

Johnson, Susan E. *When Women Played Hardball*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1994. Pp. xxiv, 292. Notes, photographs, bibliography. \$14.95.

For a group of women who, for some 30 to 30 years lived in virtual obscurity, their experiences have been vividly brought to life in recent years—through television, the movie screen and the printed word. At least three books, several journal articles, the movie, *A League of Their Own*, and two television documentaries have focused on the 1943-54 All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. And, in 1988, the Baseball Hall of Fame finally recognized the women baseball players with a permanent exhibit in the Cooperstown museum. On opening day of the 1994 baseball season, another tribute to the “other” baseball players was published: *When Women Played Hardball*.

Author Susan Johnson chronicles the progression of a women’s softball league organized by Philip Wrigley to boost wartime morale and maintain interest in baseball to a postwar league “when women played hardball.” The book focuses on only two teams in the League, the Rockford Peaches and the Fort Wayne Daisies, and their seven-game play-off for the League championship in 1950. Each of the seven sections is written as a trilogy of chapters, the first a description of each of the play-off games along with a complete report from a local newspaper about the game. A detailed biographical sketch of a selected player follows, and each section concludes with an historical account of the lives of players and the League at various stages of development. Such titles as “Early Innings,” “Life Off the Field,” and “The Years After Base-

ball” suggest the kinds of information found in each of these chapters.

The content of the book is based on interviews with 26 players from the Rockford Peaches and Fort Wayne Daisies, a former manager and a team chaperone. The content of the book also comprises Johnson’s personal recollections from her years as an avid fan of the Peaches from age 10 to 14. *Hardball* is replete with quotes from the former players reminiscing about their experiences, and as one reviewer noted, “This is mainly a book of memories” (Mike Dunham, *Anchorage Daily News*, 3 April 1994). Because memories tend to fade over time and are often selective, sport history scholars may question the authenticity of some of the information. The heavy reliance on memory as well as the format of the book also make for uneven reading.

The best approach for the person interested in the history of the League may be to read through the third chapter of each trilogy, for these chapters do, indeed, give one the sense of history. Even though much of the information was gleaned from the personal interviews with members of only two of the 14 teams that played in the League, it provides a very good overview of life as a woman baseball player at a time when women’s competition, especially in team sports, was considered inimical to woman’s role in society. Johnson details the early focus on femininity—skirts for uniforms, for example, Charm School to learn a “lady’s proper behavior,” and never appearing in public in shorts or slacks. As a result these women lived a life of contradictions throughout their playing careers. They played in a highly competitive sport world while always under pressure to appear feminine. “The tension between appearance and the game, between the feminine image and the competitive reality, was a constant of the players’ lives” (p. 143). The players’ analyses of themselves, almost always as tomboys, and their own views about why they stayed in such a contradictory role reveal the depth of their commitment to a sport usually reserved for men.

Other chapters highlight the player’s initiation into the world of baseball, from developing interest as youngsters to their selection as League players: relationships between and among the players; their lives after the demise of the League in 1954; and the revival of interest in this period in history in the 1980s. The biographical chapters richly describe the lives of selected women, most of them from working-class families, for whom baseball provided a respite, at least for a time, from a life otherwise spent in a working environment.

When Women Played Hardball was not written to chronicle the history of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League. It is, rather, a tribute to women who made up the league. As Johnson said, “It is a story of memories and miracles” (p. xvii). As such, the book provides personal insight into the lives of a group of women who shared unique experiences in a world that has, for the most part, been exclusively masculine. It does not provide a definitive history of the League, but it does offer some interesting reading

about the lives of individuals and their views of the almost forgotten period they shared with a very small group of unusual women.

Indiana University Bloomington

Mary L. Remley