Columns
Arts and Media
Social Justice



(Unsplash/Mike Bowman)



by Hannah Vanorny

Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

October 7, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Thwack!! I will never forget the sound a fast-moving softball makes when it slams into one's shin. I played first base on my high school softball team and sometimes a teammate's throw to me would take a bad bounce and leave a large purple bruise on my lower leg.

Despite the frequent welts, I really enjoyed playing softball. I liked the team camaraderie, the feel of my well-worn glove, and the strategy of trying to figure out what the next play would be. I cannot say I was all that good at the game. I was a decent infielder, but at the plate I was famous for hitting little weak grounders right back to the pitcher, and I never developed the right sense of depth perception to play in the outfield. But, still, I loved the feel of the game.

Because I grew up surrounded by the sound of Minnesota Twins baseball, I became an avid fan. When I was young, my family listened to every game on the radio; later, we watched the games on television. I memorized the names, faces and mannerisms of all the players, and was excited when I got to go to my first live game in Minneapolis.

Sometime during high school as I was watching the Twins and playing softball every summer, a friend gave me a plaque with a Scripture verse from Isaiah written on it. It said: "They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on eagles' wings; they will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint" (Isaiah 40:31). The plaque had a little baseball and bat on it, and so I associated the verse with sports.

As I played softball and volleyball in high school, and then started running in college, the lines stuck with me. I moved from a more literal interpretation of the words (how could someone run and not get tired?) to a deeper appreciation of the message. With hope in God, I thought, perhaps we could be granted extra endurance not only during arduous sporting events, but also during much tougher times. I would come to realize that this idea is tested numerous times in life.

I remember clearly the first time I saw the movie "A League of Their Own" at age 13. The movie is a fictional story of the real-life All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, a group started in 1943 when many young men were fighting in World War II and were unable to play baseball. More than 600 young women played in the league, which was in existence from 1943 to 1954.

Women playing professional baseball! I was amazed, as it had never occurred to me that my beloved Twins players could ever be women. I compared my own girls' softball team with my older brother's baseball team. Skilled girl softball players could play ball in college, but then what?

As far as I knew at that time in the early 1990s, there were no professional softball or baseball opportunities for girls like there were for talented boy baseball players. This fact was upsetting, but I forgot about it as the movie drifted from my memory.

Advertisement

I recently hosted a showing of "A League of Their Own" at the monastery where I live, introducing our millennial sisters to the movie. As I watched it in the year 2020, I was again captivated by these women who played baseball for national audiences in a league that existed more than 75 years ago.

I became keenly aware that things do not always get better and we do not always learn from the past as we should. Some injustices drag on. If women were playing professional baseball way back in the 1940s and '50s, why do we today only have men's professional baseball teams (like the Twins) and not women's? While there are professional women's softball leagues in the United States, there are no professional baseball leagues for women. Only Japan has a national female baseball league.

The "sports" verse from Isaiah on my old plaque came to my mind. Surely, women hoping to play baseball in this country have grown "weary" and "faint" waiting for a chance to play their sport professionally.

A few weeks ago, while scanning through Netflix previews, my attention was caught by a documentary called "A Secret Love," as I saw it had a connection to "A League of Their Own." "A Secret Love" tells the story of two women, Terry Donahue and Pat Henschel, and their 72-year-long romantic relationship. Donahue was one of the first members of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League and played for four seasons. She later acted as a consultant for "A League of Their Own."

The two women met and fell in love in their early 20s, but did not tell anyone they were a couple. They kept their secret going, not even telling family members, until they were both in their 80s. They got married in an assisted living facility on

Donahue's 90th birthday in 2015.

The women, while happy in their relationship together, were stymied during most of their lives by the fear of homophobia. While Donahue got to play professional baseball as a woman at a time when females played few national sports, she did not feel she could be an openly gay woman at that same time.

The story behind "A Secret Love" shows that there is strength in hope, as Isaiah promises. While women in the United States have never again been allowed to be professional baseball players, many barriers have been broken in the LGBTQ world. Old prejudices still exist, but there is more open-mindedness today regarding the spectrum of sexuality and attraction.

It may have taken 72 years, but Terry Donahue and Pat Henschel finally felt safe enough, in the year 2009, to come out to everyone they knew. Even institutions that have traditionally been wary of homosexuals, like the Roman Catholic Church, now have members forming organizations, such as New Ways Ministries and DignityUSA, that promote respect and justice for all people regardless of sexual orientation.

Donahue died in 2019 at the age of 93. After finally revealing her homosexuality, she lived the last years of her life proud of both her baseball career and her relationship with her cherished wife. Donahue and Henschel are examples of women who never gave up hope. Undoubtedly, they grew tired and frustrated with the secret life they had to lead, but they persevered until the world caught up with them.

We must do the same when it comes to any kind of injustice, women's baseball included. I am still a big Twins fan, and I still enjoy a good game of catch with my old trusty glove. And I believe that with hope in God, we will continue to look ahead to the day when justice prevails, and we will all "soar on eagles' wings."

[Hannah Vanorny is a Benedictine sister at Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck, North Dakota. She joined her community in 2006 and made her final monastic profession in 2013. She has served as the assistant director of Campus Ministry at the University of Mary in Bismarck and as the vocation director of her community. Currently, she is Annunciation Monastery's volunteer director and works as a reference associate at the Bismarck Public Library.]