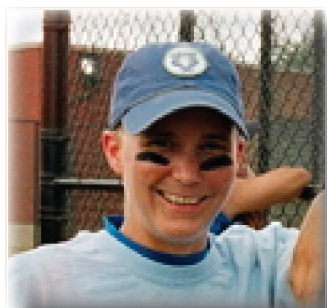


Hardball

is not just for men

Amy Schneider's childhood dream of playing baseball for the Cleveland Indians didn't exactly pan out, but that didn't stop her from becoming part of MSBL and Chicago baseball history.

by Jeff McGaw



Amy Schneider, Chicago MSL Riveters.

In 2007, the 36-year-old MIT graduate and medical software specialist was a major force in the creation of a four-team women's division in the MSBL-affiliated Midwest Suburban League—the first all-female division in the more than 20-year history of the MSBL.

Five years prior, in 2002, Schneider founded the Chicago Gems women's baseball team. With that, Schneider helped rekindle a more-than-half-century-old women's baseball flame in the Chicago area, and joined an estimated 700 women on 43 league and tournament teams now across the country.

"I always wanted to play baseball," said Schneider, player-manager for the Midwest Suburban League Riveters. "It was sort of required if you wanted to be a Cleveland Indian when you grew up."

A History Lesson

Once upon a time, long before Schneider and her fellow Riveters and Gems showed up, a few lucky women did in fact play professional baseball. Coincidentally, Chicago Cubs owner and chewing gum magnate Phillip Wrigley was at the very epicenter of the movement. Wrigley helped fund the league, which began with four teams—the Kenosha Comets, the Racine Belles, South Bend Blue Sox, and Rockford Peaches—in 1943. (The Peaches were immortalized in the 1992 movie "A League of Their Own," starring

Tom Hanks, Madonna, Geena Davis and Rosie O'Donnell).

Players were scouted from fast-pitch softball leagues all over the country. One such player, Annabelle Lee, came from North Hollywood, California and made history in 1944 by throwing the first perfect game in AAGPBL history.

In 1994, an effort to establish a recreational women's league on Long Island—and to unite several independent women's leagues across the country—failed, according to MSBL National vice president Gary D'Ambrisi. While intense at first, enthusiasm for the new league waned as the efforts to organize players, get commitments, and collect money started to unravel, D'Ambrisi said.

No Girls Allowed

The women's professional years aside, the national pastime has generally ignored women and girls.

"I couldn't play organized baseball because I was a girl and we weren't allowed to play," Schneider said. "And there weren't any softball leagues for girls where I grew up."

Kate Mitchum, one of the early Gem players, recalled how a relative broke the gender barrier as a kid. "My aunt showed up to her pony league tryouts in catcher's gear so they wouldn't know that she was a girl, she made the team."

Emily McPherson, a standout player in the East Coast Women's Baseball League, published an essay on the league website at

Comets catcher Haley Stewart puts the tag on Salina Sandoval of the Riveters. Stewart and Sandoval play in the new Women's Division of the Midwest Suburban League (www.midwestsuburbanleague.com).





Chicago Redbirds coach Tony Feo and Redbirds manager Kate Mitchum. The Redbirds are one of four teams in the new Women's Division of the Midwest Suburban League. Feo was instrumental in convincing MSL president Larry Kolcz to form a Women's Division. The couple also run a training facility in the Chicago area (see their website at www.gohardball.com)



Jennifer Sbalchiero of the MSL Turtle Rocks on the mound during a league game.

Playing with the Boys

"I never knew."

That's what Amy Schneider often hears when she tells folks that she plays baseball, and when they find out that there are teams, leagues, and tournaments with women playing hardball across this country and beyond.

"People don't even think it exists," said Schneider, who helped found both the Chicago Gems tournament team in 2002 and the Midwest Suburban League's first women's division in 2007. "One player's parents thought it was a scam to steal their daughter's identity," she recalled. "A lot of people have a hard time getting their head around it."

For the record, it's not a scam.

Women play baseball—regular overhand baseball with 90-foot bases and a pitching rubber that is 60-feet, 6-inches from home plate. They take leads, they steal, and they slide. It's baseball without the constant spitting and scratching—and that's a good thing.

The new women's division in the Midwest Suburban League brings the grand total of women's teams to at least 46 across the country, according to the best estimates of the American Women's Baseball Federation. That's approximately 700 players.

That total includes teams like the Chicago Pioneers, a youth league team for girls aged 9-15 started in August, 2006 with about 50 players. The San Francisco Youth Baseball League introduced all-girls youth league for middle school-aged kids that they hope will gather steam.

A team of American women topped an international field of competitors to win the 2006 World Series for women's baseball. Korea, Japan, the Dominican Republic, Canada, Cuba, Hong Kong, Taiwan and India all have teams. Roy Hobbs baseball has a women's division at its annual world series in Fort Meyers, Florida.

Some women enjoy baseball so much that they play it with the boys.

HardBall photographer Norine Rathbone has played with the Las Vegas Sandvipers and last season made MSBL history by being the first woman to complete a rare 9-3 doubleplay. (Her first-person account is posted online at www.hardball.net.) "All I ever wanted, from the day my dad put a baseball in my hand at three, was to play the game," Norine says.

Mary Jo Fraser in Washington narrowly missed making a spot on the USA women's baseball team—a collection of the best players from around the country—but more than holds her own as a member of men's team, the Portland Beavers, in the Puget Sound MSBL.

Kate Mitchum and Jenn Zielke play with men in Chicago's Midwest Suburban League.

Women's leagues exist on both coasts. The east coast is probably the most active, with several leagues and teams from Nashua, New Hampshire to Arlington, Virginia, with teams in Washington D.C., Philadelphia and Boston. Two multiple-team leagues thrive on the west coast, including one each in San Diego and San Francisco.

One league website speaks volumes about women's passion for baseball: "When you're done playing softball, come be a part of the Southern California Women's Baseball League."

For more information on women's baseball, check out some of these links:

1. **The Midwest Suburban League** - www.midwestsuburbanleague.com — the first MSBL league to create a women's division.
2. **The American Women's Baseball Federation** www.awbf.org — this is possibly the best clearing house for information on women's baseball.
3. **The All American Girls Professional Baseball League** www.aagpbl.org — a great website with a full history of the professional women's baseball.
4. **New York Women's Baseball Association** <http://www.nywomensbaseball.com>
5. **California Women's Baseball League** www.cwbl.net — schedules, rosters more for the Alameda Oaks, San Francisco Fillies, and the San Jose Spitfires.
6. **The Southern California Women's Baseball League** www.playwomensbaseball.com
7. **North American Women's Baseball League** - www.nawbl.com - a 4-team league based in New Hampshire
8. **Philadelphia Women's Baseball League** www.phillywomensbaseball.com

www.scorebook.com/womensbaseball, where she wrote:

"When I was younger, no one told me I couldn't play baseball—no one, that is, until I reached the seventh grade. Being told I could not play on the boys' modified baseball team was like being thrown into a little glass box. I was singled out, told that I could not play a sport I had grown up playing, a sport I had grown up loving. Looking out through the walls of my box, I could see all the other kids who were allowed to play the sport they loved to play. They laughed with their teammates at practice and shared their sports stories at school. At twelve years old, you don't yet understand why gender matters, but I was forced to understand, because my gender did matter."

"I think there are a lot of women that want to play baseball," said Jim Glennie, President of the American Women's Baseball Federation, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting women's baseball. "Either the coaches won't let them play, or the boys just grow up too fast and the girls just move off into softball. We're trying to get that group going," said Glennie who is also director of player identification for the USA Women's national baseball team.

"Baseball is not something they've grown up with," he added.

"Baseball is what I know and what I want to play," said Schneider. Unless a bunch of women in baseball uniforms stumbled out of a cornfield somewhere and asked her to play, Schneider was going to have to take initiative.

"We wanted to play baseball and play it often, and since there wasn't an opportunity to do so, we created it."

Chicago Gems Founded

After playing in a women's tournament in Detroit during the Labor Day holiday in 2002, Schneider decided to form a team that could play in the Great Lakes Women's Baseball League which had teams in Cleveland, South Bend and Detroit.

The Gems were that team. The team roster grew slowly through word of mouth, but by 2005 they still did not have enough players to compete in tournaments.

With help from longtime Midwest Suburban League player Tony Feo, who organized practices and stressed game fundamentals, and with energy supplied by the success of a Gems player named Jenn Zielke who was given permission to play in the men's division, the Gems effort gathered steam.

After several tournament losses, the Gems claimed their first win in a game in Kalamazoo, Mich., in the summer of 2006.

Even with that, "some of the Gems were getting frustrated that we couldn't play more

"All I've ever wanted to do is to provide the wonderful game of baseball to whoever wants to play it," Kolcz said. "I don't care if they're fifteen Martians; if they want to play, they'll play."

—Larry Kolcz, President
Midwest Suburban League

games," Feo said. "Everyone wanted a league, but we just didn't have the resources."

This was a bit of a chicken and egg scenario however. "We wanted to get teams together for games, but there was no league and no games so it was hard to have teams."

Concerned that the window of opportunity might close altogether for the creation of a women's league, Feo went to MSL president Larry Kolcz and asked about forming a women's division.

"Larry has a system that is proven and it works. He has the fields, the umpires, the tools, and runs one of the most successful leagues in the area," said Feo. "He loves the game of baseball."

Kolcz agreed it was time.

"All I've ever wanted to do is to provide the wonderful game of baseball to whoever wants to

play it," Kolcz said. "I don't care if they're fifteen Martians; if they want to play, they'll play. This game should be played by everybody on the planet."

With instant credibility via the new affiliation with the Midwest Suburban League, the focus turned to recruiting new players. Having a league of its own "put the there there," Schneider said.

A league of their own

On March 3 the new women's division held its first draft. A total of 43 women were chosen to play on the four new teams: the Turtle Rocks, the Riveters, the Comets and the Redbirds. Several players, most with some softball experience, have been added since then. On June 3, MSBL history was made when the first pitch of the new women's division was thrown.

"Honestly, it's better than I expected it to be," said 25-year-old Riveters player Christine Devane. "We had our doubts about being able to pull this thing off, but I am overwhelmed and impressed. It makes me look forward to the future of this league."

Devane said competition in local softball leagues isn't as fun. "A lot of people ask me how softball is going," Devane said. "I gently remind them that it is baseball."

Schneider said she hopes the success of the new division will serve as a model for women's divisions in other parts of the country.

With apologies to Shoeless Joe Jackson, or whoever it was that was whispering from that Iowa cornfield in the movie "Field of Dreams," MSBL founder and president Steve Sigler isn't yet convinced that if you build it they will come. "It's not going to be easy, but they are certainly on the right track," Sigler said. "I wish them well. Larry runs a great league that is well respected in the area. That should help."

D'Ambrisi said he'd consider adding a women's division to the MSBL/MABL Fall Classic if he knew the interest was there.

Mitchum, 25, is as fired up as anyone about women's baseball.

The longtime Gem and now player-manager of the MSL's Redbirds, she also plays for the Firebirds in the MSL's Men's A division. She is one of a few women currently on a men's league roster, and one of a much smaller group that plays in both.

Despite the Redbirds winless record, Mitchum remains excited. "My players' love for the game is really inspiring. They play the game on such a pure level."

Mitchum and Feo now run a company called "Go Hardball" that is devoted to making baseball accessible to women of all ages through clinics and skills training (www.gohardball.com). I love the game, it's my passion. I play as much as I can anywhere I can. I always want to learn and improve my game. The guys so far have been very respectful and I've learned a lot from them."

"The commitment is there and the quality of play is improving," Feo said. "We look forward to next season to see what it brings." •



Kate Mitchum and Tony Feo and staff at one of their Go Hardball girls-only baseball clinics.



Living Legends:

Annabelle "Lefty" Lee, AAGPBL



For seven years starting in 1944, diamonds really were one North Hollywood girl's best friend—baseball diamonds.

The girl was Annabelle Lee, aunt of former major league pitcher and sometime MSBL player Bill Lee, and great aunt to Inland Northwest Men's Baseball League player Mike Lee. She was one of over 600 women who played in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) during its 11 year existence from 1943-1954.



With a surge in the popularity of women's baseball recently, Lee's diamond days on fields from Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field to Cuba are worth noting.

Chewing gum magnate and Chicago Cubs owner Phillip "PK" Wrigley helped women's professional baseball get started in hopes that it would hold fan's interest during the war years. He commissioned scouts to gather talent from the best fast pitch softball leagues across the country.

One scout, Bill Allington, coached in Lee's softball league in North Hollywood and invited her and nine others to spring training in Peru, Illinois. Lee made the cut and signed an \$85 per week contract to play for the Minneapolis Millerettes. Her previous job with the Bank of America in North Hollywood had paid \$95 per month.

Women players were required to wear lipstick and uniform skirts, and prohibited from cursing and smoking. "We had to act like ladies, but play like men" Lee said.

Initially, the All American Girls Professional Baseball League used 12-inch balls, 65-foot base paths, and underhand pitching at a distance of 40 feet. Over time, baseballs gradually shrunk to about nine inches, base paths grew to 85 feet, and pitchers were allowed to throw overhand from 60 feet.

On June 4, 1944, Lee tossed a perfect game to lead the Millerettes to a win over the Kenosha Comets. One year later to the day, on June 4, 1945, while throwing for the Fort Wayne Daisies, Lee no-hit the Grand Rapids Chicks. Lee played for several teams in her seven year career.

Her most enduring memories are tied to spring training in Cuba where



she came face to face with another culture and learned to appreciate the differences in life. In 1949 she represented the United States on a women's baseball exhibition tour of Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Guatemala. The experience gave her an appreciation for how others live—an appreciation that endures to this day.

"It was really quite an experience.... It's amazing what a little travel will do," Lee said.

Lee's career ended after she sustained a head and neck injury while sliding into home plate during a game in 1950. The injury caused her to suffer intermittent bouts of amnesia and partial paralysis.

Lee is now 85, retired, and living in Costa Mesa, California. She is two shoulder-surgeries and 57 years removed from her pro baseball career, but fondly recalls those good old days. "They (the fans) really appreciated what we were doing," Lee said. "They were amazed at the caliber of game we were playing."

LEFT: Annabelle Lee Harmon in 2004 with (l-r) her great-nephew Mike Lee, his son Kazdan Lee and her nephew Bill Lee. Mike and Bill both play in the MSBL.