

**Little League Girl:** When Maria Pepe put on her Hoboken, New Jersey Little League baseball uniform and pitched in 1972, Little League was being played worldwide by about 2.25 million boys and one girl. That girl was forced off her Hoboken team by the Little League's national office after only three games because, "girls were not eligible" (allowed) to play in the Little League.



Title IX legislation, which banned sex discrimination in schools, including athletics, had just been enacted and the National Organization for Women (NOW) drafted a legal case which took that girl off the playing field and into the legal court system. After three games, two years of court battles as a pre-teen, and her New Jersey Supreme Court victory in 1974, more than 30,000 girls nationwide played on Little League teams the following year.

About ten million girls have played Little League since 1975 and, as well, millions of young girls have played a variety of other sports with boys. Her victory enabled millions of boys and girls to play sports side by side in positions of equality at an early age. That said, most of New Jersey's two thousand Little League teams suspended play altogether rather than enroll girls, and a few local Little League organizations reportedly disbanded.

Pepe never officially played in the Little League because she had turned fourteen when her courtroom victory became final thus was too old for the Little League which enrolled eight- to twelve-year-olds. She later recalled however, that "after the ruling came out . . . , my dad said, 'You have to think about all the girls that will follow.'"

But many of the girls who followed did not wind up (pun intended) in baseball. At the time Little League let girls into baseball, it also started a softball division. Donna Lopiano, former CEO of the Women's Sports Foundation and women's A.D. at the University of Texas for 17 years said, "They decided to ignore the spirit of the law by creating softball programs as a place to admit girls. It was a methodical push of girls into softball."

Since 1974, girls' and women's softball has exploded, with more than 1.1 million female

players on about 90,000 amateur softball teams in the United States. NCAA softball, which is women only, has grown from 416 collegiate teams and more than 7,400 players in 1981-1982 to 950 teams and more than 17,000 players in 2007-2008.

At the end of the 2008 season, girls accounted for more than 99 percent of the 360,000 youngsters playing Little League softball but only about 10 percent of the more than 2.2 million youngsters playing Little League baseball. Five professional women's fast-pitch teams exist, but there is no women's NCAA baseball, nor is there professional women's baseball.

In 2004, Pepe was invited to throw out the ceremonial first pitch at the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. On her way to the ceremony she reflected that, "It's really nice to contribute to someone else's life. I'll always get to play every time I see a girl out there."

At the ceremony, Maria met and shook hands with Little League's former executive vice president, Dr. Creighton J. Hale, who led the national organization's dogged effort to exclude girls, and who testified as the lead witness against Pepe in the hearing conducted thirty years earlier by the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights. Dr. Hale demonstrated just how much Maria Pepe had influenced gender equity in America. "I just want you to know," he confided, "that my granddaughter plays."

The Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), the preeminent all-sports television network, ranks Maria Pepe's legal victory as number five on its list of the top ten all-time "greatest U.S. women's sports moments."

The four ranking ahead of Maria in ESPN's top ten are:

- #1: Title IX's enactment itself 1972,
- #2: Tennis great Billie Jean King's victory over former Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs in the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes,"
- #3: The U.S. Women's soccer team's 1999 World Cup title, and
- #4: African-American runner Wilma Rudolph's three-gold-medal performance in the 1960 Olympics in the early years of the Civil Rights Movement.

Caps off to Maria Pepe.

Sources:

<http://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1505&context=facpubs>

[http://www.aarp.org/personal-growth/life-stories/info-06-](http://www.aarp.org/personal-growth/life-stories/info-06-2009/the_woman_who_changed_the_face_of_little_league_baseball.html)

[2009/the\\_woman\\_who\\_changed\\_the\\_face\\_of\\_little\\_league\\_baseball.html](http://www.aarp.org/personal-growth/life-stories/info-06-2009/the_woman_who_changed_the_face_of_little_league_baseball.html)

Watch video: <http://www.makers.com/maria-pepe>