

JACKIE MITCHELL

Throughout the 20th century, women gained a lot of ground in earning the respect they deserved. One who cleared a path for many women to follow was Jackie Mitchell, the first woman to play baseball in the minor leagues and be signed to an all-male team as a pitcher.

Jackie was born in 1914 under the name of Virnett Beatrice “Jackie” Mitchell, and was inspired by her father to play the game. Throughout her teenage years, she attended baseball camps and played in many amateur games—once even striking out nine men in succession. It is said of Mitchell today that she was one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history. While attending a pitching camp in March of 1931, in Atlanta, she was approached by Joe Engel, the owner of the Southern Association’s AA Chattanooga Lookouts, to sign on as a pitcher for the team. She was seventeen years old.

Mitchell received unfair treatment from many critics and the media. But, refusing to fall to their expectations, she stood her ground. On April 2, 1931, with a crowd of 4,000 people and dozens of reporters, she played the game of her life. When she entered the game, the fans of New York did not take her seriously, and the first batter she faced was baseball hero, Babe Ruth. Her best pitch was a sinker, and that was the first pitch she threw. Ruth swung and missed. She then pitched two balls, followed by another sinker—Ruth missed again. On her last pitch, catching the corner of the plate, Ruth was caught looking. In only five pitches, Mitchell had struck out a baseball legend in her first attempt as a professional pitcher.

The next to bat was Lou Gehrig, or more commonly known as the “Sultan of Swat” and the “Iron Horse.” It only took three pitches and Gehrig swinging and missing for the fans to take Mitchell and her talent more seriously.

The third batter was Tony Lazzari, whom Mitchell walked. She was immediately pulled from the game, and Clyde Barfoot, the starting pitcher, was back in. The Lookouts ended up losing the game with a score of 14-4.

That game on April 2, 1931, was the only Major/Minor League game Mitchell ever played in. By the next day, Baseball Commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis voided her contract. He claimed that baseball was “too strenuous” for women, and proceeded to ban all women from the game. Mitchell was crushed, but she did not stop playing. She was active in many women teams and exhibition contests. But for Jackie Mitchell, being a woman in baseball was not acceptable, nor would it be during her career. After endless and degrading jokes, like playing an inning while riding a donkey, she found herself burned out by the critics and retired at the age of 23. She went to work for her father and later married. In 1987, Mitchell died at the age of 73.

Jackie Mitchell did not live long enough to see the rewards of her efforts and hard work in breaking down barriers for women. In 1992, the ban for women to play baseball was lifted. There are few women in the Professional League today, but more and more young girls are joining Little League teams and playing at college and high school levels. Mitchell’s silent courage and natural skill was just the beginning for women—not just in baseball, but in all sports.