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## A Lavender League of Their Own? Voice and Visibility of Lesbian Ballplayers

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# A Lavender League of Their Own?

*Voice and Visibility of Lesbian Ballplayers*

PETER DREIER

In 2010, President Barack Obama nominated Elena Kagan, the Solicitor General and former dean of the Harvard Law School, to serve on the Supreme Court. The *New York Post* ran a seventeen-year-old black and white photograph of Kagan smiling and getting ready to swing a bat in a softball game under the headline, “Does this photo suggest high court nominee Elena Kagan is a lesbian?”<sup>1</sup> Other news outlets quickly raised the same question, stirring a controversy over Kagan’s sexuality, which was no doubt what those opposed to Kagan’s nomination intended.

The controversy reflected both the persistent stigma against lesbianism and the persistent stereotype that links women athletes—and particularly baseball and softball players—to lesbianism.

The story of lesbians in baseball parallels the struggles of women and gay people to gain more equality in all walks of life. In the 1940s and 1950s, when lesbianism was a taboo topic, especially in the sports world, the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League—the inspiration for the 1992 film *A League of Their Own*—did everything it could to avoid that stigma. The rise of modern feminism in the 1970s, especially the passage of Title IX of the federal Education Act of 1972, significantly increased the number of girls and women participating in organized sports at all levels, from preteens through the professional ranks. As the gay rights movement also burgeoned, a growing number of lesbian athletes came out of the closet, and the stigma was no longer as powerful.

## WOMEN IN BASEBALL

Since its inception in the early 1800s, baseball was known as a sport for boys and men. “Baseball is too strenuous for womankind,” wrote Albert Spalding in 1911,<sup>2</sup> reflecting the dominant views of the period. Women faced ostracism

and derision—including the fear of becoming unmarried “spinsters”—if they dared violate social norms about engaging in sports.<sup>3</sup>

The first women’s colleges were established in the 1860s and within a few decades some of them—including Smith College, Wellesley College, and the Women’s College at Brown University—fielded baseball teams.<sup>4</sup> In 1919, New York City’s school system incorporated baseball as a physical education activity for girls. Most young girls played what eventually became known as softball, but some insisted on playing by men’s rules and with baseball equipment.<sup>5</sup> Gladys Palmer’s 1929 book, *Baseball for Girls and Women*, included a variety of rules for indoor and outdoor games.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE AAGPBL

During World War II, professional baseball faced a labor shortage. Eventually, over five hundred major leaguers served in the military during the war, while others worked in defense plants. Major league owners worried that fans would not pay to watch teams with second-tier players, but Philip K. Wrigley, the multimillionaire chewing gum magnate who owned the Chicago Cubs, figured they might buy tickets to see women play baseball. He recruited businessmen to sponsor local teams in mid-sized industrial cities within a one hundred-mile radius of Chicago. The league started with four teams—the Racine Belles and Kenosha Comets in Wisconsin, the Rockford Peaches in Illinois, and the South Bend Blue Sox in Indiana—and eventually grew to ten.

Softball had grown in popularity in the 1930s and 1940s. By 1943, there were at least forty thousand women’s softball teams—one quarter of all the teams in the country.<sup>7</sup> They provided a talent pool for the AAGPBL, but Wrigley insisted that they play some version of regular baseball.

Over six hundred players participated in the league, which operated from 1943 to 1954. (Even after Jackie Robinson broke baseball’s color line in 1947, the AAGPBL excluded Black players). Most players were from working-class families. Their salaries—initially ranging from \$45 to \$85 a week—were considerably higher than most other jobs available to women, and many men, even in defense plants. Most of them still had to work during the off-season, in factories or at clerical and office jobs.

In 1987, Kelly Candaele made a public television documentary about the AAGPBL called *A League of Their Own*, based in part on the experiences of his mother, Helen Callaghan, who played for three AAGPBL teams between 1944 and 1949. Candaele’s film inspired director Penny Marshall to make a Hollywood version with the same title. Marshall may have known that many AAGPBL players were lesbians, but her film made no mention of that fact.<sup>8</sup>

According to Candaele, “My mom, who was working in a factory in Vancouver, told me that she didn’t even know about lesbianism until she joined the Minneapolis Millerettes. She said that all the players knew that gay relationships in the league were common, but also that nobody seemed to make much of it.” Among his mother and her fellow players, Candaele said, “their attitude seemed to be that what happens within the team stays within the team.”<sup>9</sup>

No players were open about their sexuality except to close friends and some teammates. Wrigley and the team owners wanted to differentiate the AAGPBL from existing amateur women’s softball leagues, where players were often viewed as rough and masculine, wearing regular male-style uniforms on the field. One 1943 magazine article worried that the AAGPBL would turn women’s baseball into an “uncouth Amazonian spectacle,” code words for lower class and lesbian.<sup>10</sup>

Because many of the best ballplayers were lesbians, it was impossible for the league to exclude them. But AAGPBL executives --all men --insisted that the teams avoid the perception that any players were lesbians.<sup>11</sup> They were told to avoid appearing “mannish.” The league handbook insisted that the ballplayers radiate the “highest ideals of womanhood” and required players to “dress, act, and carry themselves as befits the feminine sex.” The AAGPBL expected players to “Play like a man, look like a lady”—or, as player Lois Youngen put it, “Look like Betty Grable and play ball like Joe DiMaggio.”<sup>12</sup>

On the field, they played in flared skirts like those worn by women in figure skating, field hockey, and tennis, even though they were expected to slide, which led to many bruises.

Off the field, players were prohibited from smoking or drinking in public, required to get their chaperones’ permission for “all social engagements,” and had to be in their rooms by a curfew hour. The league sent player profiles to local newspapers that focused not only on their playing skills but also their domestic skills and hobbies, such as cooking and sewing. In local ads and publicity, the league promoted the most traditionally feminine-looking players.

After daily practices, players attended classes run by Helena Rubenstein’s charm school that included makeup tips, etiquette, language, posture, social skills, and personal hygiene, plus the league’s strict dress code. Each player was given a guide with instructions for appearance and behavior.

Many AAGPBL players were married, engaged, or had boyfriends back home or in the military. Like many pro athletes, some had affairs during the baseball season. Some of those affairs were with men, while others were with women, including their teammates. League officials did their best to monitor

the players' behavior and punish those who engaged in same-sex relationships or even had the appearance of being lesbian.

One AAGPBL manager released two players whom he suspected of being lesbians, worried that they would "contaminate" other players on the team.<sup>13</sup> When AAGPBL publicity director Fred Leo learned that a married player was having an affair with another woman, he contacted the player's husband, who came and took her home.<sup>14</sup>

Connie Wisniewski—a five-time All-Star who played from 1944 to 1952—was told that she would be released if she got a close-cropped haircut called a "bob." Dottie Ferguson, an outstanding player between 1945 and 1954, was warned by her team chaperone not to wear women's Oxford shoes, because they were too masculine-looking.

#### THE PLAYERS

Despite these restrictions, women in the AAGPBL gained self-confidence that lasted beyond their playing days. "It was just a chance of a lifetime to someone who loved to play baseball as much as I did," recalled player Gloria Cordes Elliott.<sup>15</sup> While only 8.2 percent of women of their generation earned college degrees, 35 percent of AAGPBL players did so, with 14 percent earning graduate degrees.<sup>16</sup> Many became teachers, coaches, and advocates for women's sports and female athletes.

*A Secret Love*, a 2020 documentary, reflects the hardships that lesbian players endured as well as changing attitudes toward lesbianism. It focuses on Terry Donahue and Pat Henschel, who met and fell in love in 1947, when Donahue, then twenty-two, was playing for the AAGPBL and Henschel, then eighteen, was a phone operator. They kept their true relationship secret for over six decades.

Both women grew up on Canadian farms. A topflight softball player in Moose Jaw, Donahue joined the Peoria Red Wings in 1946, playing for them until 1949. After Donahue left the league, the couple moved to the Chicago area, where Donahue played part-time for women's professional softball teams.

During the AAGPBL season, Henschel traveled to the small Midwestern cities to attend Donahue's games and have private moments together. While apart, they wrote long love letters to each other, later tearing off their signatures to keep their relationship secret from family, friends, and team officials in case the letters were ever found.

During the 1950s and 1960s, they avoided gay bars, which police often raided. They feared that they could get arrested, be fired from their jobs,

or deported to Canada. They had a small coterie of gay friends who socialized in each other's homes, where they felt safe. When the gay rights movement erupted in the 1970s, they remained on the sidelines. They worked for the same Chicago interior design firm but hid their relationship from fellow employees.

Donahue rarely talked about her baseball-playing days, but after the release of *A League of Their Own*, she gained some recognition. In 2010, she was the grand marshal of the St. Patrick's Day parade in St. Charles, Illinois. An article about Donahue in the local newspaper described Henschel as her "cousin and roommate."<sup>17</sup> In an oral history interview that year, Donahue didn't even mention Henschel.<sup>18</sup>

*A Secret Love* depicts their decision to come out to family and friends, to live openly as a couple, and to get married on Donahue's ninetieth birthday in 2015, the year same-sex marriage was legalized.

American culture had changed enough by the time Donahue died in 2019, at age ninety-three, that the AAGPBL posted a photo of the couple on its Twitter page, describing Henschel as her "partner of 71 years."<sup>19</sup>

Many other lesbians in the AAGPBL had long-lasting relationships during and after their playing days, but remained closeted, even years after many of them had hung up their spikes. It was only after they, or their partners, died that they came out of the closet, usually through phrases in their obituaries like "long term partner" or "long term companion."<sup>20</sup>

Mildred "Millie" Deegan, born in Brooklyn in 1919, was an outstanding high school athlete. At fifteen she came in second in the women's javelin throw and would have made the US Olympic team in 1936 except she was underage. Her prowess on the softball field led to her nickname, "the Babe Ruth of women's softball."<sup>21</sup> She pitched and played second base for six teams during her nine years (1943-51) in the league. In 1944, after watching her play, Brooklyn Dodgers manager Leo Durocher said, "If she were a man, she no doubt would have been a Dodger."<sup>22</sup>

When her playing days ended, she coached a women's softball team from 1958-79 in Linden, New Jersey, where she met Margaret Nusse, the team manager and star pitcher. From the late 1930s through the early 1960s, Nusse threw at least thirty no-hitters and batted .537. In 1968 she was named commissioner, and Deegan secretary-treasurer, of the Eastern Major Softball League.<sup>23</sup> Deegan and Nusse became life-long partners, moving to Florida in 1976. A 1993 profile of Nusse in the *Tampa Bay Times* described Deegan as her "cousin" and "roommate."<sup>24</sup> But the *New York Times* obituary for Deegan in 2002 described Nusse as her "companion and her only survivor."<sup>25</sup>

Born in 1920, Mabel Holle grew up in Jacksonville, Illinois. She played on

sports teams with local boys, including the boys' football team in her freshman and sophomore years in high school.<sup>26</sup> In 1942 she earned a bachelor's degree in physical education from MacMurray College, where she played field hockey, volleyball, and basketball. She was one of the original sixty AAGPBL players, playing for Kenosha and South Bend, but the league did not renew her contract after one season. For the next two seasons she played for the Chicago Chicks in the rival National Girls Baseball League. She then taught physical education for forty-five years at Waukegan High School, coached softball, basketball, and volleyball, and earned a master's degree in 1955 from MacMurray.<sup>27</sup> According to the *Chicago Tribune*, she was "instrumental in getting girls involved in sports before Title IX legislation paved the way for equality in school athletic programs."<sup>28</sup>

When she died in 2011 at ninety-one, obituaries in the *Chicago Tribune* and *State Journal-Register*, and on a family website, described Linda Hoffman as her "longtime partner."<sup>29</sup>

Josephine "Jo" D'Angelo worked in a steel mill during the day and devoted her evenings to playing baseball in Chicago. She played outfield for the South Bend Blue Sox in 1943 and 1944. D'Angelo was a lesbian, but she wore feminine-style clothes and avoiding hanging around with the league's "gay crowd" in order to keep her sexuality a secret.<sup>30</sup> The Blue Sox released her during her second season. The reason, she said years later, was her "butchy haircut," which a hair stylist had given her without her permission.

D'Angelo used the money she made playing pro ball to help pay tuition at DePaul University, earning a degree in physical education. She later got her master's in counseling and spent her career working at Chicago-area high schools as a gym teacher and school counselor. She died in 2013 at eighty-eight. Her obituary in the *Chicago Sun-Times* noted that as early as her teenage years, D'Angelo identified as a lesbian.<sup>31</sup>

As a teenager in Rockford, Illinois, Jean Cione played for industrial league women's softball teams. While in high school in 1945, she joined the AAGBPL's Rockford Peaches and played for three other league teams through 1954. She was one of the AABPL's greatest pitchers, throwing two no-hitters in 1950 and winning twenty or more games in three seasons. After the league folded, she earned a bachelor's degree from Eastern Michigan University and a master's degree at the University of Illinois. For a decade she taught physical education in elementary school. She returned to Eastern Michigan University in 1963 as a professor of sports medicine, coached women's track and basketball, and in 1973 became the university's first director of women's athletics. After she retired from EMU in 1992, Cione and her partner, Ginny Hunt, moved to Bozeman, Montana, where Cione died in 2010 at age eighty-two. Her

obituary in the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, and her profile on the SABR website, described Hunt as “her partner.”<sup>32</sup>

Some outstanding lesbian athletes refused to play in the AAGPBL when they learned about the strict rules and surveillance. Dot Wilkinson was only eleven when she joined the Phoenix Ramblers of the fast-pitch American Softball Association (ASA) in 1933 and was considered one of the country’s best players. A decade later, the AAGPBL eagerly recruited her, offering her \$85 a week (the equivalent of over \$1,300 today), but she refused. She didn’t want to put up with the AAGPBL’s confining rules. She remained with the Ramblers—who allowed her to play in Levi’s or shiny satin shorts—until 1965. During World War II, she operated a drill press in defense factories while playing ball at nights and on weekends.

Wilkinson played softball from 1933 to 1965, earning nineteen All-American awards and leading the Ramblers to world championships in 1940, 1948, and 1949. While traveling around the country with the Ramblers, she also held a full-time job, because her baseball pay wasn’t sufficient to make ends meet. Many consider her one of the great women softball players—and the greatest catcher—of all time.

In 1963, Estelle “Ricki” Caito, also an All-American player, joined the Ramblers as a second baseman. Wilkinson and Caito only played together for two seasons, but they began a lifelong relationship that lasted forty-eight years. They lived in Phoenix and worked together renovating homes for resale.

“We were born at a time when we were all in the closet and that was just the name of the game,” Wilkinson explained. “And you have to live with it and that’s what we did.”<sup>33</sup> Caito’s obituary in the *Arizona Republic* identified Wilkinson as her “long time companion.”<sup>34</sup>

#### GROWING VISIBILITY OF LGBTQ ATHLETES

Two decades after the AAGPBL’s demise, the rise of modern feminism and the emergence of the gay rights movement helped increase the number of women and lesbian athletes playing at all levels. These movements changed attitudes and sponsored lawsuits that opened doors for these athletes, increasing women’s participation in sports and triggering a growing number of lesbian athletes to publicly declare their sexuality.

The most important catalyst for the growing visibility of women and lesbian athletes was Title IX, a 1972 amendment to the federal Education Act designed to provide everyone with equal access to any program or activity receiving federal funding. Though not focused on sports, the law is often associated with dramatically increasing girls’ and women’s participation in athletics,



especially in high school and college sports, and laying the foundation for the growing popularity of professional women's sports.

Many of the female teams common today didn't exist in 1972.<sup>35</sup> Between 1972 and 2018, the number of boys participating in high school sports grew from 3.6 million to 4.5 million, a 25 percent increase, while girls' participation grew from 294,000 to 3.4 million, a spike of over 1,000 percent.<sup>36</sup>

By 2018, about 100,000 girls played pre-high school youth baseball each year, but only 1,284 girls played baseball in high school during that season. Girls get channeled into fast-pitch softball, particularly since that's where the college scholarships are. Since 1973, the number of high school girls playing fast-pitch softball rose from 110,140 to 362,038.<sup>37</sup>

The number of women participating in intercollegiate sports increased from 64,390 in 1982 to 216,378 in 2018—from 28 percent to 44 percent of all intercollegiate athletes. In 1982, 55 percent of NCAA institutions fielded a women's fast-pitch softball team, with 7,465 women participating. By 2018, 90 percent of NCAA members offered the sport, attracting 20,316 female athletes.<sup>38</sup> These numbers don't even include the growing number of women athletes participating in club sports in college. In 1982, the NCAA sponsored the first Women's College World Series, providing the sport greater exposure and leading to growing participation.

The growing number of women playing fast-pitch softball in high school and college laid the foundation for Olympic competition. Women's softball was an Olympic sport from 1996 to 2008, removed for the 2012 and 2016 games, and added for the 2020 games (postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic).<sup>39</sup> Title IX didn't apply to Little League, a private organization, but it helped change the climate that influenced how parents, coaches, and judges felt about girls playing sports.<sup>40</sup> When it began in 1939, Little League prohibited girls. During the 1950s and 1960s, several girls—some pretending to be boys—joined Little League teams but were quickly forced to quit. By 1972, over two million boys, but no girls, played Little League baseball. That year, however, the National Organization for Women filed a gender discrimination suit on behalf of Maria Pepe, a would-be Little Leaguer from Hoboken, New Jersey. Sylvia Pressler, a hearing officer for the state Division of Civil Rights, ruled in Pepe's favor. Little League's national office appealed the ruling, but the state Supreme Court upheld the decision. By 1974, New Jersey Little League told its local chapters that they must allow girls play. In 1974, in the face of more than twenty lawsuits and changing public opinion, some local leagues relented, and Little League Baseball revised its charter to allow girls to play. The next year, more than thirty thousand girls played. The number has escalated since then; in 2014, thirteen-year-old Mo'ne Davis from Philadelphia, pitched the first

shutout by a girl in the Little League World Series and appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. She later played softball for Hampton University.

As more females participated in sports, a growing number of public figures publicly acknowledged their homosexuality. In 1981, when tennis star Billie Jean King came out, it was big news.

The gay rights movements catalyzed the growth of gay sports leagues for men and women in many cities. In 1982 gay athletes founded the Gay Olympics (renamed the Gay Games). In 2018 over ten thousand athletes from ninety-one countries participated in the ten-day event in Paris.<sup>41</sup> Since 1999, a website called *OutSports* has been identifying and chronicling the dramatic increase in out-of-the-closet LGBT sports figures.

It has been easier for athletes in individual sports—like King and fellow tennis star Martina Navratilova, diver Greg Louganis, and figure skaters Adam Rippon and Johnny Weir—to come out of the closet than for players on team sports.<sup>42</sup> Among athletes on professional team sports, gay women have been more likely than men to publicly assert their sexual orientation.<sup>43</sup> This is particularly true in professional women’s basketball and soccer.<sup>44</sup> When the US women’s national soccer team won the World Cup championship in 2019, Megan Rapinoe—a charismatic thirty-four-year-old midfielder—became the public face of women’s soccer and perhaps the most well-known athlete, gay or straight, in the world. “You can’t win a championship without gays on your team. It’s never been done before, ever,” she told the media.<sup>45</sup> At least four of her teammates were openly lesbian.<sup>46</sup>

At least 185 publicly out gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and non-binary athletes participated in the summer Olympic Games in Tokyo, more than twice the number in the Rio games in 2016. Women were 90 percent of the athletes on that list. *Outsports* identified eight women’s softball players—four from the US—as lesbians but did not include any men on Olympic baseball teams on the list of LGBTQ athletes.<sup>47</sup>

These openly lesbian athletes are role models for the many young lesbian athletes in high school, college, and semipro sports.

By 2021, only nine male players in the top baseball, football, and basketball leagues had come out after their careers were over. Only four (one NBA player, two NFL players, and one NHL player) have come out of the closet while still actively playing. Among the twenty thousand athletes who have played major league baseball since the late 1800s, not one has come out as homosexual. A few minor league ballplayers have come out in the past decade, but none climbed to the major leagues.

## A LESBIAN ON AN ALL-MEN'S TEAM

Ila Borders broke many barriers in college and among the professional ranks, where she competed on all-men's teams. She eventually came out as a lesbian, but only after she ended her professional baseball career.

Borders was a beneficiary of both Little League and Title IX. Born in 1975, she grew up in La Mirada, a Los Angeles suburb. Her father encouraged her to pursue her passion for baseball. At age six she began playing in an all-girls Little Miss Softball league. At ten, she signed up for Little League, despite efforts by league officials to dissuade her. Borders recognized that she was gay in elementary school, when she had her first crush on another girl.<sup>48</sup>

She was the only girl on the baseball teams at Whittier Christian Junior High School and then at Whittier Christian High School. She chose to attend Southern California College, a small Christian college, becoming the first woman to win a college baseball scholarship and to win a game in men's collegiate baseball. She transferred to Whittier College for her senior year and was part of the starting rotation on the otherwise all-male team. At Whittier she became the first woman to pitch in NCAA Division III baseball.<sup>49</sup>

In 1997, the Saint Paul Saints, a professional team in the independent Northern League, invited her to try out for the team and eventually offered her a place on the roster for \$750 a month. One month into the season, she was traded to the Duluth-Superior Dukes. The following season, on July 24, 1998, Borders became the first woman (since the Negro Leagues era) to officially win a game in a men's regular season professional league.

Throughout high school, college, and her professional baseball career, she kept her sexuality secret. "I tried everything in my power to make my feelings for girls go away. I prayed, and when that didn't work, I prayed harder," she wrote in 2017.<sup>50</sup>

"If a woman plays hardball, people figure she's likely gay," Borders wrote.<sup>51</sup> "In the closet as I was, I unconsciously accepted the message that I must look feminine. So I only did cardio workouts," rather than lift weights and gain visible muscle mass.<sup>52</sup> With her long hair, Borders did not fit the stereotype of a lesbian, so reporters rarely probed about her sexuality. Throughout her baseball career, however, she was frequently asked if she had a boyfriend. She would sometimes lie that she dated men. "When people tried to set me up [with men], it was easy to say, 'No thanks, too busy.'" She had her first secret, platonic romance with a woman in college, but their relationship was fraught with fear at their Christian school, so they avoided being seen together in public. She secretly dated women during her minor league days.<sup>53</sup>

The fear of being outed—especially given all the media attention she received as a woman trying to make it in men’s baseball—put extra pressure on Borders. The psychological toll, as well as the very low pay, hampered her performance on the field. She played four years of pro baseball in several independent leagues, but never did well enough to secure a contract with a franchise affiliated with a major league team. She retired from pro baseball at age twenty-five, midway through the 2000 season.

Like other gay athletes, Borders found it emotionally exhausting to live a double life. “It’s why I quit. It’s the worst thing on Earth to hide who you are.”<sup>54</sup>

“I remain certain that my professional career would not have been possible had I come out,” she wrote.<sup>55</sup> Even so, in retrospect she realized that her greatest regret about her baseball career “wasn’t not making it into Organized Baseball; it was living the Great Lie of who I was.”<sup>56</sup>

Borders became a firefighter and paramedic, working for fire departments in California, Arizona, and Oregon. When she eventually decided to come out to her fire department colleagues, it “made barely a ripple. Were times changing or just me?”<sup>57</sup>

In 2016, Borders married and later divorced Jenni Westphal, a shoe designer for Nike. She came out publicly when she published her memoir in 2017. Borders frequently does clinics and coaches young women and men. During the 2021 All-Star Week in Denver, she participated in a pitching clinic for MLB.

#### SLOW BUT STEADY PROGRESS

Borders is one of several women who have played for all-male professional baseball teams.<sup>58</sup> (These experiences led Fox to broadcast a television dramatic series, *Pitch*, in 2016 about the first woman to play in the major leagues. The series was cancelled after one season).

In the past two decades, however, a small but growing number of women have played on all-men’s teams at the high school and college levels.<sup>59</sup> In 2021, at least six women played baseball on otherwise all-men’s college teams.<sup>60</sup> However, most women who play baseball or softball, whether amateur or professional, do so in all-women leagues. This provides a more supportive culture for lesbian athletes, but the stigma and stereotypes have not disappeared.

Malaika Underwood was an infielder on the 2008 and 2014 Women’s World Cup baseball teams and a member of the US women’s national baseball team, which won a gold medal at the 2015 Pan American Games. When asked to discuss female athletes, “[s]he regrets that she sometimes capitulates to the impulse to be ‘proactively heterosexual,’ often making certain to mention that

she has a boyfriend early in the conversation ‘to establish that I’m not gay without them questioning it.’<sup>61</sup>

Outfielder Tamara Holmes played Little League and high school baseball in the Bay Area. At the University of California at Berkeley, she played softball and basketball where, she recalled “there is a higher chance of having gay members on the team,” which made her more comfortable as a Black lesbian.<sup>62</sup> In 1996, she joined the Colorado Silver Bullets, an all-female professional baseball team, even though she hadn’t played competitive baseball since high school. (The Bullets lasted from 1994 to 1997). She graduated from Berkeley in 2001 and played on Women’s World Cup teams every two years from 2004 through 2014, and for the US team in the 2015 Pan American Games. She was not out of the closet until she married her wife in 2016. Holmes became a firefighter and athletic trainer in Oakland after her athletic career ended.

The number of women playing baseball is far behind their counterparts in softball, because most young women still get channeled into softball at the high school, college, professional, and adult amateur levels. So despite many strides in preparing young women to play baseball, it is still quite rare. Several initiatives, however, seek to increase the pipeline of girls who are ready to play baseball at the high school level and beyond.

In 1996, Justine Siegal started Baseball for All, a nonprofit organization that encourages girls to pursue baseball beyond Little League. It began as a four-team all-women’s baseball league in Cleveland and has expanded since then. It sponsored the first national girls’ baseball tournament for girls ages 10–13 in Orlando, Florida in 2015, attracting hundreds of players. The 2019 event, played at Beyer Stadium in Rockford, Illinois, home of the AAGPBL’s Rockford Peaches, expanded to include girls from ages seven to eighteen, attracted 350 participants.<sup>63</sup> In 2017, USA Baseball and Major League Baseball launched a new tournament called Trailblazers for girls aged eleven to thirteen, held in Los Angeles area. By 2019, the two-day event attracted girls from twenty-one states, Canada and Puerto Rico, whose expenses were covered by MLB. In 2018, MLB sponsored Girls Baseball Breakthrough Series (GBBS) aimed at identifying and grooming young girls to play baseball.

The first Women’s Baseball World Cup tournament has been held every two years since 2004. By 2016, twelve countries sent teams to the tournament. The US Baseball Women’s National Team represented the United States at these events and at the Pan American Games in 2015, the first year women’s baseball was included.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, the number of women playing softball has proliferated in recent years. Local amateur women’s softball leagues are often a gathering place for lesbians.<sup>65</sup> More women are playing softball in professional leagues, which

have a significant number of out-of-the-closet lesbians.<sup>66</sup> Lauren Lappin, for example, was an All-American softball player at Stanford, graduating in 2006. She didn't come out publicly until 2008, after Vicky Galindo, her teammate on the silver-medal winning US Olympic team, came out to her teammates.<sup>67</sup> In 2010, she played on the US national team, which won the world championship. She then became a full-time professional, playing for the USSSA Pride team in the National Pro Fastpitch league, retiring in 2015.<sup>68</sup> In 2018, Aleshia Ocasio, a Black Puerto Rican, graduated from the University of Florida, where she played on the NCAA champion softball team. She came out as bisexual in college, explaining, "Playing in this sport and being around the same people every day who a lot of identify as LGBTQ+, I'm blessed to say that I've been comfortable with the process of coming out and being in an environment where I feel supported."<sup>69</sup> In 2019 she joined Chicago Bandits, a National Pro Fastpitch team, and was outspoken on behalf of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The feminist and gay rights movement have had a profound impact on the world of sports. One indication of how things have changed can be seen in the Amazon TV series based on *A League of Their Own*, which was scheduled to debut in 2021 but was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the show's cocreators, the series will include lesbian characters.<sup>70</sup>

Unlike the lesbians in the AAGPBL, today's lesbian baseball and softball players no longer have to hide their sexuality on or off the diamond. For many, it is now a badge of pride.

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#### NOTES

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