All American Girls Professional Baseball League Essay, Research Paper

The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League operated from 1943 to 1954 and represents one of the most unique periods in baseball history. The league went through a full life cycle in its eleven years of existence and ended up being a predecessor for other women?s leagues to come. The All American Girls Professional Baseball League had many successes that surprised a lot of people but also faced many failures, which resulted in its death as a women?s professional baseball league.

The league was the brainchild and social experiment of Philip K. Wrigley the chewing-gum mogul who had inherited the Chicago Cubs major league baseball franchise from his father. In 1943 American men were serving in the armed forces during the second world war and but it was late in 1942 when Mr. Wrigley helped developed the idea of women playing professional baseball which eventually grew into the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. He believed that famous managers, such as Hall of Fame players Dave Bancroft, Max Carey, and Jimmie Foxx, would draw fans to the new league. Wrigley already had an established recruitment network in place from his ownership of the Cubs and had sports connections throughout North America. Talent for the league was abundant and it was soon evident that the women’s high caliber of play was going to be the main drawing card for the fans.

In Canada, the driving force for the All American Girls Professional Baseball League was Johnny Gottselig, who was a

former defenseman for the Chicago Blackhawks national hockey team in the 1920’s and 1930’s. He was from Regina, Sask. and by 1942 was managing the Blackhawks’ Kansas City farm team. He had many contacts among sporting figures in the Prairie Provinces, one of which was a Regina-based hockey scout named Hub Bishop. It was Bishop who was responsible for signing Mary “Bonnie” Baker. Bishop was also responsible for scouting Arleene “Johnnie” Johnson after she had moved to Regina and started playing for the Meadows Diamonds of the Inter-City Ladies’ Softball League. In America, heavy recruitment came from the North Central States while many women boarded the train in California and headed out to Chicago to try out for the new league. The All-American Leagues recruiting had played havoc with some of the Canadian and American teams. In fact two entire Chicago-based teams were wiped out by Wrigley’s intense recruiting.

In 1943 when the league began, the girls were actually playing fast-pitch softball using an underhand pitching delivery but with certain variations to make the game faster (Nash, 23). Runners were allowed to lead off and steal, and the size of the diamond was larger than the field used in softball but smaller than a baseball diamond. As the league grew in the number of teams and fan support into the postwar years, fast-pitch softball rules were modified. For example, the circumference of the ball was decreased in increments from the original 12-inch ball in 1943 to 10 3/8 inches in 1949 and finally to 9 inches, regulation

baseball size, in mid-1954, the league’s final season. The pitcher’s mound was moved further from home plate in gradual steps, from 40 feet in 1943 to 50 feet in 1949, to 55 feet for the next four years, and finally to 60 feet in 1954. Also, a cork center and red seams were added to the ball in 1948 (Life, 46). Combined with overhand pitching, which also began in 1948, the smaller and livelier ball led to an increase in batting averages during the last half of the league’s existence.

After the 1944 season it was evident that the Major Leagues would not be affected by the war, Wrigley decided to sell the league to Chicago advertising executive Arthur Meyerhoff. It was under Meyerhoff that expansion and publicity of the league reached its peak. In the first three years after World War II, teams often attracted between two and three thousand fans to a single game. One league highlight occurred when an estimated 10,000 people saw a Fourth of July double-header in South Bend in 1946. The girls were having a good time and for a while the league was prospering; but who exactly was playing the league?

The girls in this novel league ranged in ages from 15-28 years old (Fidler, 56). The majority of the girls were between the ages of 18-22 years old. As the league went on the average age kept on getting older because there wasn?t a big pool of new talent to draw in from. The typical height and weight of the girls was around 5? 5? and 130 pounds. Size was obviously not a deciding issue of playing in this league. The girls were drawn

from a wide area of places covering 17 states and 5 Canadian provinces. Some Cubans eventually joined the league in 1946 (www.dlcwest.com). About half of the girls recruited from the states were from the Midwest and a good majority were from Illinois. A good number were from the west coast and were discovered when they tried out for men?s teams. Jean Faut was discovered this way when she was trying out for a men?s semi-pro team in California. Nancy Mudge was a Taylor student and was given a tryout by one of the scouts when Don Odle arranged for a meeting between the two parties. Many other girls joined the league in ways like these.

Most of the girls had similar backgrounds as well. Eighty-three of the original ninety girls had played some form of organized softball. One third of them came from the same office clerk profession (Fidler, 98), and eighteen percent of the league were former factory girls. The girls had interests in many other sports such as bowling, tennis, and basketball (Mudge interview). Very few girls were married. Only twelve of the hundred forty-four girls were actually married and only three of the girls had a kid (Macy, 67). Race was not a determining factor of who could play in the league, but very few Afro-Americans ever tried out. The league was dominantly Caucasian.

Once the girls were in the league they had many rules that they had to follow. There were rules that outlawed certain hairstyles, banned drinking and smoking, and made it mandatory

that girls had to wear lipstick at all times during the ballgames. Chaperones were always a must, and the girls could not go anywhere without consulting their chaperone first (www.dlcwest.com). The girls did not seem to mind these rules because they were able to be playing baseball. For some of them this was a childhood dream coming true. It was the heart of the girls that gave this league successes and allowed the league to run for over 11 years when many people felt that it had no business being in effect (Nash, 101).

Why was the All American Girls Professional Baseball League successful for many years? Many things contributed to making this league something that would impress even the biggest business tycoons. Location, publicity, a positive public image, financial stability, strong leadership, and curiosity from the fans gave this league many reasons to prosper for many years.

The location of the teams was a critical part of the success that the league saw. The teams were located in middle-sized cities with war industries. This provided entertainment to the hard working people who had some money to spend but couldn?t travel real far because of gas rationing. Being in these middle-sized cities allowed for the teams to generate hometown pride for the girl?s teams. ?It was kind of like a popular high school basketball team back then. Everyone wanted to cheer on their favorite home team?? said Fran Janssen (Janssen interview).

Many of the girls lived in the towns they played in, and that gave newspapers great coverage on the hometown heroes that the girls would prove to be. Even national magazines and papers were covering the league. Life and Newsweek highlighted many of star players in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League. This helped the All American Girls Professional Baseball League gain even more popularity, and gave it the exposure that it needed to give itself a positive public image.

The league required that the girls play with dignity and integrity, and that provided a good example for the fans to follow. The league?s positive public image concerning its hard play was due to one of the girl?s mottos, ?Play like men, but look like women.? (Life, 46). To gain respect and publicity the girls were sent to charm school before they could play. They were sent to a school that was run by Helena Rubenstein cosmetic company. At this school the girls were given a beauty kit, and taught how to look their best. Although this ?charm school? idea may seem trite it showed the public that the league wanted to be the best it could be, at baseball and looking good.

When Wrigley started up the league he gave each team half of the $45,000 that it needed to get under way. The cities that each team played in were responsible for coming up with the other half of the money (Nash, 89). This generosity allowed for teams to be financially stable and gave the league stability as well.

The league was run as a non-profit organization, and any money that was earned helped pay for new projects being done in the

cities. The public and city governments loved this aspect of the league, and gave cities reasons for keeping the league financially stable.

The financial stability that the league enjoyed was also due to strong leadership that started immediately from the top. Wrigley was an outstanding leader for the coaches and girls to follow. He was respectable, and seemed to get along with everyone. He also hired great coaches, many of which played in the Major Leagues prior to the war. Names like Jimmie Foxx, Max Carey, Dave Allington, Dave Bancroft, and Marty McManus could be seen throughout the All American Girls Professional Baseball League as coaches and managers (www.dlcwest.com). These men new what it took to be great ballplayers and this experience gave the girls great leaders to follow in this new league.

The All American Girls Professional Baseball League was a novelty in its time. There were no other professional girl?s leagues of any kind. Many people were attracted to the league just for sheer entertainment of watching girls act like men. Pepper Davis, a former All American Girls Professional Baseball League player, once said, ?Maybe at first the men came out to see the legs, but they stuck around when they realized they were seeing darn good brand of baseball.? To many people the league was a dream come true, or rather just dream. Dorothy Hunter, also a All American Girls Professional Baseball League player, shared her thoughts with Newsweek Magazine (1946) and stated, ?If anyone would have told me that in two months I would be in the United States playing baseball on a professional team and getting paid for it I would have thought it to be a pipe dream.? The All American Girls Professional Baseball League was more than just entertainment and had many great things that people could brag about, but it also had several failures that caused the league to fold in 1954.

Failures were hard for the league to handle, and in 1954 the league couldn?t rebound from its hard times. Once a success, the financial stability of the league took a 180-degree turn for the worst. In 1946 Wrigley decided to sell the league for 10 million dollars after he saw that the men?s Major Leagues were not going to go under like he thought. He sold the league to Arthur Meyerhoff, and that is when everything peak, and started to rapidly crash into failures. Meyerhoff immediately decide to make the league a profit organization and that all the proceeds would go straight to him (Fidler, 156). This caused great dissension between him, the teams, and the cities that the teams played in. The teams and cities felt that they were getting ripped off, and attendance started to decline. When Meyerhoff realized that he was in a no-win situation he decided to sell the teams to individual owners in 1950. This proved to be the biggest downfall of the league. These individual owners didn?t have the income to keep the teams afloat, and operational costs, advertising, and salaries were cutback. This problem soon led to many other problems.

The cutback in salaries kept a lack of new players coming into the league and forced many players in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League to retire. Injuries, motherhood, marriage, lack of child care, sick families, education, job conflicts, and aging players also contributed to many of the girls retiring. Before the 1950 season, after Meyerhoff sold the league, thirty percent of the current players retired (Fidler, 169). Society also contributed to the end of the girls? professional baseball careers because it felt that the women should be back at home with their families, and not out playing ball. With the end of the war in the wings, many felt it was time for this temporary fill-in for the Major Leagues to end.

Various forms of other entertainment also took away any popularity that the All American Girls Professional Baseball League had. America was seeing many changes due to the end of the war. Gas rationing was lifted and Americans began to travel much more. Television also became popular, and in 1950 Americans bought 7.5 million television sets (compared with only 975,000 in 1948) (Macy, 176). Major League baseball games were now being televised more often giving Americans the convienece of watching the ballgames in the own living rooms. People were starting to spend more of their income on gadgets like refrigerators, cameras, washers, dryers, and vacuums. This left les money to spend on activities like going to a professional

girls baseball league game. The ?American Dream? was also being realized by many Americans, and many Mid-West families began to move towards many parts in the south, namely Florida. These were the people that us to fill the stands at the women?s ballgames. Kids? attentions were now being consumed by activities that were gaining popularity like Little League, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, music lessons, and many television programs. It is evident that the All American Girls Professional Baseball League just could not keep their fans.

The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, which operated from 1943 to 1954, represents one of the most unique periods of baseball’s history. The league went through a full life cycle in its eleven years of existence and ended up being a predecessor for other women?s leagues to come like the Women?s National Basketball Association the is still in existence today. The All American Girls Professional Baseball League had many successes that surprised a lot of people but also faced many failures, which resulted in its death as the only women?s professional baseball league that the world has ever seen. The league may not be known by a lot of people, but the girls who worked so hard to realize their baseball dreams will never be forgotten.

Bibliography

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