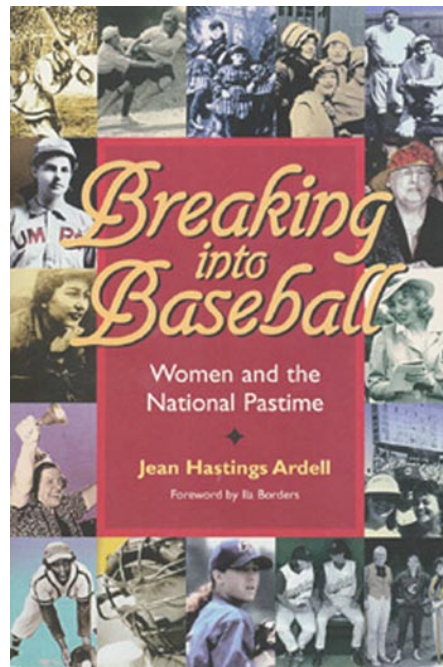


Jean Hastings Ardell

From Newark Eagles co-owner Effa Manley and Brooklyn Dodgers super-fan Hilda Chester to minor league umpire Pam Postema and minor league pitcher Ila Borders, women have carved out a small but not insignificant niche within professional baseball. In her new book “Breaking Into Baseball: Women and the National Pastime” (Southern Illinois University Press), Southern California-based journalist Jean Hastings Ardell explores the many roles women have had in baseball, including as journalists, front-office executives, and fans.



Ardell herself has worn several baseball caps. She grew up as a New York Yankees supporter — breaking the heart of her father, who worshipped the New York Giants. She has written about the sport for such publications as *The Sporting News*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Elysian Fields Quarterly*, and *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture*. And, she is married to Dan Ardell, a former University of Southern California first baseman who enjoyed a cup of coffee with the California Angels.

“Breaking Into Baseball” joins other works in the growing field of women-in-baseball books, including Barbara Gregorich’s “Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball;” Gai Ingham Berlage’s “Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History;” and “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend: Women Writers on Baseball” (edited by Elinor Nauen). Ardell, who also contributed a piece

for Nauen's book, spoke to SportsLetter by telephone from her home.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Did you play baseball growing up?

Jean Ardell: The only baseball I played was pickup baseball at the 78th Street Park in Jackson Heights in New York City — and that was totally unsupervised. I never played organized baseball as a child because Little League didn't permit girls to play until 1974, so I was ahead of my time. My great lament is that I didn't know that Bernice Gera, the umpire, lived in Jackson Heights. We never met although the bus I rode to school probably went right by her house.

SL: What position did you play?

JA: Second base. I believed that I would take Billy Martin's place at second base for the Yankees. My father never said, 'You're crazy, girls don't play baseball.'

SL: Was that a good thing that your father never discouraged you about that?

JA: Yes and no. I think it was good that he didn't discourage me. However, there's a reality check. If I had shown some talent, it would have been a good and kind thing to work with me and explain the real world, that if I was going to do this what I would face. I know Ila Borders quite well — she's gone farther than any woman ever did as a ballplayer. That's what her dad did with her — he always gave her the reality check.

SL: You write that your father was a huge baseball fan: how did his love of baseball influence you?

JA: He was a New York Giants fan, and just to annoy him I had to choose another team. I knew I could never pull off the Dodgers — he would never go to Brooklyn — so I rooted for the Yankees. During the 1950s, they were hot and could do no wrong. My father used to lecture me about the

true meaning of being a fan, and not being a fair-weather fan. I parted company with the Yankees not because they started to lose, but because I moved to the other coast. They were so far away, so I've been with the Angels since the 1970s.

I learned about heartbreak through the Angels. As I sit here I have the two tickets that I bought for the World Series in 1986 [when the Angels were one out away from advancing to the Series before losing to the Boston Red Sox]. We were there the night before disaster struck, and as soon as they went back to Boston I knew they were in trouble. I never turned the tickets in.

SL: How would you describe your experience as a sportswriter?

JA: I was never a sportswriter. After realizing that I wasn't going to take Billy Martin's place at second base, I began to show some talent in writing in high school. One day, I came down and said to my father: "I've decided what I want to do. I want to be a sportswriter like Red Smith at the Herald Tribune." My father, who was a mild-mannered man from the mid-West, put down his glass of milk and said: 'No woman in this house is going into the locker-room.'

I was floored, and I didn't fight him on it. I studied journalism in college, then went on and did other stuff before eventually returning to write about baseball in the 1990s. I maybe could have been one of the early female sportswriters if I had fought for it.

SL: How difficult has it been for women to make it in the press box?

JA: Again, there's still the issue of the clubhouse. It's gotten a whole lot better, but every once in a while you get some really bad behavior by players — and that's not going to change.

SL: Why did you decide to write this book?

JA: I wasn't planning on doing a book. I was a free-lancer and loved the assignments I was getting. In February of 1992, I was sitting around thinking, "Gee, I think I'll do something about women in baseball." I

thought I'd have to write fiction. I thought it would be a short book — a year of research and a year of writing, and I'd be done. It didn't work out that way. The 1990s wound up to be a very exciting decade for women in baseball. Ila Borders got a college scholarship, the Silver Bullets were playing, and *A League of Their Own* was a top-grossing film that sparked a lot of interest in women's baseball. So, I was lucky the book took a long time to develop because I think it's a richer book.

After I was working on it for a while and had an agent, baseball went on strike. So, we decided to hold off until a better time. When I got back into it, I was really taken with the subject. My book is not just a history of women that have been involved in baseball. It is a way of looking at how American women have fared over the last 150 years in our country - the barriers that were put up and what they did about that - through the prism of the game. Baseball has been used for so many other social causes; it's also a great way to understand about women.

SL: How would you describe the relationship between women and baseball?

JA: It's close. Women adore the game. That being said, there are still barriers there, and baseball has to know that. It's changing, but it's changing slowly. I really struggled with the tone of the book. I didn't want it to be a diatribe about all the bad things that have happened to the women who tried to play or tried to get involved. I wanted it to be more of a celebration of how they fought through that even though it wasn't pretty sometimes.

SL: You cover every angle of women in baseball, including owners, players and umpires: what surprised you most in your research?

JA: When I started out, I thought I wouldn't have much of a story to tell. That's why I thought I would have to write fiction. I had always seen myself as part of a small minority in my feelings for the game. What amazed me was how many women felt the same way. There's a huge number of them out there, and they didn't have a book to point to. I wanted to get on record what women had done in baseball, and I wanted to tell a narrative story more than just a history.

SL: The All-American Girls Baseball League and, more recently, the Silver Bullets, were short-lived efforts to jump start women's professional ball. Do you feel they got a fair shake? Why hasn't the concept of women playing baseball caught on?

JA: The All-American Girls League was an anomaly in our history. It happened during wartime, when many of the Major League ballplayers were overseas. The women were only invited to play because so many male players were gone. We're not in that boat today.

I think the Silver Bullets were a mistake. I don't think it makes any sense for women's teams to take on men's teams. There are people who will argue that women are just beginning to find their true strength, that they've been culturally trained to not be strong. Even so, if you stack up the world's women against the world's men, the men are going to be bigger and stronger overall.

No question, there are women out there that could physically compete against men. But if they're that strong and that talented, they're not going to play baseball. There's no glory in it, there's no money in it. Where are they going to go?

SL: Perhaps the most famous female player in recent years was Ila Borders. Do you feel she had a legitimate chance to succeed?

JA: First, it took a Mike Veeck to sign her. Your orthodox, traditional baseball man is not going to sign a woman. There's this thing about the way things are done in baseball — it's written in capital letters — and signing a woman is not one of them. So you need to find somebody who's an unorthodox figure. And, as the money gets bigger, it becomes harder and harder to find someone like that.

Getting back to Ila, I saw what she went through. I visited her when she was playing for the Duluth Dukes. I wound up driving her to Wisconsin when she was let go, and we talked a lot. She had her chance. It's hard to say if she was given a legitimate shot at making it because she was so emotionally beaten down by the barriers that were there. A lot of it was from other women — the players' wives and girl friends were always

suspicious of her. It was a groupie thing — any woman that's around their player is going to be suspect. Also, when she was younger, the mothers of her opponents hated the idea of her striking out their sons. You know, they talk a lot about Little League fathers. Well, Little League mothers are just as bad.

A lot of the ballplayers — and especially those on her team — saw that she understood the game like few people do, and they respected her for that. She also knew how to keep her mouth shut about the stuff that went on off the field, and so they respected that.

SL: What is she's doing now?

JA: She's keeping a very low profile. She's been hired as a fire-fighter in Southern California. She's in her rookie year, and she's going through a lot of the same stuff that you do when you're a rookie in baseball.

SL: Do you think women will play in the Majors anytime soon?

JA: No, I don't. I think the odds are stacked against them. I think the women that are that talented go toward sports that are more hospitable to women, where they can get a college scholarship and get into the Olympics.

SL: Like softball?

JA: Most little girls are going to take the easier path, and I don't fault them for that. A talented girl who plays softball will get heavily recruited by colleges and, if she's lucky, get a full scholarship. The women that I've talked to that have played both sports say that they're not the same. Usually, you have an affinity for one or the other. Ila Borders turned to baseball in part because she caught a dream — she said, 'I want to do this.' But also, she didn't like throwing underhand. She grew up watching her dad play baseball, and it didn't seem natural to throw underhand.

SL: Many observers seem to feel that, if a woman does make it to the Majors, it will be as an umpire. Do you agree?

JA: I think they have a better chance of getting there as umpires than they do as ballplayers. The sad thing is, there are women out there who share Ila's dream. I would like to see them have a chance to go as far as their talent will take them. Really, the last barriers that organized baseball has are toward women and gay men. And I think that's wrong.

SL: You write about Bernice Gera and Pam Postema, two women who umped professionally in the Minor Leagues. Why didn't either make it to the Majors?

JA: They both encountered tremendous sexism. If you read Postema's book, it's on every page. It was just ridiculous the stuff that went on. At one point, someone said, 'How can we have a woman umpire with all the bad language?' That's so ridiculous. I mean, if you know Pam Postema, you know she gives as good as she got. I talked with her at length on the phone. What shocked me was how agreeable and amiable she was. She has a great sense of humor, and I didn't see that in any of the articles I read about her. If [baseball commissioner] Bart Giammati had lived, I think we would have seen Postema in the Major Leagues. He saw the bigger picture.

Gera fought the court case that made the difference, but she really only called one game. It was unfortunate — really regrettable — that she walked off the way she did. Gera was only something like 5-foot-3; she did not have the physical presence that an umpire requires.

SL: There is one active female official in the NBA; what is the situation today with female umpires?

JA: Last season there were two women in the minor league system: Shanna Kook, who came out of the Toronto pipeline, and Ria Cortesio. Cortesio is further along - she's made it to the Southern League in Double AA. She's had some very good mentoring and coaching along the way. The fans are not the problem. I think most young boys and young men are growing up or have grown up sharing the field of competition with women, whether in sports or in school. So, we'll see if that translates into real change.

SL: Women have been owners and executives, but none has run an organization. Do you think that will change?

JA: I do. For one thing, if the stats-oriented way of building a team prevails or at least finds a place in organized baseball - as it was depicted in the book "Moneyball" - then you can't argue that because a woman didn't play competitive baseball all the way through the big leagues she doesn't know anything about the game. Anybody can run the stats through the computer. The other argument is that, because women have played competitive sports in increasing numbers over the last 35 years, they do have an understanding of what it takes to make it. Beyond that, if you accept that women are relationally-oriented more so than men, a female G.M. may have some insight into a player's makeup that might escape a guy that's just looking at him as a ballplayer.

SL: Kim Ng, the Dodgers assistant G.M., was recently profiled in Los Angeles Magazine: do you think she will become baseball's first general manager?

JA: She very well could be because she has the skills. There's a lot of people that would bet on her because she's willing to put in the hours that she's got to do to make it work. And, she thinks outside the box. Dan Evans hired her as an intern while she was still in college in Chicago, and he was blown away by her. He said she didn't just ask 'the why,' she asked about the why behind the why. That shows a good mind.

I didn't speak to Kim Ng for the book. She was not available to me, and I think I understand why. If you're trying to be the first woman ever at something, the last thing you want to do is to be singled out and quoted in a book.

SL: In the book, you write about Dorothy Seymour and her uncredited efforts in researching and writing material for her husband Harold Seymour's award-winning baseball books. How did that happen?

JA: What Harold Seymour did was outrageous and flat-out wrong morally. It was so bad what he did, and what was so ironic is that he had real issues with anybody that didn't attribute his work properly in their writing.

Dorothy Seymour was very much a woman of her times. She was married when she was very young, and her husband was very autocratic. That was pretty common in those days, and that's what women coped with. What's remarkable is that, even today, she is very forgiving of him. She didn't hold a grudge about it. She did write her book, but she wrote it with such grace.