

*Courtesy AAGPBL-PA*

**Canada's Greatest All-American  
Mary "Bonnie" Baker**

Anyone who loves playing ball knows the terrible impatience of waiting for the season to begin. When you live in Canada, that can be a long wait, but the day

you're able to grab your glove and play catch, even if your fingers are numb and the palm of your hand soon stings every time the ball hits your mitt ... that's a good day. For generations, kids all over the country have gloried in the short, precious season of play on their beloved diamond, whether their sport of choice is softball, baseball or something in between.

Canadian girls and women have played organized ball — usually softball — since the late 1800s, as Bill Humber documents in his authoritative history of the game in Canada, *Diamonds of the North*. It's almost certain that they played ball informally for decades before that.

Many readers will realize that their mother or grandmother played ball, whether that was in a city league or on a workplace competitive team or behind the church or school with the other farm kids after the haying was done for the day. If you're looking for proof, just drop into a seniors' residence some night when the Blue Jays are playing. Gathered around the communal television will be several women in their 70s, 80s and 90s who know the game inside out because they played it fervently as youngsters.



Female military personnel play officers of the Regina Rifle Regiment in the Netherlands, August 1945.  
*Library and Archives Canada*

Of course, if both boys and girls dreamed of playing professionally, only the boys ever really had any chance of doing so. Except, that is, for the brief existence of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, something the vast majority of people had never heard of until the movie *A League of Their Own* came out in 1992. This paper is by no means a comprehensive guide to the league, which ran from 1943 to 1954 under various names, but it's helpful to be aware of a few basics.

A group of men connected with the major leagues, led by Philip K. Wrigley, was looking for ways to keep American ballparks busy as male players enlisted or were drafted for service in the Second World War. Teams were being hollowed

out, attendance was slipping, and over it all loomed the possibility of fuel rationing shutting down baseball altogether.

The All-American Girls League went by several different names over its history, mirroring the changes on the playing field. At first it was a softball league with a 12-inch ball, underhand pitching — albeit off a mound — a shorter distance to the plate and shorter base paths than in baseball. Over the years the ball shrank to nine inches in diameter, and the distance to the mound and between bases increased. The league moved first to sidearm and then finally to overhand pitching.

Famously, AAGPBL players were required to wear a one-piece uniform, with a short flared skirt, and go to charm school. And while the most common reaction to these outfits is that they were cute if impractical, anybody who thinks it's cute to play baseball in a skirt should try sliding into base while wearing one. Mary Baker, the great Canadian catcher, said she knew one coach who always turned away when a player had to slide — he couldn't bear to watch. According to her daughter, the players even had a deceptively lighthearted word for the nasty scrapes they got while sliding: they called it a strawberry.

Players attended mandatory lessons in how to comport themselves and apply makeup; they were required to wear lipstick at all times. They were not allowed to be seen in public smoking or drinking, and could never wear slacks.

Such strictures might sound amusingly old-fashioned, until you think about being recruited for a job where you're expected to perform at the highest athletic level, while every aspect of how you look and what you do when you're in public is controlled.

But there was a reward — these women got to play ball. Many said they would have played for free, and it's entirely possible that plenty of them would have paid for the privilege. After all, at the time the AAGPBL was gearing up, women had only been considered persons under Canadian law for a little over a decade. It was perfectly legal to pay a woman less than a man, even if they were

doing exactly the same job, and a woman was expected to quit her job as soon as she married.

Put yourself in the position of a young woman of this era, with a limited number of occupations open to you and powerful societal restrictions on virtually everything you do. Just imagine how inspiring it would be, this short, thrilling time when skilled female athletes got the chance to escape those limits for a while — to leave their ordinary lives behind and do the thing they loved best, with other women who were as passionate about it as they were, with the bonus that they'd make a good living doing it. That is precisely what makes the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League so important.

Despite its name, not all of the players in the league were American. About



The plaque honouring Canadian AAGPBL players in the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

Author photo

10 per cent — 64 of the 650 women who played in the AAGPBL over its history — were Canadian. Nearly half of their number were from Saskatchewan. (Mary Baker once said that Saskatchewan ballplayers were so good because it was the only thing to do there in the summer besides chasing grasshoppers.)

There's some truth to her assertion. If you venture off the main highway and visit some small towns in Saskatchewan, you'll notice that not only do they all have a curling rink, nearly all of them also have a well-cared-for ball diamond complete with bleachers, even if it's only a community of a few hundred people.

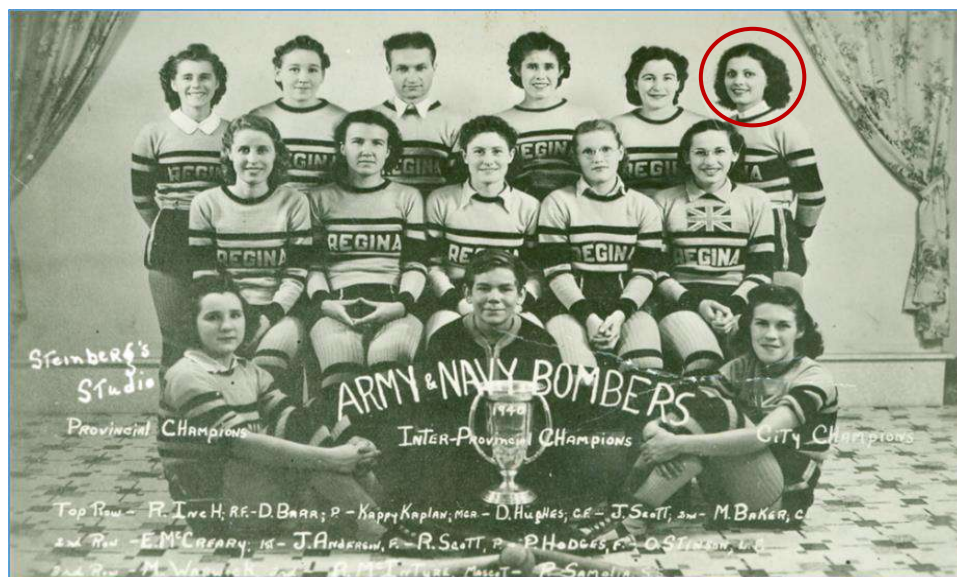
(The book *Girls of Summer* quotes another outstanding Saskatchewan player in the All-American Girls League, Arlene Johnson Noga, describing a cultural barrier between her and some of her American teammates. When they asked her what she did in the off-season, she tried to describe curling to them, but realized "it was hard to explain what that was unless you could demonstrate. It wasn't enough to say you threw a rock.")

Recruiting for players in Canada was so intense that newspapers said the new league was “playing havoc with some Canadian teams” and one columnist even suggested that the clubs where these women developed their skills should be compensated by the AAGPBL.

No one was more excited about the opportunity to play pro ball than Mary Baker. She’s sometimes mentioned in lists of all-time great Canadian athletes, when a writer is looking to add in some interesting women, but her achievements are largely unknown even here in her home country.

Mary Geraldine George was born in Regina on July 10, 1919 (some sources say August; some put the year at 1918). She had four brothers and four sisters. When a sports-oriented family has nine children, it’s reasonable to assume that makes one ball team, but apparently that wasn’t the case for the George kids — all nine of them became catchers.

This was the age of tuberculosis, which Mary contracted at nine years old, and which put her and some of her siblings in and out of the sanitarium. She doesn’t seem to have suffered any lasting results; by age 13, she was playing softball with a women’s team in Regina.



Regina’s Army & Navy Bombers, named for the store in which the players worked, won the women’s provincial championship in 1940. Mary Baker is indicated with the red circle.

After she graduated from high school she married Maurice Baker in 1936. In 1938, she started playing with the Army & Navy Bombers, a team made up of women who worked for the Army & Navy store in Regina. They won the provincial championship in 1940. It appears she also did some barnstorming on a women's team that travelled from Saskatchewan into the United States, but this period of her life is less well-documented than what was to come.

Somewhere during this time, however, came a memorable development: the origin of her nickname, Bonnie. The Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum's archives include a copy of a survey Baker herself filled out in 1982, possibly at a reunion of AAGPBL players. One question asked whether the player had a nickname and if so, how she got it. Here's her answer: "While barnstorming in the USA with a Canadian team and in Chicago, a broadcaster who interviewed me then went on to talk about my bonny disposition while broadcasting. The girls then tacked it on me."

Baker's daughter Chick says her mother liked the nickname Bonnie and considered it a compliment. Reporters frequently upped the adjective quotient, referring to her as "Pretty Bonnie Baker." But even a nickname that focused on her looks couldn't overshadow her natural talent as a ball player, and her deep love of the game, not to mention her fierce competitive streak.

In *Girls of Summer*, Lois Browne writes that Baker played ball knowing perfectly well her husband, Maury, wouldn't be too happy about it. In 1942, she'd been given a chance to play in Montreal but he'd insisted she stay home. He was still serving overseas with the Royal Canadian Air Force when she got her big chance. This account says it was actually her mother-in-law who told Mary she should just go ahead and play and tell Maury later. As a compromise, Mary promised him she'd quit playing ball when he returned from the war.

In an interview years later, she said, "My intentions were good. I was going to stay home like a good wife, but the closer it came to the time to go, the more miserable I got." To his credit, after Maury watched her sit out spring training in 1946 and when the season was about to start, she says he told her, "I know you're not going to be happy here all summer. You might as well go where you're



going to be happy.” And like a shot, she was back on the diamond. All things considered, for the era, Maury seems to have been remarkably supportive of his wife’s ball-playing career and genuinely proud of her popularity.

There are multiple descriptions of how Mary Baker was discovered and signed to play pro ball, but they all share some basic facts. The recruiting network Wrigley had set up included a former Chicago Black Hawks defenceman from Regina named Johnny Gottselig. He had coached women’s ball teams in the off-season, and when he was asked if there were any prospects for the new league in his area, he turned to a friend of his, a hockey scout named Hub Bishop.

One morning, Baker was in her favourite coffee shop reading the newspaper. When she turned to the sports page, she later told an interviewer, “there was a picture of Mrs. Wrigley with Johnny Gottselig and a model with this uniform on. I read it and said to myself, ‘Oh, God, it’s happening. Now, am I going to be lucky enough to get in?’” Bishop called her that same afternoon.

On that survey from 1982, there was a question asking “Why did you decide to play in the league?” Baker’s answer speaks volumes: “I dreamed all my life of playing professional ball so I naturally was thrilled when I was invited.”

In turn, she recruited half a dozen more players from Regina. And in May of 1943, she attended the AAGPBL’s first-ever training camp in Chicago; she was assigned to the Blue Sox, who would play out of South Bend, Indiana — an industrial city of about 100,000 just east of the southern part of Lake Michigan. In a 1993 interview, she described training camp this way: “It was very cold and ugly and windy at the tryouts, but I loved it anyway.”



Mary Baker at a practice.  
*Courtesy of Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame*

Right from the start, Mary Baker stood out as a strong all-round player. Arleene Johnson Noga described her as “a complete player with all five tools — a real competitor.” In an article on the league, *Time* magazine reported that Baker could easily throw 345 feet.

Mary Baker was, to put it mildly, an intense competitor. In her book *A Whole New Ball Game*, author Sue Macy recounts a story from pitcher Ruth Williams. Williams was used to playing her position, so when a pop fly went up, she said, she ran for it. “So I’m reaching for the ball, and all of a sudden up comes an arm, and an elbow hits me in the face. It was Baker. And she yells ‘I’ll take it!’



Injuries happen when you play as hard as Bonnie does, but she can take it.

Courtesy of Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame

Boy oh boy, she cracked me in the jaw. She said, ‘Don’t you know that the catcher takes all pop flies?’ I said, ‘I do now.’”

In one game, Baker twisted her ankle, but she just taped it up and kept playing ... through 16 innings. At one point in the 1946 season, Baker refused to give up on a foul ball and chased it into the dugout. She fell and hit her head and was out cold for 10 minutes.

Twice she had her hand broken by a batter’s swing. (She was called for interference on both occasions.) The first time it ended her season. The second time, the bat left her with a hairline fracture; she taped her hand, put some extra padding in her mitt, and kept on playing. Not surprisingly, by the end of the season, the fracture had turned into a full-on break.

Thanks to this combination of skill, hard work, grit and competitiveness, as well as her ball-playing smarts, Baker quickly became a team leader. At 23, she was actually one of the older Blue Sox, and by the middle of the first season, the manager was already relying on her input.

One writer described Mary Baker as a “formidable presence in the dugout and the locker room,” showing both leadership ability and a strong personality.



On the surface, she adhered to the code of conduct, but soon found her way around rules that didn't suit her. For instance, she absolutely *loved* Coca Cola; one source quotes her saying she drank — wait for it — 24 bottles a day. “I went to bed with one on my night table and got up in the morning and drank it,” she told one interviewer. And even though it was forbidden, she routinely took bottles of Coke into the dugout during games.

Also not allowed — indeed, explicitly prohibited for all AAGPBL players — was smoking, but Baker did it anyway, in private and during games. She'd slip around behind the dugout where members of the public couldn't see her, and have other players pass her cigarettes to her.

While coaching staff appreciated her abilities, Baker was also a fan favourite. She was the most recognizable player in the league from its earliest days. When *LIFE* magazine did a major story on the league in June, 1945 — it was supposed to be the cover story but got bumped by war news — the biggest photo was a close-up of Baker in profile, smiling behind her catcher's mask, prominently placed on the article's first page.

She told the magazine that she'd received a letter from a male fan who was serving overseas as her husband Maury was. “He told me he had two daughters, and hoped they'd grow up to be just like me. That type of thing means a lot.”

Unlike many of the women in the league, Baker had experience with being in the public eye — she had done some modelling in Regina and was a natural when it came to talking to reporters. During her time with the AAGPBL, she was often featured in advertising, both for her team and the league, and for local companies.

Being a star who was both athletic and knew how to present herself meant Baker usually received a disproportionate amount of news coverage. In an interview later in life, she commented that another player could get three hits and make several spectacular plays, but she'd still get more attention, for better or for worse. “In the same game, I'd run after four pop flies. But I got the

headlines. Of course, if I dropped a ball and someone else hit a home run, I got the write-up for that, too.”

Mary Baker soon became the highest-paid member of the South Bend Blue Sox. By 1947 she was making \$100 a week at a time when the league’s maximum allowable salary was ... \$85 a week. In a letter to the incoming team president in 1948, Baker says she would play as long as she got the same deal as the previous year. She wrote “I am quite certain that you know that I was getting a hundred a week. The extra 15 to be paid in a lump sum or weekly.” (The average weekly wage in Canada at the time was in the \$35 range — that’s for men, of course. Women made less; many players left jobs where they were making \$10 a week.)

It was widely rumoured that around the same time, Baker landed a signing bonus of \$2,500, which in 2019 would amount to something like \$26,000 to \$27,000. She denied that amount but also never said exactly how much the bonus was.

The book *Girls of Summer* recounts a great example of Baker’s comfort with her own value, although the story isn’t dated. When she was approached by the higher-paying rival Chicago League, she called league executive Max Carey to let him know she was talking to the competition. Carey took her out to lunch and even brought Rogers Hornsby along to impress her, but Baker would not be distracted. Carey said he was disappointed she’d consider leaving the All-American league, to which she replied, “Would you leave your team if another offered you twice as much?” He said he might consider it. “You wouldn’t consider it,” Baker replied. “You’d make a deal.” Which they did, right away, with Carey permitting her to once again negotiate a higher salary.

Although the AAGPBL players’ appearance and behaviour was tightly restricted in public, when they were on their own, they were often quite happy to cut loose a little. Baker and other players often got together to play poker after curfew; by all accounts she was as good a poker player as she was a ballplayer. Another top-ranked player from Saskatchewan, Daisy Junor, said Baker was always clear when the stakes started to get high. “She’d say ‘Get out,’ and I did. She could clean their clocks in no time.”

Mary Baker's daughter says that when she attended players' reunions with her mother, all anybody wanted to talk about was playing poker with Mary, who always seemed to have a Coke in one hand and a cigarette in the other. During the 1946 season, Baker and her roommates invited two rookies to room with them, but one of the new players, Jean Faut, obviously knew what she'd be getting into. "I figured living with them would mean drinking and card-playing, so I stayed in the (boarding) home."



South Bend Blue Sox and chaperone travelling to a game  
*Courtesy of Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame*

On the field, though, Baker was all business. A three-time all-star, she had her best season in 1946, batting .286 with 94 stolen bases in 94 games. She gave up catching in the 1949 season and started playing second base. Over the course of her career, she played 930 regular season games and 18 playoff games, the most of any player in the league.

It's widely assumed that she was at least one of the real-life people on whom Geena Davis's character in *A League of Their Own* was based. And in fact, one of Baker's sisters, Genevieve, known by her married name as Gene McFaul, also briefly played in the league, but there's no parallel between their lives and those of the sisters in the movie.

In June 1950, Mary Baker was traded to a team that was then the Muskegon Lassies, but would soon move to Kalamazoo — both cities are in Michigan, just a couple of hours north of South Bend. South Bend owner Harold Dailey was quoted as saying that Baker was "about done" as a player but that her loss meant "less brains in the infield" for the Blue Sox.

The Muskegon team was on the brink of folding, so the idea was to bring Baker's baseball knowledge, playing ability and star power to help them out. She did even more than that — she became a player-manager, making her the first-



Mary Baker as a player-manager with the Kalamazoo Lassies  
Courtesy of Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame

ever female manager in all of professional sports. During her time as manager, she moved the club from last place to fourth. A local paper said she'd taken "a floundering, colorless group, and turned it into a fighting, winning team. No one could do more."

Canadian sports historian Bill Humber interviewed Baker for a 1986 article in a publication called *Innings*. In talking about her time as a manager with Kalamazoo, she said, "I must have done pretty good because they wanted to rehire me, but the league held a meeting in Chicago and vetoed the idea. I can understand their thinking. All the other teams

were managed by men and they didn't think it would look good if I was beating their teams."

At the league's board meeting in December 1950, it was made official: no team could employ a "feminine manager," as their decision put it, and just like that, Baker was done. The owners said fans didn't like female managers and the players didn't respect them, but it's possible Baker was closer to the truth when she told an interviewer, "They didn't want to take a \$400-a-month player and make her into a \$500-a-month manager."

Baker took the 1951 season off to have a baby, a daughter she and her husband named Maureen, but who was given the nickname Chick by Baker's teammates; Chick Baker says she's proud of the name, which she still goes by. Baker came back to play the 1952 season, which would be her last, bringing Chick and her nanny along, too.

In August of 1952, Baker appeared on the hugely popular quiz show *What's My Line?*. (The video of her segment is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfXG2--b6ys>.) She almost stumps the panel, with one male questioner, having established that she wore a rather skimpy

costume to entertain crowds, seemingly unable to get beyond the idea that she was an exotic dancer.

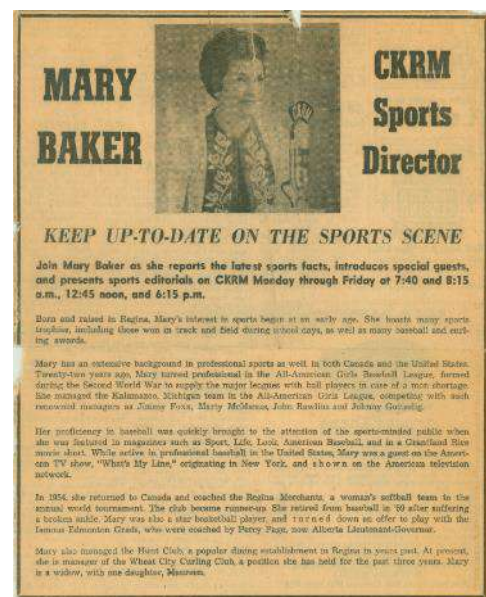
On the survey she filled out in 1982, there was a question asking about an unusual or memorable moment from her career. Baker wrote: "One evening before game time I had a couple of gentlemen come to the dressing room, and ask for me. When I talked to them they were wrestling promoters and were interested in signing me up for the off-season as a lady wrestler. I didn't like that sport so said no thank you."

A few questions later, there's one that asks why she stopped playing pro ball. It's hard not to imagine how wrenching that decision must have been when you read what she wrote: "My daughter was very young and felt it wasn't fair to her to cart her around the country so decided to quit."

Baker came back to Regina where she continued playing sports. She led her softball team to the 1953 Class A provincial and Western Canadian championships and ultimately to the World Ladies Softball championships in Toronto; the team didn't do especially well but Baker hit .500.

A natural athlete, Baker excelled at both bowling and curling; the Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame has trophies attesting to her prowess in both. She continued to coach girls' softball and women's ball, and was also the only female coach in a boys' PONY league in Regina in the mid-'50s. She was made the coach of its all-star team in 1955.

After Maury died in 1962, Mary had to find work to support herself and Chick. Not surprisingly, she didn't take a predictable path, choosing instead to continue being a trailblazer. In December 1964, Regina radio station CKRM hired her as its sports director, making her the



Courtesy of Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame



first woman with a regular sports report anywhere in broadcast media in this country. She only stayed in the position six months — on the survey she wrote, “In 1965 I became the first lady sportscaster in Canada. I didn’t like that too much so I left the radio station six months later.” Chick Baker says her mother never talked about the decision, but believes that had she encountered sexism in the job — which it’s safe to say she did — Mary wouldn’t have quit; she’d have just fought harder.

In fact, Chick says, Mary was a very sociable person who vastly preferred her next job as manager of Regina’s Wheat City Curling Club, a position she held for 25 years. And of course she joined the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League Players Association, which maintains a website with league history, player stats and profiles, and more at <https://www.aagpbl.org/>.



How many Regina softball players knew they were up against two former members of the AAGPBL? Mary Baker is in the back row; Arleene Johnson Noga is in front.  
*Courtesy of Saskatchewan Hall of Fame*

Mary Baker has been named to the Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame, the Saskatchewan Baseball Hall of Fame and the Regina Sports Hall of Fame. She and the other Canadian players in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League were inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in 1998, although she was not at the ceremony.

Despite her enormous one-time fame and ground-breaking achievements, Baker didn't make a big deal of her days as a pro. Her nephew Gary George told Global News, "She never talked about that with us kids. Most of us didn't know she played baseball until we were in our thirties."

Chick Baker says, "I always knew she was special, and that people thought she was special, but I didn't really understand the depths and importance of what she'd done until I was an adult." She remembers one time when a young man showed up at their house with an article about Mary asking if she would sign it, and Chick realized "Wow — my mum *must* be special." Aside from her athletic abilities, Chick describes her mother simply as "an extraordinary person" whom others were just drawn to.



*Author photo*

Mary Baker died in 2003 of respiratory failure at age 84. In 2015, a mural-covered kiosk was dedicated to her in Regina's Central Park. A ball diamond in the park was named after her; Chick Baker talks about having spent many hours there as a girl watching her mother play. Along with the kiosk, the park has information panels explaining Baker's career and prowess. A few years later, in 2018, she was named to the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame.

The Canadian women of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League were fortunate to have a chance to play the sport they loved in a world that wasn't ready to let them do much at all. For a brief, shining time, these athletes transcended the restrictions on their lives and did something unique, and all Canadians deserve to know their story — girls perhaps most of all. And from among the ranks of these accomplished women, Mary Baker stands out as one of the best: a great ballplayer, a strong person, and a trailblazer in baseball and in all of Canadian sport.



*Courtesy of Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame*

Nancy Payne  
November 2019