



Jennifer Ring's *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don't Play Baseball*

Nonfiction

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Smoky Joe Wood was blessed with a perfect baseball name and, judging from his 15-year career, a near-perfect baseball body. Born Howard Joe in 1889, Wood earned his epithet with an incandescent fastball, often cited as the hardest of its era. Talented and handsome—[a pinstriped, black-and-white Hayden Christensen](#)—Wood quickly became a star, striking out 23 hitters in an exhibition game, throwing a no hitter in 1911, and, in a historic 1912 season, winning 34 regular-season games and three more in the World Series. In 1913, he slipped while fielding a bunt and broke his thumb. The injury never completely healed, so Smoky Joe just moved to the outfield, playing there until 1922.

Wood, in short, enjoyed quite the career. When it came time to reflect on his time in baseball, though, he bogged down at the beginning. "A funny thing happened in September of 1906 that I'm not too keen about talking about," Wood said. "But I guess it wouldn't be exactly right to act like it never happened. In a nutshell, that's when I started my professional career, and I might as well just take a deep breath and come right out and put the matter bluntly: the team I started with was the Bloomer Girls. Yeah, you heard right, the Bloomer Girls."

Wood wasn't even the most famous alumnus of the semipro Chicago Lady Bloomers; Hall of Famer Rogers Hornsby also played briefly with the team. In the early twentieth century, women enjoyed their own baseball teams, their own baseball fans, even their own "Babe" (that would be Babe Didrikson, who, in one game, threw a ball 313 feet).

None of this should surprise us, since women started playing baseball in the 1860s. And yet it does. Women have been largely erased from baseball's history and culture—Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen reference girls playing baseball, but Ken Burns's mammoth documentary *Baseball* does not—and, in her new book, Jennifer Ring, a professor of political science, "attempts to follow the history of the women's game in order to understand why American women have had such a difficult time playing a game they so clearly love."

Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don't Play Baseball begins with a lyric little passage about Ring's daughter, Lilly, and how she catches baseball fever. At age 11, in Little League, when you

still sign up for the team instead of the team signing you, Lilly gets snubbed from the All-Star Team, "for political rather than athletic reasons." Lilly's story is important—as an example of Ring's personal investment and of her best writing, and as a clear signal that she hopes to cover not only lost histories (back then), but also lost opportunities (right now).

Nevertheless, the title of this book suggests a narrative, even a conspiracy, and in A. G. Spalding Ring finds her chief villain. Spalding, of course, founded the sporting goods company that still bears his name, but he did more than supply bats and balls. It was Spalding's "special commission on baseball" that, in 1907, fabricated the game's prehistory and legitimized the Doubleday myth, and Spalding continued both threads in his own history of baseball, *America's National Game* (1911). Spalding's marketing and his myths—and good luck unraveling the two—both depended on certain nationalistic and patriarchal assumptions. So too did muscular Christianity and other contemporary cultural ideas, but Ring turns to Spalding's biography to argue that "it was personally important for him to separate baseball and women."

Such separation, Ring believes, is part of "a historical narrative that, unfortunately, repeats itself." Perhaps the most memorable example of this narrative comes in her discussion of women's cricket. In 1821, Christina Willes, an English woman trying to balance the demands of cricket with her century's many skirts, invented the art of overhanded pitching. Yet her brother, John Willes, decided to take credit for her innovation, to the point that his tombstone reads, "He was the first to introduce the move to round-armed bowling in cricket." Moving from cricket to women's basketball, from the early history of women's baseball to the 1970s lawsuits that tried to ban girls from Little League—or, just as bad, in Ring's view, to funnel them to softball—*Stolen Bases* spends a total of ten chapters on the "historical, cultural, and economic forces" that have prevented girls from playing America's game.

Let's be clear: while Ring has sound politics and a fascinating topic, her book does not do them justice. First, and most damning, Ring's book fails to hold the reader's attention, mostly because it never tries to. Her chapters jump around haphazardly; they skimp on characterization and context and eschew a clear driving narrative. For example, Ring mentions Smoky Joe Wood a handful of times, but never fleshes him out—other than the long quotation, all of the details in my opening paragraphs come from Wood's Wikipedia page. Ring gets closer to telling an engrossing story with Spalding (who should have made for an even better character than Wood), but then, inexplicably, takes a turn for the psychoanalytic. She latches on to Spalding's mother with such ferocity that paragraphs on sequential pages repeat each other verbatim.

The chapter on Spalding and his mother ends with this sentence: "But the iconization of baseball specifically as a 'national pastime' where no girls are allowed is attributable to Spalding in greater part than is usually recognized." In other words, we might blame some of the book's problems, along with this waffling prose, on the trappings of the academic book. I have to think that *Stolen Bases* won't find a warm welcome in that world, either, given its lack of primary research. Ring makes some curious oversights—despite her arguments about women and baseball culture, she mentions *A League of Their Own* only once, in the epilogue—and commits several factual errors. *Baseball* is an 18-hour documentary from 1994, not a 25-hour documentary from 1986, as she has it. And Smoky Joe Wood is not a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, despite Ring's repeated claims to the contrary. [He should be.](#)