

Mahon, Elizabeth "Lib"

By Jim Sargent

From the Official Website of the AAGPBL
All-American Girls Professional Baseball League
Players Association ([link](#))

From 1943 through 1954, when the All-American Girls Base Ball League operated in the Midwest, baseball was regarded as part of the male world. Females, if they played ball, usually played fast-pitch softball—a sport that became popular during the Great Depression of the 1930s. But Elizabeth Mahon (pronounced M-AN), who grew up playing ball with her brothers in Greenville, South Carolina, proved herself to be a very good baseball player in the All-American League, as most players and fans called the girls' league. A lifetime .248 hitter who batted in 400 runs during her nine seasons, "Lib" enjoyed an impressive baseball career that opened the door to many opportunities, including her second career as a teacher and a counselor as well as her induction into the South Carolina Athletic Hall of Fame.

By the time she was picked for the postseason All-Star team of the All-American League in 1946, Mahon had become a top-notch hitter for her ballclub, the South Bend (Indiana) Blue Sox. That year, for example, she led the league with 72 RBIs, and she hit .276, the sixth best average for players with at least 100 at-bats. Further, Lib showed occasional power, slugging seven doubles, seven triples, and a home run. Three years later, in 1949, she led the league again in RBIs, driving home 60 runners.

In 1946, one of Mahon's triples led South Bend to a 13-9 victory over the league-leading Grand Rapids Chicks. On Monday, July 14, the two teams clashed at South Bend's Playland Park, and 2,916 fans enjoyed the 10-hit attack of their diamond heroines. It was the largest Monday crowd to date for South Bend. That audience brought the club's total to 47,715 in 1946, only 2,000 below the total Blue Sox attendance for 1945, the last wartime season.

South Bend tied the second-place Racine Belles with the victory, and the hard-hitting Mahon swung the biggest bat. The game was a see-saw affair, thanks in part to Grand Rapids' Audrey Haines's walking twelve Blue Sox hitters before being relieved in the seventh inning. The home team also stole twelve bases. Meanwhile, South Bend's hurler, Phyllis "Sugar" Koehn (pronounced CANE), went the distance, allowing nine hits and four walks.

The Blue Sox scored in every inning except the eighth, and Mahon's blast came in the seventh. With her team holding a 10-9 lead, Lib lined a bases-loaded triple to right center field, giving her four runs batted in for the evening. Koehn also received timely backing from the bats of Marge Stefani, Inez Voyce, and Senaida "Shoo-Shoo" Wirth, each of whom drove in two runs. Besides Mahon, Daisy Junor was the only other South Bend player with two hits.

Two days later, in a Wednesday night outing against the Chicks, Mahon showed the home crowd more all-star hitting. The Blue Sox won easily, 13-5, this time before 2,522 fans. Although making three errors and handing the visitors three unearned runs in the first frame, South Bend collected 11 hits off three Grand Rapids pitchers. Mahon contributed three base hits, scored three runs, and batted in two teammates. Daisy Junor and Shoo-Shoo Wirth added two hits apiece. After scoring four runs in the bottom of the first inning, the Blue Sox won going away. Left-hander Viola Thompson—the only other South Carolina athlete to make the AAGPBL—earned the victory, scattering eight hits and giving up only two runs after the first inning.

Those kinds of performances characterized Lib Mahon's 1946 season, a year when she usually batted clean-up. Beginning her professional career in 1944 with Minneapolis, she played three weeks for the Millerettes before being traded to the Kenosha Comets. After being traded to South Bend in 1945, Mahon played the rest of her nine seasons with the Blue Sox. A right-handed batter, she proved to be one of the league's best run producers throughout her career.

Attractive, witty, and forthright, the 5'7" 135-pound brunette from Greenville, South Carolina, became very popular in South Bend. When a shortage of teachers developed for the 1946-47 academic year, she was offered a position in the city's schools. A 1942 graduate of Winthrop College, Lib taught physical education. After earning a Master's degree at Indiana University in 1960, she became a guidance counselor. Retiring in 1981, she continued to live in South Bend until her death on September 6, 2001.

Born into the family of Pearl and David Mahon on November 18, 1919, one year after the Great War ended, Lib was one of six children. Her father was a big baseball fan, as was her older brother, and her three older sisters handled most of the chores around home. Lib became the family's first all-around athlete. She and her younger brother Fred often played sandlot ball and games like marbles.

At age twelve, Lib began playing for a company basketball team sponsored by the Brandon Cotton Mill, where her father worked. Two older sisters, Katherine and Nancy, also played. Katherine and Lib were forwards and Nancy was a guard, that is, a defender. The mill sponsored men and women's basketball teams and also a men's baseball team. In those days the mill teams competed in industrial leagues.

"When I was a kid," Lib recalled in a 1997 interview, "my Dad drove a truck for the Brandon Mill. He would drag the baseball field on Saturday mornings when they were going to play a game at home that afternoon. I would go with him. If we were there long enough, I would shag flies in the outfield when the men came to warm up. They would take batting practice, and I would shag flies."

In the summer after her junior year of high school, Lib played her first season of organized fast-pitch softball. At that time, South Carolina did not offer interscholastic sports for girls, a common practice of the era. Dunean Mills sponsored Lib's team. The team played home games in Greenville, and for road games, the girls traveled to towns as far as 35-40 miles away.

“On one of those jaunts,” Lib recollected in 1997, “I played against Viola Thompson, who came up with me to play ball in 1944. She lived in Anderson, South Carolina, and she was the southpaw pitcher for the Anderson team. Her dad worked for a mill, too.

“I remember I hit a home run over the center fielder’s head off her. After the ball game, she said, ‘Lib, did you have to do that to me?’”

“That was the first organized softball I played. Around home, we’d pick up little games and go out and play in a cow pasture, within a couple or three blocks from my house. We played with a hard baseball. Our family was very poor, ‘poor but proud.’

“Somebody would have a baseball, and somebody else would have a bat. We would make bases out of whatever we could pick up. Then we’d play ball in a cow pasture. That was when I was much younger than a junior in high school.

“Betsy Jochum and I have talked about that a lot. Because we were pretty good athletes, we’d get to play on teams with the boys, because the girls usually weren’t good enough.”

Lib also played intramural sports at Parker High, including field hockey, basketball, and soccer. After graduating in 1937, she continued working at the Brandon Mill, where she had worked the afternoon shift (four o’clock until midnight) as a senior. One year later, an aunt offered to pay her way through Winthrop College. Lib talked it over with her parents and accepted the opportunity.

“Things were so cheap back in the Great Depression. My Dad would buy me a train ticket from Greenville back to Winthrop College, in Rock Hill, with a five-dollar bill. The ticket was \$1.20. He’d give me the change from that ticket, and it would last me until the next time I could get some money, which might be a month. In those days, parents would send boxes of food to their kids in college.

“I went to school on a shoestring. My aunt paid the tuition. My sisters, who were working, helped me out with a few bucks here and there. The same aunt who sent me to college could sew well, and she would make me some clothes. We had to wear uniforms at Winthrop College, or as it was called then, South Carolina College for Women. The uniforms were navy blue or white, or some combination thereof. It was a tough row to hoe, but I made it!

“I finished college in 1942 with a degree in physical education, what else?” she asked, with a laugh. “I had a minor in science and in English, because I always liked English-type subjects

“Had I not gone to college, I might have ended up working in a cotton mill. Thank God for a college education and for the opportunity to play ball, too. That changed my life completely.” After college, Mahon spent one year in Whitmire, South Carolina, teaching all subjects to a class of seventh graders and earning \$90 a month.

“All the teachers in that town, high school and elementary, lived in two houses. I had a room which cost \$30 a month, and our meals were served there. The food was absolutely wonderful! At the end of that school year, I had \$33 left between me and starvation.”

Remembering those years, she said, “The next year I got a job in the U.S. Post Office making 65 cents an hour, which was more money than \$90 a month. I lived in Greenville with my parents.

“That’s when the president of the Greenville Spinners, Jimmy Gaston, came to my window in the Post Office. I was playing softball in Greenville on the same team with Viola Thompson. He knew that I would go with my Dad and watch the Spinners play.

“Jimmy Gaston said, ‘Lib, how would you like go up North and play ball for money?’

“That’s the way I got the opportunity to play with the All-American Girls. They signed me for \$60 a week. Viola and I took a train to LaSalle-Peru, Illinois, for spring training in 1944. Thank God for the Army! Those poor guys on the train helped us carry luggage and everything else.”

At spring training, Mahon and Thompson met players from the original four franchises, the Racine Belles, the Kenosha Comets (both in Wisconsin), the Rockford (Illinois) Peaches, and the South Bend Blue Sox, the teams that began league play in 1943. The All-American League planned to field six teams for 1944, the Minneapolis (Minnesota) Millerettes and the Milwaukee Chicks. As a result, the league sent a number of scouts to look for new players for the tryouts. Scouts would contact other baseball men they knew, including local officials like Jimmy Gaston.

Lib recalled, “They looked over what we were able to do for about ten days, you know, throw, and pitch, and hit, and field the ball, and all. Both Viola and I got assigned to a team.”

Mahon was allocated to Minneapolis Millerettes, an expansion team, but she spent just three weeks in Minnesota.

“I came into the league as an infielder. Marty McManus was hitting me ground balls, and watching me throw to first base. I had not properly warmed up, and I kind of hurt my arm the first day of tryouts. I never did throw as well after that.

“Marty McManus had watched me try out, and he was the manager of the Kenosha Comets. He had the opportunity to make a trade, and he sent Anna Meyer to Minneapolis and brought me to Kenosha. I spent the remainder of the year in Kenosha at second base, because I had hurt my arm and couldn’t throw hard. In softball I was either a third baseman or a shortstop most of the time.”

The Winthrop graduate played 107 games during her first season. She hit .211 with a career-best three homers, and produced 38 RBIs. In the off-season she remained in Kenosha, working in a defense plant.

After being traded to South Bend, she spent the first two off-seasons in Greenville doing recreation work.

Mahon explained, "Every year that I played professional ball I was either third, fourth, or fifth batter, sometimes sixth, for our team. I never remember batting in any other position, and I usually batted clean-up or fifth. In South Bend Betsy Jochum would bat either fourth or fifth, and I was ahead or behind her. Betsy was always a good hitter, too."

Mahon began her career in the league's second season. The All-American League's first season was inaugurated by Chicago Cubs' owner Philip Wrigley who used the assistance of Arthur Meyerhoff, his advertising executive, to publicize the new league. Meyerhoff became the league's commissioner in 1945. Wrigley also assigned Ken Sells, then an assistant to the Cubs' general manager, as League President and charged Sells with the day-to-day responsibility of organizing and operating the women's league. Wrigley and his All-American administrators believed baseball was a better spectator sport than softball, so they initially designed the All-American League to play a modified form of fast-pitch softball, which allowed runners to lead-off and steal, making for a faster-paced game than softball.

Beginning with the 1943 season, pitchers used an underhanded delivery to fire a 12-inch circumference ball (official softball size) to the plate, which was set a distance of 40 feet from pitcher to hitter, and the bases were 65 feet apart. The underhanded style of pitching lasted until 1947, when the league allowed a sidearm delivery. In 1948, the AAGPBL went to overhand pitching, making the game closer to men's baseball.

In the meantime, All-American administrators made other changes. The ball's size was decreased in stages, ranging from 12 inches in circumference in 1943, to 11 inches in 1945 and 1946, to 10 3/8 inches in 1948, to 10 inches with red seams from 1949 through 1953, and to 9 1/4 inches (regulation baseball size) in 1954, the league's final season. As the women's circuit moved to a smaller, livelier baseball (notably after 1949) and increased the length of the basepaths (72 feet from 1946 through 1952), the hitters gradually developed an advantage.

In summary, the AAGPBL at its inception played a hybrid form of softball and baseball that never really became baseball until (1) overhand pitching began in 1948, and (2) the ball changed to the red-seamed 10" size in 1949.

Also, from the beginning in 1943 through the final season of 1954, the All-American League was never known as the "All-American Girls PROFESSIONAL Baseball League," even though it was a pro sport. As Merrie Fidler pointed out in her excellent book, *The Origins and History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* (2006), the circuit started out as the "All-American Girls Soft Ball League" in 1943. The closest the official name came to AAGPBL was the "All-American Girls Professional Ball League" in 1944-45. In mid-1943 and from 1946 to 1950 the league's official title was the "All-American Girls Base Ball League." From 1951 to 1954 it was officially titled the "American Girls Baseball League" (AGBL), but it continued to often be referred to as the AAGBBL. Some teams even continued to wear the

AAGBBL patch on their shoulders. Thus, the league as a whole from 1943-1954 can more accurately be described as the "All-American Girls Base Ball League." The name All-American Girls Professional Baseball League was adopted by the former All-Americans when they organized the players' association in 1987. Because of the 1992 movie *A League of Their Own's* association with the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League Players Association, the 1943-1954 league is currently identified as the AAGPBL.

Still, during the years before 1948, the All-American League was a pitcher's loop, and few batters could average .300 or more. For example, South Bend's Betsy Jochum led all hitters with a .296 mark in 1944, and Dorothy Kamenshek paced the hitters with .306 in 1947.

In 1945, when Marty McManus came to South Bend as manager, he traded for three Kenosha players, Lib Mahon, Pauline "Pinky" Pirok, a shortstop, and pitcher Sugar Koehn. To get Pirok, the Blue Sox gave up an outstanding shortstop, Dottie Schroeder, who became the only All-American to play all twelve seasons. Although playing 80 games and hitting .246 with 21 RBIs in 1945, Mahon came into her own in 1946 when she led the league with 72 RBIs.

Overall, Mahon enjoyed eight good seasons with the Blue Sox. Except for 1952 (when she was relegated to a reserve role) and her first season in 1944, she averaged .255 with 49 RBIs per year.

Summarizing the 1946 All-American League's All-Stars, Dell's 1947 Major League Baseball: Facts and Figures reported that Mahon, named to the outfield along with Merle Keagle of Grand Rapids and Thelma "Tiby" Eisen of Peoria, "attained full stardom in right field with the Blue Sox in 1946, batting .276 for 6th spot among the league's regulars and setting a new all-time record for runs-batted-in, as well as leading the league in the important Total Advanced Bases column with 326."

Mahon's Fritsch baseball card indicates she made the All-Star team from 1946 through 1949. In fact, she was an All-Star twice: in 1946 and 1949, but not 1947 or 1948. She suffered an off-year at the plate in 1947, as did many Blue Sox hitters, perhaps because of the modified sidearm pitching delivery used that year. In any event, Lib batted .234 with 23 RBIs. But she enjoyed good seasons in 1948 and 1949, hitting .258 and .245 with 65 and 60 RBIs, respectively. She continued to be one of the league's most dangerous batters with runners in scoring position.

During her career Lib's team was usually a contender, but it wasn't until 1951 that South Bend won the AAGPBL Championship. Her teams performed as follows:

- 1945: Fifth place (of six teams), 49-60 record, and missed Shaughnessy Playoffs.
- 1946: Third place (of eight), 70-42 record, and lost first round of playoffs to the Racine Belles, three games to one.
- 1947: Fourth place (of eight) 57-54, and lost first round of playoffs to the Grand Rapids Chicks, three games to two.

1948: Third place (of five in Eastern Division, and ten teams total), 47-69, and missed playoffs.

1949: Tied the Rockford Peaches for first place (eight teams), 75-36 record, but lost division championship to Rockford in four straight games.

1950: Fifth place (eight teams), 55-55 record, and missed playoffs.

1951: Third place (of eight) in first half of season, 38-22 record, first place in second half, 38-14 mark, and won league championship by defeating Rockford in playoffs.

1952: Second place (six teams), 64-45 record, but won championship by defeating Rockford in playoffs.

During the big 1951 season, Mahon hit .269 and drove home 60 runs, helping pace the Blue Sox to the regular-season pennant. South Bend clinched first place by beating Rockford on Saturday, September 1st, 5-1.

Three days later at Playland Park, in the opener of a best-of-three playoff against Fort Wayne, South Bend right-handed ace Jean Faut stopped the Daisies on six hits, 2-1. Mahon helped tally both runs. She started the scoring by driving in Shirley Stovroff with a single in the second inning. In the fifth, Lib belted a long double to the fence in right center field, and she came home on Betty Wagoner's single to left.

After a one-day delay due to rain, Fort Wayne bounced back and clubbed South Bend, 9-1, thanks to eight and one-third innings of shutout relief pitching by Pat Scott.

But in the crucial third game at Fort Wayne's Memorial Field, Faut—the AAGPBL Player of the Year in 1951 and 1953—scattered eight hits and South Bend won, 2-1, when her club scored the tie-breaker in the top of the tenth. Dot Mueller bunted with the bases loaded, scoring Shirley Stovroff, who had doubled.

Those victories put South Bend into the best-of-five Championship Series against Rockford. On Saturday, September 8, the Blue Sox lost the opener (played in Fort Wayne), 5-4. The game ended when Rockford center fielder Dottie Key raced in for a two-out shoestring catch of a bases-loaded line drive off the bat of Jane "Jeep" Stoll.

In Sunday's game two, Rockford right-hander Rose Gacioch, who hit a solo home run, allowed six hits. But Rose proved tough to hit with runners aboard, and the Peaches won, 5-4.

Facing elimination, South Bend rallied to beat Rockford, 3-2. Jean Faut came through again, allowing six hits—two by Dot Kamenshek, who scored both Rockford runs. The hard-hitting Faut also fueled the Blue Sox's three-run third inning with a key double.

South Bend evened the series when Georgette "Jetty" Vincent spaced six hits and won game four, 6-3. Shirley Stovroff paced the 10-hit attack with three singles, Charlene "Shorty" Pryer and Shoo-Shoo Wirth added two each, and Mahon (who scored two runs), Stoll, and Wagoner each chipped in one hit.

In the finale, before 2,268 fans at Playland Park, the Blue Sox won the club's biggest game in nine years, trouncing the defending champion Peaches, 10-2. Rockford tallied one run off starter Lillian "Lil" Faralla in the first and another in the third. At that point, with the bases loaded and two outs, Faut moved from her third base position (she was an excellent fielder) to the mound. Thereafter, she blanked Rockford, while South Bend rapped out thirteen hits. Betty Wagoner paced the club with four singles, and Shorty Pryer and Jeep Stoll contributed three hits each.

Mahon, who turned thirty-two after South Bend's championship season, retired to concentrate on teaching. However, in the spring of 1952, she decided to return to the Blue Sox and her salary of \$100 a week. But second-year manager Karl Wunsch, a former minor league pitcher, had his lineup set. So Lib played mostly in reserve, hitting .229 in 166 at-bats. As usual, she hit well in run-scoring situations, and her 38 hits produced 16 RBIs.

Mahon's favorite memory, which she recorded on a questionnaire for the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, was winning the All-American Championship in 1951. On the other hand, her least favorite memory came in 1952, when she and four others left the Blue Sox just before the playoffs because of "a disagreement with the manager about the treatment of a teammate."

As Barbara Gregorich explained in her 1992 book, *Women at Play*, South Bend's ballclub had groups of players who would neither speak to Karl Wunsch nor talk to his wife, Jean Faut (she and Karl were married in 1947). Wunsch, after a good first season, became increasingly tough in his treatment of players.

Dissent reached the boiling point on Saturday, August 30, in Kalamazoo, just before the regular season ended. According to the South Bend Tribune of August 31, 1952, Wunsch "called Pryer on the carpet" after she balked at pinch-running late in Friday's game. The Lassies won, 1-0, behind Gloria Cordes' two-hitter.

"Shorty was wearing her moccasins on the bench," Lib explained later, "and she hesitated before putting on her shoes and going into the game. Wunsch got after her for that. Now in the same inning, he had to wait for me to tie my shoes to pinch-hit, but he didn't say anything to me."

Mahon remembered that Wunsch suspended Pryer after the game. That night at the team's hotel, several Blue Sox veterans talked the situation over. Five players, including Mahon, Stovroff, and Stoll, quit the team in support of Pryer.

"I know the way we handled it was wrong," Lib said in 1997. "We should have gone as a group to the team's board of directors. But hindsight is 20-20. I joined the walkout because I thought a teammate was treated unfairly. I'm just sorry my career had to end that way."

In the best-of-five championship series, South Bend, with only twelve players, defeated Rockford in the fifth game, winning the title with a 6-3 victory. On Thursday evening, September 11, at a neutral field in Freeport, Illinois, Faut (who was 20-2 with a 0.93 ERA in 1952) pitched an outstanding game. Scattering eight hits in her fourth playoff appearance, Jean slugged two triples, drove in two runs, and scored another run after her second three-bagger.

In retrospect, Mahon was satisfied with her stellar professional career. Averaging .248 lifetime, she batted 2,903 times in 837 games, amassed 721 hits, and scored 432 runs.

Perhaps more important, she produced 400 RBIs, tying for fourth best on the AAGPBL's all-time list (Dot Schroeder, who played 12 seasons, ranked first with 431 RBIs.) Lib enjoyed seasons with 72 RBIs (ranking first in the league) in 1946, 68 RBIs (second) in 1951, 65 RBIs (third) in 1948, and 60 RBIs (first again) in 1949. The Winthrop graduate made the All-Star team for the 1946 and 1949 seasons, and she helped South Bend win the AAGPBL Championship in 1951.

Like many of her league contemporaries, Lib collected little memorabilia. She just loved to play ball. Seizing her big opportunity, she played the game, earned a good living, and realized opportunities after her playing days that might otherwise not have been possible. As many former All-Americans now ask, Who would have thought our league would become a big deal after all these years?

An all-around athlete, an independent-minded person, and a devoted teacher and counselor, Elizabeth "Lib" Mahon treasured her years in the All-American League. She especially treasured the friendships and camaraderie that became important parts of her life during her years as a player and during her years as a member of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League Players Association, which was organized in 1987.

Her final honor came posthumously, when the Greenville native was inducted into the South Carolina Athletic Hall of Fame on May 5, 2005. The event allowed Lib Mahon's family members and friends to gather one more time and celebrate the life of a first-class All-American.

Sources

This is an expanded version of my original article about Elizabeth Mahon, "Journey From the Sandlots: Elizabeth 'Lib' Mahon," that appeared in the now-defunct magazine *Autograph Times*, vol. 4, no. 10 (Nov/Dec. 1997), pp. 21-23, 25-27. For this profile article, I first interviewed Ms. Mahon by telephone on June 23, 1996, and I spoke further with her half a dozen times in 1996-97 about her baseball career and the All-American League. Her statistics come from the summary sheet prepared on a yearly cumulative basis for the All-American League by the Howe Bureau, copy in AAGPBL Files in the Northern Indiana

Center for History (NICH), South Bend, Indiana. I also gained much useful information about Mahon and the Blue Sox from the booklet, "The South Bend Blue Sox" in St. Joseph Valley Record, published by the Northern Indiana Historical Society, vol. 5, no. 1 (Summer, 1993), pp. 1-17. I also obtained several clippings about her career from Mahon. Further, I accessed Mahon's file at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, and I researched the Blue Sox at the NICH. For the best history of the league, see Merrie Fidler, Merrie A. Fidler: The Origins and History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 20006).