The Women's Baseball World Cup Was Played Under Gaslight

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In late August, I went to the Women's Baseball World Cup, billed as "Baseball's Biggest Event for Women." It is essentially the World Series for the women, but they aren't allowed to call it that — copyrights and such — and it's not really the biggest, at least not this eighth iteration, which was the first world cup hosted in the United States. The Japanese Women's Baseball League, the only women's professional baseball league in the world, pulls in many more fans on average than the WBWC title game drew.

But do I tell you that? I'm struggling to figure it out. Do I start out by noting how few women there are in baseball in general? A few are in the booth (and wow, do people dislike when they dare to show up there). Rarely are women behind the plate. You'll find girls in Little League, but only occasionally do they still show up on the field once they age out of it.

So I'll say what we often like to say about women's sports in order not to harm what little women have as is: The story of the WBWC is one of triumph against adversity and discrimination, a glimpse into what is possible and a source of hope for the future. That's all true, but questions nag. Where were the media and the fans in August, and where are the resources and the pipelines to produce more female baseball players in all the other months? And when will women's baseball be treated as something other than a curiosity? The World Series is on right now, baseball's biggest event for men. It is bitterly funny to watch and think about the differences between the men's sport and the women's version. One represents a radical break from the game's much-honored past. The other involves women playing baseball.

Wasting Away In Viera

Let's just start where you are supposed to start: the scene. It was late August in Viera, Florida, an awful month and an awful place to spend a lot of time outside. The town is on the Atlantic coast, about halfway down the state, just off of I-95 and only miles from the ocean. The weather vacillates between heavy rain bursts and lightning displays, and intense periods of bright, hot sunlight and oppressive humidity. I grew up nearby, so none of this was a surprise to me. It did make me wonder why this competition wasn't being played in November, though.

At the USSSA Space Coast Stadium, where the tournament was held, the keyboard player (with his setting on "organ") would play all sorts of tunes, including Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville," which felt particularly fitting. A single concession stand was open in the stadium, but the hot dogs

were good. There was almost no merchandise to buy, and you had to know to go into the shop near the outer entrance to find it. If you did find your way in there, you could get a tournament program or shirt for the WBWC (no gear for Team USA was available on site).

The 9 a.m. games would sometimes start with two dozen people in the stands, the number slowly rising as others wandered in (the stadium had a capacity of 8,100). By the time the 1 p.m. games had rolled around (often delayed due to weather), dozens of baseball fans had gathered and sat in clumps under the covered areas at the top of the stands on each side of the field, just up from first and third bases. Spectators crowded together under the shaded awnings in an attempt to escape the direct sunlight, often moving back as the sun slowly crept up the stands. Luckily, I guess, the crowds were small enough that if you wanted to sit in the shade, there was room for you. The dedicated would sit closer, just above the dugouts if they were rooting for a particular team, or behind home plate. Umbrellas were a common sight — portable shade.

On the field, the players just had to sweat through weather, and they did. It was hard to know how much they minded, though, because they all seemed thrilled to be there and to be playing baseball. If only they had had crowds as large as they deserved.

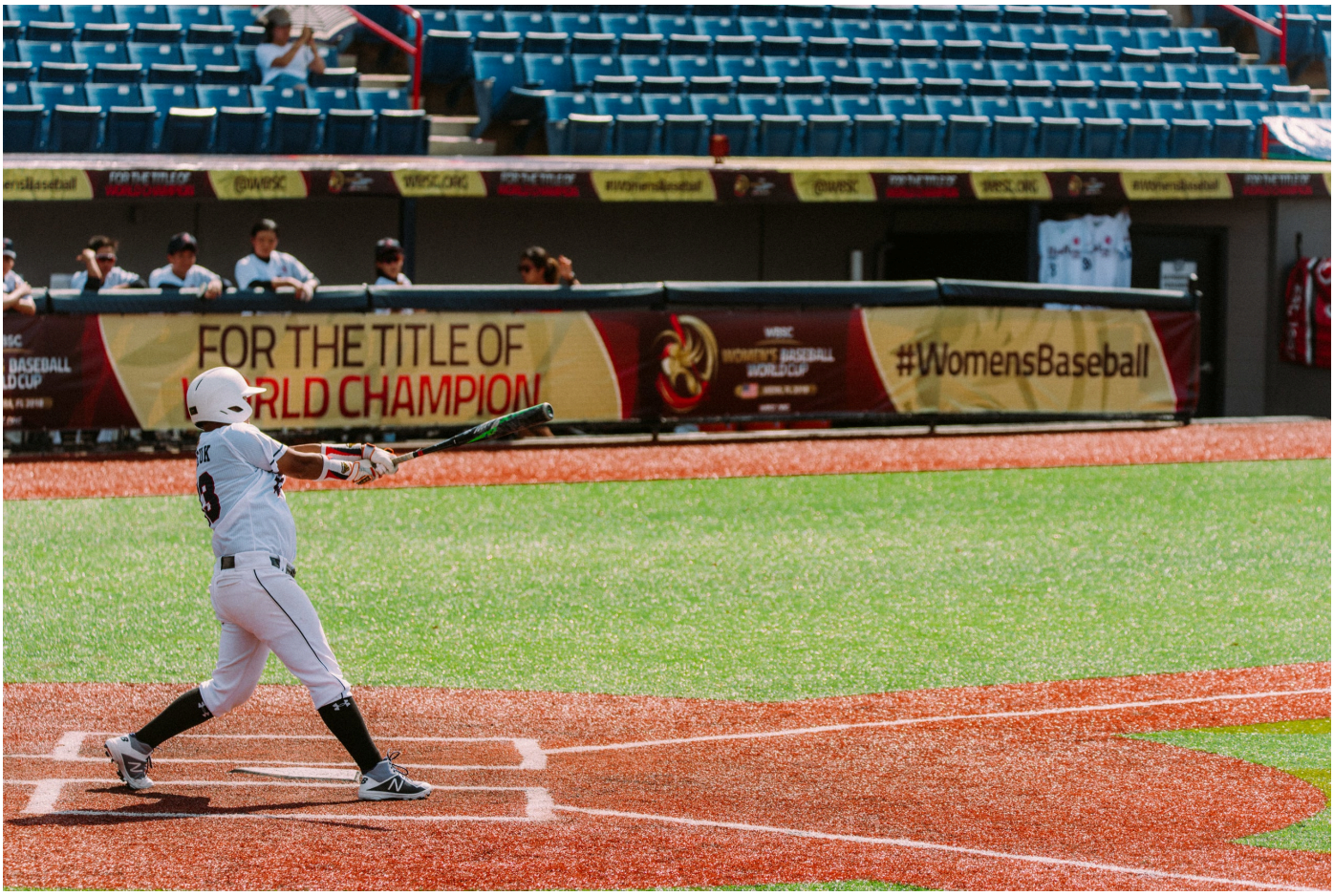
Oscar Lopez, the head of communications for the World Baseball and Softball Confederation, said the total official attendance for the 50 games was 17,969. I'll do the math for you: That's an average of 360 people per game. That is dismal. Lopez said via email that "attendance was significantly lower than that of 2016" — when the tournament was played in Korea — "but that edition was free to enter whereas 2018 incorporated ticketing."

Jade Gortarez, a pitcher, shortstop and the leadoff batter for the U.S. Women's National Team, told me that the fan atmosphere at the 2014 World Cup in Japan and the 2016 World Cup in South Korea was very different from the crowd in Florida. In South Korea, Gortarez said, "I know that there were church communities that came out and picked a team and supported only that team. It was a whole group just to show up and cheer and just create that type of atmosphere. That's something that we don't have here." In Japan, she recalled, combined attendance over the team's final two games in 2014 numbered 28,000 people. The final in 2016 had 2,300 people in attendance. I'd be surprised if there were more than 1,000 people at this year's final, and that includes most of the other teams who were there to watch.

In Viera, there was a high school across the street — you could see it from the stands — and yet no sign that any of their teams, even the softball team, were there to see the world's best female baseball players play.

If you didn't go in person, the only way to watch was streaming through the website. More than 3.5 million viewers in 212 countries and territories livestreamed the games (compared with 6 million in 2016). Lopez noted that the time zone might've depressed these numbers, since the majority of WBSC followers are in Asia. Malaika Underwood, who plays first base for the United States and who has represented the country in international competition a record nine times, put a sunny spin

on the Americans' fan support. "We've got a lot of people watching on YouTube," she said after the United States' victory over Canada, "and through social media we've heard a lot of their cheers, too." By the WBSC's reckoning, the tournament's social media presence generated 13.6 million impressions.



Hong Kong's Woon-Yee Cheuk, batting in front of a lot of empty seats.

There was little other media to speak of, though. The 2016 event was televised in South Korea by the Seoul Broadcasting System, which Lopez credited with helping spread the word around the country. This year's tournament had nothing of the kind. HBO and Around the Rings were there, as well as local and state media, and international media from Venezuela, Cuba and Japan, among others. But other than MLB.com, which had coverage throughout, and Sports Illustrated, it's not clear that any major national sports media was on the ground at the tournament. And in an industry that is full of men, as far as I could tell, very few bothered to show up.

After all of that, I should be clear: It was fun to be there in the crowd. I feel as if I have to tell you that. In reporting on women's sports, especially those that are massively under-covered and rarely supported, it is my moral obligation to assure you, dear readers, of the fervent participation of the fans — and trust me, it would be difficult to overstate the enthusiasm of the people who did show up to the World Cup.

The teams had their own chants and cheered each other on throughout each game, and the spectators who did show up were very much into it. The U.S. crowds were loud, with many fans decked out in red, white and blue. Japan, Canada and Chinese Taipei all had sizable contingents at their games, relatively speaking — 40 to 50 fans, if not more. Japan and Chinese Taipei had ringleaders who would direct the groups in cheers; every fan base always had someone with a whistle, it seemed; and shirtless Canadian male fans showed up with painted torsos to at least one game. This is a universal truth about women's sports: People who give time and attention to them often fall deeply in love. At the World Cup, the support was small, but it was mighty.

How Baseball Got Gendered

Maybelle Blair and Shirley Burkovich were there, too. They played in the All-American Professional Girls Baseball League, of "A League of Their Own" fame, and in Viera they spent the majority of their time taking pictures with fans of all ages and talking to anyone who wanted to chat about baseball. They also gave pep talks to the U.S. team before some of their games.

Women's baseball has a past, their presence declared. Given the sport's evolution, that's a radical statement. The elevation of baseball into the national pastime was accomplished through the erasure of women from the history of the sport. As historian Jean Ardell, author of *Breaking into Baseball: Women and the National Pastime*, told me, "It's been well documented that all over the world whenever somebody had a bat and a ball or a stick and stone, or whatever they could find to play with as children, girls participated it." But, she said, "once organized baseball got into control of the game, there was real institutional bias against women."

In professional baseball's early days, when games were sparsely attended, some pro women's teams outdrew the men's teams. The comparisons are inexact, but as author Debra Shattuck notes, six of the eight teams in the National League in 1879 averaged less than a thousand fans per game. The Red Stocking and Blue Stocking traveling pro women's teams, which played games against each other, often in cities with National League franchises, averaged more than a thousand fans.

But the professionalization of the sport was accompanied by a mythmaking effort whereby baseball was shorn of its British roots and transformed into an America-spawned crucible of manhood. This was a neat trick. In his book *Base-Ball: How to Become a Player, with the Origin, History and Explanation of the Game*, John Montgomery Ward, a founding member of the Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players, made the case that baseball was "a wholly American invention," as Shattuck writes in her corrective, *Bloomer Girls: Women Baseball Pioneers*:

> While others focused on highlighting the differences in rules between American baseball and British games like baseball, cricket and Rounders, Ward argued that since *girls* had played British baseball, it simply could *not* have been the precursor of the American game. He cited three references to British girls playing baseball. The first was the letter Mary Lepel (Lady Hervey) had written in 1748 that mentioned the Prince of Wales playing baseball indoors with both male and female family members during chilly winter days. The second was Jane Austen's inclusion of a female baseball player in her novel *Northanger Abbey*; his third reference was a comment in the 1852 edition of Blaine's British encyclopedia of sport that "there are few of us of either sex but have engaged in base-ball since our majority."

From this evidence Ward concluded that American baseball was a different game altogether: "Base-ball in its mildest form is essentially a robust game, and it would require an elastic imagination to conceive of little girls possessed of physical powers such as its play demands."

The turn of the century saw the "final gendering of baseball as a man's game," Shattuck writes. Physical education programs created separated tracks for boys'/men's baseball and girls'/women's baseball: Boys played on teams based on their ability and competitiveness; girls participated in a system that promoted equal participation for all, no matter what skill level.

The divergence widened in the following decades as the men's sport became more and more professionalized and commercialized. Girls and women continued to play baseball, though, and in 1952, the MLB forbade teams from signing women to contracts, a ban that remained in place for four decades. And, of course, always running parallel beside this was softball, the stick-and-ball game open to girls and women. Little League had to be forced to allow girls to play in the early 1970s, and, even then, Little League softball was established to shuffle girls into that sport and away from baseball. To this day, girls and women playing baseball is more a novelty than a norm. Blair and Burkovich were a reminder for those in attendance at the WBWC about this long history of discrimination and adversity, and also the perseverance of girls and women in a sport whose governing bodies want nothing to do with them.

The Conversation

In the middle of the week, word spread that the most famous fan of women's baseball in the U.S. had shown up. Francis Ford Coppola, the Oscar-winning writer and director, was in the house, and, it turned out, he had read my piece about why Japan is so good at women's baseball and wanted to meet me. I made my way up to his suite at the top of the stands just before the start of the final between the unstoppable Japanese team and the up-and-comers, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan). Coppola's feet were bare, a pair of glasses that separate at the nose were draped around his neck, and a soft cream-colored International Women's Baseball Center cap covered his gray hair. When the two teams shook hands before the game, he stopped mid-sentence. "How touching that is," he said, "how sweet."

Stacy Piagno pitches for the U.S. Women's National Team on Aug. 23, 2018.

Coppola's love of women's baseball traces back to family games at his baseball field at his wine estate, where, he told me, "inevitably it was always some aunt or some cousin or some lady relative that was the star." After the 2015 baseball season, Coppola offered to sponsor the independent professional baseball team the Sonoma Stompers. "It was my condition that I would sponsor them if they would add women to their roster and play the women," he said. And they did. In June 2016, the Stompers announced they had signed Kelsie Whitmore (a pitcher and outfielder) and Stacy Piagno (a pitcher and infielder) with the intention of playing them in their next game. It was a historic moment, with the team becoming "the first co-ed professional baseball team since Toni Stone, Mamie Johnson and Constance Morgan played in the Negro Leagues," as the New York Daily News wrote. Later that summer, Anna Kimbrell joined them, and she and Whitmore became the first-ever all-female battery in professional baseball.

"I saw some of the games and I thought they were great," Coppola said. "They were so entertaining and... Stacy Piagno told me the men [she played alongside] were great." He also recalled what it meant to have women on that team. "I would see the little girls with their gloves." He said he'd hear them say, "I'm gonna be a pitcher."

"I was touched," Coppola said.

Whitmore, Piagno and Kimbrell played on the USWNT at the Women's Baseball World Cup this year, all veterans on the team.

It makes sense that Coppola made the journey to Viera to see the USWNT play on their home soil. “Of course, women can play baseball,” he said, emphatically. “It’s absurd to even doubt that.”

The Restoration

The outcome of the WBWC was written before the first pitch was thrown. There could be no other winner than Japan, which has now won 30 straight games at the event and six straight titles; the Japanese are simply too good. Watching them play four days in a row, you could tell that those women spend a lot more time playing baseball generally, and playing baseball as a team, than the countries they compete against. Many of them are professionals, unlike their competitors. Many of the women who play for Japan also play in the Japanese Women’s Baseball League. They didn’t have to spend time during the tournament shaking off rust or smoothing out their wheel plays. It’s telling that their opponent, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), is the only other team with professional baseball players on it; three of them compete in the JWBL.

Canada came in third after beating the U.S. in a tight bronze medal game that went into multiple extra innings. It was a disappointing end for the U.S. team. No one from the team showed up to do press until pressure from the few media people there got a player and the manager in the room.

But there are reasons for Americans to be hopeful. Piagno said it does matter that the WBWC took place here, because every little bit helps. She said that back in 2004, when she first tried out for the team — the first year that USA Baseball fielded a women’s team, in fact — there were only a few dozen girls, maybe 50. “Now we have hundreds of girls trying out every year and they’re all good.”

“The competition is much better, and we’ve got younger girls who we’re starting to do developmental camps and things with them,” Piagno said. “The pool is growing. Every year it gets bigger. It needs to continue to grow, and it will, as long as we continue to do all of this stuff and publicize and all of that.”

That development is, in part, headed up by Major League Baseball in conjunction with USA Baseball. Their Trailblazers series is a 13U (ages 13 and under) event that Liz Benn, the coordinator of labor, diversity and youth programs for MLB, told me is “a feel-good event” where “girls come from all over the country, and a couple from Canada, and they get to play with other girls.” Their Breakthrough series is for girls ages 14 to 18, and they work more on development of the players. It’s position-specific, so they can begin to hone their talents and specialize. MLB wants girls to “have more development opportunities [and] higher-quality development opportunities,” Benn said.

One of the youngest members of Team USA this year at the WBWC, Ashton Lansdell, a middle infielder and pitcher, was a veteran of the Breakthrough series. She played beautifully in the field and at the plate in the last few games of the tournament, especially the bronze medal game, spending a fair amount of time on base when the team was on offense and showing off an

incredible springiness on defense. Lansdell missed her first few weeks of her senior year in high school to be at the tournament. She said she doesn't know of any other girl in Georgia who plays baseball, but she expects to play on her high school team this year and is adamant that she will play baseball in college, something only a handful of young women have done in the United States, ever.

Expanding women's baseball is an act of restoration, not revolution. John Montgomery Ward and his fellow mythmakers propagandized women out of history, and the professional game has been played under gaslight ever since. There's no denying that the WBWC did not have the crowds and media coverage that one would hope for if you love and care about women's sports, baseball in particular. But the opportunity it provided for many, especially young people like Lansdell, cannot be discounted. Out in the scorching light of Viera, women were reinserting themselves into the narrative of baseball.

Ayami Sato, the Japanese pitcher and three-time tournament MVP, said through a translator after one of Japan's wins that she wants "the whole world to make [a] better environment for women's baseball." The "more media covers the women's baseball, more people will know women's baseball is there," and so Sato does interviews to show that "hey, I am at the World Cup, women's baseball is there."

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