BATTER UP!

It is the bottom of the ninth inning and the bases are loaded. The batter steps up to the plate, takes a couple of deep breaths and a few practice swings. The pitcher steps up to the mound and concentrates on the catcher’s signals, while preparing the ball for the next pitch. The crowd is going wild. The cheering renders conversation impossible. The pitcher releases the ball...smack! There goes the ball! It is going...going...it is gone! Another homerun for West and another win for the team!

This may sound like the World Series Playoffs, but indeed it isn’t. You have just experienced a game played by the Girl’s All-Stars Softball Team of 1941. That is not all. They were Missouri State Champions vying for the 1941 National Pennant.

Originally there were two teams before 1941. One was the Herman Girls Team and the other, Sherer-Sherman, was formed in 1937. The coaches, Ralph Sherer, Dr. Claude Martin and Dr. Joe Bigsby, became interested in forming an All-Star team and entering them in the Missouri State Softball Tournament. Each coach selected the best players from his team. They combined the talented players into one team that showed amazing power in hitting, pitching, and teamwork that was unmatched. This outstanding team became known as the Kirksville All-Stars.

The lucky and obviously talented group of ladies that were chosen to represent the All-Stars were Marguerite Buban, Wilda Sherer, Mildred West, Josephine Buban, Sarah Rose Maize, Kathryn Buban, Ann Radosevich, Maggie Weber, Lucille Siegmund, Mary Frkovich, Phyllis Tipton, Zola Shearer, Fern Hill, Mary Wheeler, and Lucille Gregory.

The All-Stars won the state championship at St. Joseph, Missouri, during the Labor Day weekend in 1938. The townspeople rallied behind them and sent them to Chicago, Illinois, for the national championships. The Kirksville All-Stars played their first game, which was one of five games being played simultaneously, at Soldier’s Field; they were defeated. The girls returned to Kirksville determined to go back to nationals.

Practices were held on a regular basis. The women tried to get together at least every other day, and if possible, more often. Each of the girls had other concerns such as their jobs, schooling, and duties at home. Afternoon and morning practices were routine, but evening practices were not uncommon. When official practices were not held, the four Buban sisters were known to grab their gear and practice in a vacant lot near their home.

When the team did get down to practicing, it was taken very seriously and each individual girl worked toward her own personal potential. Each position was practiced with the utmost care. “We didn’t practice every day, but when we did, we were expected to be the very best,” said Mrs. Marguerite (Buban) Prather. Soon, softball became a major part of their lives. They were put on diets, practiced on a regular basis, and were sure to get plenty of rest.

The girls received their uniforms and equipment through different merchants. “Kirksville was on the front and on the back we advertised our donator’s business,” commented Mrs. Prather. In addition, the ladies were also given traveling suits, on two separate occasions, from the merchants. “They were very nice. I guess you could say they
were fancy,” Mrs. Prather said. “The area merchants were all very supportive,” added Mrs. Maggie (Weber) Mudd. Mrs. Weber was a member of the All-Star team and recalled several examples of spectator support. “When we played my whole hometown would come to see us play.” Huge crowds of the local townspeople would come to the home games and many out-of-town games as well. The gate fee was 10 cents. They played many games at Stickler Field which was one of the newer and nicer ballfields of this area. Stickler Field, built by Dr. R. O. Stickler, was situated on Highway 11 East where Pfeiffer Field is currently located.

The girls played several teams, some from out-of-state: Arizona; Lucas, Iowa, which over 1,000 people attended; and Des Moines, Iowa, who succeeded in attracting over 1,400 spectators. These teams were all subject to the All-Star’s wrath. Was it wrath or was it pure team work and determination? The girls worked together as a team. “We all played together and enjoyed playing the game,” said Mrs. Prather. “They always said that you never got any arguments out of the Kirksville team. If there were any arguments the coach took care of them. To me that’s the best way to be.” What made the team so effective? The love and respect for the game and more importantly, each other. The countless days of sweat, conditioning, training, and hard work finally paid off.

The Kirksville All-Stars were again crowned the Women’s State Softball Champions on Labor Day, 1941, in Jefferson City, Missouri. That seemed to be the ‘frosting on the cake’ for the ladies’ season, but the coaches had other plans for this gifted group. The National Softball Championships were being held in Detroit, Michigan. That was where these women belonged. That was where they were headed.

The girls had the record to prove they belonged at Nationals. Now all they needed was the money to get there. The girls were determined to go, so they and their coaches pulled together every ounce of imagination into hosting fundraisers. They sponsored ice cream socials at the Kirksville Armory and played in several benefit games for donations, some of which were against men’s teams. On one occasion the band didn’t appear for a dance so to improvise, one of the attending citizens brought his nickelodeon and created one of the funniest activities that they held. Many area businesses donated to the team as well. “We were lucky enough that people around helped us out,” said Mrs. Prather. It was hard work, but exciting also. The women had enough money to get to Detroit!

Many of the Kirksville girls also filled in for other teams that were short of players. On occasion, Mrs. Prather and Mildred West filled in for the St. Joseph, Missouri team. By this time the Kirksville team had changed a bit. St. Joseph, Missouri players, Imogene Pipes, LaVeta King, and Alice Ward, played for the 1941 Kirksville All-Stars. Maggie Weber, Zola Shearer and Phyllis Tipton left the team and the new players joined such as Louise Buban and Mary Jane Phillips. Many of the original members remained on the team, with G. E. “Shag” Grossnickle as their coach.

The All-Stars left Kirksville on Tuesday, September 9, 1941, in order to arrive in time for the welcoming parade, and the first game on Wednesday. Upon arrival at the welcoming parade, recalled Mrs. Prather, a group of individuals were curious as to whether or not they were going to wear shoes during the parade, since they were from Missouri. “We were poor little country girls to them,” said Mrs. Mudd. The team received a bye in the first round, winning their first game automatically. The All-Stars played Tulsa, Oklahoma, on Thursday, September 11. The pitcher of the opposing team was nicknamed the “Strike-Out Queen.” That lends itself as to how tough this team was to beat. Coach “Shag” Grossnickle said, “We were defeated in the last inning 1-0. Statistic-wise we played a better ball game, we had nine hits and they had two.” He added, “The team that beat us went on to win the National Championships.”

The team returned to the Arlington Hotel in Detroit where they stayed. They packed their bags and returned home riding in the automobiles of Mayor Bartlett, Mr. and Mrs. Cory Siegmund, Carl Johnson, and Mr. and Mrs. Goodman.

Even though victory was not theirs, the memories of the good times, and the bad, will be theirs forever. In the words of Mrs. Prather, “We all loved the game and we all got along. We had fun and it was worth it.” The story does not end there. The team did dissolve after the tournament. “World War II had begun and we had family and friends tied up in the War, so we had other things to be concerned with,” said Mrs. Mudd.

Many still remain in the Missouri area, and still make it a point to keep in touch. Mrs. Prather, Mrs. Mudd, and Sarah Rose (Maize) Grossnickle still live in Kirksville. Lucille (Siegmund) McClain resides in Quincy, Illinois, and Wilda (Sherer) Morris lives in Macon, Missouri. Josephine (Buban) Gridler, lives in Richmond, Missouri, and has not ended her career yet at age 62. She is an active member of the Stet women’s team, and is currently playing on the same team as her twin daughters, Donna and Debbie. It is uncommon for her to pitch as many as five games in one weekend and is viewed as one of the most valuable players on the team. They still remain the best of friends, and try to keep up-to-date on each others whereabouts and activities.

Though the candle of victory has long since died out, the memories of their years of triumph as the Women’s State Softball Champions and the team that made it all the way to nationals, will burn in their hearts forever.

By Andrea Vorkink
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The 1938 All-Stars of Kirksville, Missouri. The girls are in their first official uniforms, donated by Kirksville area merchants. (Photo courtesy of Marguerite Prather)