

Berlage, Gai. *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994. Pp. xiv, 202. Notes, photographs, appendix. index. \$22.50.

*Women in Baseball* is a valuable contribution to the steadily growing body of literature on the history of women baseball players. Until a few years ago, there were no books on the subject, although baseball historians like Harold Seymour and David Voigt sometimes mentioned women players or women's teams in their studies.

In October 1980, a former member of the All American Girls Baseball League began to search for teammates, using local and national media to find them. Over the next several years reunited players began a concerted lobbying effort to have their league inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. In September 1987, AAGBL players held the first official meeting of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League Players Association.

During this same period, public television stations across the country broadcast two documentaries, *When Diamonds Were a Girl's Best Friend* and *A League of Their Own*. There was an almost immediate upsurge in the number of articles on the league in the popular press. In November 1988, the National Baseball Hall of Fame opened a permanent exhibit dedicated to women in baseball, featuring the All American Girls Baseball League. Within a few years, AAGBL players had generated so much publicity that director Penny Marshall decided to produce a feature film based on the league. *A League of Their Own* opened in July 1992 and by mid September 1992 had grossed more than \$100 million, making it one of the hit movies of the summer (Sue Mace, *A Whole New Ball Game*, p. 122).

Not surprisingly, the nationwide media publicity on the league spawned several books on the history of women baseball players. Lois Browne's *Girls of Summer* came out in 1992. Sue Macy's *A Whole New Ball Game: The Story of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League*, and Barbara Gregorich's *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball* followed in 1993. Berlage's *Women in Baseball* is the latest addition to the field.

*Women in Baseball* is the most thorough documentation of the history of women baseball players, fans, umpires, and owners to date. It traces women's participation with the national game from the mid-nineteenth century to the early 1990s. Berlage divides players into several groups: those who played baseball in college, those who played on mixed teams of men and women, those who played on otherwise all-male teams, and those who played for the All American Girls Baseball League. She includes sections on women umpires and on black women who played for or owned Negro League teams.

Berlage's main thesis is that, although women were playing baseball even before softball was invented, baseball remains a male bastion because women have been socially conditioned to see participation in baseball as a male endeavor and that women have accepted that condition (p. xiv). She speculates that much of the early history of women players was forgotten "because of the long-lasting Victorian influence on American ideals of womanhood" (p. xiii).

It is Berlage's depiction of women's history that is most problematic in this book. Her documentation of women players, umpires, and owners is, by and large, well done, but the social context she uses to undergird her chronology is often inaccurate.

Berlage sets the stage for her book by describing the "Victorian ladies" who left "parlor couches," "smelling salts" and "feminine frailty" to play baseball. She describes the "true" women of the period who devoted their lives to husbands and homes and concludes that, given this "accepted gender-role ideology," it seems "incongruous that women actually played baseball during the Victorian era" [which she places from 1876 to 1900] (p. 1).

To explain the incongruity, Berlage states that it was the rapid social and economic changes sweeping America in the late nineteenth century and the

women's suffrage movement that contributed to opportunities for women to play sports. While immigration, industrialization, and urbanization were transforming America, baseball was growing in popularity, Berlage writes. Hence, "It was only a matter of time before women would want to try their hand at playing the game." But first the image of the "true woman" had to be transformed to that of the "new woman" (p. 5). Berlage states that it was the women's colleges that provided the "major impetus" for "the acceptance of sports for women, and the opportunities for women to play baseball" (p. 6).

There are several problems with Berlage's social construct. The main one is that it is overly simplistic. While it is true that women in the nineteenth century labored under serious misconceptions about their physical and mental characteristics and abilities, the image of "true womanhood" falls far short of describing how nineteenth-century women actually lived their lives. While paying lip service to the ideals of true womanhood, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women tamed a frontier, joined social reform societies, founded labor unions, took an active role in politics, ran businesses, climbed mountains, and founded schools where they could challenge their minds and exercise their bodies. As Roberta J. Park noted in "The Rise and Development of Women's Concern for the 'Physical Education' of American Women," the "inconsistency between the actual facts of daily life and the concept of the 'delicate' female was one of the things which gave credence to the objections of the early feminists" (in Reet Howell, *Her Story in Sport*, p. 45).

A second problem with Berlage's social construct is that, while the women's colleges of the late nineteenth century did play a role in introducing scores of young women to vigorous exercise and sports, they did not necessarily have a big influence on the rise of women baseball players and the acceptance of sportswomen. Non-collegiate women were playing baseball as early as collegians and there is no evidence that either group influenced the other. To argue that women's colleges were the "major impetus" for the acceptance of sports for women is equally problematic since one would have to prove a connection between physical education programs at the women's colleges and acceptance of sports by non-collegians. In reality, collegiate and non-collegiate sports for women developed simultaneously, as advocates of exercise for women gained credibility.

In addition to a shaky historical context, *Women in Baseball* contains several inconsistencies and poorly supported assertions. At one point Berlage notes that by the late 1800s, "Baseball had come to typify all that was good about America." A few paragraphs later, she writes that professional baseball players in the 1880s "were seen as ruffians who lacked the Victorian social graces" and that baseball had spread to the masses and "become rougher and less genteel" (p. 3).

In another section, Berlage claims that softball "really didn't become popular until the 1930s" (a questionable assertion in itself) and then goes on to state that the "establishment of softball virtually ended girls' chances to participate in

baseball” (pp. 96-97). The latter statement is troublesome on two counts. First, Berlage herself notes throughout the book that opportunities for women to participate in baseball have always been scarce. Consequently, one could argue, the invention of softball in the late nineteenth century neither added to nor detracted from these opportunities. A second irony is that much of Berlage’s book is dedicated to players who came *after* 1930, when chances for girls to participate in baseball had supposedly “virtually ended.”

Berlage tends to make sweeping generalizations with little supporting documentation to back them up. In her chapter on women in the Negro Leagues she states that during the 1930s, with “most legitimate black businesses either destroyed or weakened by the depression, the only people in the black community with large amounts of capital were the policy kings” [i.e. racketeers and gamblers] who backed the Negro Leagues in order to gain respectability and legitimacy (p. 119).

In another instance, she states that after women achieved suffrage, “marriage” became the number one goal of women attending college and that, in the 1920s, “the sporting-girl role disappeared from college campuses,” even as it found acceptance in society at large (p. 21). Neither of these statements is supported by the available historical evidence.

The problems with historical context aside, *Women in Baseball* is a welcome addition to scholarship on women baseball players. Berlage does a thorough job detailing a long-forgotten part of women’s past. Her chapters on Little League, Allington’s All Americans, and Turn-of-the-Century Women Pioneers in Men’s Minor and Major League Baseball are especially good. I do question Berlage’s assertion that Alta Weiss had a professional baseball career spanning 16 years. While it is true she appeared in a game in 1922, it is unlikely she had been playing regularly since her debut in 1907. Her scrapbook contains scores of articles from 1907 and 1908 and virtually none after that until the article mentioning the game in 1922. In an interview sometime around 1909, Weiss stated that she was not going to continue playing baseball. She noted that she had enrolled at Wooster and planned to attend medical school. “I’m preparing for four or five years stiff study, and I won’t even have time for any more baseball, *except as a recreation*” [emphasis mine] (undated article, Weiss scrapbook). An undated news release from the University of Wooster (also in her scrapbook) confirmed that Weiss was taking no part in college athletics while at school. It is more likely that Weiss, after abandoning a professional career in baseball, played occasionally as time permitted.

*Women in Baseball* lays a solid foundation for other scholars who wish to pursue broader issues relating to women’s association with baseball. Time will tell whether the rediscovery of this chapter of women’s history will lead young girls and women to follow in the footsteps of baseball pioneers like Lizzie Murphy, Toni Stone, and Dottie Schroeder.

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