

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Women's baseball week honors past, aims at a more accessible future

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Thursday, July 20, 2017*

When I heard about International Women in Baseball Week (July 24 -30), I thought some activists were inspired by the recently cancelled Fox series *Pitch* to campaign for a female major-leaguer. Or at least a team general manager who could rebuild as actively as Theo Epstein or Rick Hahn.

While the GM gig remains in play for any fledging female front-office exec, a Marshall University professor named Kat Williams disabused me of the idea near-future five-year plans should include a female player, a la the soft-tossing African-American woman on *Pitch*.

Williams doubles as president of the International Women's Baseball Center, which is staging a women's *baseball* – not softball – tournament during the women's baseball week near the home field of the Rockford Peaches popularized in the 1992 movie *A League of Their Own*.

“There are over 100,000 women playing baseball out there,” said Williams, whose academic specialty is women's history. “There are teams in Washington, D.C., California and Florida, and a USA National Team. The Rockford Starfires play on the old Peaches Field. Girls and women's baseball all over. There are female umpires.

“The biggest goal should not be a woman (player) in MLB baseball. Sure, if a woman wants to play, she should have a chance. She'd have to be like a real good knuckleball pitcher. Women are not as strong or as big as men at that level.



International Women's Baseball Center founders and former All-American Girls Professional Baseball League players Maybelle Blair and Shirley Burkovich meet with a young player at the Baseball For All Nationals event. Photo courtesy of Cami J Kidder, producer of the forth coming documentary "Throw Like A Girl" and IWBC board member.

“For me, personally, I don’t want to spend too much time butting my head into that same concrete wall. Women can get into it in any (other) capacity.”

Williams includes an all-women’s league, citing the WNBA as an example. But then she stumbles into an even bigger, more profound issue – getting kids of any gender to play baseball in large numbers, given the kind of choke points present in advancement in the game. She must look ahead as much as she looks back, via this statement: “Our goal is to preserve and protect the long history of women.”

To that end, the International Women’s Baseball Center has acquired property near the old Peaches field with the goal of “creating a physical space, a museum of sorts or educational center...one location where it’s home of all that,” said Williams.

A League of Their Own seemed to promote a short burst of interest in women playing competitively. But 25 years after the movie’s release, the large numbers of women playing hardball to which Williams refers is virtually anonymous now. Bat-and-ball-inclined girls are still segregated into softball, with Little League participants still headline-generating exceptions. ESPN covers the NCAA national women’s softball tournament.

Laura Ricketts top female exec

Women have made advancements, but only in scatter-shot fashion, in baseball’s management and broadcasting structure. Laura Ricketts, charged with running Cubs Charities, is one of four of the world champions’ co-owners. A community relations ace, Christine O’Reilly is one of the long-running and best-liked White Sox executives. Sharon Pannozzo worked for the Cubs for 24 years, the last 15 through 2006 as media relations director. She’s now vice president of East Coast publicity for NBC-Universal.

Pannozzo had worked her way up from Boston Red Sox intern in the early 1980s. Dealing with the egos and politics in the pressbox and broadcast booth, she sometimes had to convince doubters she was actually the department head, not her male deputies. When Pannozzo began as media-relations chief, Don Zimmer was Cubs manager, as old-school as they came.

“I was one of those dreamers and I had the good fortune to work for the Chicago Cubs for almost 25 years,” she said. “There were many challenges to overcome, but it was an amazing work experience and I was able to witness some of the most memorable moments in sports history.”

Coming up in the 1980s, when women sportswriters had to tread carefully in locker rooms, Pannozzo actually had role models in National and American League offices. Katy Feeney and Phyllis Merhige handled media relations duties for the NL and AL,



IWBC president Dr. Kat Williams.
Photo courtesy of Lexi Browning.

respectively, with Feeney graduating to be her league's chief schedule-maker, while still directing traffic in post-season interview sessions. Feeney died unexpectedly early this season at 68.

"Katy and Phyllis were pioneers in the executive ranks of the National and American Leagues and then Major League Baseball," PannoZZo said. "For many years, they were the only role models available to women who wanted to work in the front offices of a professional baseball team. These women were truly remarkable and paved the way for other young women who dreamed of an opportunity to work in such a male-dominated field."



Christine O'Reilly (left) of the White Sox and Sharon PannoZZo, formerly of the Cubs and now with NBC, had long careers in the front office.

Merhige actually gave me some bad news in the Fenway Park pressbox during Game 3 of the 2005 American League Division Series during the Red Sox and White Sox. Some prissy big-media type obviously assigned to the cafeteria without a live view of the field must've objected to my status in a third-row seat as a representative of a Chicago suburban daily newspaper, and a non-

staffer at that. Merhige was equal to any man in adhering to baseball's media caste system. She informed me for Game 4, I'd have to switch to a cafeteria seat. Fortunately, the Pale Hose swept the Beantown Dudes, no small thanks to El Duque Hernandez's clutch pitching, and I did not have to carry out Merhige's dictum.

Williams should establish firm diplomatic relations with the Laura Rickettes and Phyllis Merhiges of the world. She will have her hands full campaigning to straighten out the political inequities of baseball broadcasting, where sexism apparently still rules.

Waldman, Mendoza only booth regulars

The colorful Suzyn Waldman on Yankees radio broadcasts and former softball player Jessica Mendoza on ESPN Sunday Night baseball are the only regular female baseball announcers. Women have been segregated to sideline and clubhouse reporters, as they are in other sports. The "eye candy" effect is obviously in place. If they did not serve those roles to lure male viewers, why not have men in these jobs? But with women increasingly serving as studio sportscasters, voiceovers for commercials and off-camera announcers for late-night talk shows, this "broadcast booth ceiling" should be cracked.

Similarly, sports-talk radio shows, which possess a heavy male demographic, are almost exclusively male in their rosters of hosts. A Julie DeCaro on 670 The Score is largely consigned to fringe shifts and update duties.

Williams has got a lot on her plate, obviously. She played baseball with the boys growing up in Louisville. She simply wants those who followed her to have some chance to enjoy the game through their careers.

“Baseball wants to keep its masculinity,” Williams said. “Baseball been used throughout history to Americanize immigrants. It’s wrapped up in a masculine ID. For some reason, the powers that be in baseball are not as willing to get behind women’s baseball in the same way as the NBA does with the WNBA.

“We realize we’re doing for it (seeking a permanent women’s baseball center) for multiple reasons. Preserve that important history, but also give them an opportunity. What I care about is girls get an opportunity to experience the best sport in the world. To be an umpire, a groundskeeper, a statistician.”

For more information, visit Internationalwomensbaseballcenter.org.