

c o v e r s t o r y

By Molly Klimas | Photos by Kathy Denton

Listen for it. The crack of the bat, the roar of the crowd, the familiar voice of Ernie Harwell or Harry Caray on a radio in someone's back yard – in days gone by.

Listen for it. That sound of spring. It's almost here again.

You can bet your Mickey Mantle baseball card that Rosemary "Stevie" Stevenson does.

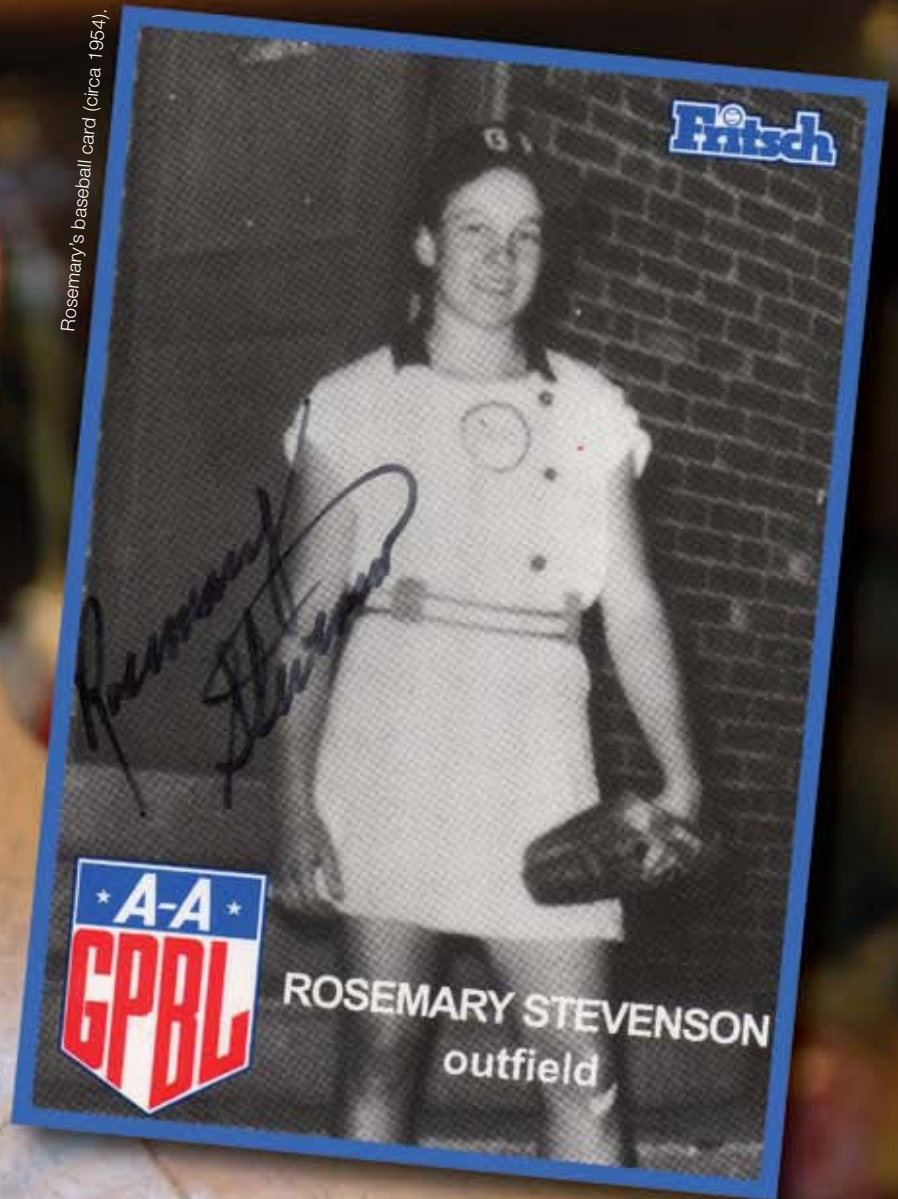
Right here in West Michigan's back yard, this retired Grand Rapids Chicks professional baseball player remembers a moment in time when she and more than 500 other talented women from around the country were in a league of their own.



God, baseball and the gift of listening



Rosemary's baseball card (circa 1954).





>> Rosemary displays a replica of the uniform she wore in 1954 when she played for the AAGPBL.

I pinch myself when I think about it – that I got to play professional baseball,” said Rosemary. It was faith in herself, and faith in God, that helped to make it happen; faith that fills her still – 55 years later.

In 2006, she wrote a book about her experiences, *Don't Die on Third*. The title is a mantra her dear coach from childhood, Jack LaPointe, drilled into her.

“He said, ‘You must get home,’” Rosemary recalled in her book.

If you've seen the 1992 movie *A League of Their Own*, starring Geena Davis, Tom Hanks, Madonna and Rosie O'Donnell, you can imagine a bit of what it was like for Rosemary.

Rosemary's baseball journey began in the spring of 1954 when she was just 17. She read about tryouts for women's professional baseball being held in Battle Creek.

The tryouts may as well have been in another country.

“That was a long way for a farm girl from Michigan's U.P. to travel,” she said.

But Rosemary listened to her heart, to her gut and to God.

Life in a northern town

The oldest of seven children, Rosemary grew up helping her mom and dad on their 160-acre farm near Stalwart, a town about 25 miles south of Sault Ste. Marie. Born and raised Catholic, Rosemary's faith was a big part of her life. Sundays meant church in the morning and baseball in the afternoon. Her dad coached the men's community baseball team. As a little girl, she'd chase foul balls for a nickel. Beginning at age 11, she'd play softball whenever and wherever she could – in pick-up games in nearby hay fields, for school teams and then for traveling teams like the Sault Lockettes of Sault Ste. Marie.

“Every little town had a team,” she said.

But chores came first. And there were plenty – milking the cows, feeding the animals, weeding and haying and even chopping wood.

In her book, she recalled: “I remember one day when my father told me I couldn't go play softball until I got all the hay into the barn ... My mother and sister helped and we were able to get all the hay in the barn except for one load ... I didn't think I was going to play that day, but [my mother] told me, ‘Go play ball.’”

Rosemary got home later that night and worked on the last load. But a rope on a pulley used to help unload the hay broke, and they weren't able to finish until her father came home from working an evening shift. Rosemary thought she would be grounded for going to the game before getting the hay done. But her father didn't ground her. He knew her heart was in the right place.

“He fixed the rope and pulley the next morning, so we could finish ... Believe me, I wouldn't let anything stand in the way of my playing, so all my chores were done,” she wrote in her book.

Although Rosemary lived for baseball, the Catholic Church was becoming the love of her life. As a teenager, she helped the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who taught catechism to local children at St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish in Goetzville, a town located near the eastern tip of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The sisters had a profound effect on Rosemary. Her maternal grandmother also instilled in her a deep faith and love. She considered religious life and told her parents she wanted to become a nun.

“I always had the feeling of being called to serve in the church in some way,” Rosemary said.

God, however, had other, more immediate plans for Rosemary.



>> The cover of Rosemary's book, *Don't Die on Third*.

No guts, no glory

By the time she read about the tryouts in Battle Creek, she knew all about the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). Everyone did. It was the league that kept pro baseball going when the men – including famous baseball players like Ted Williams – enlisted in military service during World War II. Coach LaPointe paid her expenses and drove Rosemary down to Battle Creek, where she competed against 105 other girls from the Midwest for a handful of spots in the league. At the end of three days, six girls were chosen. Rosemary, among those select few, got a spot on the Grand Rapids Chicks.

"I was so happy – I couldn't wait to get home to tell my folks," Rosemary said.

Her family didn't have a phone at the time, so Rosemary had to hold onto the good news during the 300-mile car ride back home. Her parents were so happy for her – especially her mother. But they didn't like having her so far away from home.

Encouraged by the boys' high school baseball coach, Rosemary practiced for two weeks with the boys' team to learn to hit overhand pitches. She also wrapped up her final days at Pickford High School.

"The school year couldn't end fast enough for me!" she said.

Play ball!

After graduating from high school, Rosemary headed to Grand Rapids to start her pro career playing outfield for the Chicks for \$50 a week. She joined players like Earline "Beans" Risinger, Jean "Smithy" Smith and Doris "Cookie" Cook.

"Everyone had a nickname," Rosemary said.

The Chicks played, often to sell-out crowds, at South Field, a baseball field that once occupied the corner of Madison Avenue and Crofton Street in downtown Grand Rapids.

"If you hit a good home run, you'd hit a nearby factory window," Rosemary said fondly of South Field.

And she hit plenty of home runs that spring and into summer. As an outfielder, she also once leaped into the centerfield stands and stole a grand slam away from Jo Weaver of the Fort Wayne Daisies.

The Grand Rapids Chicks played the Rockford (Ill.)

Peaches, the Daisies, the Kalamazoo Lassies, and the South Bend (Ind.) Blue Sox. They played every day of the week and double-headers on Sundays. Rosemary always went to Mass and enjoyed going to churches in towns across the Midwest. Like all

players in the AAGPBL, Rosemary wore a skirted uniform and adhered to the grooming niceties required by league founder and owner Philip K. Wrigley, the chewing gum magnate who also owned the Chicago Cubs.

"We had to project a feminine image, but still play like the men; Wrigley didn't want us to appear like tomboys," Rosemary told a reporter in 1954. The players looked "dainty by design" to appeal to fans – but fans had long ago begun appreciating the girls for how they played, like leaping to catch a ball that robbed the league's best batter of a home run, stealing bases, sliding into home, getting dusty and bruised and even breaking a few bones.

Rosemary loved every minute of it.

The season ended that September. At the time, none of the players realized the league itself would also be ending. In December 1954, Rosemary received a letter from the Chicks' business manager saying the league had been disbanded because of lack of funds. Men were back from war. Major League Baseball was on the upswing.

And television had become the new American pastime.

"I had finally realized a dream, and now the bubble had burst," Rosemary wrote in her book.

But the optimist counted her blessings: "Besides the fun of playing

“I always had the feeling of being called to serve in the church in some way,” Rosemary said. God, however, had other, more immediate plans for Rosemary.



>> A sampling of Rosemary's personal collection of baseball memorabilia.



>> A replica of the uniforms Rosemary wore as a member of the Grand Rapids Chicks in 1954. The originals were sent to the cleaners in 1954, but when the league folded and no one came to pick them up, they were thrown away.



>> Rosemary holds a baseball signed by fellow players in the AAGPBL.

ball, I also met many wonderful people in the different cities we traveled to . . . I visited and corresponded with many of the friends I had made,” she added in her book.

Rosemary found ways to play ball throughout her adult work life. Through her faith, she also found ways to serve God.

“I believe as one door closed for me, another one opened,” Rosemary said. “The Holy Spirit knows what He is doing!”

Extra innings

Just a few months after the league disbanded, Rosemary headed back to Grand Rapids and found employment at Michigan Bell. Perhaps it's ironic that Rosemary went to work for the phone company, her employer for the next 34 ½ years. To some, the phone means talking. But for Rosemary, it's about listening. She got back into softball, playing on a number of teams in West Michigan, including those of Michigan Bell, Whirlpool and Bissell. Over the years, she played every position except pitcher.

In November 1988, Rosemary and other AAGPBL players were inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. More than 500 former players showed up.

“We took the town by storm!” Rosemary said.

She was inducted into the Upper Peninsula Sports Hall of Fame at Northern Michigan University in 1990.

In 1991, she served as a consultant on the movie *A League of Their Own*. She and other former AAGPBL players traveled to a practice field in Skokie, Ill., to help movie director Penny Marshall coach the actresses in how to play ball.

“Overall, the movie was authentic – it was how it happened. I saw bits and pieces of my former team members in characters in the movie,” Rosemary said. “They did a good job making the film.”

In February 1992, she fulfilled another dream: Spending a week in Lakeland, Fla., playing baseball at the Detroit Tigers Fantasy Camp. Jason Thompson and Dave Rozema coached Rosemary's team. She hobnobbed with other famed Tigers like Mark “The Bird” Fidrych, Steve Kemp and Willie Horton.

And through the years, she coached and coached and coached – boys' and girls' teams and adult leagues – all over West Michigan. In the early 1960s, she organized a softball program for young girls in Grand Rapids that welcomed players at all skill levels. The program, called the Rocketts Association, caught on and spread to other states.

Her teams won championships. But it was the impact on individuals that touched Rosemary most. Just like she had, as a teen, helped the sisters teach catechism to children, she loved, as an adult, coaching and mentoring players.

“There was one little girl I remember who really played like a girl when she began, but ended up as the best player on her team. That was very satisfying because I like to help people meet their goals and potential in life, regardless of their age. This means more to me than my own goals in life,” she wrote in her book.

“There are three things in my life which I really love: God, my family and baseball. The only problem – once baseball season starts, I change the order around a bit.”

Al Gallagher, 1971 – Major Leaguer 1970-1973



>> The names of all the teams that played in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League.

Faith coach

Over the years, God tapped Rosemary’s coaching skills in other ways.

In the early 1980s, she served as the sponsor for close friend Alice Goll as she went through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) at Holy Family Parish in Caledonia.

“Rosemary helped me in my journey with Christ. I had been going from church to church and didn’t feel that I belonged. But, when I came to Holy Family with Rosemary, I knew I was home,” Alice said. “Rosemary helped me to find the peace that is Jesus.”

At Holy Family, Rosemary also served in high school ministry, as a sacristan and an extraordinary minister of holy Communion, and as a Bible study teacher and liturgy chairperson. She also became a Stephen minister during her years as a parishioner there.

“Stephen Ministry is about helping people in crisis – we are trained as listeners, as someone to talk to during times of great worry and grief,” Rosemary explained. “We are there for people who need a confidential ear, a shoulder to cry on.”

In the late 1980s, she moved to Nunica, built a log cabin and joined her present parish, St. Michael in Coopersville.

At St. Michael, she has served in many ways, including on pastoral councils and the stewardship committee and as a member of the Cursillo movement and a volunteer in the Landing program for fallen-away Catholics. For six years, she served as the RCIA coordinator and teacher. She is now coordinator of pastoral services, which includes setting up for funeral Masses, serving as a lector, if needed, helping grieving families and

assisting the pastor, Rev. Tony Pelak.

Rosemary also fulfilled a life-long goal of serving God through the Dominican Order, becoming a Dominican associate in 1993.

“It gives me the opportunity to live the Dominican charisms of prayer, study, ministry and common life, in the spirit of hospitality, and with the support of the Grand Rapids Dominican community,” Rosemary said.

Going for home

At Michigan Bell, Rosemary had worked her way up through the ranks, from a switchboard helper to switching supervisor. At the time of her retirement in the late 1980s, she oversaw 16 Michigan Bell offices in the region. But Rosemary was just rounding second. God next called her to complete an associate’s degree in religion at Aquinas College.

After earning her degree, she taught for a year at Muskegon Catholic Central High School, and coached the girls’ softball team.

Growing up on a farm, Rosemary had a penchant for fixing things – and her experience at Michigan Bell shaped her into a good manager of people – so she stepped into the role of maintenance and custodial supervisor at the high school, a position she held from 1994-1999.

In addition to coaching, she connected with the students by participating in school liturgies and filling in to drive school buses when drivers were sick.

“Rosemary’s spirituality was evident,” said Tom Powers, retired superintendent of Muskegon Catholic Central High School. “She cared. She served not only as a coach but also as a mentor to our young people. And, could she whack the ball!”

Former school secretary Vickie Welbes had become good friends with Rosemary; they continue to stay in contact.

“Rosemary is a wonderful, faith-filled person who would do anything for anybody. She helped my husband and me through some difficulties. I know if I need someone to pray for me, I can pick up the phone, call Rosemary and she starts praying. To me, she is an angel,” Welbes said.

The new millennium brought additional honors – an induction into the Grand Rapids Sports Hall of Fame and reunions with fellow players.

Although baseball and softball are never far from Rosemary “Stevie” Stevenson’s mind, through the years, the call of Jesus Christ has been the stronger pull in her heart.

“The church has filled a need for me that can’t be met in any other way,” Rosemary said. “An early Church leader wrote, ‘The virtuous soul that is alone is like the burning coal that is alone. It will grow colder rather than hotter. Christianity is not purely intellectual, internal faith. It can be lived only in community.’” ☪



>> Rosemary clears snow from the deck of her log home in rural Nunica, where she awaits the coming baseball season.