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If You Grant It, They Will Play

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Report

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Abstract

If You Grant It, They Will Play

Aaron Preston Schnautz, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisor: Rusty Todd

Last fall, Fox debuted its baseball drama “Pitch,” which imagines a female baseball player for the San Diego Padres breaking Major League Baseball’s gender barrier. But the show’s cup of coffee lasted just 10 episodes, as network executives recently announced the show’s cancellation after one season. “Pitch” may have lacked a large audience, but are enough executives, coaches, players, fans, and most importantly, girls, ready to make this fantasy become fact?

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Introduction

“How can this day get any better?” Suzie exclaimed in the car after the game. To celebrate her fifth birthday, her parents bought tickets to watch her hometown Texas Rangers play in person for the first time. She had seen The Ballpark in Arlington many times on TV, often falling asleep on her father’s lap before the seventh-inning stretch. But she sat awe-struck next to her two brothers in the right field bleachers, taking in the full experience.

By the fourth inning, she had become entranced with the national pastime the same way so many others do: the incredible feats of athleticism, the picturesque early-summer weather, the peanuts and cotton candy, the quality time with loved ones. A speeding white bullet would meet a brown toothpick and a dozen ants frantically reacted to the outcome. To Suzie, nothing felt more perfect.

After the game, the Rangers invited kids down to home plate to run around the bases. As Suzie rounded third, well ahead of her brothers, she decided she would do what more than 14,000 men before her had done: start in a Major League Baseball game.

Her baseball career began a year later, with a pink glove and her younger brother sharing the left side of the diamond with her. Her oversized ballcap occasionally covered her eyes but never hid her beaming smile. Despite being the only girl on her tee-ball team, Suzie had more confidence than any of her male teammates. The parents also cheered more loudly for her than any of the boys, even when her throws bounced past the first baseman.

Win or lose, the game never took the smile off Suzie’s face. Every night she would fall asleep to Rangers games, dreaming of a packed Rangers crowd cheering for her as

she hit a walk-off home run. At 6 years old, she had no idea just how much history she would make.

History

There have now been nearly 19,000 Major League Baseball players since the Boston Red Caps faced the Philadelphia Athletics for the first time on April 22, 1876. None of those players have been women. For that matter, none have appeared in a minor league game either.

That's not to say women have never played professional baseball in the United States. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, made famous in the 1992 movie "A League of Their Own," featured more than 600 women during its 12-season run. The AAGPBL, originally called the All-American Girls Softball League, started in 1943 during the height of World War II. Baseball owners grew concerned about profits dipping when their players registered for the draft, so they brainstormed a women's league to keep baseball in the public eye.

The first season began with four teams playing a game that resembled softball more than baseball. The women – who wore dresses and were instructed to remain ladylike on and off the field – threw a regulation-sized softball. Pitchers used an underhand windup until 1948, when owners introduced overhand pitching and a smaller ball. The basepaths and mound length, originally shorter distances than a softball field, were pushed back over time to better model the national pastime.

Most expected the league to collapse as soon as major league players returned from the war. Instead, AAGPBL reached its peak attendance in 1948, when 10 teams – with nicknames like the Belles, Chicks, Peaches and Daisies – drew nearly a million fans.

But as minor leagues returned to and then surpassed their pre-war popularity, the women's league faced numbered days.

The AAGPBL contracted to six teams in 1952, and only five remained for the 1954 season, which would be its last. That didn't, however, spell the end of women in professional baseball. During the final seasons of the AAGPBL, three women broke the gender barrier in the Negro League's dwindling days. The Indianapolis Clowns signed Toni Stone in 1953 to replace Hank Aaron, who left to begin his legendary MLB career. They added Mamie "Peanut" Johnson later that year and brought in Connie Morgan the following season after trading Stone to the Kansas City Monarchs, though none of the three played after 1955.

Another female professional ballplayer wouldn't come around for more than 40 years.

Ila Borders reignited the movement in the 1990s. After becoming the first woman to receive a scholarship to play college baseball, she made 52 pitching appearances for four independent teams from 1997-2000. Eri Yoshida made her professional debut in Japan in 2009 before pitching in 21 games for the Chico Outlaws and Maui Na Koa Ikaika, two more independent teams, from 2010-2012. Now 25, Yoshida is the only woman to play professionally in multiple countries.

Mo'ne Davis took the movement to new heights in 2014. The South Philadelphia flamethrower became the first girl in Little League World Series history to pitch a shutout, which propelled her to the cover of Sports Illustrated, appearances on the late-night circuit and a 16-minute Spike Lee mini-documentary. And last year, the Sonoma Stompers of the independent Pacific Association made headlines nationwide for adding three women to its roster, including the first all-female pitcher and catcher tandem.

LBJ High School baseball coach Eric Martanovic expects the increased media exposure to directly impact his roster next season. In seven years as a varsity coach, he has yet to have a girl on his team. But he has already heard from two who want to try out next January.

“Beyond the fact our program is gonna grow, the opportunity to have and be a part of this change, to have the change happen right in your back yard, I really hope they come in and do a great job and play for us and get the recognition they deserve,” Martanovic said.

The first-year LBJ coach has a young female ballplayer at home as well. His 5-year-old daughter plays tee-ball, and though he said girls are expected to transition to softball around 8, he wants to keep her in baseball until she decides to switch. And if that day never comes? Coach and parent may become one.

“My daughter sees the athletes I coach, how the athletes treat her and my [6-year-old] son,” Martanovic said. “It’s always been an inviting and welcoming experience for her. She has always gravitated toward it. As long as she has positive experiences, she’ll keep with it.”

Tami Kimball already fulfills both roles. Her daughter, Anna, is the starting pitcher for Kimball’s 12U Bulldogs, a co-ed baseball team in Allen, Texas. Kimball doesn’t think her daughter has the drive to play high school baseball, but that’s not why she runs the rec team.

Anna has played with the same group of boys for five years now. At this age, kids see nothing political about sports. Glass ceilings and wage inequalities don’t factor in their games. Baseball exists simply for a group of friends to enjoy an activity together.

“She’s developed a real bond with the boys,” Kimball said.

But that doesn't stop parents and coaches from asking the question every girl inevitably faces early and often in her baseball career: why not softball? Kimball has the simplest answer – Anna has yet to show an interest in it.

“She wanted to play baseball,” Kimball said. “She didn't care who she played with or how she did it. She just wanted to play.”

Without her mother's intervention, however, Anna's baseball career wouldn't have seen a sophomore season.

Heartbreak

“I don't understand,” Suzie said as they drove home from practice. “I played with them last season. I had fun last season. Did I do something wrong?” Her mother tried to hold back tears as she gripped the steering wheel. “No, of course not, honey!” she said. “You were far better than any boy out there.”

After practice, while Suzie and her brothers raced around the basepaths, her coach informed their mother that he had found new boys to join the team and wanted to move to a competitive division. Both brothers were invited; Suzie was not.

Suzie's mother grew accustomed to this attitude when she was growing up and even into her adult life. But she would be damned if her daughter grew up with men telling her all the things she could not achieve, could not even dream of achieving.

“Suzie, I promise you will get to play baseball again,” she said as she looked at her daughter in the rear-view mirror. “Even if I have to coach you myself.”

Puberty

Anna Kimball may not have a lively fastball or biting curve, but her athleticism can't be questioned. She won a punt, pass and kick event at her elementary school, and willingly battles her brothers and the neighborhood kids in backyard football games. That competitive nature traces back to her first baseball season, when she shared a dugout with younger brother Carson. The coach praised her ability and even informed Tami that her daughter was the better ballplayer.

But when Tami tried to sign up the kids for the 2012 season, Anna had lost her dugout seat next to Carson.

"The coach was clear he wanted to play select baseball," Kimball said. "He flat didn't want a girl on his team. I'm guessing he wanted to intimidate the other coaches with how great his team was. A girl on the team represented some kind of weakness."

Local TV station KDFW interviewed the family for a segment on the nightly news. Tami expressed her frustration, Anna said she was "very, very sad," and Carson threatened to quit sports altogether if he couldn't play with his sister. Fox Sports and Yahoo Sports picked up the story within days.

Anna's exclusion provided more fodder for the decades-long discussion of gender equality in this country – the intricacies of which go well beyond most 7-year-olds' comprehension.

"She understood she wouldn't get to play baseball anymore," Kimball said. "She knew it was because she was a girl."

So Tami turned her frustration into action, starting the Bulldogs before the season launched. Now her daughter can play the sport she loves without harassment, and another youth coach is encouraging girls to chase their baseball dreams.

That is music to Justine Siegal's ears.

The Baseball For All founder has made a career of breaking stereotypes and shattering glass ceilings. Siegal first made history in 2009. While working on her doctorate in sport and exercise psychology at Springfield College, she joined the coaching staff of the Brockton Rox (an independent team in the Canadian American Association of Professional Baseball) to become the first female coach at any level of pro ball.

In 2011, she became the first woman to throw batting practice to an MLB team, tossing BP to the Cleveland Indians at spring training. She then earned the title of first female MLB coach in 2015 when she served as a guest instructor for the Oakland Athletics' instructional league. The most recent addition to the stellar résumé is an appearance with Team Israel as an assistant coach at this spring's World Baseball Classic.

But her crown jewel is the nonprofit she started nearly 20 years ago to create and promote more opportunities for girls in baseball. Siegal began Baseball For All as one female All-Star travel team when she was 23. It has since grown to an expanding network of girls teams from coast to coast and hosts the country's largest girls baseball tournament.

Most importantly, it provides girls with a chance to play with and against each other, avoiding the stigma often associated with being the only girl on a boys high school team. Siegal estimates that more than 100,000 girls play youth baseball in the United States. Of that number, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported that just 1,290 girls played varsity baseball last season. Compared to the 488,815 boys they played alongside, that equates to one girl for every 379 boys.

Forget about being the only girl on the team; that's like being the only girl in the district.

"To see more girls playing high school baseball, we need to see more programs actively recruit girls and let them know girls are welcome," Siegal said. "The support of girls playing baseball needs to happen from an early age, not just as they enter high school."

Though women such as Kimball and Siegal are opening more doors, reaching the level of female varsity baseball player is a long and daunting path. Too many girls are still told they can't compete with boys or should switch to softball. And playing with the boys becomes a bigger spectacle the older they get.

But occasionally the planets start to align. And when a talented player comes along who has a strong support system and finds a high school coach willing to give her a chance, a star can burn even brighter.

Phenom

"Are you nervous?" Suzie heard her mother ask as they got out of the car.

"A little bit, yeah," she replied.

A quick glance around the field confirmed what she already expected. Out of the 40 kids trying out for varsity this season, she would be the only girl. Suzie grabbed her glove and cleats out of the trunk and gave her mother a quick hug.

"Remember what you told us after your first Rangers game," she said.

"I know, mom. One step closer to The Show."

Suzie's fingers trembled as she tied her cleats in the dugout. Baseball never made her this nervous before. But she couldn't turn back now. Besides, what's the point of waking up so early on a Saturday if she wasn't going to play baseball?

Her nerves dissipated as soon as she heard the first crack of a ball meeting a bat. She needed less than an hour to win over the coaching staff. Her fastest lap around the bases beat all but one boy, the school's champion sprinter. She missed a few fly balls, but fielded every grounder cleanly.

After she hit four straight line drives to the outfield wall, the head coach leaned over to two of his assistants and said, "I think we've got our starting shortstop."

Growth

Georgetown High School coach Adam Foster has not forgotten the last time he faced a girl in a varsity baseball game.

He took his team to Houston for an early-season tournament in March 2014. Among the opponents was George Ranch High School, a Houston-area team with a junior southpaw who stood out from the rest of the players.

"I'm sure there was some snickering about them having a girl on their team," Foster said. "She had a big, long ponytail. Nobody really knew what to think until she started throwing."

Sarah Hudek entered the game in relief. Foster chuckled when he remembered she struck out junior pinch hitter Ben Arledge-Bottlinger, who doubled as the school's starting quarterback. The coach said his teammates razed him when he returned to the dugout.

"She was legit," Foster said. "She was the real deal."

Hudek was one of 242 girls who played varsity baseball in Texas that year, according to NFHS records. But analyzing the movement's growth in the Lone Star State gets tricky. Participation peaked at 276 girls the year before, but fell to a four-year low of 241 last season. The 2011 season, however, featured just 163 varsity baseball girls.

Growth at the national level also depends on the tightness of the scope. Last season saw 292 more girls than five years ago, but 122 fewer than a decade ago. One reason to explain the stagnant growth, at least in Texas, could be the steady rise in softball. Participation rates increased 18 percent from the 2007 season, with 76 more schools reporting a team.

Jason Bourgeios believes softball's rise in popularity contributes to why he hasn't had a girl try out for varsity baseball in 11 seasons as a head coach. Should the opportunity arise, however, the seventh-year Vista Ridge High School coach is ready to step to the plate.

"Wherever I'm at, if a girl is good enough to play, I don't care whose feelings are hurt," Bourgeios said. "Facts overrule feelings."

One fact can no longer be ignored: women have become more athletic and competitive, and not just in baseball. Longtime McNeil High School coach Andy Dawson points to the U.S. military as an example, with more women taking up traditional male roles like infantry. Dawson believes these real-world models can inspire young girls to compete with the boys just as much as other female baseball players can.

"As we go on in this world, it's become more and more acceptable to become strong and athletic and pursue those goals," Dawson said.

Having more forward-thinking high school coaches would undoubtedly provide new channels for girls to pursue the sport. But ultimately, baseball is a business, even at

the high school level. Coaches have to win to stay employed. And how a coach builds the roster to get those wins is the million-dollar question.

Bourgeios believes more coaches in Texas would play the best available players, regardless of gender. Or species.

“I definitely think there are a lot of coaches out there that it doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl or an alien,” Bourgeios said. “If you’re one of the best nine, you’ll play.”

Decision

The gold medal had barely been placed around Suzie’s neck before reporters bombarded her with questions.

“What’s next for you?”

“Are you really giving up a full-ride softball scholarship to keep pursuing baseball?”

“How much longer until you become the first woman to break Major League Baseball’s gender barrier?”

She had thought about that last question for most of her life now. She understood all she had sacrificed to make it this far, becoming a state baseball champion in her senior year. She also knew how much further she had to go. Her parents weren’t pleased when she turned down a full scholarship, but this was about more than an education and a boring desk job.

This was about making history.

Change

Sonoma Stompers president and general manager Theo Fightmaster watched Eri Yoshida pitch for Maui Na Koa Ikaika in 2012 and wondered why he couldn't do the same.

No, not how to throw Yoshida's devastating knuckleball. Instead he wondered why more women weren't playing baseball, even at this level. At the time, he worked as the director of operations for the San Rafael Pacifics of the independent North American Baseball League. Watching the "Knuckleball Princess" make history inspired him to be a vehicle for change when his own opportunity arose.

"It seemed like it was such an exciting event in San Rafael," Fightmaster said. "I was always open to finding a moment to implement or recreate that."

He would get plenty of chances with the startup Stompers.

Sonoma began play in 2014 and didn't take long to make history. Bill "Spaceman" Lee, who won 119 games as an MLB pitcher in the 1970s, started and won a game for the Stompers that August. At 67 years old, he broke his own record for oldest player to win a professional baseball game.

The next season, Sonoma added Sean Conroy, who became the first openly gay professional athlete. And last year, Fightmaster did something that hadn't happened since the 1950s Negro League. He signed Stacy Piagno and Kelsie Whitmore (and later Anna Kimbrell) to field a co-ed professional ball club. The three became the newest champions of the girls in baseball movement, which was a role Piagno needed to grow into.

"When I first started playing... that was never a goal of mine," Piagno said. "I said, 'I'm just here to play a sport I love.' But the older I get, I'm seeing this larger picture and it's becoming more of a goal of mine."

Fightmaster explained from the initial press conference that their signings were more than minor league marketing ploys. Smaller baseball teams are known for unique and sometimes wacky promotions – Sonoma hosted a “Jose Canseco Weekend” in 2015 where the 50-year-old slugger suited up for a weekend – but these roster moves had a deeper purpose.

They presented his chance to recreate those magical San Rafael nights.

“Everything we do is about publicity,” Fightmaster explained. “We are a business that is striving for ways to gain eyeballs and interest. One of the things important to us was it wasn’t a one-day thing where we sign a girl and have her start, sell out the ballpark and get some press, and she’s gone the next day.

“Kelsie and Stacy were in the clubhouse every single day, getting early work in and doing drills and getting cardio. They were available on the roster to play if the situation saw fit.”

Both players struggled to adjust to the new league, though. Whitmore struck out in eight of her 13 at-bats, recording a lone hit, run and RBI. And Stacy went 0-2 with a 9.00 ERA in 12 innings while allowing 25 hits and five walks. Despite the poor results, Fightmaster liked what he saw enough to invite Piagno back this year. Her season starts June 2.

“Everyone seemed so genuine and wanted to help as players and athletes,” Piagno said. “Even if it was a publicity stunt, it gives me a chance to play baseball, which I love.”

That the national pastime continues to hold a significant role in the advancement of American society should come as no surprise. Baseball has championed social issues, such as when Brooklyn Dodgers president and general manager Branch Rickey brought Jackie Robinson in to break the MLB color barrier in 1947. It has also healed wounds,

like Mike Piazza's game-winning home run for the Mets in the first sporting event in New York after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.

"Who's to say in the scope of all of that, is there not a young woman out there who could step up?" Dawson said. "Yeah, probably more than one."

Fightmaster, Piagno and Siegal all agree that the best plan moving forward would be to add more girls teams and leagues around the country. Until that happens, the next ceiling to smash requires getting a woman into one of MLB's recognized minor leagues.

The 36-year-old Stompers president's efforts are beyond commendable, but he realizes his resources limit his outreach. Perhaps a progressive owner, say the Chicago Cubs owner who shares Fightmaster's name and is already known as one of the smartest men in the game, would take that next step?

"If it didn't happen in 10 years, I'd be surprised," Fightmaster said.

Closing

Suzie's phone wouldn't stop buzzing.

She had stared at its lifeless form all day, waiting for a call that seemingly would never come.

Until her hometown Texas Rangers called to say they had drafted her in the 43rd round, making her the first woman selected in the MLB Draft.

Messages filled with warm wishes poured in from friends and family and former competitors. "Not many 'firsts' left to cross off the list!" one said. Another asked how to get free tickets. But Suzie ignored them all as she and her mother made the short drive to Globe Life Park to sign the paperwork.

After they dotted the i's and crossed the t's, Suzie and her mother took a stroll across the outfield. Neither spoke as they walked across the pristine grass. When they reached right field, Suzie stopped and stared at the bleachers she first sat in some 20 years ago, enjoying her cotton candy and falling in love with baseball. She recalled her sprint around the bases after the game, and the countless nights of falling asleep to Rangers games on the couch, when she dreamed of fans cheering her name.

The walk-off home run would come in due time. She simply wanted to savor this moment.

She had finally made it.

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