9781990160424 Ice in Their Veins

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Sample Chapter: "A League of Their Own"

There's a bandshell in a local park I go to once in a while during the summer. Most days, kids are there smoking pot and getting chased off. Once a week, however, the local concert band assembles to perform songs from the archives of jazz or pop. Families like mine spread blankets on the grass, couples unfold lawn chairs with wine hidden in mugs and, as the night closes, a hat is passed around for donations. At the opposite end of the park is the armoury, a large ornate building a few hundred feet in length. Inside, spiral staircases rise to a catwalk overlooking the historic tile floor. On weekends, the armoury is transformed for weddings; at Christmas, it is illuminated and filled with vendors.

Between the bandshell and the armoury, Tecumseh Park hosts a lawn bowling club. To most, this patch of manicured green space along the Thames River and its participants dressed in all-white are the only hint that sport ever existed here. But only a few dozen steps away is a plaque commemorating Marion Watson who, in 1946, made her professional baseball debut in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). The plaque describes Marion's humble start playing in Tecumseh Park for the Chatham Silverwoods and Maple City Laundry, a team she led to a provincial championship in 1939. It also describes her 1946 season in the AAGPBL, playing for the Peoria Redwings. A talented pitcher, Watson's career was cut short only a season later. During spring training in Cuba, she broke her leg sliding into home plate and never returned to the game.

Immortalized in the 1992 film *A League of Their Own,* the AAGPBL was founded in 1943 by Major League Baseball executives anxious to capture the imagination of sports fans while

millions of American men fought in World War II. This “lipstick league” was marketed as a novelty that juxtaposed femininity with athleticism. As league president and Baseball Hall of Famer Max Carey stated, “Femininity is the keynote of our league; no pants-wearing, tough-talking female softballer will play on any of our four teams.” Players were required to wear skirts and attend charm school where they learned how to apply make-up and behave appropriately in social settings. For owners intent on keeping stadiums filled, the league was a success, drawing upwards of 900,000 fans at its peak.[1] In 1988, Watson and the rest of the AAGPBL were recognized by the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. A decade later, Watson, along with sixty-seven other Canadian players, was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame.

Although it is the best known, the AAGPBL was not the first all-women’s sports league. Founded in Montreal in 1915, the Eastern Ladies Hockey League (ELHL) also kept arenas full and fans entertained while men were at war. Working-class women were thrust into jobs in factories and stores where they ably replaced men fighting overseas. Previously a pastime of the elite, women from all social groups now found hockey a viable option. As M. Ann Hall wrote in her 2008 book, *Immodest & Sensational: 150 Years of Canadian Women in Sport,* “Ice hockey was no longer a game played primarily by women in universities or from the more bourgeois sectors of society, because thousands of working-class girls took up the sport with enormous enthusiasm. It had a wide following among factory workers, department store clerks, secretaries and the like, especially in small towns, and slowly they began to organize themselves into leagues and organizations.”

The ELHL was a financial success, drawing thousands of spectators to many games, and producing bona fide stars. Edith Anderson was called a “phenom” by the *Ottawa Citizen*[2] and Eva Ault was nicknamed “Queen of the Ice.”[3] But it was Albertine Lapensée who shone most brightly as the first superstar of women’s hockey. Hailed by fans and newspapers as “the lady hockey marvel,”[4] she was indisputably “the world’s premiere women’s hockeyist.”[5]

Albertine Lapensee was born in Cornwall, Ontario on August 10, 1898, the fifth of seven children who grew up skating on local ponds with her three older brothers. At age seventeen, she joined the Cornwall Victorias of ELHL for the 1915-1916 season and proved an immediate sensation. Fans packed arenas to see her play. As *The Ottawa Journal* wrote, “She was the attraction that resulted in most of the spectators being present. Everyone wanted to see her perform.”[6] She led the Victorias to an undefeated season, winning forty-five games and tying one against another famed club, the Ottawa Alerts. Paced by Lapensée, “a tempestuous and controversial teenage superstar who might be the greatest female player of all time,” the Victorias were nearly unstoppable. The papers called her the “Miracle Maid” and “Star of Stars” helping her celebrity quickly rise as “thousands of fans flock[ed] to her every appearance.” [7]

Lapensée’s talent was undeniable. “She skates, shoots, back checks, and blocks with the ability of any amateur playing the game,” *The Ottawa Journal* asserted.[8] Her shot was so powerful that one opponent, Montreal Westerns’ netminder Corinne Hardman, started wearing a baseball catcher's mask at practice in preparation. Had she donned the face mask during a game,

Hardman would have been the first in hockey history to do so, usurping Queen's University netminder Elizabeth Graham who wore a fencing mask in action in 1926. Three years later, Clint Benedict briefly wore a primitive leather mask in National Hockey Association (NHA) action with the Montreal Wanderers while recovering from a broken nose before Jacques Plante popularized the mask among NHL goalies in 1959.

In New York, teams skating at St. Nicholas Rink formed America's first noted women's team in 1916. St. Nicholas' top player was Elsie Muller who, like her Canadian counterparts, grew up skating outdoors, as indoor rinks were primarily reserved for men. She skated on the Hudson River and later at Lake Placid, representing the United States in speed skating at the 1932 Olympics. Captaining St. Nicholas, Muller "proved herself to be among the very best women ice hockey players of her era."[9]

The success of the ELHL was a catalyst for the formation of teams in Pittsburgh, New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Cleveland. In 1916, the Cornwall Victorias and Ottawa Alerts played a three-game series in front of packed crowds at Cleveland's Elysium Arena that was the de facto Canadian championship, despite being played in the United States. Cornwall won all three games, with Lapensée collecting fifteen of her team's eighteen goals. The Alerts would return to the USA in 1917 to play a three-game series against the Pittsburgh Polar Maids, further aiding in the migration of competitive women's hockey.

The ELHL's on-ice talent, led by Lapensée, Anderson and Ault, even sparked speculation that the NHA, the NHL's predecessor, would begin to "draft the best of the women players."[10] Lapensée, on talent alone, drew envy from men and women. The *Ottawa Journal* maintained that she could "shoot as good as any forward in the NHA,"[11] and *The Montreal Star* observed, "There are a good number of boys in Cornwall who wish they were as adept with the stick and as clever on skates as Miss Lapensee. If they were they could be commanding good salaries in one or other of the big league teams."[12]

Albertine Lapensée was regularly compared to the top men's players of the day. "To see Miss Lapsenée's rushes would make you think of [Hall of Fame member] Sprague Cleghorn."[13] These comparisons soon sparked rumours that, given her dominance, she must be a man. The more she scored, the more people entertained this notion, which *The Montreal Star* stated was "gaining currency on account of her being so superior to any other lady player and her agility on the steel blades."[14] Unable to defeat her, accusations stemmed not only from the media, but from her opponents "and their supporters" who claimed "she really was a boy in girls' clothing."[15]

During a game against the Montreal Westerns, an opponent pulled the toque from her head, hoping to show the presumed shortness of her hair. Instead, the action "caused (her hair) to fall in long braids down over her shoulders." Similarly, in a game against the Ottawa Alerts, the Ottawa team brought Lapensée to their dressing room to ascertain her womanhood and "settle the matter." At the end of the1915-16 season, an investigation by *The Montreal Star* found that although Lapensée's "style resembles that of the average male professional to such an extent that it is little wonder that people unacquainted with the girl are led to believe from her play that

she is a boy," the claims were false. Moreover, the paper stated, Lapensée's ability "only goes to show what degree of perfection young ladies can acquire in athletics if they are inclined that way and practice diligently."[16]

Throughout the 1916-1917 season, Lapensée continued to draw crowds by the thousands whenever stepped on the ice—without any compensation. Like the generations of women who would follow, her fight for equality failed. As Bruce Yaccato wrote in *The Montreal Gazette,* "Typical of the challenges women in sport have faced, Lapensée realized how much money was being made filling arenas to witness her skills, that she requested to be paid. When she was refused, Lapensée walked away from the league at age 18, ending the phenom's reign."[17]

Following the 1917 season, Lapensée left the game of hockey and moved to New York, perhaps "drawn by the wonderful stories told her of the United States Metropolis."[18] Some believed this included the ability to more freely express a more masculine gender. Whether it was to avoid constant gender policing, protest the lack of pay equity or escape media scrutiny, Lapensée left Cornwall and, without their star, the Victorias folded.

At the time, the *Montreal Star* observed, presciently, that "Montreal may never see Miss Albertine Lapensee, the lady hockey marvel, again."[19] The only subsequent surfaced in American newspapers a month later claiming that Lapensée, "by far the speediest skater and most nimble player among the fair devotees of the Dominion's national winter sport"[20] might continue playing with St. Nicholas Rink. That rumor proved unfounded and Lapensée largely disappeared from the public record. A profile of the family published in the *Cornwall Standard Freeholder* on March 18, 1940, refers to her as Mrs. Albert Schmidt of New York but there is no other record of her life after hockey, including when she died.

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[17] Yaccato, “Puck Pioneers Captivate a City.”
[18] “Miss Lapensee Gone To New York Says Z. Runions.”
[19] “Miss Lapensee Gone To New York Says Z. Runions.”
[20] “Girls Ready for Hockey.”