

“Make a Home Run for Suffrage”: Promoting Women’s Emancipation Through Baseball

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At specific moments in history, women publicly entered the masculine realm of baseball to advance female suffrage in the United States. Girls and women took to the field in the nineteenth century, enjoying newfound bodily freedoms and disrupting Victorian constraints. While their performances may not have always translated into explicit suffrage activism, their athleticism demonstrated strength at a time when many people used women’s supposed weakness as an argument against their political enfranchisement. However, as the popularity of baseball increased at the turn of the century, the number of female ballplayers decreased. Activism in the sport therefore changed. In the mid-1910s, suffragists advertised at men’s baseball games. The women recognized the value of promoting suffrage through sport; yet, they also acknowledged that by entering ballparks, they entered a male space. Suffragists therefore exhibited conventional White gender norms to avoid aggrrieving male voters. Women’s different engagements with baseball, as either players or spectators, had varying consequences for women’s political and sporting emancipation. Women’s physical activism in baseball demonstrated female prowess and strength in sport, but only abstractly advanced women’s political rights; suffragists’ promotional efforts through men’s baseball more directly influenced the eventual passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, but their actions supported women’s position on the sidelines.

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On July 7, 1915, thousands of women “invaded” National League Park. The women pulled up to the Philadelphia ballpark in “yellow-decked cars and in jitneys,” armed with pamphlets, posters, and reading materials. They waved yellow pennants and wore “Votes for Women” buttons as they cheered for the Philadelphia Phillies against the New York Giants. During the seventh inning stretch, members of the Woman Suffrage Party of Philadelphia fielded questions and distributed literature about women’s enfranchisement. The women also “got in some neat proselytizing” about the cause and shared “telling cuts” against the “antis,” those opposed to women’s suffrage (“Suffragists Carry Ballot,” 1915).

After the game, Boston suffragist Margaret Foley jumped on the dugout and addressed the crowd. She implored the male fans to extend enfranchisement to women, countering prevailing ideas about women’s supposed deficiencies (“Suffragists Carry Ballot,” 1915). Like other suffrage speakers, she used prevailing beliefs about White, middle-class women’s innate morality to argue that, if given the chance, they would counteract corruption (Enstam, 2002, p. 820). The baseball fans responded positively, giving Foley a “hearty shout of understanding.” According to a recap in the suffragist publication the *Woman’s Journal*, Foley “was assured . . . that every man present intended to vote for the suffrage amendment” (“Pennsylvania,” 1915, p. 228).

Although the Phillies split with the Giants, the suffragists considered Suffrage Day a “decided success.” To the members of the Woman Suffrage Party of Philadelphia, the final score was less important than the captive male audience they had reached. Women attended games before and after this suffrage “invasion”; however, the suffragists focused their attention on the men in the crowd. The male fans could vote for women’s suffrage, the female

fans could not. The men therefore “had the kingly prerogative of ruling over the destinies of the envious women” who demanded the right to vote (“Suffragists Carry Ballot,” 1915). By promoting suffrage through sport, the organization leveraged the popularity of baseball to garner support for women’s enfranchisement.

As demonstrated by the 1915 Suffrage Day at Philadelphia’s National League Park, White women publicly entered the masculine realm of baseball to advance female suffrage in the United States (US). US gender norms in the Victorian era positioned White, middle-class men as overseers of the public realm and White, middle-class women as responsible for domestic affairs. Social expectations also rendered US sport a male domain. The “separate spheres” ideology thereby limited women’s involvement in political matters and physical activities alike. When women fought for suffrage and pursued sporting opportunities, they challenged prevailing gender beliefs.

Yet many scholarly analyses tend to overlook the relationship between sport and suffrage. As historian Joyce Kay (2008) notes, “the women’s suffrage movement and women’s sport seldom inhabit the same academic territory” (p. 1338). Although it is true that some suffragists viewed recreation as trivial and many female physical educators appeared “indifferent to whether they could vote or not” (McCrone, 2014, p. 278), other women purposefully engaged physical activities as a way to support their right to vote. Perhaps as one of the most notable examples in the US, women organized suffrage hikes in the mid-1910s to draw attention to women’s enfranchisement. According to sport scholar Jaime Schultz (2010), by traversing hundreds of miles, the women participated in what she calls “physical activism,” the combination of physical activity and political activism. Following Schultz’s definition, examples of women’s physical activism can be seen in a variety of activities, including in bicycling, mountain climbing, and swimming (Bier, 2011; Borish, 2004; Kimberley, 2017; Strange

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and Brown, 2002). What remains unexplored, though, is women's engagement with professional men's sports to promote their right to vote.

An assessment of suffrage publications, suffragists' papers, and local newspapers shows that women used baseball as a tool to advance female enfranchisement, as both players and spectators.¹ During the nineteenth century, girls and women played baseball, enjoying newfound bodily freedoms, disrupting Victorian constraints, and displaying physical activism. While participation in baseball may not have always directly translated into explicit suffrage activism, their performances demonstrated strength at a time when many people used women's supposed weakness as an argument against their political enfranchisement.

However, as the popularity of baseball increased at the turn of the century, the number of female ballplayers decreased. The more status men gave the sport, the less they welcomed women on the diamond (Ring, 2009; Shattuck, 2017). Activism in the sport therefore changed as women moved from the playing field to the bleachers. Following the directive from the national suffrage organization that sought to increase media attention, suffragists advertised at baseball games. The women recognized the value of promoting suffrage through sport, but also acknowledged that by entering ballparks, they entered a male space. Suffragists therefore displayed conventional White femininity through their actions and advertisements to avoid aggrrieving male voters. They took great pains to assure male fans that they would not abandon their domestic responsibilities if afforded the right to vote.

Women's different engagements with baseball, as either players or spectators, had varying consequences for women's political and sporting emancipation. Women's physical activism in baseball demonstrated female prowess and strength in sport, but only abstractly advanced women's political rights. Suffragists' promotional efforts through men's baseball more directly influenced the eventual passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, but their advertisements supported women's position on the sidelines. The suffrage spectacles reaffirmed the belief that sport, and particularly the national pastime, rightfully belonged to men.

Suffrage and Sport in the Victorian Era

Victorian-era gender norms supported separate spheres. This ideology suggested White, middle-class men oversaw public issues, while White, middle-class women assumed responsibility of the home (Blumin, 1989; Kerber, 1988; Norton, 1996; Welter, 1996). Sport therefore also developed in the US as a male activity. Physical pursuits occurred in public spaces and embodied aggression, competitiveness, and manliness. White, middle-class notions of femininity viewed women as weak, passive, and subservient, thereby discouraging their participation in athletic endeavors (Cahn, 2015; Gorn, 2010; Messner, 1998; Putney, 2001). However, the demands of female activists and emergence of the athletic new woman helped dismantle the influence of separate spheres and the perception of sport as reserved solely for men. As some women engaged in social reform movements, others participated in new recreational opportunities. These undertakings not only challenged gender restrictions, but also demonstrated female political and athletic ability, providing tacit support for women's political enfranchisement.

The first forms of female activism focused on women's unique roles as caregivers, culminating in demands for social reform. Depictions of women as the natural protectors of the private sphere allowed them to gain clout in abolition, anti-prostitution, and

temperance movements (Baker, 1984; Blocker, 1985; Fletcher, 2007). Buoyed by this background in social reform, activists started to demand political enfranchisement for women, including at the 1848 Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York (Baker, 1984; Keyssar, 2009; Tetrault, 2017). Many women argued that granting female enfranchisement could help cure social problems, a rationalization tailored to prevailing gender ideology. "Suffrage emerged in the 1860s as both a powerful symbol of equality with men as well as an instrument of reform," notes historian Jean H. Baker (2002, p. 3). In other words, if women could vote, they could reform society at a political and legislative level.

This strategy allowed female activists a step into the political realm; however, it also prioritized White women's experiences and embodied a gendered form of activism. The US suffrage movement at this time was largely comprised of White, middle-class women. White female responses to racial injustices ranged from purposeful ignorance to employing stereotypes for personal gain. For example, White suffragists excluded Black women from leadership positions, organized segregated events, rejected Black women's suggestions, and ignored their concerns. Some suffrage leaders also explicitly embraced racist tactics—such as barring Black women from attending national meetings—to gain White, Southern male support (Freedman, 2003; Terborg-Penn, 1998). Indeed, the disagreement over the Fifteenth Amendment, which provided Black men the right to vote, caused a schism in the women's movement for two decades that persisted until the factions merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890 (Keyssar, 2009).

As suffrage leaders navigated gender and racial dynamics, women gained access to new physical pursuits, which helped dismantle Victorian-era norms. Participating in recreational activities offered White, middle-class women social and physical mobility. For example, the bicycle surge of the 1880s and 1890s saw White women take to the wheel in unprecedented numbers. The bicycle served as an athletic outlet and allowed women self-directed transportation, weakening the bounds of domesticity. "If for no other reason, the bicycle posed a challenge to the doctrine of separate spheres, by offering women a way to escape the physical confines of the home" argues scholars Lisa S. Strange and Robert S. Brown (2002, p. 616). Along with providing White women a reprieve from domesticity, participation in physical endeavors also helped alter restrictive clothing norms. Victorian-era fashion celebrated tight corsets and heavy skirts, which hindered women's movement. Unable to jump, ride, or run in such encumbering clothing, women adopted more functional options, such as divided skirts and "bloomers," trousers that gathered at the ankle (Christie-Robin, Orzada, & López-Gydosh, 2012; Warner, 2006). Female swimmers in the early 1900s similarly exchanged full-coverage, wool bathing suits for functional swimwear to enhance mobility (Bier, 2002; Borish, 2004). "Women's natural development is seriously restricted and impaired by social costumes," wrote Australian film star and long-distance swimmer Annette Kellermann, who famously protested US modesty laws by wearing a one-piece swimsuit (Kellermann, 1918, p. 45). The image of women in less restrictive options served as a powerful visual of an improved social position.

Engaging in arduous recreation also challenged commonly held ideas about White women's physical incompetence. Medical doctors cautioned that jumping, riding, running, and swimming caused physiological problems, including uterine displacement, spinal shock, and pelvic damage (Cahn, 2015; Vertinsky, 1994).

Women nevertheless took up several different physical activities at the end of the nineteenth century, countering notions of female frailty. As temperance leader Frances E. Willard (1895) argued about riding a bicycle, female cyclists dismantled “the old fables, myths, and follies associated with the idea of woman’s incompetence.” The athleticism and skill required of many sporting endeavors helped disrupt the stereotype of White, middle-class women as physically incapable of handling the strain of public affairs, including voting.

Yet, similar to the racial breakdown of the larger women’s suffrage movement, racialized tensions existed in physical activities. White, middle-class women limited their participation to endeavors that demanded less bodily contact and required financial wealth to participate, such as bicycling, golf, swimming, and tennis. Black women and White, working-class women competed in more financially accessible and physically grueling contests, such as athletics and basketball (Cahn, 2015; Lansbury, 2014). In addition, Black physical education leaders more openly encouraged Black women to engage in arduous activities. As historian Amira Rose Davis (2016) explains, “the lack of widespread animosity toward girls in sports allowed sports to blossom within black institutions” (Davis, 2016, p. 77). Black women thereby excelled in athletics and basketball, which allowed for new opportunities, but also reinforced assumptions of Black women as less feminine than White women (Cahn, 2015).

Thus, in many ways, participation in physical activities embodied the spirit of the women’s suffrage movement, as well as its racialized dynamics. Leading suffragists notably welcomed the bicycle’s ability to foster women’s emancipation. Susan B. Anthony told reporter Nellie Bly (1896) that the bicycle had “done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world” (p. 9–10). Like others, she interpreted the bicycle as a significant tool to help dismantle debilitating gender norms, which in turn bolstered women’s claims for enfranchisement. Women’s participation in baseball similarly challenged gender norms and provided them with new, liberating opportunities.

Women at the Old Ball Game

Baseball in the US grew in popularity amongst both men and women during the mid-nineteenth century. According to baseball historian Debra A. Shattuck (2017), “playing bat and ball games was a normative (not aberrant) activity for girls and young women” at this time (p. 24). The sport spread during the Civil War, with male and female ballplayers participating on coed, collegiate, and semi-professional teams (Ring, 2009). In 1866, Vassar College organized the first female baseball team at the collegiate level. Although it folded after one year, other women’s colleges quickly followed suit with Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley organizing their own women’s intramural baseball squads (Ring, 2009, p. 377). Women also played professionally, earning money for their athletic performances. “Bloomer Girl” teams, named for their loose-fitting trousers, barnstormed around the country, competing in cities from Boston to Denver. The Dolly Vardens, a Black women’s professional baseball team, competed in Philadelphia in the mid-nineteenth century. Although little is known about this team, it is evident that enough female interest allowed the Dolly Vardens to divide into two squads, the Chester Dolly Vardens and Philadelphia Dolly Vardens (Davis, 2016, p. 76). Accounts of individual women’s reasons for playing baseball are similarly scant in the historical record; however, the female athletes who competed on the diamond undoubtedly challenged prevailing notions of race and gender.

While women’s motivations remain largely unknown, newspapers interpreted their actions as a form of physical activism. Like female bicyclists and swimmers, women baseball players challenged Victorian expectations. “There is no question,” writes Shattuck (2011), “that their presence on the baseball diamond was often interpreted by contemporaries as a tactic in the battle for women’s rights—a direct assault on the barrier between men and women’s social spheres” (p. 3). Male sportswriters saw women’s baseball as directly linked to women’s suffrage. Game-day descriptions appeared adjacent to information about women’s enfranchisement, connecting the two for readers (Shattuck, 2017). For example, a *Chicago Tribune* article that discussed a women’s game between two churches surmised that “If the women of Oak Park can wield the ballot as effectively as nine of them wielded the bat and baseball last night, a referendum on woman’s suffrage would be carried in the suburb without a dissenting vote (“Women Play,” 1909, p. 1). The sight of women batting, running, and sliding disputed prevailing conventions that depicted women as frail and passive, which was accentuated by the press accounts that explicitly connected women’s ball playing to women’s right to vote.

Yet, as baseball promoters worked to imbue the sport with nationalistic characteristics, they purposefully removed women from the narrative. Former pitcher and sporting goods entrepreneur Albert Spalding famously—and falsely—argued that Abner Doubleday invented baseball in 1839 in an effort to cast the sport as a unique American creation. Regardless of the falsity of this origin story, the myth persisted and baseball gained recognition as the American pastime (Altherr, 2017). “Male baseball boosters proclaimed their sport’s ability to heal social ills, transcend sectional differences, and forge a national identity,” writes Shattuck (2017). In doing so, “they linked this power to masculine ideas” (p. 33). Spalding repeatedly connected the preeminent status of the sport to manliness. In a 1910 *New York Times* interview, for example, he succinctly argued that “Baseball is a man maker” (Marshall, 1910, p. SM13). If participation in baseball fostered manliness, women ballplayers needed to be sidelined. Therefore, in his 1911 book *America’s National Game*, Spalding cautioned that “neither our wives, our sisters, our daughters, nor our sweethearts, may play Base Ball on the field” (p. 10). He ignored decades of women’s participation in the sport to conclude that “Base Ball is too strenuous for womankind” (p. 11). The erasure of women from baseball shifted the perspective of the sport as one appropriate for all to one just for men.

Thus as baseball gained social status, it became increasingly gendered as male and considered inappropriate for women. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported in 1878, “The teaching of centuries have established the fact a woman can’t play base-ball. None but a perverted and bald headed advocate of female suffrage would permit the assumption . . . that a woman could throw a ball underhand or attempt to catch one” (Prejudice, 1878, p. 7). Activism in baseball therefore shifted from athletic participation to the creation of spectacles at men’s baseball games from the bleachers. Somewhat paradoxically, women moved from the playing field to the sidelines to demonstrate the need for women’s emancipation.

Suffrage and Sport in the Progressive Era

During the early twentieth century, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) overhauled its national strategy as sport gained new social meaning. Suffrage leaders unveiled a plan in the mid-1910s that included a revitalized focus on federal legislation, measures to obtain financial stability, and increased

publicity to sway public opinion (Schultz, 2010). At the same time, Progressive Era reformers looked to physical activities as a way to curb the upheavals caused by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. An increase in the number of immigrants entering the US, coupled with a shift from agrarian labor to dangerous factory work in crowded cities, sparked concerns about the vitality and strength of US boys and men. Reformers believed that sport developed character and cultivated masculinity, which increased its significance and popularity (Anderson, 2015; Stacy, 2015). Moreover, baseball emerged as the national pastime during this period. Many people viewed it as the culmination of US values and an exemplar of the American way of life, despite the major leagues' overt exclusion of players of color (Riess, 1999; Seymour & Mills, 1971). Recognizing the newfound importance of sport and following the NAWSA's change in tactics, local suffrage organizations turned to baseball as one way to generate support for women's enfranchisement.

By the turn of the century, the NAWSA had few successes to celebrate, forcing suffrage leaders to reconsider their tactics. The organization was disorganized, unpopular, and financially unstable (Fowler & Jones, 2002; Keyssar, 2009). It also continued to embrace racist methods to curry political favor and ignored the demands of Black suffragists. For example, NAWSA leader Carrie Chapman Catt suggested women's suffrage would enhance, not derail, White supremacy. In 1911, NAWSA President Anna Howard Shaw similarly refused to ask members to denounce White supremacy, fearing such a request would create divisions amongst the White women. Furthermore, the NAWSA focused on state-level initiatives rather than federal action, discreetly lobbying for the vote on a state-by-state basis. By 1896, only four states had granted women enfranchisement: Wyoming (1890), Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), and Idaho (1896); Washington next joined the list in 1910.

Frustrated by the overall lack of progress, a new generation of women helped usher in strategic changes. They mirrored the more active and militant tactics of the British suffragettes. Following the British example of "deeds not words," they created public spectacles to gain support (Dando, 2010; Schultz 2010). As historian Holly J. McCammon (2003) explains, the women took the cause "out of the parlors and into the streets," purposefully entering "the very public sphere in which suffragists demanded a formal political role" (p. 788). The NAWSA thus moved from gradualism to action (Graham, 1996). NAWSA leader Carrie Chapman Catt launched the "Winning Plan" in 1916, which pushed the organization to centralize its efforts, obtain financial stability, assume a more military-like stance, and become an "efficient publicity machine designed to sway public opinion" (Fowler and Jones, 2002, p. 135). The new publicity efforts oftentimes made a spectacle of suffrage. Suffragists marched in suffrage parades, performed in suffrage pageants, participated in pickets, gave street speeches from atop cars and soapboxes, and organized suffrage displays at sporting events. Promoting women's enfranchisement through baseball was therefore just one piece of a larger strategy.

Influenced by the British suffragettes and aligning with the NAWSA's change in publicity strategy, women promoted suffrage through a variety of US sporting activities. Their physical activism supported enfranchisement while simultaneously showcasing female athleticism (Schultz, 2010). For example, in 1911, US mountaineer Annie Smith Peck hiked Peru's Mount Coropuna and planted a "Votes for Women" pennant at the peak (Kimberley, 2017). Suffragists also organized several multi-day pilgrim hikes that saw women traverse hundreds of miles to promote women's

enfranchisement (McCammon, 2003; Schultz, 2010). The National Women's Life-Saving League (NWLSL), an organization led by White women, similarly sponsored different suffrage events to showcase the physical capabilities of women in support of women's enfranchisement ("Suffrage and Swimming," 1913, p. 6). During a 1915 aquatic carnival, NWLSL members wore yellow "Votes for Women" sashes as they raced to save "Aunty Anti-Suffrage," a drowning mannequin weighed down by a water-logged white dress, white silk gloves, white cap, stockings, and a red "Anti-Suffrage" sash ("Women Life Savers," 1915, p. 5). As Schultz (2010) notes, such feats "eschewed both the cultural mores of acceptable feminine behavior and the prevailing cautions against arduous exercise and female over-exertion in . . . endeavours to win the ballot" (p. 1133). Suffragists' appearance in the sporting realm undermined concerns about women's supposed frailty, while simultaneously generating media attention.

Yet entering ballparks as spectators, not participants, offered suffragists a different, more focused type of publicity. Stadiums provided them direct access to male spectators. Baseball at the turn of the century had a large fan base. Major league attendance doubled to 3.6 million attendees between 1901 and 1908, reaching a zenith in 1920. Minor league attendance also increased during the Progressive Era. For example, the Atlanta Cracker's gate receipts rose from 40,000 in 1902 to over 221,000 in 1920 (Riess, 1999, p. 14). In addition to increasing ticket sales, baseball fans increasingly viewed the sport as the embodiment of American values. People believed that participation in baseball assisted in self-improvement, cultivated character, and contributed to public health (Riess, 1999). Constantly bolstering such claims, Spalding surmised (1910) that "Baseball elevates and it fits the American character. . . . I know of no other medium which, as completely as baseball, joins the physical, mental, emotional, and moral sides of man's composite being" (Marshall, 1910, p. SM13). For many White, middle-class men in the Progressive Era, baseball represented the ideal American way of life (Riess, 1999).

However, a discrepancy existed between the image of baseball and the realities of the sport. The exclusion of Black players from organized baseball countered the supposed democratic structure of the sport. After a handful of Black ballplayers competed in the major leagues at the end of the nineteenth century, White organizers drew a color line that remained intact until 1947. For over five decades, White owners maintained Jim Crow segregation and refused to sign Black players. The racially motivated exclusion led Black leaders to create separate leagues in the 1920s, such as the Eastern Colored League and Negro National League. These leagues became spaces for Black athleticism and entertainment staples for the Black community (Heaphy, 2003; Lomax, 2014). The Negro Leagues also offered Black women opportunities to compete professionally—a prospect not permitted for White women until the development of the short-lived All-American Girls Baseball League during World War II—including Pearl Barrett (1917), Isabelle Baxter (1933), Toni Stone (1953), Mamie "Peanut" Johnson (1954), and Connie Morgan (1954) (Davis, 2016).

Several White owners also upheld segregation in the stands. The two St. Louis teams, the Browns and Cardinals, competed in Sportsman's Park, the southernmost stadium in organized White baseball at the time. Sportsman's Park mandated segregated seating until 1942. Other ballparks did not explicitly require racial separation, but more subtly instituted segregation in the stands. For example, in Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., the right-field pavilion was reserved for Black attendees. While White owners did not rigidly enforce segregation, and Black fans occasionally sat in

the left-field bleachers, they rarely allowed Black spectators into the grandstands. As author Brad Snyder (2004) explains “The off-the-books segregation at Griffith Stadium proved that Washington was no different from the rest of the Jim Crow South” (p. 2–3). Northern stadiums may not have been as explicitly segregated as those in the South, but ticket costs and other de facto regulations nonetheless meant that White spectators typically sat in the grandstands and Black fans watched from the bleachers. Despite these obvious contradictions, in the eyes of most White, middle-class fans, baseball celebrated character, teamwork, and meritocracy. White suffragists used these sentiments to help sway public opinion about women’s enfranchisement, mostly through interactions with White fans in the grandstands.

“We’d Like Our Innings”

White suffragists invaded ballparks in the mid-1910s to create spectacles for suffrage. This aligned with the NAWSA’s larger strategy and mirrored the suffrage demonstrations held at county fairs, pickets, and street parades. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1913, the suffragists hoped to add “some of the enthusiasm they [the male fans] show for the national game to the support of the votes-for-women clause” (“Baseball Fans,” 1913, p. III2). The women interacted with White male spectators in the grandstand, advertised to fans, sought celebrity athlete endorsements, and generated funds through ticket sales. Yet, in leveraging the popularity of the men’s game to achieve political ends, the women risked alienating male voters. Suffragists therefore exhibited conventional femininity to assuage their concerns. They suggested women would not upend separate spheres if given the opportunity to vote. The female activists also underscored men’s proper authority in public matters, including sport, adding tacit support to the belief that baseball was a game reserved for men.

Prior to entering ballparks, women first passively publicized suffrage at baseball games. This allowed them to gain the attention of male attendees without entering their male space. For example, in 1912 the Oregon Equal Suffrage Association placed an “immense sign” on the local ballpark fence that read “Votes for Women—Next November.” The association’s president Abigail Scott Duniway projected that one million people would see the sign before the election (“Oregon Slogan,” 1912, p. 139). Oregon’s

male voters approved women’s statewide right to vote that year. As another example, a local New York suffrage organization advertised in several ballparks across the city. “Soon the billboards and the score cards . . . will blazon forth with suffrage arguments,” explained an account in the *Woman’s Journal* (“Suffrage Work,” 1915, p. 99). Local leader Ethel S. Peyser posited that the posters, some of which were fifty-six feet long and nine feet high, would reach hundreds of thousands of voters over the course of the season (“New York,” 1915, p. 108). These strategically placed advertisements promoted female suffrage without women directly interacting with male baseball fans. The suffragists could gain political favor without encroaching into the male realm of sport.

Deeming the signage a success, women next moved directly into the stadiums to foster support. Female leaders attended baseball games to disseminate information and educate fans. Their promotional efforts again aligned with the NAWSA’s plan to increase media coverage through public spectacles. As NAWSA leader Ida Husted Harper recounted in 1922, the organization used several means to draw attention to the cause, including “Votes for Women” kites, a suffrage automobile parade, and the distribution of literature in baseball parks (Harper, 1922, p. 285). In 1913, Californian suffragists encouraged women to attend every home baseball game in suffrage colors. The women aimed to “win from the ‘fans’ some of the enthusiasm they show for the national game to the support of the votes-for-women clause” (“Baseball Fans,” 1913, p. III2). In Boston, “women vote seekers” attended home games in 1915 “to get the army of ‘fans’ to warm up to their cause” (“Home Runs in Boston,” 1915, p. 4). Such positive reception led to more organized demonstrations at baseball games.

Local organizations started to sponsor “Suffrage Days” at ballparks in 1915. These occurred in major- and minor-league stadiums, primarily in larger, East Coast cities. The setup typically involved the local suffrage organization working with club owners to sell tickets and share gate receipts. Presidents and owners agreed mostly due to the financial benefit of the arrangement, not out of a deep connection to the cause. For example, New York Giants Club Owner Harry Hempstead “enthusiastically recommended the venture to Cincinnati Reds President August Hermann as a means of attracting women spectators and making money” (Riess, 1999, p. 36). Chicago White Sox Owner Charles Comiskey similarly offered a local suffrage organization use of his ballpark in 1914, but

Suffrage Days at Baseball Games				
Date	Location	League	Home	Away
May 18, 1915	New York City	National League	New York Giants	Chicago Cubs
June 25, 1915	Newark	Federal League	Newark Peppers	Kansas City Packers
July 7, 1915	Philadelphia	National League	Philadelphia Phillies	New York Giants
July 23, 1915	Nashville	Southern League	Nashville Volunteers	Birmingham Barons
August 10, 1915	Boston	American League	Boston Red Sox	St. Louis Browns
August 18, 1915	Birmingham	Southern League	Birmingham Barons	Chattanooga Lookouts
August 28, 1915	New Orleans	Southern League	New Orleans Pelicans	Atlanta Crackers
September 16, 1915	Pittsburgh	National League	Pittsburgh Pirates	New York Giants
June 3, 1916	New York City	National League	New York Giants	Cincinnati Reds
June 28, 1916	Little Rock	Southern League	Little Rock Travelers	Atlanta Crackers
August 21, 1916	Nashville	Southern League	Nashville Volunteers	New Orleans Pelicans
August 16, 1917	Nashville	Southern League	Nashville Volunteers	New Orleans Pelicans
August 30, 1917	Little Rock	Southern League	Little Rock Travelers	Nashville Volunteers
July 24, 1919	Little Rock	Southern League	Little Rock Travelers	Birmingham Barons

the group declined the invitation (“[Women Decide](#),” 1914, p.3). One exception was Nashville Volunteers President Clyde Shropshire, an attorney and politician who actively supported women’s suffrage. He not only helped set up suffrage days with the Nashville Equal Suffrage League, personally providing additional cash prizes, but also introduced a suffrage bill to the Tennessee State House of Representatives (“[Vos and Barons](#),” 1915, p. A10). After selling tickets, suffragists then decorated the ball parks in yellow and white, and distributed banners, badges, buttons, and flags emblazoned with “Vote Yes” ([Suffrage Leaders](#), 1915, p. 5; [Good Publicity](#), 1915, p. 303).

The 1915 Suffrage Day at the Polo Grounds was one of the most successful affairs. Hosted by the New York State Woman Suffrage Association (NYSWSA), the event “linked up suffrage with the American classic” (“[Annual Report](#),” 1915, p. 59). Suffragist Vira Boardman Whitehouse headed the NYSWSA’s Votes for Women’s Baseball Committee, which peddled thousands of tickets to the game. After splitting the proceeds with the New York Giants, the NYSWSA earned \$6,303, the largest single sum in its fundraising efforts (“[Annual Report](#),” 1915, C3). The mutually beneficial financial arrangement encouraged the NYSWSA and Giants to partner for a second event in 1916. According to the *Woman’s Journal*, the 1916 Suffrage Day at the Polo Grounds “netted about \$4,000 and much enthusiasm for the cause” (“[News from the States](#),” 1916, p. 189). The publicity and funds accrued through New York’s Suffrage Day prompted other local suffrage organizations to partner with baseball clubs, including in Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Nashville.

The spectacle of suffrage days promoted women’s right to vote. As Harper (1922) recounted, suffrage “stunts,” including hosting baseball games, “receive[ed] a large amount of newspaper publicity” (p. 473). NYSWSA leaders specifically mentioned the success of the Suffrage Day at the Polo Grounds in generating media coverage. According to Press Director of the Empire State Campaign Committee Rose Young, the event “introduced the cause into the sports columns of the newspapers and put it under the eyes and noses of men who would never have paid any attention to it in any other columns.” Moreover, she explained, the game “was one of the suffrage stunts that took care of its own publicity.” The NYSWSA press department released only four stories about Suffrage Day; in response, journalists wrote 95 articles about the event (“[Annual Report](#),” 1915, p. 59–60). The novelty of women using baseball games as a publicity platform encouraged newspaper coverage of their cause.

To help convince fans to support women’s enfranchisement, suffragists used baseball slogans to justify women’s right to vote. Recognizing their encroachment into male political and sporting spaces, they couched their demands in common images and sayings. According to historian Elizabeth York Enstam (2002), this was a common tactic deployed by suffragists. “To counter such basic fears about woman suffrage’s effect on social order and personal identity,” she argues, “the suffragists needed familiar symbolism, non-threatening rhetoric, and arguments more subtle than rational debate.” (p. 833). Baseball clichés provided all three. Suffragists reworked common baseball sayings to articulate subtle arguments in a non-threatening fashion. For example, in 1915, New York suffragists erected posters in stadiums that read “Women hate coaching from the sidelines” and “Mother makes a ‘home run’ every day” ([New York](#), 1915, p. 108). Similarly, during the 1915 Suffrage Day at the Polo Grounds, advertisements asked fans to “Make a Home Run for Suffrage” and “Be a ‘Good Sport,’ Vote ‘yes’ for the Woman’s Suffrage Amendment” ([Suffrage Leaders](#),

1915, p. 5; [Good Publicity](#), 1915, p. 303). Suffragists also passed out score cards that combined baseball slogans with suffrage sentiments: “Fans, Fair Play: Vote ‘Yes’; ‘We’d Like Our Innings’; and ‘Line Out a ‘Votes for Women Homer’” ([Suffrage Leaders](#), 1915, p. 5). The women repeatedly combined fair play rhetoric with the need for female enfranchisement. “You believe in fair play. Every fan does. How then would you like it if you paid taxes but others decided how to spend them? . . . Make a home run for suffrage” ([Suffrage Reigns](#), 1915, p. 2). These messages appealed to fans’ love of baseball and ideals about fairness in sport. The women tacitly suggested that notions of fair sport transcended sport. Making arguments for women’s enfranchisement through baseball clichés allowed the women to make this point in non-threatening, subtle ways.

Women also gained support through endorsements from star players. The acceptance of athletes as advocates aligned with the NAWSA’s eventual embrace of male allies. After initially rebuffing male membership, the NAWSA shifted course to embrace influential—primarily White—men as new allies ([Kroeger](#), 2017, p. 7). Male supporters provided the cause with both new resources and legitimacy. Likewise, finding baseball advocates helped quell male misgivings about granting women’s enfranchisement. Baseball players who signed off on women’s suffrage showed that it was both acceptable and masculine to support the cause. Examples of athletes who publicly supported women’s suffrage include Pittsburgh Pirates outfielder and manager Fred Clarke, Boston Braves second baseman Oscar Dugey, Washington Senators pitcher Walter Johnson, Philadelphia Phillies catcher Bill Killefer, and Philadelphia Phillies catcher Pat Moran (“[Sporting World](#),” 1915, p. 8).

Perhaps as the most surprising convert, the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association convinced Ty Cobb to publicly support women’s enfranchisement. Cobb, one of the most successful and infamous professional baseball players at the time, embodied an aggressive form of Southern, White masculinity. He was known for taunting opponents, teammates, and fans alike ([Leerhsen](#), 2016). After the Mississippi organizers presented him with flowers at a game in 1915, Cobb responded that “It has been my observation that when women want anything they always get it. Since it is evident that the women want to vote we may as well give them the franchise without any more fussing about it” (“[Ty Cobb](#),” 1915, p. 113). While not exactly a wholehearted endorsement of women voting, Cobb’s backing was still likely persuasive to White, male fans. If a masculine athlete like Cobb could support women without compromising his masculinity, so too could an average fan who worried about the potential repercussions of female enfranchisement. Support from male athletes calmed fears that granting women’s suffrage would usher in dramatic social changes.

Suffragists Root for the Home Team

Despite acceptance from star athletes like Cobb, Suffragists recognized that their presence at baseball games could still potentially alienate male spectators. As historian Lauren C. Santangelo (2019) explains, “With women politicking on the streets, a ticket to a baseball game or boxing match must have seemed particularly precious to men already feeling emasculated” (p. 114). They therefore attempted to convince male fans that women voters would not significantly change the gendered status quo. Suffragists highlighted the ways in which their authority over domestic affairs actually served to enhance their political abilities, as well as

repeatedly emphasized their outsider status in the world of baseball. Both strategies intended to soothe fears and garner male support. While this approach likely alleviated gender concerns in the short-term, deploying these ideologies helped further cast baseball as a sport to be played by men.

To emphasize their continued acceptance of domesticity, suffragists engaged in wordplay. They purposefully connected baseball phrases that included the word “home”—home runs, home plate, and home team—with women’s responsibilities at home. This double entendre used the language of baseball to underscore White women’s natural authority over private matters. For example, the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA) awarded five dollars “for every Home run on the Home grounds by a player on the Home team.” In a corresponding article titled “Home Runs will Count for Home,” the *Woman’s Journal* reported that the Boston suffragists successfully showed fans “that suffragists are interested in at least two other things beside the vote—the home and baseball” (“Home Runs,” 1915, p. 153). White suffragists defended against accusations of political ambition by highlighting their positions over home matters, by drawing connections to common baseball items.

Suffragist Margaret Foley perhaps most clearly illustrated this link during a speech at a Boston Braves game. According to Foley, the MWSA awarded the prizes “in order that the sacred word ‘Home’ may become identified with the cause of Equal Suffrage in the minds of all lovers of our great national game.” She wanted the male fans to consider the suffragists the appropriate purveyors of the domestic realm. The Boston suffragists were therefore thrilled when Braves catcher Hank Gawdy hit the first home run. They highlighted his position as “defender of the Home plate” upon awarding him the cash prize (Foley, 1915, pp. 57–58). In their view, Gawdy’s protection of home plate mirrored women’s protection of the home. Suffragists hoped to show their support of the idea that men’s and women’s proper responsibilities were to protect home plate and the home, respectively. The suffragists highlighted the respective roles to ease anxieties about women abandoning their domestic duties if granted the right to vote.

References to motherhood also appeared. Aligned with the tactics of past reform movements, the NAWSA and other suffrage organizations used images and conceptions of motherhood to curry support for women’s enfranchisement. However, as historian Eileen Boris (1989) points out, ideas about motherhood “led to different outcomes for black and white women when it came to status and rights” (p. 26). Black women, who were viewed as outside the social script for motherhood, highlighted mother-child relationships to foster economic and social uplift. White women, considered the prototype of motherhood, argued that the ability to vote enhanced their domestic capabilities. Put simply, “White women could use dominant cultural conceptions as a political tool” (Boris, 1989, p. 48). The latter strategy appeared at baseball games. For example, a women’s Tennessee suffrage organization hung a banner for its suffrage day in 1916, specifically referencing White women’s unique position as mothers. It argued:

For the safety of the nation
To the woman give the vote,
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Will never rock the boat. (Tennessee, 1916, p. 285)

The sign suggested that women’s inherent virtue would be a positive force in preserving the security of the country. Moreover, connecting women’s domestic responsibilities—rocking the cradle—to maintaining the current social order—not rocking the boat—likely

intended to calm angst about potential changes. The advertisement assured fans that suffragists did not want to completely upend the public and private responsibilities of White men and White women.

Finally, suffragists also stressed their outsider status at the ballgames to assure male fans that their presence at games was not permanent. This helped solicit support but simultaneously cast doubt about women’s place on the diamond. Suffrage publications and press accounts described the efforts needed to teach women how to watch baseball, insinuating that only men naturally understood the nuances of the game. For example, suffragists gathered before the 1915 Suffrage Day in Pittsburgh “with the purpose and intention of ‘learning the game’ and how to talk ‘fan stuff’” (“Local Suffragists,” 1915, p. 24). NYSWSA’s Rose Young described a similar strategy ahead of the Suffrage Day at the Polo Grounds. “The women in this movement are already learning much of the game’s lingo,” she explained, “so that by the time the game is played, they will have learned enough of the rules and fine points to talk intelligently with their husbands” (“Suffrage and Baseball,” 1915, p. 16). The explicit incorporation of matrimonial happiness seemingly served to help soften the suffragists’ demands. Yet, it was Foley who again most clearly underlined this strategy. As she stood atop the dugout in Boston, she proclaimed that “I take pleasure in announcing that there are to be no Suffrage speeches today. This is baseball day and at a baseball game woman’s place is watching the game, while the men play it” (Foley, 1915). Women used gender norms to cultivate a positive image. However, in doing so they reaffirmed the growing belief that baseball was a sport to be played by men.

Conclusion: A Home Run for Women?

Thousands of women attended the July 7, 1915, Suffrage Day at the National League Park in Philadelphia. As described in local newspaper the *Public Ledger*, the women sought to usher in a “dual alliance of the suffragists and the baseball team for ‘Victory in 1915’” (“Suffragists Turn Out,” 1915). Each group sought a different type of triumph that year. The Phillies wanted to win its first World Series; the suffragists wanted to win the right to vote in Pennsylvania. Despite their “dual alliance,” neither accomplished its 1915 goals. The Phillies came closer, finishing first in the National League before losing to the Boston Red Sox in the World Series. Pennsylvania voters rejected the referendum to grant women the right to vote in the state.

Although the Phillies came closer to victory in 1915, the suffragists ultimately found success before the team. On June 24, 1920, Pennsylvania became the seventh state to approve the Nineteenth Amendment, which prohibited denying enfranchisement on account of one’s sex and was ratified on August 18, 1920. The Phillies did not win the World Series until 1980. In conjunction with the NAWSA’s numerous other publicity efforts, the “dual alliance” between suffrage and baseball appears to have helped White women gain political rights.

The social significance of baseball provided women an opportunity to demonstrate physical activism and offered suffragists an influential publicity platform. Female ballplayers demonstrated strength and vitality at a time when many opponents to women’s enfranchisement used female frailty as a rationale for their exclusion. At the turn of the century, as women disappeared from the playing field, suffragists entered the stands to promote the cause, foster a conventional feminine image of female activists, and assuage the concerns of male voters. Women posted signage around ballparks, held suffrage days at baseball games, passed

out pamphlets at stadiums, and sold tickets to support their right to vote. Linking suffrage to baseball provided publicity, fundraising opportunities, and a chance to assure men that suffragists would not abandon their domestic duties when given the opportunity to vote. However, their actions also tacitly supported the idea that women belonged on the sidelines in sport, and specifically in baseball.

Paralleling the limitations that came with political enfranchisement, women's participation in baseball also remains restricted. With the right to vote granted, the women's suffrage movement fractured. The NAWSA evolved into the League of Women Voters, which slowly splintered into several self-interest social groups. No longer united by disenfranchisement, women did not work in bloc for female advancement. By 1960, women filled only 24 of the 2,050 super-grade positions in federal bureaucracy (Hartmann, 1989, p. 14). Thus despite federal legislation, women remain sidelined in political positions of authority. Likewise, women are underrepresented as baseball players in the US. Despite the "invention" of baseball in the US, US women have few opportunities to compete in the national pastime and are oftentimes pushed into softball.

The women's suffrage movement did not cause the gendering of baseball. Suffragists did not force women off the playing field nor encourage them to participate in modified versions of the sport. However, the suffrage leaders' spectacles helped reaffirm ideas about who belonged on the diamond and who did not. In hoping to reap the benefits of connecting with the national pastime, the women implicitly supported the gender breakdown of the national pastime. Moreover, their explicit embracement of gender norms only further bolstered the assumption that women belonged in the bleachers. These limitations helped set the stage for the next wave of activism, when women's political demands again connected with sport, including in the national pastime.

In the 1970s, women again linked sport and politics. The resurgence of the women's movement encouraged female athletes to seek more opportunities in sport, including in baseball. This time, women demanded opportunities on the diamond, not through spectacles in the stadiums. Perhaps most notable, 11-year-old baseball player Maria Pepe filed a lawsuit against Little League Baseball in 1973. Little League organizers at the time barred girls, arguing that their participation degraded the game and put them in danger of injury (Ring, 2009). The New Jersey Superior Court disagreed and required Little League permit girls. Although Pepe was too old to compete by the time the court ruled, her suit opened the doors for other female baseball players. By demonstrating physical activism, athletes like Pepe chipped away at the long-lasting gender norms of sport and the national game. As women remain underrepresented in baseball and elected office, they continue to connect sport and politics. Their actions mount a broader challenge on the place of women in both realms.

End Note

¹First, an analysis of the suffrage periodical the *Woman's Journal* suggests suffrage leaders promoted women's right to vote at baseball games. Bostonian suffragist Lucy Stone and Henry Browne Blackwell founded the *Woman's Journal* in 1870, which eventually became the official organ of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1910. The *Woman's Journal* was a leading suffrage publication during the mid-1910s, dedicated "to the interests of woman, to her educational, industrial, legal and political equality, and especially her right to suffrage." Second, suffragists' papers from Boston and New York—urban centers where baseball was the most popular at the time—illustrate the local rationales for

hosting events in ballparks. Finally, newspapers offer a glimpse into how men interpreted women in baseball. Male sportswriters offered varying opinions on women ballplayers and the suffragists, ranging from patronizing humor to full-fledged support. An analysis of all three shows that women dismantled gender norms by participating in baseball in the nineteenth century, while suffragists created spectacles from the sidelines in the mid-1910s.

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