

April 2022 – Did You Know? Play Ball!

Another pro baseball season is about to begin, so it's time to talk some baseball. Did you know that Grand Rapids once had a professional baseball team? Read on.

Over our long history, many celebrities have visited Blythefield CC. Although most famous guests came here to play our beautiful golf course, that's not true for all. Some were here to swim, including players from the Grand Rapids Chicks, a team in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League ("AAGPBL").

The photo below shows some of the GR Chicks on a day off relaxing at Blythefield's original pool. The photo was taken on our old pool's high dive. The photo is undated but must have been before 1954. (The BCC yearbook for that year had an emphatic rule: "The diving tower is NOT to be used at any time." This rule was implemented after a couple incidents of divers hitting the bottom; the water below was not deep enough for diving from that height.)



The GR Chicks on a day off



our original pool, approximately 1953 (photo found by Collin Romanick)

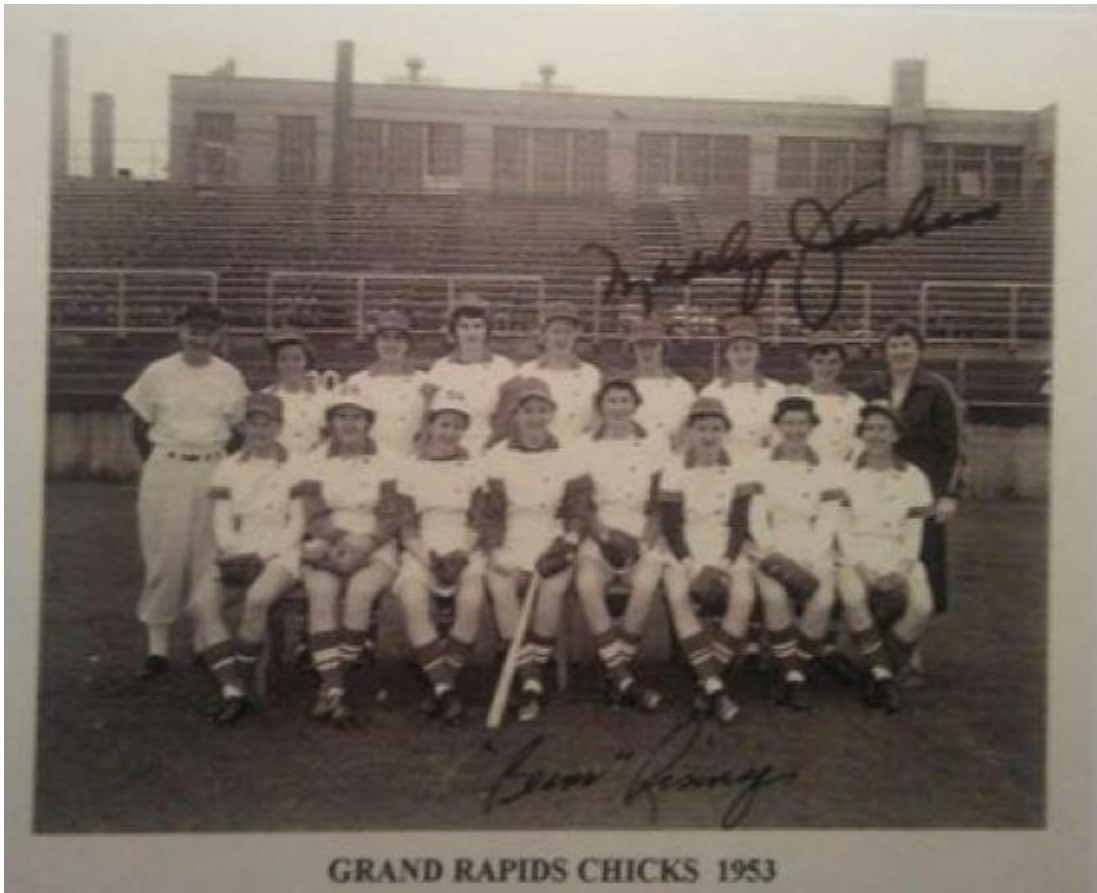


1940's postcard of our original pool

The history of the Chicks and the AAGPBL is interesting. How did it start? World War II was the impetus. Whether to continue the national pastime was debated soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Men's professional baseball was affected as many who played in the majors entered military service. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League was created by P.K. Wrigley, who owned not only a chewing gum company but also a men's major league franchise, the Chicago Cubs. He was concerned that pro baseball might be suspended as guys were called into service. Wrigley formed the AAGPBL to assure professional baseball during WWII. As it turned out, MLB was not suspended. For several years, there was both MLB and the AAGPBL. In all, this women's baseball league lasted from 1943 to 1954. For most of that time, we had a team here in west Michigan, the Grand Rapids Chicks.

The Chicks played their home games at South High School in Grand Rapids, except for 1950-52 when games were played at Bigelow Field in Wyoming

Township. The Chicks made the playoffs every year they played. Below is a team photo of the Grand Rapids Chicks.



The AAGPBL inspired the 1992 hit movie, “A League of Their Own”. You may recall a famous line from that movie: “There’s no crying in baseball.” Perhaps a different quote should be remembered, one from a Marilyn Monroe movie, circa 1953:

“Diamonds are a girl’s best friend.”

DYK believes that the history of the GR Chicks and the AAGPBL provide a completely different meaning to that line. So, let’s play ball!

Brent Rector

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p.s. For those interested, below is a GR Press column from May 19, 1950, at the start of the GR Chicks' season.

p.p.s. Is photo editing is in your skill set? DYK is looking for a volunteer to help with some old photographs.

SPORTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

by ROSCOE D. BENNETT



The Chicks Open New Season

The Grand Rapids Chicks open a new season in the All-American Girls Baseball league Saturday night and there will be a big outpouring of the faithful, provided the weather behaves. The Chicks are looking forward to a profitable season and the management, through its diligent efforts, has virtually assured the club of a profit by the close of the season. There are no fears about the Grand Rapids club weathering the season. It is one of the few in the league that is soundly organized, backed and promoted.

The building of the Chicks is a good example of what can be accomplished through unified effort. The men backing the enterprise here have constructed an organization that has been helpful to the community, to the league and to the girls playing the game under their banner. The promotion has been smart and adequate, all of which has inspired confidence in the fans and the public at large. Therefore the Chicks have no worries at the moment, outside of the actual competition. They have plenty of worries there.

Locals Face Many Problems

The Chicks are none too hopeful of a pennant this season because they just do not have the pitching necessary. During the West Baden Springs training camp Manager Johnny Rawlings got himself a big shock when he found that Alce Haylett was through, Millie Karp had a sore arm, Chubby Fisher had left and he had only his second stringers of last season around. He tried to bolster the staff the best way he could and at the same time build a club that could compete with the tops in the league. Since there is a great scarcity of players of big league caliber, Rawlings' problem has been a big, and at times most discouraging. However, the old New York Giants star is not one to give up quickly. He has been patient and he has been thoughtful in his construction processes. But after watching his charges in spring training games he is not too optimistic.

The club this season defensively is probably on a par with that of last season. Dorice Reid's replacing Connie Wisniewski has substituted speed for power and whether the substitution has weakened or strengthened will not be known until the season gets well under way. Working under the new rookie rule—forcing a rookie to be played in every game—Rawlings has decided to go along with two first-year girls, Dolly Nemiec and Pat Courtney at third base. This spot has been a weakness with the Chicks for the last two seasons. There is reason to hope that the new girls will fill the bill a bit more capably than it has been filled the last two seasons. The rest of the infield is strong enough but unquestionably it has not improved as much as some of the other infields in the circuit. The outfield is bolstered by Phyllis Koehn in center and Doris Satterfield in left, the star slogger of the circuit.

The entire club is lacking in speed. The girls are not as fleet as they might be.

Three Cities Building Strong

Three clubs in the circuit, Fort Wayne, Rockford and South Bend, are deliberately building with the thought of winning the pennant at almost any cost. Racine and Kenosha are standing almost pat. Muskegon under Lonny Zintag, its new manager, is going all out for new material. Zintag took two teams of rookies on a tour of the nation last summer and is convinced that the newcomers with a season's play under their belt will be the equal of if not better than any of the clubs made up of old-timers. Peoria is a question mark. The club there has had a lot of trouble and the organization backing it has been seeking help from other members of the circuit. What they have now will not be known until play has been under way for a while. In this setup the Grand Rapids outfit is being looked upon generally only as a first-division contender.

Even though things are not too promising now there is no reason why the fans here should give up hope. Rawlings is constantly on the lookout for new material and he is known throughout the league as one of the best in developing players into major league stature. As the season goes on, the Chicks undoubtedly will be stronger as the newcomers develop and new help is obtained. It is almost certain that the club will not go backward. It must improve. Should this improvement be fast and should the Chicks get the breaks it is entirely possible for them to upset the dope and come roaring down to the finish a fighting contender for all league glories. Here's hoping.

