

CO-ED PARTICIPATION – WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MEN'S PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL

CAN WOMEN COMPETE AGAINST MEN IN PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL?

There is great variation in size and strength among the entire population of men and the same is true for women. Although there are large size and strength differences between the average man and the average women, those differences are far less when you look at only the strongest and largest men and women. When you match up men and women with the same lean body mass and size, the differences are small. Any woman who attempts to play professional baseball will, in all likelihood, be a female elite athlete with lean body mass and size comparable to many male athletes in the minor leagues who play baseball.

The National Strength and Conditioning Association issued a paper in 1990 that summarizes the scientific information available on women athletes and strength. The paper, "Strength Training for Female Athletes: A Position Paper," reviews the physiological differences between men and women. It acknowledges that the differences between average men and women are substantial. It goes on to compare similarly sized men and women.

"When the difference in body dimensions and lean body mass between genders is taken into consideration, however, the relative strength differences between the sexes are less appreciable. In the lower body, using a strength to lean body weight ratio, Wilmore and others have found women to possess approximately equal lower body strength compared to males. Hosler and Morrow, in a 1982 study involving 87 men and 115 women, found that 'the impact of gender is rather small when one considers strength differences after allowing for body size and composition'. In this study, gender accounted for only 2 percent in leg strength and 1 percent in arm strength."

Even then, absolute strength and size are not key factors in baseball. Baseball is a game involving skills that are combinations of timing, coordination, strength, knowledge of the game, strategies, control and savvy, to say nothing of the importance of

competitiveness and desire. Even though strength may be a factor in pitching and hitting, timing and coordination can produce throwing and bat speeds in ways that absolute strength and muscle mass can be a hindrance. Bat speed and bat control are more important than absolute strength. There are plenty of examples in major league baseball of the smaller but very highly skilled player who overcomes disadvantages of foot speed, size or strength to be an exceptional player.

The biggest disadvantage that women players will have to overcome will be the fact that they will be less experienced in playing baseball. Even though baseball and softball are similar games, the smaller size and weight of the ball, the longer pitching distances, basepaths and field size and the subtle differences of the game will pose more disadvantages than physical size or ability differences. Female players will need time to adjust to this new game since they have not had extensive life-long experience in Little League and other levels of organized competitive baseball.

WILL WOMEN PITCHERS THROW UNDERHAND AS THEY DO IN SOFTBALL OR WILL THEY THROW OVERHAND?

THEY WILL PROBABLY THROW OVERHAND. Women already throw overhand in all positions other than pitcher in softball. Throwing underhand involves the same principles and skills of throwing underhand so acquisition of overhand pitching techniques will not be difficult. However, women overhand pitchers will need time to develop because of their lack of experience with the specific skill.

Women players could conceivably try pitching underhand in a baseball game. It is simply not known whether the underhand slingshot or windmill pitching techniques would be effective in baseball. Most suspect that similar pitching speeds can be achieved with an underhand throw but that the trajectory of an underhand throw may have more of a tendency to flatten out as it approaches the plate, thereby making it easier to hit.

It is interesting to note that because the arm is closer to the body in an underhand throw and therefore in a stronger and less straining position than the position in an overhand throw, using an underhand pitching technique would permit a pitcher to throw more frequently and for longer periods of time than an overhand technique.

THERE WAS A SEPARATE, ALL WOMEN'S TEAM THAT PLAYED MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL (THE COLORADO SILVER BULLETS). WOULD IT BE BETTER TO INTEGRATE MALE AND FEMALE PLAYERS ON A TEAM OR TO HAVE A SEPARATE WOMEN'S TEAM COMPETING IN A LEAGUE?

THERE ARE THREE REASONS WHY HAVING A SEPARATE WOMEN'S TEAM MIGHT BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO INTEGRATE WOMEN INTO BASEBALL:

1. TO DATE, LEAGUES HAVE NOT BEEN WILLING TO LET WOMEN BE BASEBALL UMPIRES MUCH LESS PLAYERS.

There is reason to believe that individual women players on predominantly male teams will not get the support, playing time or most optimum environment for them to acquire the skills and experience they need to compete or advance in the game. There is historical precedence for "affirmative action" special programs to assist disadvantaged groups in breaking into environments where they were previously unwelcome. Having a "team of their own" will provide a much more supportive environment than a lone woman would have to face breaking into an all-male team.

2. ANY PLAYER ON AN ALL WOMEN'S TEAM CAN GO ON TO PLAY ON PREDOMINANTLY MALE TEAMS. The measure of success will be to see a woman progress into the major leagues.

3. WOMEN HAVE SIMPLY NOT HAD THE OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY BASEBALL. To be on a team that recognizes there will be an adjustment period and is committed to doing everything it can to cut down the time it takes to make the transition to baseball or patiently give players the experience they need appears desirable.

There is one downside to having a separate women's team. We know from studies of segregation and integration of racial groups, that stereotypes and other causes of tension between groups are more easily broken down in integrated settings. However, given the fact that women players really need an optimum environment to make up for lack of opportunity and time to adjust to the game of baseball, beginning on an all women's team will probably result in more women successfully advancing into an integrated setting over the long run. Keeping to wait for a men's team to give a woman the chance to play and not having that women receive regular playing time will not result in the rapid entry of women into baseball.

Having an all-women's team that receives considerable media attention will provide much needed role models for little girls who want to follow in the footsteps of these players.