



“Let the Girls Play!” – The Emergence of Women in Baseball

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Albert Goodwill Spalding was a man of ambition. Born during the Industrial Revolution, Spalding was an entrepreneur, an innovator, and a professional athlete. A combination of these interests would lead to one of the most renowned sports lives ever lived. Between 1871 and 1878, Spalding played major league baseball for the Boston Red Stockings and Chicago White Stockings, where he played as both a pitcher and position player. As a batter Spalding posted a career .313 batting average with over 600 hits, and as a pitcher he recorded a 252-65 record, a 2.14 ERA, and near 250 strikeouts. He was also the first popular professional player to use the fielding glove. After his retirement in 1878, Spalding would go on to co-found the A.G Spalding sporting goods company, participate in the first world baseball tour, and organize the National League in Professional baseball alongside William Hubert. However, Spalding wanted more. He was determined to make baseball America's national pastime. To do so, he constructed a fable that presented baseball as a sport meant for the true American. He called for a commission, now known as the Mills Commission, that would investigate the origins of baseball, and this commission would attribute baseball's origins to Abner Doubleday, a career army man and Union General during the Civil War. In more modern times, baseball historians have declared there is no such evidence that would suggest Abner Doubleday had any connection to the original conception of baseball, but still Spalding's goal had been achieved. The lore spread like wildfire, and baseball would in fact become America's pastime. Yet, with Spalding's intentions of America embracing the game of baseball wholeheartedly accomplished, he never believed the game should embrace all Americans. In fact, in his book "America's National Game" Spalding wrote, "A woman may take part in the grandstand, with applause for the brilliant play, with

waving kerchief to the hero, but she couldn't actually play: Base Ball is too strenuous for womankind." In Spalding's mind, there was no place for women in the game, an idea that still persists in the highest circles of the baseball community. To this day, women are still struggling to gain acceptance in the sport.

Marti Sementelli woke on a warm spring California morning in 2011 thinking only of baseball. She was nervous. It was not a sensation she experienced often, but the day was unlike any day she or anyone else had ever experienced.

The San Marcos High School Royal had been on her mind the entire week. The game against the Royal was not the first big game Marti had pitched in as a High School varsity baseball player. As a sophomore, she pitched 21 1/3 innings, posting a 2-1 win record with thirteen strikeouts and only four walks, but Ghazaleh Sailors would be the opposing pitcher. The matchup would be the first time two women would oppose each other as starting pitchers in a varsity baseball game.

She arrived at the Lake Balboa Birmingham field early. Though it was still morning, it was a warm day, and a clear blue sky soared overhead; perfect baseball weather.

She made her way to the locker room quickly and dressed herself in the team's standard home uniform, a plain white jersey with navy blue sleeves, white pants, which on her were low and baggy at the waste and ankles, a white hat, and a special pair of white cleats, which were not team issued, but a bit of her own personal taste. Conversation was casual between her teammates, but still she could not shake the nervous feeling moved through her even as she tried to focus.

Warm ups, In and Out, the customary pregame bullpen, all passed in a blur, and before she knew it, it was game time. The Birmingham field bleachers were filled. The national anthem sounded, and first pitch drew ever nearer. As the anthem ended, the beating in Marti's heart increased. She was focused, but even through the focus, a nervous tug still pulled at her heart; however, no one in the stands or on the field would have known it. She took the mound with confidence stretching every inch of her frame as high as she could skyward.

Standing at only 5'2 and weighing only 115 pounds, Marti was not an imposing figure even when she wanted to be. That is until one has seen her from the batter's box.

Marti toted the rubber in the first inning. Across the field, in the opposing dugout, her opponent, Ghazaleh Sailors, watched intently. Almost immediately, Marti was in trouble. Though known for her smooth delivery, pin point accuracy with a whopping six pitches, and deceptive velocity, pitching anywhere from the high 70mph to the low 80mph range, she managed to load the bases on three straight walks. However, the "dawg" in her, as baseballers call it, would not let her give in. The fear and nervousness melted away, and the comfortability she was so used to pitching with returned to her. She picked off a runner, and then rolled another batter into an easy double play, ending the first. The battle had just begun.

At 5'3 and 145 pounds, Ghazaleh Sailors was only a slight step above Marti in physical intimidation; however, her long stride, ferocious delivery, and near perfect mechanics had earned her the right to be labeled in the category of respectable if not dominant high school pitchers at the varsity level. She would come to the mound, wearing her grey pants at the knee, to show off the teams royal blue socks, which matched the blue lettering of the name San Marcos, scribbled across their scarlet red jerseys, but her outing would be less than spectacular.

After 3 1/3 innings, Sailors would be relieved after giving up three hits and three runs, while Marti would go on to pitch six innings giving up only 5 hits and one run in route to her team's 6-1 victory. The win, though important to Marti and her team, in retrospect mattered very little. For both women the game meant so much more. During the game Sailors and Marti had been enemies, but before and after the game, they could not have been closer allies. Together, they had made a statement--a statement that would garner national attention though it was a simple action they had been doing time and time again their entire lives. Both women had competed against men in the game of baseball and found success. However, whenever an established party seeks to create change in the field of a traditional establishment, hardship is sure to follow.

Marti and Sailors both graduated from their respective high schools in 2011, and both would receive scholarships to play baseball at the collegiate level. When NAIA affiliate Montreat College in North Carolina offered Marti even a minimal scholarship, Head Coach Michael Bender claimed that boosters and even some players were upset by the offer. Some players threatened to transfer, and alumni and boosters alike questioned Bender's reasoning behind offering a girl a scholarship to play for the team, though Bender's offer was not nearly enough to cover the \$33,000 tuition fee to attend the school, and she would only pitch for the JV team, which Bender claims is worse competition than what she faced in high school. Likewise, Sailor faced similar hardship, receiving death threats via social media and email after accepting an offer to play baseball at the University of Maine-Presque Isle.

In a game that holds tradition very dearly, hostility towards change is one of baseball's oldest covenants that has been kept. This game that is known as America's pastime may also tell

us a lot about the country's present, and more importantly, about its future. Ghazaleh Sailors and Marti Sementelli represent the future of equality in America.

As I sat in the Jacksonville University Baseball dugout seething with anger and frustration, one word crossed my mind about my teammates: pussies. We were losing 5-1 in the bottom of the eighth to Florida A&M University, a team that lacks talent on both the pitching mound and at the plate, yet, they have beaten our team four out of the last five times we had competed against them. With not one pitcher that threw over 84 miles per hour, they managed to hold our offense, which had been scoring runs consistently over the course of the first thirteen games of the season, to only six hits. Our pitchers, all of whom threw in the upper 80's and low 90's, had managed to surrender twelve hits, due to a lack of command of off speed pitches. Shoulders were slumped. Timid and passive looks stole onto faces, as batter after batter returned to the dugout after unsuccessful at-bats. In my mind, defeat was inevitable because the team had already given up. Again, the word came back to me: "Pussies." A red flag immediately triggered in my mind, and I tried to box the thought away in the deepest space of forgetfulness. I had again ascribed weakness or lack of will power to a word meant to represent the female anatomy.

As I trudged into the outfield for what was sure to be another long inning of defending, still fuming at my team's lack of desire and determination not to be defeated by a team far less talented than us, I found myself thinking about the phrase: "we're playing like girls." I continued to monitor my thoughts. Almost instinctually, every time my guard dropped or my anger overwhelmed my greater senses, I defaulted to a slur of my teammates based in some egregious reference to a woman's 'frailty.'

As the ninth inning came to a close and the game was completed, I had to ask myself why slanders of women's nature were my primary default when it comes to sports. I consider myself gender conscious, and I would never say something of that nature to a woman or about a woman intentionally, but in the realm of a sporting event, in my mind, it somehow became acceptable. It was normal.

Our language has always viewed masculinity as strength and femininity as weakness. From youth, this tradition was seared into my mind as if with a hot iron. In athletics, children are raised to see the strength of women as inferior to that of a man, and it shows in our everyday colloquialisms.

Sexism is not only engrained at baseball's core but at the heart of every sport. A study of sexist language in sports conducted by Bowling Green State University's Janet B. Parks and Mary Ann Robertson identified a subtle tendency of universities to use differentiating language when referring to men versus women's sports when they write:

Given that both language and sport can perpetuate male privilege, it is not surprising that the language of sport also favors men. Examples of sexist language in sport include gender marking (e.g., using "Lady" or "ettes" as part of the women's team name), referring to female athletes as "girls," focusing media coverage on women's physical attractiveness or marital status rather than on their athletic prowess, and assuming that the "real" event is the men's event and the women's event is "other. (481)

This seemingly minute tendency to differentiate between women and men in the realm of sports is prevalent in college sports and professional sports nationwide. It shows that a difference does exist, and it is a difference that has enough impact to affect the women who play the sport.

Sports terminology insists on portraying women as weaker and inferior athletes to men though women have proved this idea to be false time and time again. one of the most famous schemes in baseball movie history comes from the movie *The Sandlot* in which Porter, one of the Sandlot crew, insults Phillips, a member of the snooty All-Star team, after they get into an argument about whose team is better by screaming at him, “You play ball like a girl!” The two groups of boys are astounded by the insult and silence ensues, which is followed by the issuing of a challenge by Phillips to decide who the better team was on the field once and for all. Likewise, “Throws like a girl,” has long been a term endeared primarily by young boys who play baseball to refer to a boy who does not have a strong throwing arm or throws in a strange fashion. However, this would change during the Little League World Series when female pitcher Mo’ne Davis would lead her Philadelphia Little League team to the 2014 Little League World Series, where they would finish fourth out of sixteen teams. Davis became a national icon, and the hashtag “throws like a girl” became her calling card, giving the term an entirely new connotation.

Even in more brutal sports such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship, better known as the UFC, women have come to forefront and arguably become the face of the sport. Bantamweight champion Ronda Rousey has dominated the women’s half of the sport in her weight division, defending her belt in her last two titles in sixteen seconds and fourteen second respectively. Rousey strikes fear into not only the hearts of the women in her division, but the average male as well. UFC announcer Joe Rogan is quoted as saying he believes Ronda Rousey could best “might be able to beat 50 percent,” showing the respect and reverence she has received from the male audience within the sport.

Women have proved in every sport in which they have been given the opportunity that they are every bit as athletic and talented as their male counterparts. Weakness is never a trait that should be attributed to women because they have proven on numerous occasions that they can compete with men at every level and in every sport. In fact, the growth of women's sports is arguably based on one woman's victory over a man.

On September 20, 1973, former Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs took the court at the Houston Astrodome to face off against Billy Jean King, women's top tennis player, in what would come to be known as "The Battle of The Sexes." Riggs believed that he could beat any woman player in the sport. Though he was fifty-five, Riggs was once considered the best men's player in the world, earning Wimbledon titles in men's singles, doubles, and mixed doubles in 1939. To make his return to the tennis spotlight, Riggs began issuing challenges to women's top tennis players. His first challenge was to Margaret Court, who at the time was ranked number one in women's tennis. He would go on to defeat her handedly 6-2, 6-1. After his defeat of Court, Riggs' sexist attitude worsened. An article published by the History Channel concerning this "Battle" reports that Riggs, in a statement given to the media, stated that women should make less, as "Women play 25 percent as good as men..." He then began issuing challenges to Billy Jean King, widely considered tennis top player after winning ten major tournaments at only twenty-nine years of age. King refused initially, but after a slew of sexist comments and slurs, King consented and a match was scheduled. In front of 30,492 seated spectators and an estimated Ninety-million viewers world wide, "The Battle of The Sexes" raged. King waged war using extended baseline rallies to wear Riggs down, and after three long sets, King would emerge victorious, winning the match 6-4, 6-3, 6-3. The victory launched King into stardom, and paved the way for other women's sports to gain noticed nationwide. It took a woman defeating a man to

show the world a women's strength. Yet, this strength is still often seen as anomalous, a moment when David slew Goliath. However, these feats of strength are becoming commonplace for women, particularly in the realm of baseball.

Sarah Hudek was raised and immersed in much of baseball's rich history. Her father, John Hudek, played Major League Baseball from 1994-1999, pitching for five different teams, including the Astros, the Reds, the Braves, the Mets, and the Blue Jays. From 1994-1997, Houston would be Sarah's home while her father pitched for the Astros in the "The Eighth Wonder of the World", the Astros's Astrodome, an 18 story high enclosed AstroTurf dome. The Astrodome was the first of its kind in Major League Baseball, and in 1994 her father would pitch his way to an All-Star Game appearance on his way to tossing 39 strikeouts in 39.1 innings, posting a 2.97 ERA in 42 appearances. In 1998, after signing with the New York Mets, John would land Sarah and his family in Queens, New York. Naturally, Sarah spent much of her time in the windy Shea Stadium, named after William A. Shea, who oversaw the return of Nation League Baseball to New York. However, John would be traded to the Reds midseason, and so the family would move again to Cincinnati. During that time, Cinergy Field, formerly known as Riverfront Stadium, home of the historic "Big Red Machine" would be Sarah's playground. In 1999, John would be traded to the Braves, landing the family in downtown Atlanta and Sarah at Turner Field, which was originally Centennial Olympic Stadium after serving as the centerpiece for the 1996 Summer Olympics before being converted in to a baseball stadium. That same season her father would again be traded to the Blue Jays in Toronto, Canada, giving Sarah international baseball experience. The Rogers Centre, formerly known as the Sky Dome, lived up to its former name, as the navy blue lighting illuminating the ceiling strikes an eerie resemblance

to the Northern Lights, which northern Canada is so well known for. The Roger Centre was the first Major League Baseball domed stadium to incorporate a retractable roof. It is also the first stadium to have a 348 roomed hotel connected to it. Seventy of these rooms overlook the baseball field.

The Rogers Centre would be the last of the Hudek's stops along their five year tour of historical major league fields before returning to Texas. However, the many years spent at the ballpark, picking the minds of her father and the great baseball minds of his major league friends, left an indelible impression on Sarah. She tried playing softball, but her heart lay with the boys of summer on the baseball diamond. With her father's tutelage Sarah would begin her baseball career as a pitcher, where she would not only succeed against women but dominate against men as well. In 2014, the 5'10 left hander who could throw 82mph with a changeup, a curveball, and a cutter was named USA Baseball's Sportswoman of the Year after posting a 1-1 record and a 0.53 ERA in 17 innings at the Women's World Baseball Classic, leading team USA to a silver finish. She would also lead her high school team George Ranch to a 4A playoff appearance.

There's a saying in baseball which states that there is a school for everyone who wants to play the game, but for the longest time, that statement only held relatively true for men. However, on Wednesday February 14th of 2015, Sarah Hudek of George Ranch High School in Richmond Texas, signed a grant-in-aid scholarship to play baseball at Bossier City Community College in Bossier City Louisiana. When asked about the signing Head Coach Aaron Vorachek told reporters, "This is not a gimmick and I could care less about media attention... I'm signing

her to help us win ballgames.” Hopefully, Sarah Hudek’s accomplishments are a sign that the old guard of baseball tradition is graduating and a new era of true equality is just around the corner.

Sixty-three degrees was the high on April 15, 1947, arguably the most memorable date in baseball history. The skies over the 11221 zip code (Brooklyn, New York) were clear, and a light wind blew over Flatbush, chilling Ebbets Fields’ 34,219 seats only slightly. On a normal April 15th a light chill would not have been enough to deter New Yorkers from filling the downtown stadium to witness baseball’s Opening Day, but for one reason or another, only 26,623 people were seated in the stands to witness history. The Brooklyn Dodgers would take on the Boston Braves in a home series to start the season, and an African American would take the field as a Major League Baseball player for the very first time. That man was Jackie Robinson. Though he was 1-4 on the day and would score the go ahead run late in the game, overall, Robinson’s debut in the eyes of the media would be labeled uneventful. However, after winning a Major League Baseball World Series Champion in 1955 and retiring in 1957 with a career .311 batting average, Jackie Robinson became a national icon. Just as Jackie Robinson’s debut went overlooked, just maybe, one day we will look back at the women’s movement in baseball, as a time overlooked by most, and a time that was beneficial for the growth of sports as a whole.

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