

Striking Out for a New Tradition: Baseball at the Women's Colleges, 1866–1900

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For decades baseball historians have debated the origins of the national pastime—whether a derivation of cricket and colonial bat and ball games, or the unique brainchild of Alexander Cartwright and the New York Knickerbockers.

One aspect of the game has needed no debate—its status as a man's game. The masculine character of baseball was established early on. In 1865, Harper's Weekly proclaimed: "There is no nobler or manlier game than base-ball. . . ." None of the numerous sporting books of the nineteenth century recommended that girls play. In fact, *Cassell's Complete Book of Sports and Pastimes* (1896) went so far as to say that baseball, "when played up to the highest mark," was not even suited for boys, due to the "fatigue involved, and the injuries frequently sustained."

Ironically, despite strict proscriptions against strenuous exercise and public spectacle, scores of women took up bat and ball and rounded the bases on the diamond as best they could in their cumbersome garb.

My paper will focus on the women who played baseball on the campuses of the eastern women's colleges in the nineteenth century. I will begin at Vassar in the Spring of 1866 when Annie Glidden (Class of 1869) wrote her brother John on April 20th: "They are getting up various clubs now for out-of-door exercise. They have a floral society, boat clubs, and base-ball clubs. I belong to one of the latter, and enjoy it highly I can assure you." Baseball was a far cry from planting flowers or rowing leisurely across a quiet pond and one can only imagine John Glidden's reaction to his sister's revelation. Twenty-two other daughters of society's elite joined Annie Glidden on the baseball diamond at Vassar in 1866 and a dozen more played the following spring.

Baseball playing women were by no means restricted to Vassar college (or to college campuses for that matter) in nineteenth century America. I will analyze the actions of women baseball players at Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley colleges as well. I will specifically be addressing the following questions: Did women baseball players realize that what they were doing was not socially acceptable? If so, is that why they did it? Did their unique situation at the relatively secluded women's college campuses make their actions less significant?

My paper will be based on research I conducted this past summer at the women's colleges. What I found was that women baseball players were very aware that what they were doing was socially unacceptable; yet I did not find that they used baseball to promote a specific "women's rights" agenda. However, the students were extremely sensitive to the fact that their institutions were under the constant scrutiny of a public by no means convinced of the wisdom of higher education for women. To counter charges that higher education would physically break women and render them unable to bear healthy children, the majority of women's colleges set up carefully monitored physical training regimens for all students. While baseball was not an officially prescribed activity at any of the women's colleges until the late nineteenth century, women players downplayed or purposely ignored the social significance of their activities and contended through their actions that baseball was an appropriate way to get their required dose of wholesome "out-of-door" exercise. As a result, baseball did eventually become an officially sanctioned team sport for women at all of the women's colleges by the early twentieth century. Under the purview of physical education departments and various national organizations of women physical educators, however, baseball was transformed into a game thought more appropriate for the "weaker sex." There remained few, if any students, who continued to play the men's version of the game Annie Glidden and her contemporaries played.



"Bennett's Bunch"