

Helen Waddell-Wyatt talks with the Chicago Baseball Museum about her Peach of a career.



By Paul Ladewski

You grew up with five older brothers in Lemoyne, Pa., a small town outside Harrisburg. What role did they play in your baseball career?

Well, they beat the heck out of me, but nobody else could. Oh, yeah, they toughened me up. I played baseball with them and I played football with them. Whatever there was to be done, I was out there with them. I was a tomboy, but I had to be to defend myself. (Laughs.)

You played second base for the 1950 Rockford Peaches team that won the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League title. What made it special?

We had a lot of good hitters. We had a left-handed first baseman named Dottie Kamenshek, and she was so good that a men's team in Florida wanted her to play down there. She could outplay any man I ever saw. She was the best player I played with or against. She could hit for power and she could field.

Cubs owner Philip Wrigley founded the league to fill a void in the war years. Was it a worthwhile experience for the players?

We did well for ourselves. I was paid \$75 per week, and that was good money at the time. That was more than some guys made. On the road, we stayed in the best hotels in town and got \$9 a day in meal money. A lot of girls put themselves through college on that.

So your husband Neil married you for the money?

(Laughs.) No, he told me that I could either play baseball or get married. I was dumb and got married. It didn't make too much sense back then, but what I can say?

In A League of Their Own, when manager Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks) said there's no crying in baseball, did he really mean it?

In my rookie year, a veteran on the other team came into second base with her spikes up to take me out. She cut me up a little bit. When we came in to bat, my teammates came over

and said, "Sis, are you all right?" I said, "Yeah, I'll be OK." They said, "Don't worry. We'll take care of it." I didn't know what they meant. Then every time one of our gals got on base, she slid with her spikes up. The other team didn't try to hurt anyone after that. We handled it the way it needed to be handled.

I saw one gal break her ankle, and we picked her up and carried her off the field. The chaperone put her in the car and took her to the hospital, and they fixed her up. I saw another kid break her wrist. They took her to the hospital, and they fixed her up, too. There's no crying in baseball, I'll tell you that. And that's the truth.

A League of Their Own was inspired by the Peaches and AAGPBL to large extent. Did the movie do them justice?

It was a good movie, but Hollywood had to get its licks in with some of that stuff. Like the little kid in the dugout -- the league would never have allowed that. And the drunken manager . . . We had a good manager in Bill Allington. He had played semi-pro ball in California, and he believed that women could play ball because he had coached them there.

Can a women's professional league become popular nation-wide?

I certainly hope so. I think it will eventually, but it will take a bit of time. People will have to accept the fact that women can do it. I hope another league comes along, because there's a lot of good women athletes out there. They got the training. They got the facilities. They got everything. We had nothing except a ball and bat.

Do you follow Major League Baseball at all?

Not all the time. The showboating stuff that the guys do nowadays . . . It makes me sick to watch them play. The guys who beat their chests after they hit a home run? Oh, I'd like to kill them. Ahhh, such egos! It's ridiculous. They make me so mad that I start to yell at the television, so I switch to a good cooking show or something to calm me down. (Laughs.)

Would the Peaches have put those guys in their places?

Oh, we would have taken care of them. There wouldn't be any more chest-thumping, trust me.

(Editor's note: Waddell-Wyatt and her two dogs currently reside in Loves Park, Ill.)