

PIONEERS, PLAYERS, AND POLITICOS

# WOMEN'S SOFTBALL

★ IN MINNESOTA ★



*Anne Enke*

**When Frances Kidd was growing up** in Minneapolis during the 1910s and 1920s, she loved competitive sports. She gained access to boys' ball teams through a male cousin, played softball at Pillsbury Settlement House and, later, joined workingwomen's teams sponsored by businesses. Nonetheless, Kidd knew that her freedom to pursue competitive sports was uncommon: she was raised by two aunts who were "very supportive. . . . They knew I wanted to play, and they knew that it was the only way. . . but [they] thought it was terrible."<sup>1</sup>

While some girls and women like Kidd found a way to play competitive sports, the development of women's softball in the twentieth century is far from a tale of steady or inevitable progress. Women's sports grew in popularity in the first half of the century, at least for some, but suffered a sharp setback at midcentury when white, middle-class norms about proper female pursuits triumphed. Softball, played in open public view, became one of the most important arenas in which women challenged these norms and began rebuilding women's athletic programs in Minnesota.

The explosive growth of slow-pitch softball during the 1960s owes much to the women who loved the game and defiantly countered expectations about women's skill, playing style, and proper appearance. The *Avantis*, a team of white, mostly working-class women, for instance, proudly introduced an aggressive playing style to the Upper Midwest. "Showing people how competitive the game could really be," they promoted high-caliber slow-pitch softball throughout the region. Then, in 1973, a handful of politically minded women founded the Wilder Ones recreational-division team to offer a distinctly feminist version of softball: nonauthoritarian, nonhierarchical, and woman-run.<sup>2</sup>

By the late 1970s, thousands of Minnesota girls and women from all walks of life played softball on teams ranging from recreational to nationally ranked Double A

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RIGHT: *An intent softball player, probably a member of a Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board team, about 1925*

leagues. Women's softball had become the bread and butter of community-recreation programs, and Minnesota had more women's teams for its size than any other state. Softball's pioneers, players, and politicians had captured public attention and created new possibilities for women's athletics and, even, alternative models of womanhood.<sup>3</sup>

**By some accounts,** wealthy men of an elite Chicago boat club invented softball, an indoor form of baseball, in 1887 as a gentlemanly diversion when Lake Michigan was unsuitable for yachting. Within a decade, the exclusive indoor game had spread to outdoor playgrounds where people of all ages and classes could play.<sup>4</sup>

According to Minnesota lore,

however, Minneapolis firefighters invented softball in 1895 in the lot behind the fire station. Not a pastime of the leisure class, it was a means for workingmen to keep in shape between fighting fires. Minneapolitan Lewis Rober created and hand-sewed the leather ball, coined the sport's name—"kitten ball"—and organized the first games between the city's fire





*Frances Kidd (middle row, center) found an opportunity to play softball on a nattily outfitted working-woman's team sponsored by Dayton's department store, 1924.*

stations in 1897. Teams such as the Kittens and the Rats drew a thousand spectators to their games.<sup>5</sup>

Sports scholars believe that white, middle-class notions of masculinity, femininity, and gender-appropriate behavior are responsible for classifying specific sports as suitable for boys (e.g. baseball and football) or for girls (ballet and volleyball). Early debates in the Twin Cities about the best name for softball reveal the desire to keep it appropriate for men only. While some liked the name “kitten ball,” baseball players derogatorily

called it “sissy ball” and “dainty drawers,” and by the mid-1920s, the Minneapolis association that coordinated leagues insisted on finding a more masculine name. It officially became “diamond ball” in 1925. Nine years later the new Amateur Softball Association helped standardize the name “softball” throughout the country, although the term “kitten ball” persisted in some circles.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1920s Minnesota's high schools seemed willing to encourage girls' sports by awarding athletic letters to players such as Frances

Kidd. New Deal and wartime spending on recreational facilities further increased the popularity of both women's and men's sports, leading to the creation of associations such as the Amateur Softball Association in 1934 and the All American Girls Professional Baseball League in 1943. But during the 1940s the Twin Cities, despite its early leadership, offered little exception to the growing national censure of girls' and women's school sports. That decade witnessed the nationwide dismantling of virtually all girls' and women's competi-



tive school programs. Athletic directors increasingly insisted on sports that fostered only moderate exertion and modesty for female players.

Acceptable female sports were often limited to swimming, golf, and tennis, favored by white, middle-class women who could play them in private clubs as adults. To be avoided were sports that encouraged exertion, aggression, pride, emotional outbursts, and rowdiness, things at odds with middle-class norms of femininity. This explicit disapproval of spectator sport also contributed to restrictions on facilities and the public visibility of women's sports.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, promoters such as the Amateur Athletic Union and some media enhanced the spectacle of watching a competitive women's game by contrasting the athletes' game-time "masculine" skills with their post-game "feminine" sexiness and allure. Marketing post-game beauty pageants, which turned athletes into contestants on display, professional and semiprofessional sports associations did battle with educators over issues of women's appropriate image. But the two factions shared a common goal of enhancing the athletes' perceived femininity. At the 1958 men's World Softball Championship Tournament held in Minneapolis, for example, the Sports and Attractions Committee—composed of one park-board member and the owners of two modeling schools—voted Minnesotan Ilona Heidebrink "World's Softball Queen" to preside prettily at tournament functions. Her prizes included dresses, personalized stationery, beauty treatments, a Nan Dorsey sweater, and a wristwatch. Heidebrink's friend, Paul Mead of Lowe and Campbell Athletic Goods, added a good leather softball glove—the lone sign that Heidebrink

was a talented shortstop that had played on the Robin Hood Arrows women's team.<sup>8</sup>

### **Taking a different approach,**

Twin Cities park-board leagues from the 1920s through the 1960s helped women's sport become more public and visible. In addition, while white women's colleges encouraged their students to do modest calisthenics, local businesses such as Dayton's department store sponsored softball teams for their female employees. Even in the city leagues, however, coordinators, sponsors, and concerned parents policed the public image of femininity and respectability. Kidd surmised, for example, that her aunts attended her ball games not simply out of "support" but because "they thought perhaps they better watch what was happening with the men in the stands."<sup>9</sup>

Despite some park-board and business support for women's softball, girls who grew up in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s had almost no sporting opportunities in school or out. While Kidd could letter for athletics in the 1920s, she encountered a different program when she became a health and physical education consultant for the Minneapolis Public Schools in 1952. "It was customary for the girls to get out of the gym by 4 o'clock, and the boys used the gym the rest of the time." Gyms, furthermore, were equipped to facilitate boys' teams and individual sports but contained no equipment for girls' activities, which were limited to individual sports: badminton, golf, tennis, and swimming. Nor were there varsity sports for women. Kidd successfully argued for funds to support the development of girls' extramural sports, but only after the girls "rearranged schedules so we would in no way

interfere with the boys' schedules, because facilities and money were the two big things that the men objected to. They were afraid of taking away from the boys to give to the girls."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to protecting facilities and money, many critics objected to the idea of females playing competitive sports at all. Girls' sports should be "recreational" and "have carryover value," leading beyond a tomboyish phase into a more mature, feminine, heterosexual adulthood. As a result, Kidd explained, "So many people could see nothing good about girls' [team sports]. They saw [the girls] as, just, maybe too rough. . . . And we were just tomboys, we weren't very ladylike."<sup>11</sup>

Between 1940 and 1972, most young women in the Twin Cities could neither earn high-school letters for athletics nor play varsity sports. As recommended by the National Section on Girls' and Women's Athletics, physical-education programs in high school sought to develop not "athletes," but "sportswomen" who would be wives and mothers and would not run, hit, slide, and sweat in public. Kidd's ability to secure funds for each school in her Minneapolis program—"so they could buy a T-shirt or something [and] get at least some recognition"—was exceptional, despite the modesty of her demands.<sup>12</sup>

Girls and women who were passionate about competitive sport in these years found a few local role models in women like Kidd and in the Minneapolis Millerettes of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. The lesson learned from the Millerettes, however, was ambiguous: spectators watching their games in 1944 saw some of the finest, fastest, and toughest ballplayers in the country, players who



*Minneapolis's Buzza printing company sponsored a team, photographed having fun at Parade Stadium grounds, about 1925*

moved on to form the Fort Wayne Daisies, the winningest team in the professional league. On the other hand, the Millerettes survived in Minneapolis for only one year because the city (unlike 11 of the 13 other women's league towns) already enjoyed major- and minor-league men's baseball teams. Many men feared that women's teams would draw away fans. Historians Sharon Roepke and Danielle Barber also contend that "the media was antagonistic [to the Millerettes] compared to other cities, where the outcome of the games received banner headlines." The women were so skillful that minor- and major-league

coaches considered recruiting some to play on men's teams, but in 1952 the National Association of Baseball and the national baseball commissioner officially banned women from men's teams.<sup>13</sup>

**Baseball's Negro leagues,** however, had no such rule. African American gender norms allowed women a greater range of athletic pursuits, and speed, agility, and competitiveness did not imply gender deviance. In 1939 three-fourths of the country's black colleges approved of competitive sports for women, in contrast to one-sixth of predomi-

nantly white colleges. Leaders of black recreation programs promoted concepts of womanhood that included competitiveness, self-reliance, confidence, strength, and tomboyishness. In the early twentieth century, southern baseball and softball teams organized at cotton and tobacco mills included black women's teams, and a few women played on otherwise male Negro League teams. Highly competitive African American women's softball teams sprang up in more northern industrial towns like Cincinnati and Cleveland, and by the early 1960s, these well-developed teams became

models for white Minnesotans seeking a high-caliber game.<sup>14</sup>

One of the Twin Cities' most important pioneers was Toni Stone Alberga, who broke both race and gender barriers in softball and baseball during the 1940s and early 1950s. Born Marcenia Lyle in St. Paul, Toni (her professional name derived from her nickname, Tomboy) tried softball but was frustrated that the game intentionally restricted the intensity of play. St. Paul's vibrant Rondo neighborhood, home to a middle-class and aspiring African American community, encouraged behavior that paralleled white, middle-class norms and discouraged girls from playing serious, rough sports. Furthermore, the cities, through differential distribution of resources and unwritten codes of segregation, denied African American communities access to the kind of park facilities that would have allowed black children's softball or baseball leagues to flourish. Lack of opportunities for girls drove Tomboy to play informal baseball with boys at St. Paul's Welcome Hall playground and Dunning Field. In high school her speed and precision so impressed Gabby Street, catcher for the Washington Senators and former catcher and manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, that he admitted her to his St. Paul baseball-skills school. As he recalled, "I just couldn't get rid of her until I gave her a chance. Every time I chased her away, she would go around the corner and come back to plague me again." After he watched her play, though, he bought her cleats and took her on as a student, telling her, "I haven't got anything to do with the color line that keeps your people out of baseball. And I haven't got anything to do with that unwritten law that keeps women out of the game. But if I did. . . ." In these years

she was often one of few African Americans on predominantly white teams. Before long, she began playing regularly for the semiprofessional St. Paul Giants and for Negro traveling leagues throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin. By the mid-1950s, she had played for men's Negro major-league teams in San Francisco, New Orleans, and Indianapolis.<sup>15</sup>

Stone's example influenced other black women who formed some of the best softball lineups in the nation during the 1950s and 1960s. It also influenced men who had played with barnstorming teams of the Negro leagues and were later interested in building top-caliber African American women's teams such as the Dana Gardens of Cincinnati and the Motown Soul Sisters of Detroit. Ultimately, Stone's influence made its way back to Minnesota, as local

white players looked to these models for promoting competitive softball in the 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

Like Stone, most white women in the Twin Cities who later joined park-board women's softball teams had played on boys' teams as children because they were the only option. Judy Jungworth, for example, won a place on Bloomington's boys' baseball and ice hockey teams beginning in 1950, when she was six years old, encouraged by her four brothers and father, a former professional baseball player. She was good enough that boys accepted her, although other teams shouted "tomboy" and raised the red flag that ultimately brought park-board gender regulations down on her. By the time Jungworth was 14, she found an informal University of Minnesota women's softball team (which existed

*Team, 1925, sponsored by Phyllis Wheatley settlement house, which served Minneapolis's African American community*





despite faculty admonishments), and a year later—three years under-age—she joined the Minneapolis Nicks, the Upper Midwest’s best fast-pitch women’s team. There, Jungworth found community, exciting travel opportunities, and competition that would keep her in her sport until the present day.<sup>17</sup>

Player Jan DuBois, many times chosen for the national All-American women’s softball team and inducted into the Minnesota Softball Hall of Fame, explained, “I played ball all my life. . . . I started off and I played league with the boys. At that time they didn’t have any programs for girls. Nothing.” Her first opportunity to play organized women’s softball came in 1950, when she was 13: DuBois found a church-sponsored team but had to “fib” about her age because she was three years younger

than the league’s requirement. She proved her abilities among athletes who were in their late teens and twenties, abilities she had gained by playing on boys’ teams as a child.<sup>18</sup>

### **During the 1960s, as women’s**

leagues prospered in several sports, the white, middle-class appeal to “refinement” and “modesty” began to lose its power. Women in sports, from educators to athletes, began increasingly to honor aggressive, physical play in the context of a game. Most arguments in favor of hard play on the field, however, were tempered with insistence that even “the toughest” athletes be gender-“appropriate” women off the field. DuBois recalled: “On the ball field we were really tough. Off the ball field, we were just like anybody else.” In 1967 a Bloomington newspaper titled

a story on a local fast-pitch team “Tom boys have more fun but they enjoy being girls.” Similarly, a Minneapolis newspaper article in 1968 titled “Mother, wife, career girls, clean-up” was actually about “female softball stars” who were, nonetheless, “versatile.” The ambivalent acceptance of aggression suggests that white norms of femininity and heterosexuality remained strong in all but the bounded arena of sport.<sup>19</sup>

Even women who fully intended to be “just like other women” off the field found that they could not so easily separate their athletic and personal lives. Many athletes on top teams organized their job and personal choices to accommodate their training schedules. Motivated by love of the game, camaraderie with a team that “was your family,” and visions of national tournaments, many broke



*Toni Stone Alberga, photographed about 1950 in her Louisiana Creoles uniform, played on Negro major-league teams.*

the rules, sometimes willingly or sometimes inadvertently becoming icons for girls and women searching for alternative images of womanhood.

Women who joined one of Minneapolis's new teams, the Avantis, in 1961 had little prior athletic experience but a strong drive to excel. Betty Hawes, a founding member, recalled that as a girl she got "no encouragement from home or society" toward athletics. In 1951 her high-school principal severely punished her "just for playing basketball" on a Saturday afternoon. Ten years later, Hawes would reclaim public space as a fledgling Avanti though she was, like most women who first joined, only "marginally talented."<sup>20</sup>

Hawes did not have the athletic experience that would allow her to play on fast-pitch teams as an adult, and recreational slow-pitch teams seemed to be for the people who had "fit in" in high school, women for whom softball was no more than a healthy diversion. The Twin Cities, like most cities, did not yet have a major (A or Double A) slow-pitch league. Hawes and coworker Merlin (Woody) Wood decided to build a serious, high-caliber, slow-pitch women's team. Woody, who had coached men's baseball for years, agreed to coach the Avantis, and together they set about recruiting players, most of whom showed far more determination than ability.

One of Woody's prime motivations for building the team and pushing them on to 23 national tournaments in 25 years was "to counter the unfairness" in women's sports. Included in that goal was not discriminating against lesbians or women who did not conform to traditional feminine norms.<sup>21</sup>

Wood also "wanted to show that women could really play softball" and develop the popularity and skill level of women's slow pitch. In 1962, its second year, the team worked to make it to national playoffs, but, Hawes recalled, "There we were in our tennis shoes" against a "very serious, all-black team. Fortunately they were very gentle with us, but we learned

*A team from St. Paul's Margaret Street playground, about 1930*







*Betty Norcross from a Northwestern Bell team slides into third base at the St. Clair playground, St. Paul, 1948.*

that we were nothing yet.” Wood then invited to Minneapolis the number-one slow-pitch team in the country, the Dana Gardens team from Cincinnati, to “show people what the game could be.” Hawes recalled, “Those women were really big. We were very intimidated—they were good. . . . very tough, fine ballplayers. In Minnesota, well, we had never seen anything like that.”<sup>22</sup>

The Dana Gardens became the Avantis’ first role model for how to play an aggressive game. Under Wood’s coaching, the team pioneered plays, strategies, and styles never before seen in women’s leagues in the Upper Midwest. The team also developed flashy warm-up routines

and on-the-field dramas. As they traveled to promote slow-pitch softball, they rapidly became “the team to beat.” They attracted outstanding local athletes, were invited to a number of men’s tournaments, and consistently shone in national tournaments. Spurring the development of A and Double A leagues in Minnesota, the team also conducted softball clinics for girls and encouraged the proliferation of young “feeder” teams as well as competitive play at the Class B, C, and D levels. And the Midwest took note: as one member of the famed Motown Soul Sisters recalled, “We had to travel to find competition, and the Avantis were very strong hitters. They reminded

us that we had to keep our stuff together and work hard.” Wooing crowds as a show team, Minneapolis’s players provided a model that attracted women of all ages and backgrounds to the sport.<sup>23</sup>

As the Avantis rose to fame, however, even their most laudatory media reports retained a familiar ambivalence about female athletes. The Minnesota sports magazine *Time Out*, for example, ran a feature article that began, “If you envision a successful women’s softball team to be something akin to a group of Wonder-Woman-like amazons, prepare to have one more dream shattered. The Avantis of Minneapolis, undoubtedly the most consistently powerful team

in the history of Minnesota's slow-pitch softball, are successful indeed, but not the least bit amazonish." The two accompanying photos, however, underscored the toughness of the team: one showed "All-American shortstop Linda Polley preparing to gun down another short hitter," while the other showed a relatively sedate group of seven solid-stanced women in androgynous street clothes, six with short hair.<sup>24</sup>

Nor did the Avantis' personal styles fit white Minnesotan's gender norms. Players wore custom-tailored uniforms, for example, when most other team uniforms consisted of printed t-shirts. Spectators and other teams consistently recall the Avantis' "very intimidating" black warm-up jackets. In 1972, when other women's teams still played in shorts, the Avantis introduced below-the-knee baseball pants formerly reserved for men. As Hollis Monnett remembers, "We played in the baseball pants . . . so we just tore up the diamond: slides, dives, you could do anything." Only ten years earlier, the National Section for Girls and Women's Sports, bolstered by a team of physicians and parental experts, had questioned whether it was safe for females to slide into base. The Avantis rose to fame by breaking through those very boundaries.<sup>25</sup>

Wood taught the team plays and strategies adapted from men's baseball teams. By the late 1960s, they had become a team of "very, very heavy hitters." Monnett recalled that the team was "almost feared, because they recruited the bigger and better athletes. I mean," she exclaimed, "those women could really put it over the fence!" Other differences distinguished the Avantis. One spectator recalled that they "always looked butch; there was no mistaking

them." Linda Polley, a star player for the team, explained, "We had some big women. And . . . didn't have our hair all permed and try to mask it." As Linda Joseph explained, "We played aggressively, sliding and all that. . . . People were still saying things like, 'You throw great for a girl.' We had some real rough, aggressive characters on our team, and just for that, you were supposedly a dyke." Players also remember fans heckling them for "looking like guys." Coach Wood recalled, "We were the scapegoat, because [the other teams] all swept it under the rug. The other teams could point to us and say, 'They're too butch, they must be lesbians, they shouldn't let that on their team.'" But all Avantis, whatever their sexual identity, prided themselves on their tough playing style, bravely presenting to the public a model of competitive and unapologetic female athleticism.<sup>26</sup>

In 1971 the Avantis were the first women's slow-pitch team to demand and gain a regular, one-night-per-week game spot at downtown Minneapolis's Parade Stadium. For decades, only the best men's softball leagues usually played at that park, which was prized for its visibility, diamond quality, and spectator accessibility. The Avantis later also campaigned to allow girls' leagues to play their championship tournaments at Parade Stadium before boys' leagues had even considered it.

**In the Twin Cities before the mid-1970s, women's softball was played almost exclusively by white women. Major (Double A) league teams that traveled, however, participated in the national and racially diverse softball culture. After modeling themselves on the Dana Gardens team, the Avantis developed an**

equally important relationship with the Motown Soul Sisters of Detroit. Noted for its "hard hitters," the Soul Sisters played an aggressive game and enlivened the softball field with songs, skill, and style that lived up to the name of their Motown music sponsors. As the only black team in the top league in Detroit, it had, without municipal support, desegregated Detroit's best ball fields and regularly drew more than 500 spectators to games. Players insisted, "You *had* to be tough, to withstand everything." The Avantis and the Soul Sisters appreciated each other as good rivals, inviting each other back and forth for tournaments, but the Avantis had a lot to learn.<sup>27</sup>

In 1975, after a tournament in Austin (a Minnesota softball hub, along with Rochester and the Twin Cities), the Avantis took the Soul Sisters to a local bar. "We went in to have a beer together, but the bar wouldn't serve [the Soul Sisters]. We couldn't believe it." While the Avantis were shocked to experience racism in their home state, the Soul

*A catcher, competitive and unapologetically athletic, 1936*



Sisters likened this event to the time Wisconsin bar patrons had shouted, “Niggers go home” and other occasions in the South and in Michigan that caused them to fear for their safety. The growing national softball culture, however, allowed interaction, education, and even intimacy across races. In Austin, the Avantis decided a boycott was in order. Player Hawes recalled, “We left immediately, as soon as they made it clear that they wouldn’t serve. The bar was packed with softball teams, packed to overflowing, and we got up and walked out and so did every single other team in there. And we never went back.”<sup>28</sup>

**Because pioneering teams like** the Avantis exposed more women to the game of softball, teams at all levels playing in public parks

throughout the Twin Cities came to number in the hundreds. This meant that a greater number of softball players appeared in other public venues such as bars and restaurants in diverse neighborhoods. A-league athletes particularly impressed some emerging feminists in the early 1970s as icons of liberation from society’s restrictions on women. A handful of feminists went on to create an “out lesbian” softball team known as the Wilder Ones in a conscious move to expand gender and sexual norms. As a founder of the Wilder Ones recalled, “They were sensationally beautiful women, terrifically skilled ball-players. . . . They had such ease in their own bodies. There was this . . . aura that said, ‘I’m comfortable here,’ which we of course believed. They seemed freer than we felt. Of course we were

comparing insides with outsides—I don’t know what they felt, but that’s what we saw.”<sup>29</sup> The Wilder Ones strove to discover the freedom they perceived among athletes. In part this entailed revealing their identities as feminists, lesbians, athletes, and “whole people”—on the field, off the field, on the streets, at work, and in public.

Enjoying softball as a release from politics but consistent with it, the Wilder Ones of Minneapolis was one of a handful of path-breaking “out lesbian” teams in the nation to play as registered members of a park and recreation board. One team member recalled that the board, for example, periodically asked the Wilder Ones, “Do you really need to advertise that you’re lesbians?” and we said ‘Yes!’ and that’s how it was. That’s who we were.”<sup>30</sup>

*The path-breaking Avantis, 1975; teammates include (front row, from left) Linda Joseph (1st), Linda Polley (3rd), Hollis Monett (7th); (back row, from left) Donna Wood (1st), Jan DuBois (8th), and Coach Merlin Wood (far right)*





*Players on two typical Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board teams sponsored by The Little Wagon and Mr. Peter's, 1980*



Candace Margulies described what it meant to be “out”: “We did look very, very different from the other teams: hairy legs and short hair and our whole style and appearance.” Several team members had played sports as children, but quit, either because, as Carole La Favor put it, “I got teased mercilessly from the boys and the parents and everyone,” or, as Nancy Cox recalled, “In high school, most of us [athletic girls] got labeled lesbians. The guys all said, ‘They are a bunch of lesbians.’” While other recreation teams did not support overt lesbian appearances, the Wilder Ones refused to compromise the full range of their identities.<sup>31</sup>

The Wilder Ones originally reasoned that a feminist, truly liberatory team would be one without coaches, hierarchy, or sponsorship of any kind. So, “Everyone got to play.” They initially placed fun above competitive status with the motto: “We play to have fun.” But, as Jo Devlin emphatically recalled, “After a year or two we got tired of losing *every single game!*”

Elected as the team’s first coach, Devlin explained that she was indebted to softball for “giving me my life, giving me my person.” As the team progressed, members discovered that they enjoyed “running themselves into the ground to become better ball-players.” An egalitarian ethic continued to prevail in attitude if not in practice. Player Candace Margulies, echoing the words of several teammates, recalled, “I’d get pissed if Jo didn’t put me in [to play] enough, because I felt really entitled to that.”<sup>32</sup>

Coach Devlin instituted practices three or four evenings a week to teach team members how to charge a ball, dive for a catch, and slide into base. The Wilder Ones became a leading recreational-division team with a revised motto: “We play to have fun, and winning is more fun than losing!” Feminism, then, did not mean giving up dreams of becoming “star” athletes. Rather, feminism and softball combined was about “gaining more space, a little more room for striving.” Literally, the play of the game—the

running, hitting, throwing, striving, and the visibility—for many women was the best practice for “being feminist, being a lesbian, being a lover, being a woman, being a teacher, everything that a woman could imagine herself being.” Playing ball meant unlearning the physical deference learned as girls. Devlin recalled, “We had a lot of body work to do, and softball was the ticket. We said, ‘We’re lesbians,’ and we took a lot of shit for it, and it was well worth it. The difference was just declaring our space, just declaring ourselves for who we were.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Throughout most of the**

twentieth century, homophobia and the assumption that female athletes were deviants kept many women out of sports. In the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of women and teams challenged white, middle-class prescriptions of femininity and developed a new degree of athleticism through women’s softball. Taking their examples from pioneers such as

Frances Kidd and from working-class and African American athletes, softball teams offered new ways of negotiating gender and athleticism. They drew a diversity of girls and women to the sport, not only contributing to the explosive growth of recreational softball throughout the Midwest, but also providing new models of womanhood in public

spaces. The assumption that women who publicly played competitive athletics were deviant eroded as more and more women, regardless of their sexual orientation, refused to let homophobia deter them from aggressive competition. The fundamental successes of administrators, athletes, feminists, and lesbians may be measured by the passage of Title

IX of the Education Amendments Act in 1972, which prohibited sex discrimination in any educational or athletic program or activity receiving federal funds. Today, girls are encouraged to play competitive soccer, basketball, and hockey, as well as softball and baseball, thanks to the pioneers, players, and politicians of women's softball. □

## Notes

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1. Frances Kidd, interview by author, Minneapolis, Oct. 12, 1996, tape recording in author's possession.
2. Merlin (Woody) Wood, Avantis coach, interview by author, Minneapolis, June 29, 1998.
3. Wood interview; *Time Out*, Feb.–Mar. 1977, p. 7. Until the late 1950s competitive women's softball was "fast pitch." "Slow-pitch" softball became popular because the prescribed arc of the pitched ball accommodated a wider range of skill levels. This made it a staple of park and recreation department women's leagues. Unless otherwise noted, the softball described in this article is slow pitch.
4. "The ASA: It Grows and Grows and Grows," *ASA Softball*, Winter 1970; Morris A. Bealle, *The Softball Story* (Washington: Columbia Publishing Co., 1957).
5. Jack Conner, "Softball, Started Here, Now Played by 5 Million in U.S.," *Minneapolis Star*, June 20, 1964, p. 11A; Jack El-Hai, "Diamonds in Our Backyard," *Mpls./St. Paul*, June 1987, p. 100–01.
6. Lisa Disch and Mary Jo Kane, "When a Looker is Really a Bitch: Lisa Olson, Sport, and the Heterosexual Matrix," *Signs* 21 (1996): 278–308; Michael Messner and Don Sabo, eds., *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1990).
7. League of Women Voters of Minnesota, "Organizing a Community Look at Girls' Athletics: Committee Guide" (1979), p. 23–27.  
In 1923 the women's division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation led by Lou Henry (Mrs. Herbert) Hoover formally opposed athletic competition for girls in public schools. Although not immediately implemented, this stand had significant long-term consequences. In 1929 the Section on Women's Athletics ruled against

- any publicity for female athletes and sporting events, against collecting tickets at women's events, and against women traveling beyond school walls for sports. Through the 1950s the National Section on Girls and Women's Sports (NSGWS) and the National Association for the Physical Education of College Women (NAPECW) declared that women should be confined to intramural sports to avoid the competitiveness, visibility, and publicity that accompanied extramural and varsity athletics. Only normal and industrial schools, as well as many black colleges, heartily supported women's intercollegiate competition in the 1920s and 1930s. See Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 110–39.
8. Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 140–63; official program, 1958 World's Softball Championship, Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, Sept. 1958, Minneapolis. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Section on Women's Athletics (later the National Section on Women's Athletics) insisted that highly competitive sport was elitist, caused females to harm their reproductive systems, and created commercialism and publicity that transformed athletes into spectacles and sex symbols.
  9. Kidd interview.
  10. Kidd interview. Kidd organized western Wisconsin's first girls' "sports day" in 1932. Returning to Minneapolis in 1945, she taught and supervised athletics at the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board for 17 years and later served on the steering committee for the national First Leadership Conference for Girls' and Women's Sports. In 1968 Kidd was elected to the Committee to Prepare the Bylaws for Girls' Athletics and to the national Women's Advisory Committee for Girls' Athletics. Minnesota's Statehood Centennial Commission named her Minnesota Sports Champion to recognize her administration of girls high-school athletic programs.

11. Kidd interview; Eloise Jaegger, interview by author, Minneapolis, Oct. 14, 1996.
12. Mary Jo Festle, *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 11–13; NAPECW Papers, 1952, file drawer 1, manuscript collection, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina-Greensboro; Kidd interview.
13. Sharon Roepke and Danielle Barber, interview by Stew Thornley, cited in Stew Thornley, "Base Belles" manuscript, p. 4, copy in Minnesota Historical Society Library, St. Paul. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, founded in 1943 by P. K. Wrigley as wartime entertainment, featured teams mostly from Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan and attracted thousands of spectators. In the early years, league games resembled softball, but from 1950 to its demise in 1954, women played the same baseball as men's leagues; Gai I. Berlage, *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History* (Westport: Praeger, 1994). Teams near Chicago did not like making the long drive to the Twin Cities; Margot F. Galt, "The Girls of Summer," *Minnesota Monthly*, May 1991, p. 50–54.
14. Ruth Arnett, "Girls Need Physical Education," *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 10, 1921; Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 68–72; Cindy H. Gissendanner, "African-American Women and Competitive Sport, 1920–1960," in *Women, Sport, and Culture*, ed. Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), 81–92. Mainstream African American publications, however, seemed compelled to reassure their readers that athletes were "ladies" off the fields, and most of these publications failed to promote women's athletics.
15. "Lady Ball Player," *Ebony*, July 1953, p. 48–53; "The Truth About Women Athletes," *Jet*, Aug. 5, 1954.
16. Wood interview; Betty Hawes, interview by author, Circle Pines, Aug. 14, 1998; Linda Joseph, interview by author, Minneapolis, June 30, 1998; Jackie Huggins,

interview by author, Detroit, Nov. 4, 2000; Charlotte Howza, interview by author, Detroit, Nov. 4, 2000; Victoria Lollar, interview by author, Detroit, June 20, 2000; Jan Chapman Sanders, interview by author, Detroit, June 22, 2000.

17. Judy Jungworth, interview by author, Bloomington, July 9, 1998.

18. Jan DuBois, interview by author, Crystal, Oct. 20, 1996. Most fast-pitch leagues required players to be 18; slow-pitch leagues usually had a minimum age of 16.

19. Kidd, Jaeger, and DuBois interviews; untitled clipping, Aug. 27, 1968, Judy Jungworth scrapbook.

Athletes who were educators found their life off the field under increasing surveillance precisely because they were athletes. Margaret Doussett, for example, left her teaching career because she “was always in fear. In those years, even if they *thought* I was a lesbian, they could fire me. . . . It just made my life miserable”; Doussett, inter-

view by author, Minneapolis, Oct. 6, 1995.

20. Hawes interview.

21. Wood interview.

22. Hawes and Wood interviews.

23. Sanders interview.

24. *Time Out*, Feb./Mar. 1977, p. 7.

25. Hollis Monnett, interview by author, St. Paul, Oct. 10, 1996; Festle, *Playing Nice*, 21.

26. Here and below, DuBois, Monnett, Joseph, and Wood interviews; Jo Devlin, interview by author, Minneapolis, July 26, 1995; Linda Polley, interview by author, Minneapolis, June 30, 1998.

27. The Soul Sisters regularly won state championships and placed high in national tournaments from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Spectators from Detroit confirm one team member’s assessment that the Soul Sisters had “arms like rifles” and “arms that made men notice.” Sanders interview; Virginia Lawrence, interview by author, Detroit, June 21, 2000; Diane Laffey, inter-

view by author, Detroit, June 20, 2000.

28. Sanders and Hawes interviews.

29. Devlin interview.

30. Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 185–206; Vicki Gabriner, “Come Out Slugging!” *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 2 (1976): 52–57; Devlin interview. City leagues boasting “out lesbian” teams included Columbia, SC; San Francisco; Lexington, KY; Athens and Atlanta, GA; Providence, RI; San Antonio; Chicago; Boston; and Washington, D. C. In the early 1970s, San Francisco’s women’s bars (rather than city boards) sponsored an entire league of “out lesbian” teams; attendance at games ran into the hundreds.

31. Candace Margulies, interview by author, Minneapolis, July 11, 1998; Carole La Favor, interview by author, Minneapolis, July 13, 1998; Nancy Cox, interview by author, Minneapolis, July 12, 1998.

32. Devlin and Margulies interviews.

33. La Favor and Devlin interviews.

*The Dayton’s team photo is courtesy Frances Kidd; Avantis team photo, courtesy Betty Hawes; Little Wagon and Mr. Peter’s photo, courtesy Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board Archives. The others are in the MHS collections.*



*A New Prague catcher narrowly misses tagging out an Austin Blue Soxer at home plate, 1940. The Blue Sox won, 23 to 18.*





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