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BASEBALL

The New York Times

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Betsy Jochum, 104, Dies; Last Original Member of Women's Baseball League

Playing in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, which inspired the film “A League of Their Own,” she won a batting title and stole 127 bases in 1944.

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Betsy Jochum was the last surviving player from the inaugural 1943 season of what became the All-American Girls Baseball League. [Baseball Hall of Fame](#)

By [Richard Sandomir](#)

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Betsy Jochum, the last of the 60 players from the inaugural season of what became known as the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League — which decades later inspired Penny Marshall's 1992 film, "A League of Their Own" — died on May 31 at her home in South Bend, Ind. She was 104.

Her death was announced by Carol Sheldon, vice president of the league's players association.

"When I got picked to play in the league, it was amazing," Jochum (pronounced JOCK-em) told The South Bend Tribune in 2012. "I was actually going to get paid for playing a game. Girls didn't do that back then." At \$50 a week, she was earning more than her father, a carpenter.

In 1943 she joined the South Bend Blue Sox, one of four teams in what was initially called the All-American Girls Softball League.

Philip K. Wrigley, the chewing-gum mogul and owner of the Chicago Cubs, started the league to maintain fan interest in baseball during World War II, when many major leaguers were serving in the military. The other teams that first season were the Kenosha Comets and the Racine Belles, in Wisconsin, and the Rockford Peaches, in Illinois.

In her rookie season, the 5-foot-7 Jochum played in the outfield, batted .273, led the league in hits, stole 66 bases and was chosen for the All-Star Game at Wrigley Field in Chicago, the home of the Cubs. Players from South Bend and Rockford beat rivals from Kenosha and Racine, 16-0. The game, which drew 7,000 fans, raised money for the Red Cross and other wartime causes.

Jochum fared even better in 1944. Her .296 batting average led the league, and she stole a remarkable 127 bases, including seven in one game. She earned the nicknames Sockum Jochum and Sultana of Swat.



Jochum in an undated photo. She joined the South Bend Blue Sox, one of four teams in what was initially called the All-American Girls Softball League, in 1943. She retired after the 1948 season. via Carol Sheldon

The league evolved over its 11-year run. At first it used a softball, which was thrown underhand from a pitcher's mound 40 feet from home plate. In 1948, when the league fielded 10 teams, it switched to a baseball, thrown overhand, and moved the mound to about 60 feet from home plate. The league disbanded in 1954.

"We were lucky, the ones that started out," [Jochum said in an oral history interview](#) in 2010 with Grand Valley State University, in Michigan. "We started out with a softball, and as we kept playing, the balls got small and the bases got longer and the pitchers moved back, underhand, sidearm to overhand, so we were kind of eased into it, the older players." She preferred, she said, to hit against fast pitching from the shorter distance.

After she led the league in hitting in 1944, her batting average faltered, bottoming out at .211 in 1947. She turned to pitching early in the 1948 season.

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"They needed overhand pitchers," Jim Sargent, who wrote "The South Bend Blue Sox" (2012, with Robert M. Gorman), said in an interview. "And she was an outfielder with a rifle arm."

She proved to be very good. Following a 13-6 start, she finished with a 14-13 record, a 1.51 earned run average and 103 strikeouts in 215 innings. She also continued to play the outfield, but her batting average dropped to .195.

She retired after the season rather than accept a trade to the Peoria Redwings, which would have meant moving from South Bend.

"I didn't want to go," she said in the oral history, "and they said my choice was to either go or quit, so I quit."

She later studied health and physical education at Illinois State University and graduated in 1957 with a bachelor's degree. Four years after that, having begun a new career as a physical education teacher in South Bend, she earned a master's degree in physical education at Indiana University.

She is survived by a sister, Frances Jochum.



Jochum in 2011. "When I got picked to play in the league, it was amazing," she said. "I was actually going to get paid for playing a game. Girls didn't do that back then." via Carol Sheldon

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Anna Katherine Jochum was born on Feb. 8, 1921, in Cincinnati to Frank and Katherine (Augustin) Jochum.

She started playing fast-pitch softball when she was about 12, in leagues in Cincinnati and Covington, Ky. She also participated in women's baseball-throwing events at track and field meets; she won the 1938 Amateur Athletic Union championship with a throw of 261 feet 7 inches.

She played for a softball team sponsored by a meat packing company, which also employed her in its office, where she operated a comptometer, an early calculating machine.

When it came time for the All-American league to fill its rosters in 1943, Mr. Sargent said, it looked for experienced fast-pitch players like Jochum. She tried out for a league scout in Cincinnati, then advanced to an audition at Wrigley Field.

In the oral history, she recalled that "they ran us all over the outfield, batting practice and all that, but the big thing was, we tried out at Wrigley Field and women were never on that field."

The players were required to go to charm school and were told they could not smoke or drink. During the season they were overseen by a chaperone.

Asked in the oral history why fans wanted to watch the women play, Jochum's answer was simple: "Women in skirts playing ball."

In 1983 she donated her uniform — which had been in her basement, dirty and rumpled — to the Smithsonian Institution. It was later part of a Smithsonian touring exhibition.

"With a short, flared, kicky hem disguising the athletic undershorts that were the real reason for the gig," the sportswriter Sally Jenkins wrote in [Smithsonian magazine in 2018](#), "it was designed for a ballplayer who had to look like a girl but throw like a guy."

In 1988, Jochum and other players attended the opening of an exhibition dedicated to the league at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. That scene was recreated, with significant emotion, four years later in "A League of Their Own," which starred Geena Davis, Lori Petty and Madonna as players; Tom Hanks as the manager of the Rockford team; Jon Lovitz as an eccentric scout; and Garry Marshall as a character based on Wrigley.

"A League of Their Own" revived interest in a trailblazing league that had been largely forgotten.

"Without the movie, nobody would have ever heard about us," Jochum told Smithsonian. "Nobody would've ever known."

Richard Sandomir, an obituaries reporter, has been writing for The Times for more than three decades.

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