



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

By Anne Madarasz

The Girls of Summer

Just as World War II impacted the political, social, and cultural life of the nation, so too did it impact sport in America. With huge numbers of young men called to action in the 1940s, many minor league baseball teams disbanded, depleting the ranks of the professional leagues. Fearing a collapse of the fan base as talented pro players went off to serve, Chicago Cubs owner Phillip Wrigley put together a committee charged with generating ideas to save baseball. Ultimately the committee recommended the development of a girls' softball league ready to play in Major League ballparks should attendance for big league games plummet.

This idea became the nucleus from which the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League emerged. Beginning in 1943 and lasting until 1954, the League changed the face of America's pastime. Ultimately more than 600 women competed in this professional

league that, at its peak in 1948, attracted almost a million paid fans to ballparks across the Midwest and the nation. From four initial teams, the League grew to 10, then contracted to five as fan attention returned to Major League Baseball and revenues diminished in the early to mid-1950s. But for a time, the women of the AAGPBL became, as the major motion picture reminded us, *A League of Their Own*.

Most of the teens and women who played in the League had trained as softball players. A few, however, had been exposed to baseball, playing in neighborhood or community leagues. Dorothy Kovalchick, who hailed from the Western Pennsylvania coal town of Sagamore, had an unusual exposure to the sport of baseball. For eight years she barnstormed with her father's team, the Kovalchicks, the only girl on this all-male


squad that took on semi-pro teams from across the region. Anchoring the team at first base, she stood only 5'2" but became known for her willingness to bunt any pitch hurled at her and for her headfirst slide. In 1945, Dottie accompanied her father on what she thought was a business trip to Chicago. There her father signed her up for a tryout with the AAGPBL. She spent a season in right field and on third base as a member of the Fort Wayne Daisies. Playing for \$75 a week, the team toured with the Grand Rapids Chicks playing exhibition games, then got into regular season play. Dorothy competed against women from across the United States and Canada before returning home to once again play for the Kovalchicks.

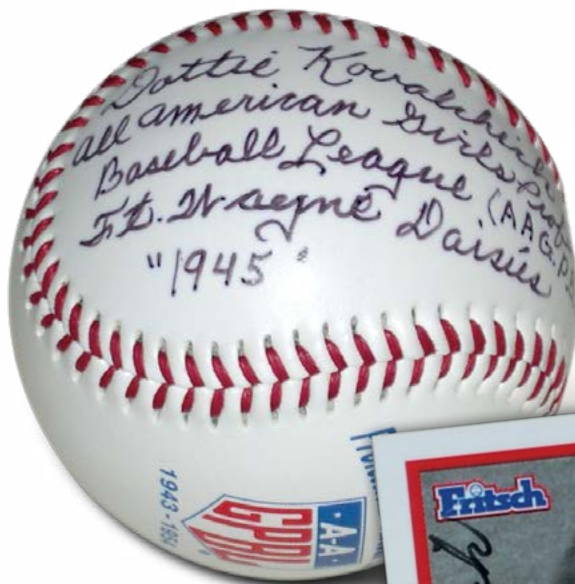
Other local girls, such as Betty Jane Cornett, or "Curly," played mostly competitive

Betty Jane Cornett poses in her uniform, c. 1950. The League insisted that the women athletes retain their femininity, even on the ball field. A League etiquette book reminded players that, "The uniforms adopted by the league have been designed for style and appeal and there is a tremendous advantage to the girl and to the team which makes the best of its equipment."
HHC Collections, gift of Betty Jane Cornett.



Kalamazoo Lassies baseball cap worn by Betty Jane Cornett, 1951.
L2004.120.1. Photo by Museum.

softball before trying out for the AAGPBL. After attending rookie camp in 1949, Betty Jane played first for the Rockford Peaches, and then toured with the Springfield Sallies (1950), Kalamazoo Lassies (1951), and Battle Creek Belles (also 1951). Her most vivid memory of her playing days remained an exhibition game held at Yankee Stadium. Two McKeesport natives, Norma “Hitch” Dearfield and Lenora “Smokey” Mandella both spent time in the big leagues before returning home. Like Betty Jane they came home to a life without many opportunities for women to play organized sport at a high level, but these “girls of summer” changed the face of wartime baseball and blazed a trail for the female athletes that followed. 



Dottie Kovalchick signed baseball and trading card. Baseball cards for the AAGPBL were not produced until decades after the league ceased operations. The cards are produced for a new generation of fans, many whom have learned about these pioneers through the movie *A League of Their Own*.

HHC Collections, 2005.40.1 and 2005.40.4.



Dorothy Kovalchick, c. 1945. The daughter of a Czech immigrant, Kovalchick grew up in coal country in Armstrong County. Pictured here in her “Kovalchick” team uniform, she played for her father for eight years, drawing fans wherever she went. Dot relished her playing time. “Everybody wants to know they’ve accomplished something, and baseball did this for me.”

HHC Collections, gift of Dorothy Kovalchick Roark.

