

Tom, Thanks for A League of their Own

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A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN (1992)

Directed by Penny Marshall

Written by Kim Wilson, Kelly Candaele, Lowell Ganz, & Babaloo Mandel

Starring Geena Davis, Lori Petty, & Tom Hanks as Jimmy Dugan

Let's remember gym class. Beachwood and linoleum, colours and stripes that seemed to mean nothing. Heavy wool curtains polluted with radiator dust and faded from the light of translucent subway-block windows. Heaven-high ceilings, speckled by a constellation of grimy plyboard. Racks of shredded yellow Nerf balls. Track pants and white-bottomed sneakers, because this absurd tradition had the power to dock grades over denim, and God forbid you scuff up the disgusting floors. The rush of achieving a state of play during school hours. The fear of getting picked last.

I can't imagine how they rationalized the dreaded Schoolyard Pick in my lifetime, but they did. I was there, and no amount of feigned indifference could soften the blow. The funny thing is, physical education is meant to empathize with all athletic proficiencies. But because it keeps students engaging equally, a power dynamic forms. Kids that love sports excel, and are frustrated by the pace of those that don't. That's flawed enough. The low to which we don't need to stoop is a practice whereby teams are drafted by two almighty alpha-kids, who take turns effectively ranking their classmates in descending order. But let me tell ya, we did it that way at Caledonia Jr High circa 2005. Ironically, the Schoolyard Pick is designed to promote balance and fairness. But as a kid that played with Lego, and wrote poems, and was never brave enough to attempt that skating maneuver where you stop at an abrupt angle to a flare of kickass snow shavings, the fairness was lost on me.

All this said, you can go mad expecting fairness in sports. As a spectator, you can't rely on them to make you feel good. As a player, the semantics of age-groups, weight-classes, gender equity, defining PED's, etc, are never-ending discussions. There are but two basic tenets of sports: everybody gets to play & everybody follows the rules. Even at the highest ranks, both are yet to be perfected.

Thus, A League of their Own is set in an imperfect age; one often remembered as *the good old days*, when the second World War occupied so many men that sports organizations were forced to mount the corporate experiment that came to be known as the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (*spit*). We meet Dottie Hinson (Geena Davis), chore-laden wife of the deployed, as she's approached in a barn by the scout tasked with rounding up some women who can play ball. He's misogyny personified. Dottie doesn't love baseball to the same extent as her kid sister, but she agrees to attend tryouts on the condition her sister can tryout too. Dirty linens and things-to-be-done and the unpaved valleys of the south, it's all very Steinbeck-Gothic.

Carole King sings Now and Forever as we follow the girls to the ball field, where both Dottie and her sister Kit earn spots as members of the Rockford Peaches, along with Rosie O'Donnell, Megan Cavanagh, and Madonna, who manages to get a little dancing in, but still doesn't meet the male-imposed standards of what makes a lady - none of them do. They're dressed in dainty, impractical uniforms, they're given elegance classes, and they're assigned a coach from the men's league. Jimmy Dugan is a washed-up former slugger who's star faded in the instant of a knee injury - the same one that's kept him out of the war, and constantly drinking to the point of belligerence. That's right. 31 minutes into A League of their Own, we meet a sloppy, crude SOB who looks remarkably like Tom Hanks.

I should have known TH veered from his signature Awesome Fella type in this movie. After all, his most famous line involves him screaming at a person about her emotions. But it's a neutral expectation that he'll be likeable in all things! The same innate charm allows him to pull off cat-calls like "You gorgeous stack of pancakes, you." Of course, by the end, he has found it in his cold heart to love this team, with a little help from the ever-rational protagonist.

Make no mistake, this is Dottie's movie - a curious choice given that all these characters are loosely based on real trailblazers, and Dottie's tenure as a Peach ends after one season, when her husband is honourably discharged. But it works because it's a movie about the snapshots of hindsight, and the impact of quick memories. It's set to a proud, symphonic score and takes place entirely in the dirt, but there's no expectation of the audience to watch any baseball; it's just a series of conversations split between expository headline transitions. With these simple mechanics, Penny Marshall's '92 classic feels more like a contemporary of *Gone With the Wind* than *Reservoir Dogs*. It ends with a reunion of the original Rockford Peaches as older women (Lynn Cartwright plays old Dottie but I honestly thought it was Geena in exceptional make-up), and the credits roll as they play ball together again. They still run, they still argue with the ump, and they still give it their all, because sisters are always sisters.

In grade 9, we played ball hockey on the gym floor. If I wasn't picked last, it was close, but please understand, I get it! The team-selection process wasn't the kids' design, and I wouldn't have picked me for my stick-handling coordination either. But by the grace of God, when the ball came my way, I took my shot and scored. It was a great feeling, but an even better one followed at the whistle when one of my sporty classmates came up to give me a run-down of what to do next. This had never happened. He called me *big guy*. As much time as I spent feeling awkward in gym, that remains my first and clearest memory of that class. We're hard-wired to keep the good old days safe inside us, as reference tools for when good new days come. No matter when you're picked, lighten up and play ball, you gorgeous stack of pancakes, you.

Thx!