

Invisible Barriers: Why Baseball Isn't America's National Pastime

It is often considered analogous to life and has optimistically been called the American people's game. The former couldn't be closer to the truth, the latter couldn't be further. Baseball is a game that is cherished by many, and though it opened its doors to black men in 1947, it has yet to do the same for women. Efforts to exclude women from baseball are as old as organized baseball itself and as modern as fast-pitch softball. And while some of the arguments for segregation have been modified, the goal remains the same. Why has baseball, with a few exceptions, remained a male-only domain for so many years? To conquer an injustice, it is necessary to first understand precisely what battles need to be fought. In the case of baseball, patriarchal dominance of the early game sought to weed out women whose participation was a threat to baseball's developing male hegemony. Later, restrictive gender norms and values paved the way for sexist policies which have plagued baseball from Little League to the Majors. The marginalization of female ballplayers continues to be facilitated by gender bias that both causes, and is reinforced by, unequal media coverage and has culminated in the foregone conclusion that girls play softball and boys play baseball. Until there is equality for women in baseball, our nation's favorite sport cannot truly claim to be the national pastime.

Sport in the United States is, aside from the military, the foremost institution that promotes, reinforces, and reproduces male hegemony (Creedon 31). No American sport has accomplished this to a greater degree than our national pastime. One explanation for the persistence of male dominance in baseball is the power of gender perceptions, expectations, and norms. The stereotype of male dominance and female weakness is perpetuated through baseball. To "throw like a girl" is to throw poorly, not properly, without much force or distance. In the

1993 hit movie, “The Sandlot,” as two rival teams hurl insults at each other, one boy is left speechless when “Ham” Porter yells: “You play ball like a girl!” To compare a male baseball player’s talent to that of a girl was, and remains, the most offensive slur ever spewed on a baseball diamond. Not only does this mentality teach boys to devalue and degrade girls’ abilities, but it also teaches girls that their presence on the diamond will always be less desirable than a boy’s.

This scene from “The Sandlot” embodies American society’s interpretation of gender and gender’s presence as not only a noun but also a verb, all while representing the unchallenged reproduction of sexism that has been accepted in the realm of athletics. Gender has been constructed in a way that encourages people to ascribe specific meanings to specific genders and, ultimately, to empower and disempower certain people. It is predominantly represented as a male-female dichotomy, with each usually recognized as possessing certain “innate” characteristics. As a result, people often understand themselves and their gender identification as residing within the boundaries of their gender’s acceptable behaviors. To facilitate social acceptance, people “do” their gender, that is they try, consciously or not, to conduct themselves in a way their gender is expected to act based on constructed gender norms. For females, playing baseball is not a behavior that falls into the “feminine” category. Baseball has a history rooted in patriarchal power structures and has exploited gender construction to the point of extreme exclusionary practices. To understand this phenomenon, one may examine baseball’s exclusion of women using critical class theory. The critical class lens provides a perspective that considers “how power was used to create social inequalities, social differences, and paths of exclusion” (Dobratz 21).

Significantly, sex differences are most often distinguished by the biological or physical. Sport, as it is represented in American society, serves as a reminder that males often have different physical abilities than females (Creedon 31). It also provides a space in which individual skills may be displayed and the use of aggression, force, and violence is sanctioned (Birrell 48). Visible achievement and violence align with societal expectations for males but do not align with the image of the feminine. Sport has long been hailed as a healthy, character-building proving ground for males in the “fight against feminization” and road to manhood (Messner 60). For a woman to display athletic prowess presents a contradiction: if she were male, her success would be celebrated, however her success on masculine terms is not always well received. As one author observes, “to succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman” (Birrell 36). Females who achieve in male domains, such as baseball, are often labeled as deviant and are thus ostracized (Birrell 36) by both males and females working to preserve the gender order (Messner 39). If a woman can succeed amidst the most prominent representations of male hegemony, it begs a curious question: what truly separates masculinity from femininity? Such a situation threatens to expose the unthinkable; that “natural” male superiority is false. The idea that baseball is not for women has long been supported by patriarchal authority with the realization that “a proving ground for masculinity can only be preserved as such by the exclusion of women from the activity” (Messner 24).

Baseball, along with other male dominated sports, has attempted to preserve a masculine facade. Not only does opposition to female participation persist, but the fear of effeminate men exists as well. Because male homosexuality is associated with “feminine” traits, it is equally taboo in the hyper-masculine environment of baseball. Homosexuality is a clear

threat to the gender order of baseball (Creedon 251). Aside from the pressure upon male players to further prove their masculinity (and assumed heterosexuality), this presents yet another challenge to female players. “Tomboyism,” or the transgressing of gender norms by girls, has been viewed as undermining femininity. For a woman to enter a male domain and display “masculine” characteristics has been perceived as an indication of homosexuality (Creedon 252). The All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) was organized by Major League Baseball (MLB) to retain its fans during World War II, however the League was careful to emphasize the femininity of its players (Ardell 114). The “girls” were required to follow strict rules during the season, attend “charm school” to ensure their lady-like appearance, and play baseball in short skirts (Creedon 244). To this day, women and men alike fear that the expression of “masculine” traits by females will turn them into lesbians (Cohen 11). By this token, a female playing baseball poses a threat to both her male counterparts’ masculinity and her own perceived femininity.

In accordance with critical class theory, and corroborated by Marxist feminist theory, baseball was created for and by men as an arena for “ideologically legitimizing” male power (Messner 8). In its very essence, baseball is not American. It is the combination and evolution of a variety of bat, ball, and base games, most notably the English game of “rounders.” However, a concerted, and extremely successful, effort was made to identify baseball as American. Baseball has become as synonymous with America as the stars and stripes and apple pie, but during the scramble to present baseball as purely American, it was also constructed as a model of patriarchy (Creedon 241), founded on respect for (male) authority, independence, and discipline (Messner 61). Baseball was *the* American sport, the most pure and true representation of America. Its best

players and the game itself quickly rose to a nearly divine status. Thus, the exclusion of women from men's baseball was a separation of the sacred and profane (Creedon 248). Paralleling the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, women were seen as temptation for men who, despite such distractions, were duty bound to continue with the higher pursuit of baseball excellence (Creedon 249). Although women did play baseball during much of the Victorian era, their participation was soon frowned upon and then largely abolished as it was determined that baseball was for men. Through its evolution, the idea that baseball was an exclusively male establishment was cemented. The ability of men to exclude women from America's national pastime legitimized male hegemony both within the game itself and in American society.

For a short time after most women's baseball teams, particularly at the college level, were disbanded in the late 19th century, females could occasionally be found playing on otherwise all male teams. For example, 14-year-old Margaret Gisolo starred on her American Legion team as they went on to win the Indiana state championship in 1928 (Creedon 242). Opposing teams protested her presence, but MLB Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis ruled the protests were invalid and allowed Gisolo to play baseball (Creedon 243). However, the following year, American Legion wrote into its rules that girls were not welcome (Cohen 132). This was quite common and widely accepted. The precedent had been set years earlier when, in 1914, the National Amateur Baseball Federation declared baseball was for boys only (Cohen 132). The origins of successful exclusion resided in the adult-run baseball leagues of the early 1900's, such as American Legion (Ardell 83). Baseball was praised as a positive way for boys to channel their masculine energy that might otherwise land them in trouble (Cohen 131), so adults gave little thought to including girls in organized leagues. Little League, American Legion's junior

counterpart, was established as a boys' organization that emphasized molding young males into successful adult citizens (Ardell 83). Soon after, professional baseball followed suit. In 1931, the Chattanooga Lookouts signed female pitcher Jackie Mitchell to a minor league contract and she struck out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in succession during an exhibition game. Nonetheless, in an about-face, Commissioner Landis immediately voided Mitchell's contract, citing the "strenuous" nature of baseball that was not suitable for women (Creedon 243). Mitchell's exclusion reflected the idea that females were too fragile and unfit to participate in sports such as baseball (McDonagh 196), but it also reinforced that baseball needed to be preserved as a male domain and protected from women (Creedon 243), especially those with potential for success at the expense of men.

Perhaps the most damaging and most frequently used excuse for the exclusion of women from baseball popped up around the same time as organized baseball began its formal barring of female players. Indoor baseball was played in a smaller space with a bigger, softer ball that was tossed underhand to batters (Creedon 244). It quickly became a popular variant of baseball among both men and women (Cohen 132). As resistance to women in baseball became apparent, softball evolved as the feminine alternative (Creedon 243). It tidily encompassed every gender stereotype that consequently shunned females from baseball and re-routed them to softball. Softball was less strenuous, required less physical power, and was about cooperation, not competition (Creedon 243). A condemnation disguised as a blessing, women flocked to the softball diamond, eager to play a game that mimicked the sport America so loved and welcomed their participation. To this day, the mentality that softball is for girls and baseball is for boys remains firmly fixed in the minds of Americans.

While many barriers were constructed a full century ago, they continued to be reinforced by policies that targeted young girls, the most vulnerable baseball players. Little League, the largest youth baseball organization in the country, formally excluded girls from 1939-1974 (Cohen 132). That didn't stop some girls from either disguising themselves as boys or finding progressive coaches who allowed them to play. In 1950, Kathryn Johnston was the first girl to play Little League baseball (McDonagh 207). She was just the first of many, as Little League saw girls continue to play and excel on teams across the country. The organization threatened to disqualify teams that fielded girls, but their threats were usually ignored (McDonagh 207). In 1964, Little League became the only youth sports organization to be granted a federal charter in which it was specified that the League's mission was to prepare boys for "manhood" (McDonagh 205). Preceding the eventual New Jersey Supreme Court ruling that allowed girls to play Little League baseball in 1974, a total of 22 class action lawsuits were brought against Little League, for which they spent \$2 million defending their exclusion of girls (Ardell 85). Finally when New Jersey Little Leaguer Maria Pepe and the National Organization for Women won a gender discrimination lawsuit, Little League's charter was amended, and they were forced to accept girls (McDonagh 208). But the floodgates never opened. Little League was so staunchly opposed to the idea of girls playing baseball that they promptly developed Bobby Sox Softball which debuted the very next season (Ardell 86). Additionally, although girls were legally able to play baseball, not everyone agreed with the new rule. Coaches, managers, parents, and players often created a hostile environment for girls who decided to join baseball teams, discouraging many from continuing (Ardell 86).

While women have made great strides in the world of athletics in the past 40 years,

policy changes have often been poorly implemented and fallen victim to institutionalized sexism. For example, the passage of legislation in 1972 known as Title IX declared gender/sex discrimination in any public sphere to be illegal (Ardell 87). Though not originally intended to address disparities in athletic opportunities (McDonagh 78), women saw it as a valid occasion for pushing gender equality in sports. The 1970's were, after all, a time during which feminists sought equal opportunities, protections, and rights in other areas of society as well (Ardell 223). With regard to Title IX's athletic equality stipulation, women encountered great pushback as schools tried to circumvent Title IX requirements, then challenged them in court, and finally begrudgingly complied (Ardell 88). But for female baseball players, Title IX might just as well have never existed. First, baseball was deemed a "contact sport" (McDonagh 79) which, due to assumptions of biological inferiority and fear of physical or psychological harm to females, provided a platform for segregation (McDonagh *xi*). Additionally, softball was regarded as an equivalent to baseball, therefore girls trying out for their public school's baseball teams could legally be turned away (Ardell 89). Clearly baseball and softball are not the same sport, since it is doubtful that any high school boys baseball coach would agree to change his program to boys softball. The societal consensus that baseball is for males and softball for females persists as a result of patriarchal hegemony. This institutionalized male power has dominated baseball's history and shaped gender norms which have been perpetuated long enough to deeply ingrain such designations in the American psyche.

Despite the moderate ineffectiveness of gender equality policies, such as Title IX and other affirmative action initiatives (Cohen 12), and stubbornly unchanging ideologies surrounding gender, women now play virtually every sport men play, many in a professional

capacity. It is worth noting, however, that in almost every one of these sports, females' athletic abilities are viewed as second-class to males who play the same sport. Of course the Women's National Basketball Association exists and features incredible athletes, but like other women's teams or individual sportswomen, it takes a back seat to the men's National Basketball Association in publicity, television time (Women Play Sports But Not on TV), salaries (Pay Inequity in Athletics), and numerous other aspects. In many athletic spheres, women have achieved parity in the sense that society believes they can play a game identical to that of men. Women's basketball courts are the same as men's, as are women's soccer fields, swimming pools, volleyball courts, diving heights, hockey rinks, tennis courts, and marathon distances. In these situations, although women's sports are separated from men's, they are, at the very least, the same sport. What is notable is that the division of "male sports" and "female sports" reflects a value system that is derived from misconceptions of biology that in turn drive separate and unequal treatment (McDonagh x). Beliefs in biological differences lead to hierarchical ideas of male power and female inferiority which are then used to justify the segregation of women from men's sports (McDonagh x). In addition to being segregated from men's baseball, women who play softball still play on a diamond with smaller dimensions than a baseball field, use a ball that is bigger, and pitch underhand. For women's baseball, there has never been a successful baseball league that has been treated as a long-term, serious establishment. The two organizations that came closest were the AAGPBL and the Colorado Silver Bullets, an independent women's team that briefly played against men's amateur and semi-pro teams in the 1990's (Ardell 122). Neither of these pieces of women's baseball history are well-known, even amongst the die-hard fans of the game.

The fact that women have, do, and will continue to play baseball without much fanfare speaks to the power of media representations to selectively include or exclude certain events, movements, or entire groups of people, thereby shaping the collective social conscience. Save for the popular 1992 Hollywood rendition of the AAGPBL's best team, the Rockford Peaches, in "A League of Their Own" (Creedon 245), women's baseball is a forgotten part of history. Toni Stone, Connie Morgan, and Mamie "Peanut" Johnson, three black women who played in the (men's) Negro Leagues (Ardell 112), don't even make the footnotes. Indeed, women's baseball, in practice and representation, has endured much of the same racism that has pervaded men's baseball (Cohen 88), with black women facing the additional challenge of being accepted by men of all races and whites of all genders.

The practice of marginalizing female athletes continues today. Even when female athletes compete on par with or above their male peers, they are not given nearly as much credit or attention as men (Birrell 54). This is true in professional, amateur, and youth sports. The Little League (boys) Baseball World Series, held each year in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, receives extensive ESPN sports coverage and big corporate sponsorships. Even its losing teams are treated to parades in their hometowns, congratulations from celebrities, and sometimes White House receptions. The Little League (girls) Softball World Series, which also happens annually, receives no such attention (McDonagh 242). This reality confirms not one, but two glaringly sexist power plays. First, girls are relegated to the softball diamond because of age-old gender stereotypes. Then, not only are girls not allowed to play baseball, but the best youth softball teams aren't even recognized. The ability of media to establish a pattern of exclusion of female

baseball players supports male hegemony and enormously impacts how we understand intersections of gender and athletics.

When the media do cover female athletes, the focus never strays far from her femininity. This has remained a constant throughout history. In 1931, one article on Jackie Mitchell included a picture of her cooking and declared “Her Curves Confused The Mighty Babe” (McDonagh 196) while today’s headlines for knuckleball pitchers Chelsea Baker and Eri Yoshida frequently describe both using the painfully unoriginal nickname “Knuckleball Princess.” There seems to be an obsession with emphasizing that female athletes are female, rather than that they are athletes. The reasons for such unfair depictions reside in both the idea that sport is for males and the fear of female athletes taking on “masculine” characteristics. America’s inability to recognize athletes of all genders purely as sportspeople reveals a sad truth: “We have decided male athletes are worth more than female athletes. And we have evolved values and traditions that keep in place practices which enforce athletic, hierarchical gender roles, sometimes using public resources to do it” (McDonagh 243). And so the cycle continues. It is not surprising, then, that women have struggled to establish a visible presence in baseball despite their love of a game that does not always love them back.

Just as race-based policies in the US have historically attempted to exclude non-whites from power and resources, gender-based policies have tried to exclude women from baseball. Although many people today support racial and gender equality in ideology, the tendency to create “color-blind” (Dobratz 176) or “gender-neutral” policies ignores an entire history of repression and inequality. Personal and institutional racial and gender bias is stubbornly entrenched, people have just become better at concealing it. The old founders of baseball leagues

and teams lay the patriarchal foundation of gender discrimination in our national pastime, and much of the nation bought into it. This is reflected in the Little League volunteer who dutifully yet ignorantly directs families with girls to the softball sign-up line, the parent of a teenage boy cut from the team who is incensed that “the girl” took his spot, the coach who benches his best hitter because she happens to be a girl, the death threats female collegiate pitchers have received for having the audacity to step on a baseball diamond. While media portrayals continue to play a significant role in “agenda-setting,” or determining what is important enough to report (Creedon 10), media are also a reflection of commonly held values. So although powerful actors like the media “place structural and ideological constraints around people’s thoughts and actions...these constraints do not fully determine the outcome” (Messner 8). Media are businesses that will cater to their customers, therefore, consumers must undertake the responsibility of holding themselves accountable as well.

Countless arguments have been made to justify the exclusion of girls and women from baseball, many of which smack of reworded old school sexism. The basis for one such view is that the currently excluded will be intimidated by inclusion and would do better if separated (Cohen 11). While this may seem like an outdated pre-Brown vs. Board of Education race argument, it still is argued in circumstances concerning gender. It fits closely with the argument that males and females have uniquely innate physical capabilities with little overlap which rationalizes segregation. Regardless of average biological differences between sexes, there are plenty of females who are better athletes than males. Females who have endeavored to play on boys’ and men’s baseball teams do not ask for favors or wish to have expectations lowered. They

simply want to be evaluated on none other than their athletic capabilities. The greatest barriers are not physical but ideological.

Two particular players in recent memory have profoundly changed the women's baseball scene by defying stereotypes and poking all kinds of holes in people's arguments against females in baseball. The first was Ila Borders, a left-handed pitcher who, in 1994, became the first female to play collegiate baseball on a baseball scholarship (Ardell 134). Borders went on to play minor league baseball, surviving the demanding travel schedule and competing alongside men, thus proving that women could indeed successfully play professional baseball. Before Borders, there existed no real "image of the female baseball player" who had not been overly feminized (Ardell 135). She filled that void. The second was Mo'Ne Davis, a 13-year-old from Philadelphia whose dominating pitching led her team to the 2014 Little League Baseball World Series. Despite her relatively small frame, Davis featured a 70 miles per hour fastball and devastating curve which garnered national media attention. Predictably, the debate about whether or not a female could ever play in the Majors surfaced with many pointing to biological differences and doubting it would ever happen. Though the public reaction to Davis was primarily positive, sexist undertones were plentiful. Today 100,000 girls like Mo'Ne Davis play Little League baseball. Unfortunately, almost every single one will have a door slammed in her face with a sign on it that says her love of the game is worthless.

Baseball's defiant exclusion of women has marred a great American tradition that has otherwise kept pace with or preceded the nation's social progress. There is something profoundly powerful in the ability to deny half a country participation in the one thing that is so thoroughly American. So long as discrimination in baseball is tolerated and systemically supported, gender

inequality in other aspects of society will linger. Baseball is just a microcosm of American society, feeding off of the patriarchal social structures that allow such blatant discrimination to continue. But despite the prevalence of restrictive gender norms and values, failed gender equality policies, unchallenged funneling of young girls into softball programs without giving them a legitimate choice, and absent or distorted media representations, there is still hope for girls and women in baseball. It is possible for ideologies and systems to change, and of us all, children are the least warped by society's boxes and restraints. It doesn't matter that there's never been a female president or a female Major League ballplayer. Young girls still dream of becoming president or playing Major League Baseball. Who are we as a society to tell girls that their dreams aren't worth just as much as a boy's? Because of this enduring youthful optimism, each day, American women come closer and closer to claiming their hard fought share of the national pastime, one girl baseball player at a time.

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