

**2017 SABR Women in Baseball Scholarship recipient**  
**“When the Person is Female”:**  
**MLB Officially Erases its “Gender Line” after 75 Years (1931-2006)**  
**By Joshua Henry Staples**

Sunday, April 2, 2006, marked opening day for Major League Baseball (MLB). In the first official game of the new season, the Chicago White Sox defeated the Cleveland Indians, 10-4, at their home ballpark, U.S. Cellular Field. As far as the players, umpires and 38,802 fans in attendance were concerned, it was just another evening at the ballpark.<sup>1</sup> But little did they know, this game was very significant – for it marked the first time in major league history that a regular season game was played under new MLB Official Baseball Rules that recognizes females as equals and potential on-field contributors (i.e. as players and umpires).<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the season, the MLB Playing Rules Committee modified Rule 2.00 in the Definition of Terms to read:

*“Any reference in these Official Baseball Rules to ‘he,’ ‘him,’ or ‘his’ shall be deemed to be a reference to ‘she,’ ‘her,’ or ‘hers,’ as the case may be, when the person is female.”<sup>3</sup>*

When home plate umpire Dale Scott yelled, “Play Ball!” to start the game on that evening, for the first time in MLB history these two words were meant for both men and women on the same field of competition. That is significant. And fittingly, the date also marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of when organized baseball first drew a “gender line” against female players.

### **Judge Landis Draws the Line**

On April 2, 1931, 17-year old Jackie Mitchell made her professional baseball debut with the minor league Chattanooga Lookouts. The southpaw had been pitching since age seven when her next-door neighbor and future hall of famer Dazzy Vance, taught her “tricks of the art of pitching.”<sup>4</sup> Advertised as “the first woman pitcher in organized baseball,” Mitchell’s debut was in an exhibition game against the New York Yankees who were traveling through Tennessee on their way north after spring training in Florida.

Before the game Jackie told reporters that her greatest ambition was to strike out Babe Ruth.<sup>5</sup> The Bambino did not like the idea of women players. He told reporters, “I don’t know what’s going to happen if they begin to let women in baseball … they will never make good. Why? Because they are too delicate. It would kill them to play ball every day.”<sup>6</sup>

Mitchell entered the game against the Yankees after the first two batters reached base. She faced the heart of the Yankee lineup – Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Tony Lazzeri, all future Hall of Famers.<sup>7</sup> She struck out the Babe on three pitches. She then proceeded to do the same against Gehrig. The Chattanooga manager then pulled Mitchell after she nibbled the corners of the strike zone against Lazzeri and delivered four straight balls for a walk.

Some found it hard to believe that a young female pitcher could strike out two of the game’s greatest hitters. “Babe and Lou let her fan ‘em on purpose,” fans said.<sup>8</sup> Later in life Mitchell told reporters that she believed the strikeouts were legit.<sup>9</sup>

What is not in dispute is that Commissioner Judge Landis contacted Lookouts' owner Joe Engel and demanded that her contract be voided.<sup>10</sup> On April 18, under pressure from Landis, Engel told the press that Mitchell would not join the team for the first road trip of the season. "Engel was of the opinion today that Jackie was not up to the task of taking a regular turn on the mound," the press reported. "I am not decided about her making the trip yet," he said. "Next year, maybe."<sup>11</sup> As we know from history, "next year" never came for Jackie Mitchell in organized baseball.

### No Women Allowed: Organized Baseball Makes it Official

The men running organized baseball underscored their position on women playing on the same field as men when the Harrisburg Senators attempted to sign shortstop Eleanor "Ellie" Engle in June 1952. Harrisburg general manager Howard Gordon told the press that he signed Engle because he was impressed with her athletic ability.<sup>12</sup> But some Senators' players didn't want Engle on their team, and manager Buck Etchison said a woman would play for him when "hell freezes over."<sup>13</sup>

Minor league president George Trautman believed that female players were just a marketing gimmick similar to St. Louis Browns owner Bill Veeck's signing of 3-foot 7-inch Eddie Gaedel in 1951.<sup>14</sup> He said "the signing of a woman player would be a 'travesty' and not in the best interest of baseball."<sup>15</sup> Major league baseball commissioner Ford Frick shared the same views.<sup>16</sup>

Trautman added that any club signing, or attempting to sign, women players would be subject to severe penalties.<sup>17</sup> In response to the ruling, Harrisburg rescinded Engle's contract.<sup>18</sup>

The decision devastated the 24-year old ballplayer. She told the press, "Baseball is making a big mistake in keeping me and other women outside the sport, women are able to play it, and the officials should recognize that fact."<sup>19,20</sup> "I thought it would have been wonderful if I could have been able to become the first woman baseball player," said Engle.<sup>21</sup> Sadly, she added, "I'll never try to get into baseball again."<sup>22</sup>

### The New Rule: Baseball Officially Welcomes Women

The addition of women to the Official Baseball Rules in 2006 did not happen overnight. Instead, the thinking behind it was the result of years of renewed recognition and new opportunities for women throughout the larger baseball community. (See Table 1 for Milestones). Together, they evolved the social and legal climate of baseball and made the game more open to women.

The first female to serve as an on-field contributor under the new MLB rules was umpire Ria Cortesio.<sup>23</sup> In July 2006 she worked several All-Star events at PNC Park in Pittsburgh.<sup>24</sup> Umpire Larry Young, a member of the Playing Rules Committee who voted to revise the MLB rules confessed that the new language was "instigated by lawyers."<sup>25</sup> Incidentally, Cortesio, a nine-year veteran umpire, was fired after the 2007 season and never achieved her dream of umpiring in the majors.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

Someday in the not-so-distant future, a female will indeed join men as peers on the field in the majors. Perhaps as a tribute to the women pioneers who blazed the trail, MLB should consider April 2, 2031 as the goal date (on or before) for the milestone to occur – a century after Jackie

Mitchell's historic performance, and 25 years after the MLB rule change in 2006. In doing so, the number 42 displayed in every ballpark in honor of Jackie Robinson could possibly take on additional symbolic meaning as 4/2 – April 2<sup>nd</sup> – the day MLB officially welcomed women into the game. As someone who fought to break down barriers in the game of baseball, Robinson would probably appreciate and welcome this gesture.

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**TABLE 1. MILESTONES IN WOMEN'S BASEBALL HISTORY, 1988-2006**

The National Baseball Hall of Fame unveils the “Women in Baseball” exhibit, 1988.

Female umpire Pam Postema calls an MLB game (albeit the exhibition “Hall of Fame” game), 1989.

Hollywood introduced a new generation of fans to women in baseball in the award-winning film, “A League of Their Own”, 1992.

Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson threatened an MLB boycott and demanded that the league improve its hiring practices of women and minorities at all levels of the game, 1993.<sup>27</sup>

The creation of the Silver Bullets, an all-female baseball team, 1994.<sup>28</sup>

Pioneering pitcher Ilia Borders, competes with and against men in collegiate and pro baseball, 1994-2000. (Note: St. Paul Saints President Mike Veeck, the grandson of Bill Veeck, said after signing Borders, “most of my compatriots do not believe that women can play baseball … I do.”)<sup>29</sup>

1<sup>1</sup>Baseball-Reference.com, “2006 Chicago Whitesox Schedule and Results,” <http://www.baseball-reference.com/boxes/CHA/CHA200604020.shtml>, accessed July 10, 2017.

2<sup>2</sup>Roder, Rick. Official Baseball Rules Changed for First Time in 10 Years.  
[http://www.austinumpires.org/rules/OBR\\_Rule\\_Changes\\_2006.pdf](http://www.austinumpires.org/rules/OBR_Rule_Changes_2006.pdf), accessed July 9, 2017.

3<sup>3</sup>Roder, Rick. Official Baseball Rules Changed for First Time in 10 Years.  
[http://www.austinumpires.org/rules/OBR\\_Rule\\_Changes\\_2006.pdf](http://www.austinumpires.org/rules/OBR_Rule_Changes_2006.pdf), accessed July 9, 2017.

4<sup>4</sup>Girl Southpaw to Get Chance to Fan Ruth in Exhibition Today, *Decatur Evening Herald (Decatur, IL)*, April 1, 1931, 15.

5<sup>5</sup>Girl Southpaw to Get Chance to Fan Ruth in Exhibition Today, *Decatur Evening Herald (Decatur, IL)*, April 1, 1931, 15.

6<sup>6</sup>Theresa Vargas, “A baseball mystery: Did a teenage girl really strike out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig?” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/04/05/a-baseball-mystery-did-a-teenage-girl-really-strike-out-babe-ruth-and-lou gehrig/>, accessed July 9, 2017.

7<sup>7</sup>Theresa Vargas, “A baseball mystery: Did a teenage girl really strike out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig?” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/04/05/a-baseball-mystery-did-a-teenage-girl-really-strike-out-babe-ruth-and-lou gehrig/>, accessed July 9, 2017.

8 Why the story of the girl pitcher was doubted, *Decatur Evening Herald (Decatur, Illinois)*, 1931 April 22, 6.

9 Theresa Vargas, “A baseball mystery: Did a teenage girl really strike out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig?” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/04/05/a-baseball-mystery-did-a-teenage-girl-really-strike-out-babe-ruth-and-lou gehrig/>, accessed July 9, 2017.

10 Theresa Vargas, “A baseball mystery: Did a teenage girl really strike out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig?” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/04/05/a-baseball-mystery-did-a-teenage-girl-really-strike-out-babe-ruth-and-lou gehrig/>, accessed July 9, 2017.

11<sup>11</sup>Girl pitcher will not travel with team, *Edwardsville Intelligencer (Edwardsville, Illinois)*, 1931 April 18, 1.

12<sup>12</sup>Banned Woman Player "Through with Baseball", *Stars and Stripes Newspaper, Pacific Editions, 1945-1963*, June 25, 1952, 12.

13<sup>13</sup>Baseball signs first woman player, but she won't play, *El Paso Herald-Post (El Paso, Texas)*, June 23, 1952, 20.

14<sup>14</sup>Baseball signs first woman player, but she won't play, *El Paso Herald-Post (El Paso, Texas)*, June 23, 1952, 20.

15<sup>15</sup>“Babe is Yanked” Girl Shortstop Banned from Baseball, *Stars and Stripes Newspaper, Europe, Mediterranean, and North Africa Editions, 1942-1964*, June 25, 1952, 9.

16<sup>16</sup>Trautman, Frick Rule “No Women”, *El Paso Herald-Post (El Paso, Texas)*, June 23, 1952, 20

17<sup>17</sup>Official Edict: Diamonds and Dolls Don't Mix, *News-Palladium (Benton Harbor, Michigan)*, June 24, 1952, 10.

18<sup>18</sup>Signing of Woman Player in Baseball Instigates Ban, *Stars and Stripes Newspaper, Pacific Editions, 1945-1963*, June 24, 1952, 15.

19<sup>19</sup>Official Edict: Diamonds and Dolls Don't Mix, *News-Palladium (Benton Harbor, Michigan)*, June 24, 1952, 10.

20<sup>20</sup>Banned Woman Player “Through with Baseball”, *Stars and Stripes Newspaper, Pacific Editions, 1945-1963*, 1952 June 25, 1952, 12.

21<sup>21</sup>Banned Woman Player “Through with Baseball”, *Stars and Stripes Newspaper, Pacific Editions, 1945-1963*, 1952 June 25, 1952, 12.

22<sup>22</sup>Banned Woman Player “Through with Baseball”, *Stars and Stripes Newspaper, Pacific Editions, 1945-1963*, 1952 June 25, 1952, 12.

23<sup>23</sup>Associated Press, “Sport’s only female umpire is on deck,” *The Gainesville Sun (FL)*, July 9, 2006,  
<http://www.gainesville.com/news/20060709/sports-only-female-umpire-is-on-deck>, accessed July 9, 2017.

24<sup>1</sup>Associated Press, “Sport’s only female umpire is on deck,” *The Gainesville Sun (FL)*, July 9, 2006, <http://www.gainesville.com/news/20060709/sports-only-female-umpire-is-on-deck>, accessed July 9, 2017.

25<sup>1</sup>Associated Press, “Sport’s only female umpire is on deck,” *The Gainesville Sun (FL)*, July 9, 2006, <http://www.gainesville.com/news/20060709/sports-only-female-umpire-is-on-deck>, accessed July 9, 2017.

26<sup>1</sup>Associated Press, “Baseball’s only female umpire fired,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 1, 2007, <http://www.chron.com/sports/rice/article/Baseball-s-only-female-umpire-fired-1844673.php>, accessed July 9, 2017.

27 Daniel P. Hanley Jr., “Owners Still Building Affirmative Action Plan,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI), March 17, 1993, 5.

28 Tom Farrey, “Women In Baseball Struggle For Their Own Field Of Dreams - Hopefuls Flock To Tacoma For A Chance To Go Pro,” *The Seattle Times (WA)*, February 17, 1994, C1.

29 Maria Elena Baca, “Play Ball - If It Were Only That Easy For Women,” *Star Tribune: Newspaper of the Twin Cities (MN)*, June 10, 1994.