern; baseball as a business still had to make money. In response to the concerns, Commissioner of Baseball, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis sent correspondence to President Roosevelt, who implored Major League Baseball to continue despite the war. Roosevelt's belief was that baseball would be beneficial to the morale of those hard at work on the home front.⁶ Despite the presidential support, baseball attendance did not increase, and neither did quality of play. The drop in numbers prompted a few enterprising baseball executives started to look for new opportunities.

Phillip K. Wrigley, owner of the Chicago Cubs, saw an opportunity. Around the country, amateur and semi-professional softball teams played each other, often drawing relatively large crowds. Many companies had their own softball and baseball teams, composed of workers from their factories and offices. Girls had been playing on school and company ball teams since the mid-to-late nineteenth century.⁷ Wrigley had a large base of female ballplayers to work with, and so he sent out scouts from the Cubs organization to find and recruit girls from softball leagues and company teams around the United States and Canada. The girls went to tryouts in Chicago, and those who made it were each organized into one of four initial teams. Two of the teams were in Wisconsin, in Racine and Kenosha, one in Rockford, Illinois, and the last in South Bend Indiana.⁸ The All-American Girl's Professional Baseball League played the first games of its inaugural season on May 30, 1943.

⁶ Rossi, *Baseball and American Culture*, 157.

⁷ Gai Ingham Berlage, *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994). Any mention of "ball teams/players" references both softball and hardball teams unless otherwise stated.

⁸ Kurys, Sophie (Interview transcript and video), 2009, interview by Gordon Olson, *Grand Valley State University Special Collections and University Archives*, September 25, 2009,

To appeal to the middle- and upper-class patrons Wrigley expected to attract with the League, players had to follow rules that governed how they looked, dressed, and acted both on and off the field. These rules and standards were being applied to them even before they were accepted into the AAGPBL. In an article in *Time* magazine, published a few weeks after the League's inaugural season began, Jimmy Hamilton is praised for a good job scouting and recruiting for the AAGPBL: "He had turned down several outstanding players because they were either too uncouth, too hardboiled, or too masculine."⁹ Several women, despite their skills, being turned away publicly for not fitting the standards of the AAGPBL sent a clear message about what the league's owners and administrators valued and looked for in their players. Before they could bridge the gap and make it into the United States' first professional women's baseball league, women had to meet pre-determined standards of beauty and behavior.

Once entering the league, before they could play games or even focus entirely on training, players were required to go through Charm School lessons. For this purpose, in its inaugural season, the league employed the services of Helena Rubinstein's beauty salons.¹⁰ The same *Time* article that praised Jimmy Hamilton for his scouting then moved on to comment on the league's use of charm schools: "They discovered another of Mr. Wrigley's novel ideas. Part of their training [*sic*] was a compulsory course at Helena Rubinstein's Gold Coast beauty salon — to learn about makeup, posture and other whatnots usually neglected by lady athletes."¹¹ An excerpt from the charm school guide provided to players pushed the standards for public image even further:

⁹ "Ladies of the Little Diamond," *Time*, June 14, 1943.

¹⁰ The league would employ the services of other similar beauty and charm schools until discontinuing the use of charm schools in 1945.

¹¹ "Ladies of the Little Diamond" *Time*, June 1943.

It is most desirable in your own interests... your teammates and fellow players, as well as ... of the public relations of the league, that each girl be ... presentable and attractive, whether on the playing field or at leisure. ...Without overdoing your beauty treatment at the risk of attaining gaudiness, practice the little measure that will reflect well on your appearance and personality as a realAll-American girl [*sic*].¹²

Not only did the AAGPBL stress the importance of meeting appearance standards, but the League also frequently emphasized its players morality and feminine behavior through a list of rules, several of which were repeated throughout AAGPBL media, including advertisements and promotions. Notable rules included:

1. ALWAYS appear in feminine attire when not actively engaged in practice or playing ball. This regulation continues through the playoffs for all, even though your team is not participating. AT NO TIME MAY A PLAYER APPEAR IN THE STANDS IN HER UNIFORM, OR WEAR SLACKS OR SHORTS IN PUBLIC.
2. Smoking or drinking is not permissible in public places. Liquor... will not be permissible.... Obscene language will not be allowed at any time.
3. All social engagements must be approved by chaperone.¹³

The codes of the AAGPBL applied both on and off the field and were likely there with the intent of protecting the moral reputation of the league's players and thus the acceptance of the players by the public.

The league relied primarily upon advertisement, publicity in local newspapers and popular magazines like *Time*, and the public's acceptance to continue playing. If the public felt that the women in the League were too masculine or poor players, the team could be ostracized

¹² "A Guide for All American Girls: How to Look Better, Feel Better, be More Popular," National Baseball Hall of Fame, accessed January 23, 2025. <https://aagpbl.org/history/charm-school> This guide was provided to the players alongside a beauty kit. They continued to provide the kit and guide to players even after the league stopped doing charm school lessons.

¹³ "The Rules of Conduct for Players as Set Up by The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League," Northern Indiana Historical Society, accessed January 22, 2025.

and lose audience. As a way to prevent this fate, the League emphasized the players femininity and womanhood in nearly everything they did, starting with their uniforms. By the 1940s, women across America wore shorts and trousers on a regular basis, and the majority of women's softball teams played in versions of men's uniforms. Some teams, like the Arizona Ramblers and the Moose Jaw Royals from Canada, played in shorts.¹⁴ With trousers and shorts being the norm for women's softball uniforms, players surprise at the reveal of the real uniform is justified. The uniform was designed by Wrigley's, Otis Shepard, and Ann Harnett, the first player to sign a contract with the AAGPBL. Otis Shepard was an artist and advertising employee under Wrigley, and he was well known for his design skills. Ann Harnett would model the uniform early on. The League's uniform more closely resembled the common tennis or figure skating uniform of the time, rather than a softball or baseball uniform. Figure skating uniforms in the 1940s consisted of short skirts with tight fitting shorts underneath. They often were short enough that a significant amount of leg was exposed. The league uniform was similar, consisting of a simple skirted tunic with a button front, a belt in a contrasting color to the tunic, and a small cap.

In addition to the unique uniforms, the players were informed that for all their brief spring training, they would be required to attend evening sessions of charm and beauty school from Helena Rubinstein's beauty salon. From these sessions the girls learned the best ways to wash their faces, apply makeup, to style their hair, and dress in ways that suited their individual looks and figures.¹⁵ The Rubinstein charm schools also served to teach players 'proper' behavior. Alongside the beauty and hygiene, lessons also taught posture, how to carry oneself in different

¹⁴ Lois Browne, *Girls of Summer: The Real Story of the All-American Professional Baseball League*, 1st HarperPerennial ed (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1993).

¹⁵ Margot Fortunato Galt, *up to the Plate: The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Co., 1995), 16-18.

social situations, which forks and spoons to use at which stages in a meal. Many of the players in the league came from small towns and working-class families, where many of the specific manners and minor aspects of etiquette were less necessary.¹⁶ By sending the players through these lessons, the administrative powers of the AAGPBL ensured that each player fit a specific standard of feminine behavior.

To ensure the players were held to that standard, even when they were not on the field or at public events, each team had a chaperone assigned to it. The chaperones served a number of different roles for their teams. They managed paychecks and meal money and uniforms, booked hotels and approved outings and dates for players.¹⁷ It was also the chaperone's responsibility to monitor each player's behavior and appearance, ensuring that they were always wearing lipstick and dressed appropriately, and when needed, stopping players from behaving in unladylike ways. Alongside their more managerial duties, chaperones also served as mother and older sister figures to the players. The chaperones served almost as interim parents for the girls in the league. Chaperones were touted as role models and moral buffers and were a major reassurance for parents that their daughters would not be consorting with the wrong crowds, or in danger while in the league, as they were so responsibly cared for.¹⁸

The All-American Girl's Professional Baseball League utilized the femininity of its players as a tool to draw in possible fans. In order to do so, players were educated on how to

¹⁶ In my research, I was unable to find specific documentation or information (with the exception of the AAGPBL guide) from the Helena Rubinstein charm school lessons. I did, however, find several videos teaching very similar things to what likely would have been taught to players in the AAGPBL. All of these videos were available via the glamourdaze YouTube channel and are available on their website as well at <https://www.glamourdaze.com>.

¹⁷ Kelly Candaele, "A League of Their Own," directed by Mary Wilson, March 28, 1987, 6:52-7:43, accessed January 30, 2025.

¹⁸ Merrie A Fidler, *The Origins and History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2006), 59.

manage their appearance to the best of their abilities, while also being taught how to behave like a lady in any situation. While the use of femininity by the AAGPBL functioned largely as an advertising gimmick, it also gave the opportunity for the women who played for the league to flip spectators' expectations on their heads. People who may have initially gone to a game to have something to make fun of, to prove a point, or, in some cases, to gawk at the sight of women in dresses playing like men did find themselves instead becoming fans or being chocked that their expectations were completely wrong. The girls of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League were simultaneously the ideal girl-next-door types, just as their marketers postured them to be, and skilled athletes. They were girls who could be feminine and immensely strong at the same time.

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