

Two Strikes She's Out: She was just 17. One afternoon in June, 1931 she signed a contract as organized baseball's first female pitcher, a lefty no less. One afternoon, about a week later, she struck out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, within days her contract was voided.

As a really little girl, Jackie Mitchell (1914-1987) learned girls weren't supposed to like or play sports. But Jackie liked baseball, liked to play it, and played it a lot with her dad. Her dad told her she could be good at anything, provided she worked at it. He let her throw a ball, swing a bat, run the bases, but it was her neighbor in Memphis, who taught her to pitch. He taught her a unique breaking pitch she called a "drop ball," the pitch she specifically worked at developing. She learned from the best.

Her neighbor just happened to be Charles Vance, better known as Dazzy Vance the dominant National League pitcher of the 1920s. His blazing fastball won 187 games for the Brooklyn Dodgers over 11 seasons. He was named MVP in 1924, pitched a no-hitter in 1925, led the league in wins twice, three times in ERAs, and is the only pitcher to top the National League in strikeouts seven consecutive seasons. Of course, he is in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Jackie became a multi-sport athlete and joined a baseball school in Chattanooga where her sinking curveball brought attention to her and to girls' baseball. The school was affiliated with the city's Class AA minor-league team the Lookouts.

Lookouts' president, Joe Engel, was a showman and promoter, a man of many stunts. He booked the Yankees for two exhibition games against the Lookouts in 1931 on their return trip north from spring training. A week before their arrival, he announced the signing of Mitchell to one of the first professional baseball contracts given to a woman.

All-women teams had competed against each other as early as the 1860s, but the women often were exploited by the male team owners offering spectators more of a girlie novelty show, rather than a women's sport event. Thus, while Jackie Mitchell wasn't the first woman to play organized baseball, her pitching performance became legendary.

A 17-year-old girl facing the mighty Yankees generated considerable media coverage, most of it condescending (sexist). It garnered revenue and a crowd of 4,000. The starting Lookouts pitcher gave up hits to the first two batters. The manager pulled him and put Mitchell on the mound knowing the next two batters in the lineup would be Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. Seemingly Mitchell knew this as well.

Mitchell threw her trademark sinker (the drop). Ruth let it pass for a ball, swung at Mitchell's second pitch and missed the ball by a foot. After he missed her next pitch, he asked the umpire to inspect the ball. With the count 1-2, Ruth watched as Mitchell's pitch caught the outside corner for a called strike three. Flinging down his bat in disgust, he retreated to the dugout. Next up was Gehrig, who swung at and missed three straight pitches from Mitchell who walked the next batter, and was pulled from the game. The Yankees went on to win, 14-4.

The New York Times' sports page headline the next day read: "Girl Pitcher Fans Ruth and Gehrig." The cover story included a photograph of Mitchell in uniform and a quote from Ruth saying women "will never make good" in baseball because "they are too delicate. It would kill them to play ball every day." But, an editorial exclaimed: "The prospect grows gloomier for misogynists." A few days later, baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis voided Mitchell's contract, reportedly on the grounds that baseball was too strenuous for women.

With no opportunity to play on white/male professional baseball teams, Mitchell and other women athletes played on barnstorming teams, including the Negro League squads. But after almost a decade of futile attempts to play serious professional baseball, exacerbated by the demeaning publicity exploits she was expected to do, and did, in 1937 Jackie Mitchell retired from baseball at age 23 and took an office job in her father's optical business in Tennessee.

After 1943, women could play in the newly formed All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (featured in the movie *A League of Their Own*). Jackie chose not to re-enter the game. In 1952, Eleanor Engle joined the minor league Harrisburg Senators but never took the field. The president of the minor leagues stated that no contract with a woman would be approved because it was "not in the best interest of baseball that such travesties be tolerated." That same year, Major League Baseball "formally" banned the signing of women to contracts.

It took a lawsuit in the 1970s, to win little girls entry into (boys) Little League. Women gained a token of acceptance in men's college ball in the 1980s, and in the 1990s, Ila Borders joined the St. Paul Saints of the independent Northern League. And that "formal" 1952 ban of signing women, it stood for 40 years, until repealed when the Chicago White Sox drafted Carey Schueler (daughter of former Chicago White Sox General Manager Ron Schueler 1991-2000) in the 43rd round of the draft for the 1993 season.

No female player has yet reached the major leagues or come close to matching Jackie Mitchell's feat of striking out two of the game's greatest hitters. Because of gender, one of the early, exceptionally talented pitchers in professional baseball world history, was never given the chance to compete, to show what she could do against the world's best.

Jackie Mitchell died in 1987 at age 73. She never got a third pitch to strike out or to strike it big because after her dexterous two strikeouts she was out.



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