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## Senior Lifestyles

# Catholic woman played baseball early

## Big leaguer met famous 'Babes'

By Susan Matthews  
Catholic News Service

PHILADELPHIA — Mary Gilroy Hockenbury remembers her days playing professional women's baseball — during World War I — as if it were yesterday.

Meeting Babe Ruth and the Yankees once during spring training at Pelican Field in New Orleans is just one of her many career highlights. "They took us out to dinner twice and were very nice," Hockenbury said.

Hockenbury, 89, a member of St. Helena's Parish in Philadelphia, also played with and against another legendary "Babe": Babe Didrickson Zaharias, who many believe was the greatest female athlete of the 20th century.

Barbara Gregorich, author of a book on women's baseball from the 1930s and an adviser for the movie hit *A League of Their Own*, spoke of Hockenbury at a reception for the film and has interviewed her for an upcoming book

on women's baseball from the turn of the century through the 1920s.

Hockenbury played big-league ball from 1918 through 1922 in the Philadelphia Industrial League, and nationally with the New York and Chicago Bloomer Girls.

Her destiny was decided early on the streets of South Philadelphia.

"My brothers would go out after supper and have a catch on the pavement. I would join them," she explained. "My father would get so mad, he'd get up and go in the house. He didn't like me playing at first. It was unusual for a girl to be playing ball. But I just kept doing it and eventually he got used to it. He became my best roofer."

Female baseball players of that time were tagged "bloomer girls" in reference to their bloomer-bottomed uniforms. Hockenbury, who played first base, earned another nickname: "Scoop," for her ability to snag low throws out of the dirt.

The Philadelphia Industrial League pitted women against women. But the traveling women's teams played men, only substituting their pitcher and catcher with male players to even the odds.

According to Hockenbury, the women won often enough.

"Those Southern boys didn't like getting beat by girls," she said. "They'd do anything to stop you. I got spiked a couple of times. But I loved to win."

Hockenbury met her husband, Bill, on the field when he played for the Fleisher Yarn men's team, while she played for the women's team. After marriage, she didn't play baseball as often. "I had babies after that," she said.

Three sons were professional baseball players in the minor leagues. One son, Bill, sat on the Philadelphia A's bench but never got into a game.

Two other sons played college basketball. Both daughters played high school basketball. Now grandchildren carry on the Hockenbury sports legacy.

Aside from her family and baseball, Hockenbury's favorite is her parish of 67 years — St. Helena in Philadelphia.

"The nuns come over and spend time with me. It's just like having another family. I used to go to Mass two and three times a day. But now I've slowed down," she said. "I'm involved in every way — Catholic War Veterans, Holy Name Society, Sodality."

At least one Philadelphia sports figure has tapped into Hockenbury's strong faith.

La Salle University men's basketball coach "Speedy" Morris calls up and asks me to say Hail Marys for him. He'll say, 'Pray, Mom, that we get some three-pointers or a 7'4" guy,' or something crazy like that," she said.

Hockenbury, who keeps up with local sports teams and listens to any baseball game that's on the radio, said she's not sure if she is going to see *A League of Their Own*.

"Why?" she asked. "I lived it."

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