

Reliving the fun that never was

By Melissa Isaacson | Jun 30, 2014

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A small chest in our coat closet held scarves, hats, odd gloves with no partners and the real treasure that only I recognized.

The flannel baseball caps with the "L" for Lincolnwood stitched on were discarded there after each Little League season, in various colors and sizes, nothing my older brothers probably thought a thing about but magnificent to me.

They were fitted in those days, so they seldom fit me, the pipsqueak of the family at seven and a half years younger than my next-oldest brother, Richard, nine years younger than Barry and 12 years younger than my sister, Susie.

I remember trying them on in the privacy of the bathroom, no reason to wear them anywhere else and no desire to be laughed out of town.

Little League was for boys, and so were its caps. I could play with my brothers and their buddies all I wanted in the backyard or bank parking lot. I could fire thousands of pitches to my neighbor Anthony Lanzilotti. But only the boys got real uniforms and played on real fields with real dugouts (OK, benches) and real fans (OK, parents).

I don't even remember being angry, just jealous. I knew I was as good as some of them, just like I knew the boy plucking grass in the outfield didn't have a clue how lucky he was. But we didn't know any better back then, not the girls and not the boys.

So I pressed my face against the fence and watched for an inning or two before going back home and waiting for Anthony.

I was just short of 13 in the summer of 1974, the year of baseball emancipation for girls in this country, but no one told me. By the time Congress officially rewrote Little League's charter the following winter and Title IX was written into law, I was already playing my first year of organized softball.

It wasn't quite as exciting as baseball, but we got T-shirts (with a drawing of a 1950s-style girl with cascading curls) and we got caps, with a feminine script "L."

That was OK. It was also OK when the half-dozen or so of us who knew how to play were spread carefully among the half-dozen or so teams, all coached by mothers. That

experiment lasted as long as it took for one mom, somewhat unfamiliar with both the rules and etiquette of the game, to try to pull a fast one and bat my friend Shirley in the cleanup spot, then again in the 6-hole and again at No. 9.

Shirley did what she was told, clobbering a home run each time until someone caught on and hilarity -- and cursing -- ensued.

But this was girls' sports as we knew them back then. If we were lucky, we played basketball beginning in seventh grade. And then we went to high school and got real uniforms, shared by every girls' team in the school.

It wasn't until I interviewed [Maria Pepe for the accompanying story on pioneering girls in Little League](#) that I think I truly realized what I had missed.

Pepe told the story about giving her cap -- which she wore for three games in 1972 before Little League threatened to pull her league's charter -- to Williamsport for display in its museum, then having it sent to Cooperstown when the Hall of Fame called five years ago.

She began crying as she told the story and I assumed she was touched, but that wasn't it at all.

"It's almost like I still miss it in my home," she said. "It still hurts. It will always hurt."

She apologized for being emotional. I told her it was OK. But I was shocked.

Because I was crying, too.