



THE GIRLS OF SUMMER

by Joan Ogden

It was the summer of 1961 and my home team was winning. On weekends, I joined my dad in front of the TV to watch the magnificent Yankees in action. He sipped Scotch and explained the fine points of the game. I cheered as the runs came in. Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris and Yogi Berra were like my uncles, my big brothers. I loved them, everything about them. The way they kicked the dust from their cleats and swung two bats to warm up; the pin-striped uniforms they wore for home games, even the tobacco they chewed.

Every day that summer I was outside, playing ball with the neighborhood kids. I longed to swing two bats and wear a Yankee cap with the magical NY logo. My friend next door Lucy Miller and my sister Augusta were similarly star struck, and by 10 am, we had taken over Lucy's big backyard, marked it out with bases, and piled up dirt to make a real pitcher's mound. Mr. Miller had a rolling lime dispenser to fertilize his lawn, which was just the thing for marking baselines. Once the ballpark was groomed to our satisfaction, we set about rounding up players. There

were about forty kids on my block alone, most of them running around outside in unsupervised summer bliss. It wasn't hard to find teammates, but it tended to be an all-girl roster. In the last year or so, the boys had decided they didn't want to play with us anymore. They had little league, after all, with proper uniforms and coaches.

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All we girls had were hand-me-down gloves, well-worn bats and balls, and a homemade home plate.

But our assembled ragtag band of neighborhood girls had high spirits. “Play ball!” called Lucy. The game went on until dinnertime when Augusta and I trooped home, tired and happy from running around all day. That night we dreamed of the Yankees.

I don't remember who came up with the notion that we should organize ourselves into a real team, like the little leaguers. But all of us were captivated by the idea. Lucy offered her backyard as our ball field, and her garage as our dugout. Eight girls signed on right away. At our first practice, we spent hours deciding on a name for the team. After much debate, we chose “She-Wolves.” Several of us were reading Jack London's tales of the Yukon that summer, and all of us loved dogs.

The team got serious about playing ball. Lucy's Dad coached us, and encouraged us to practice running and throwing. We assigned ourselves positions. I was pitcher, Augusta was catcher and Lucy played outfield. As the summer ripened, we did get better and began to feel team pride.

Then one morning, Lucy's 14 year old brother Danny ambled over to watch us play. Before long he was shaking his head and laughing.

“Hey,” said Lucy. “Quit! I think we're pretty good,”

“You think so,” sniffed Danny, “But what kind of dopey team never plays other teams? How do you know you're any good if you've never even won a game?”

Danny's question kind of ruined the day, because he was right. We did need to play a game against a real team, and win. But where could we find another team? That afternoon I asked my friends Eddie and Rick, brothers who lived across the street, if their little league team would like to play us.

"Are you kidding?" Eddie looked at me like I'd gone crazy. "The guys would laugh me out of town if I asked them to play a bunch of girls!"

"Only babies play against girls," added Rick earnestly.

The team stood around glumly, as I reported this conversation. Then Augusta spoke up.

"Well, there is this girl in my grade." Everyone looked up expectantly. "You know Jessie Whitfield?"

We'd all heard of Jessie. She was the best athlete in town, a charismatic, tough girl with a loyal group of followers. But we didn't really know her. Jessie lived on the other side of town and went to a different school. Besides she was never around in the summer. She went to sleep away camp where she reportedly learned to ride horses and paddle canoes.

"I saw her at the grocery store yesterday." Augusta continued, turning to me. "She's back from camp. I have a feeling she'd like to play and I think you could talk her into it."

Augusta's intuition was seldom wrong, so we decided to try. The She-wolves crammed into Lucy's room to listen, and Lucy handed me her princess phone. I dialed and a woman answered.



That week the She-wolves practiced like never before, and Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris hit home runs and broke records.

"Hello, Mrs. Whitfield? This is Joan Ogden from Bayview Elementary, fifth grade. May I please speak to Jessie?"

Jessie seemed surprised to get a call from a random kid from the other side of town, but agreed to meet me at the school yard to talk. That afternoon I rode my bike to Bayview Elementary, and Jessie was waiting. Her mother sat in the car, with the windows rolled up and the A/C on. Jessie herself seemed cool and confident. I was a bit intimidated as she looked me over. I took a breath and plunged ahead.

"Hey, I'm Joan, and I want to invite you to a championship baseball game. My team would like to play you and your friends. One game series. Losing team buys the winners ice cream at Beyer's drugstore."

Jessie looked at me intently, then broke into a smile. "OK. When and

where?"

"How about next Saturday 10 am? Right here. Bayview playground."

"It's a deal. What's your name again?"

"Joan."

We shook hands. The game was on.

That week the She-wolves practiced like never before, and Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris hit home runs and broke records. On Saturday morning, we pedaled to school. Jessie and her friends were there, with gloves in hand. But the school yard was surrounded by a six foot cyclone fence and the gate was locked. We couldn't get in.

The girls from both teams groaned. "Now what do we do?"

Jessie waved me over. "Gimme your glove," she said.

I handed it over. Jessie took off her own glove and threw both gloves over the fence.

"Let's go," she said, and both teams cheered as Jessie, then Augusta, then me, and then everyone climbed over the fence and we played ball. I've forgotten who won, but we had a great time afterwards at Beyer's eating ice cream, talking about the game and those Yanks. Jessie became my friend in junior high. ♦



Joan Ogden is a retired professor of Environmental Science and Policy, who lives in Davis. Her research interests are sustainable energy, zero emission transportation and energy transitions. She loves travel, and enjoys hobbies such as playing music and writing. Joan grew up near New York City, and still likes the Yankees.

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