



LOIS YOUNGEN AT THE MLB ALL-STAR GAME IN CLEVELAND, OHIO

news

A Woman's Place is at Home Base

EUGENE EMERALDS CELEBRATE AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL PLAYER LOIS YOUNGEN

By Henry Houston

A *League of Their Own*, the 1992 movie featuring Tom Hanks and Madonna that told the story about the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), was 75 percent correct, Lois Youngen tells *Eugene Weekly*.

Youngen, who is 85 years old and lives in Eugene, played catcher from 1951 to 1954 in the league for the Fort Wayne Daisies and South Bend Blue Sox — both teams based in Indiana. She says the movie did a great job overall of telling the story of the baseball league that no one would've known about unless you lived around Lake Michigan.

One thing that she says she always likes to set the record straight about is the legend of Jimmie Foxx, who's ranked in the top 20 of Major League Baseball's home run leaders with 534 career home runs. Hanks played a thinly veiled Foxx in the movie, but he wasn't uncontrollably drunk all the time. In 1952, Youngen played for Foxx when he managed the Fort Wayne Daisies.

"He was an alcoholic, but he was not a falling-down drunk," she says. "He never missed a game, never drank in front of us, never drank on the bus, never missed the bus, never yelled at anybody. He was a perfect gentleman."

Before Youngen played for Foxx or the AAGPBL, she played baseball as a child with the neighborhood boys because, if you didn't want to read all day, you had to go outside. The boys told her she could either play right field or catch. She wanted to be where the action was, so she played catcher.

When she was 16 years old, while on a family trip to Fort Wayne, Indiana, she went to her first AAGPBL game.

"At about the seventh-inning stretch, I turned to my cousin and said, 'I could do that,'" she says.

Her cousin coordinated a tryout at 10 am the next day with the Daisies, which was then managed by Baseball Hall-of-Famer Max Carey. He told Youngen they'd be in touch.

Youngen went back home, and, halfway into her senior year, she received a letter inviting her to Fort Wayne Daisies spring training. To attend, she had to get out of school, which was difficult back then, she says.

As a part of spring training, she and the team practiced occasionally at Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C. Youngen says she remembers standing at home plate, thinking, "Joe DiMaggio stood here."

After spring training, she traveled back home, went to prom and attended graduation. Then she was off to

play for the Fort Wayne Daisies. Out of 30 rookies who tried out, she was one of two who made the roster.

Youngen says players were expected to look like Betty Grable and play ball like DiMaggio. AAGPBL players couldn't even wear slacks or blue jeans in public. Although she says they were a good-looking group, it wasn't easy to look good and play well. AAGPBL players wore dresses when playing baseball. Since sliding is a large part of the game, they got skin abrasions that could last for several months.

What made AAGPBL games exciting to watch was the base running, Youngen says. Players weren't hitting the ball out of the park, but they were expected to steal bases — even home, which is a rarity in today's game.

Youngen had a decent batting average and was pretty good at stealing bases, but the one game that she remembers — and calls her claim to fame — is when she caught a perfect game on Sept. 3, 1953. Jean Faut pitched that game, and it is one of five no-hitters in the league's history.

AAGPBL ended in 1954 when Youngen was 20. She says she didn't want to be a ballplayer forever, but she had a few more years in her.

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Youngen says she's thrown out the first pitch for baseball games around five or six times. Whether she's throwing out the first pitch for the Seattle Mariners in 2007 or the Eugene Emeralds' Aug. 2 game, each time she thinks about how she's representing the AAGPBL league and every person who played for it.

"I feel proud that I was an All-American, and I feel proud to represent them," she says. "I hope it contributes to our legacy. Not just mine, but the legacy that All-Americans could really play ball." ■

Youngen will throw out the first pitch at the Eugene Emeralds game Friday, Aug. 2. The game will also have a Youngen bobblehead giveaway.