

## **(Some) Crying in Baseball**

30 years after the release of the original film of the same name, *A League of Their Own* was released on Amazon Prime in August 2022. Set in 1943, it follows Carson Shaw as she travels to Chicago to try out for the Rockford Peaches, an all-female baseball team formed as part of the World War II wartime efforts to draw paying crowds while the men were away having been drafted.

I am late to the party, but eventually persuaded to watch the series by three things: A *Guardian* review that I was sent incessantly, which described the show as “euphorically, unapologetically gay”, the frequency with which butch characters Jesse McCreedy and Lupe García appear on the Instagram stories of those I follow, and my longstanding joy and fascination at the proximity between lesbians and sport.

I am a simple woman, easily convinced to do pretty much anything by one cute butch, let alone two. Besides, I feel starved of lesbian cultural content - I cannot watch another period drama in which two women glance desexed at one another across a stale room. I am one re-watch of *The L Word* away from knowing it by heart. *The Guardian*'s use of the word unapologetic speaks to me, too; I imagine gritty, complicated, human characters - lesbians! - dodging both the flattening of their sexuality and the complete embodiment of it at the cost of the rest of their being.

Two weeks before the series is released, England win the Women's European Football Championship. When the tournament begins, my interest in football comes solely from a place of lust. I want to watch women in shorts, running, in July heat. I do not know what the offside rule is, I cannot identify a high press, the tactical difference between a left-back and a forward is both beyond my recognition and subject to my indifference. By the time the tournament ends, my passion has changed shape. I spend game after game across the country falling increasingly in love with football not just as a sport, but with the way it acts as a site for lesbian desire, community, and friendship. I go to a sold-out queer watch party in an East London pub to see a game I missed tickets for. On a whim, I create a lesbian football meme account on Instagram. The page gains more followers in less time than any of my personal social media ever has. London's only lesbian bar reshares a post which is about Ellen White's goal record, but

also oral sex. Women send me messages. Things like “I’ll be at the match on Saturday too!” or “I would trade my wife for Lina Hurtig.”

While my own lesbianism had played an integral role in my being at each match, I hadn’t considered that this may be the case for hundreds of other women too. Suddenly the often unrelenting feeling of loneliness that often accompanies my lesbianism was dissipating. Of course, it makes sense: while homosexuality in men’s football remains what feels like an impossibility, being a lesbian in women’s football is not just tolerated, but celebrated. After watching England beat Spain in the knockout stages, I turn to my sister and joke about the number of lesbians in attendance. A stranger behind us quips, “That’s the best part though, isn’t it? Half the fucking team are lesbians.”

Maybelle Blair said, during the panel talk on which she came out, that she estimates that around 60% of the AAGPBL was gay.

Several weeks after the Women’s Euros and I am adrift without the steady schedule of football and its joyous, unabashedly lesbian fanbase. I need something to stop the gap until the Women’s Super League begins in September. So I start *A League of Their Own* (2022).

There are many things I enjoy about *A League of Their Own* (2022). I have to stop watching episode two for a minute to collect myself. Jess is about to be sent back home instead of allowed to compete in the league. She has refused to put on makeup as instructed by the charm school coaches who have been sent to ensure the players look proper, like women. Palatable, desirable, and, most importantly, heterosexual women. I watch her face contort in discomfort as she returns to her seat in front of a mirror, looking at what she must sacrifice.

In November, Arsenal Women sign a commercial deal with beauty brand *II Makiage*. It launches with a campaign called 'Focus On My Game Face'.

I am thinking of the women I have loved. How at one point each of them has pulled out a photo of themselves, unrecognisable - feminine and imprisoned - and presented it to me. Sometimes laughing at the theatre of it, the absurdity of their own past. Sometimes without saying anything at all. I know how much this moment weighs. I know what they mean when they show me is *I trust you*, I know what they mean is *you see me*. I know what they're saying is *it wasn't easy. It isn't easy*. I think of my hand on the back of their heads in those moments. My thumb at the nape of their necks. Their point five fades. Angles and audacity. I am trying to say *I love who you are now*. I am trying to say *there is no loss here*. I want to say *I'd pay any bounty. I'd bail you out every time*.

I try not to think too hard about the fact that a series set in the 1940s is speaking so directly to experiences women I know are having today.

I wish that I could be satiated by 'representation' alone. The word itself is mentioned three times within *The Guardian* article that in part lured me into watching. Representation. Representation. Representation. I'm not sure at which point we as LGBT people - readers, watchers, listeners, viewers - replaced our desire for quality with the desire to simply see ourselves (or an iteration of, or someone we could liken to, ourselves) within work instead. Media should have us in it, because we are within the world - I don't think merely reflecting us back to ourselves is a basis for praise, a reason for celebration. If it were, maybe I would be more on board with some of what *A League of Their Own (2022)* does. Its main relationship - between Carson Shaw, a semi-closeted, married woman (and eventual coach of the Rockford Peaches), and Greta Gill, the gutsy, charming femme seductress, feels flat. There's no...believability. No chemistry. I keep waiting for something to happen, a backstory to be hinted at, a connection to develop. I wait for the tension and competition between Carson and Lupe to spill over into a different territory, for a romance to grow in that direction. I keep thinking Greta will share a kiss with her best, butch friend Jo, with whom she has a genuine intimacy. But neither happens. It is not lost on me that Carson and Greta are the most digestible, most inoffensive representation of lesbians conceivable. That even if representation was all I asked of the show, it would barely be delivering.

The contrast between the bad and the better parts of *A League of Their Own* (2022) makes the former harder to understand or to justify. The story of Max Chapman, a black lesbian who is prohibited from joining the AAGPBL on the basis of her race is integral to the show, which starkly contrasts to the all white ensemble of the original 1992 film. But elsewhere, the series feels saccharine and unambitious. The hasty and improbable redemption of Peaches teammate Shirley Cohen from out-and-out homophobe to not, thanks to one speech from Carson, feels jarring, especially in comparison to the delicate but three-dimensional character and story of Bertie Hart, Max's lesbian aunt and passing butch<sup>1</sup>. I enjoyed seeing Bertie on screen, complicated and well acted. The relationship between her and her 'wife' - the allowing of strangers to misread them as heterosexual for the sake of their safety, the interchangeable gendered ways in which she is referred to without - felt like some of the few brave choices made within the series.

I am thinking about choice and about sports, about their relationship to one another. I am thinking of all the stories people tell when you ask them for their reasoning behind supporting a particular team - often citing a family history of doing so, a current or prior proximity to a stadium, the story of a first match. In this sense, it is less that we make a choice and more that a team is passed down to us, that we inherit them. The choice we make is to keep supporting. To keep showing up. To buy tickets to games. To book pub tables on match days. To put a player's name on the back of our shirt. To remain seated when the crowd sings "stand up if you hate Tottenham". To maintain hope, even when trailing at the bottom of the league, or conceding at half time. I think of the toddlers in their full kits, the babies in their team-themed babygrows. I wonder to what extent they'll be able to answer the question "why do you support them?" when asked later on in life with anything other than "I just do. I always have."

At seventeen, my girlfriend at the time says she has something to show me that will make me laugh. She is only recently out as a lesbian, and has been combing backwards through her life with this newfound information to see where the teeth get caught. What she pulls out for my entertainment is her holy communion photo. In it she is dressed in her godly, satin cream dress, and her

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<sup>1</sup> Passing butch is a term used for a butch woman who is read as and often functions as a man in straight spaces, while still identifying as a lesbian and being recognised as one by her peers.

right foot rests, defiantly, atop a large football. Blessed, she tells me, by the priest. There is something so profoundly lesbian about the image, though she is only eight years old. Growing up in Poland, the boys who lived in her block of flats would cover for her in football games against other local children. This is our friend, they'd say. His name is Nick. He's going to play with us today.

Rosie O'Donnell, who played Doris Murphy in the 1992 film, makes a cameo in the Amazon Prime series as Vi, the owner of a gay, underground speakeasy. O'Donnell has spoken in recent years about Marshall's alleged adversity to any "gay stuff" in the original film. Her appearance doesn't feel gimmicky, or like a clumsy nod back to the film, but more like a subtle wink. A setting the record straight - or not straight, as the case may be.

Max takes a factory job in order to be eligible for tryouts for the Negro Leagues - choice. Carson leaves to try out for the Rockford Peaches just as she is informed her husband will be returning home from the war - choice. Maybelle Blair comes out aged 95 - choice. Your friends lie about your gender in order to allow you to play football, and you let them - choice.

At the final of the Women's Euros, I'm crying when the whistle blows after 120 minutes of play (England 2 - 1 Germany). In the stands just below me, a butch wipes her femme's tears so they don't ruin her false eyelashes. I fix my lipstick, which is all over my teeth from where I've been screaming. We catch each other's eye, and smile. In every direction, in Wembley Stadium, are lesbians. Obvious, clockable lesbians.

When people ask, earnestly or otherwise: "why *do* so many lesbians end up involved in sports in one way or another?" What else can I answer with but "we just do. We always have"?

On the same day that the Amazon Prime series is released, the Ballon D'or nominations are announced. When England and Barcelona FC player Lucy Bronze learns of her nomination, she takes to Instagram. "Thanks," her story reads, "but the best Lionesses player all year and during the Euros was Keira Walsh [Bronze's girlfriend]... She should be the first English name on the list." When, in episode seven, a woman Max barely knows fakes an injury in order to

call her out from the stands and onto the field to pitch in her place, I respond in two halves: this is so unbelievably ridiculous. This is so (un)believably lesbian.

Aged nine, I got a real Manchester United shirt for Christmas, complete with name (Rooney) and number (8). My granddad, who lived with us, supported Manchester United and sometimes when I couldn't sleep, he'd invite me onto the sofa and talk me through a match. I didn't understand much about the game, but I liked the late nights it afforded me. How as a young girl, it felt like being part of some kind of secret club.

At school, football was its own religion. The boys lived and breathed it - compared boots, new balls, t-shirts. They knew the score of each and every match, had the order of every league table memorised. Each new signing another God, every goal its own miracle. The girls spent afternoons dedicated to picking the best footballer of our year group. They stood on the sides of the allocated 'pitch' in the playground and watched, with no real measure for discernment. They picked names at random - maybe they caught a goal he scored. Maybe he looked extra fast that day. Maybe he had the proper shoes, the colourful ones, the ones with the studs. A boy being the best at football provided logic, basis, excuse, for any girl's crush.

One summer, I begged my mum to let me go to football camp, over and over, until she gave in. I was the only girl. My hair was cropped. My clothes were practical, and male at the point of purchase. I wanted so badly to be good (I wasn't). I wanted to dribble the ball through the plastic cones (I couldn't). I wanted to effortlessly move the ball from myself to the goal with the side of my right foot (I didn't). I wanted to be fast. I'd even be goalkeeper if I had to. If I could. I wanted to pull my shirt up over my head after scoring. I imagined, with retrospective delusion, returning to school in September and the boys allowing me into their game without question. I imagined my name making its appearance in those sideline conversations. Being a new contender for the other girls' giggles, their blushing, making my way into their impossible rankings.

What I desired, I know now, was not to be good at football at all. What I desired was to be desired.

By the time I get to episode eight, I discover that there is, contrary to popular belief, some crying in baseball. I don't know how I feel about the series as a whole. Nothing remarkable or visionary has happened - though I was never promised as such. But when I watch the Peaches kiss Joey's biceps for good luck I get it. The twins in Vi's speakeasy, who need very little convincing to sit with Jess and Lupe for a beer, having watched them both on the field: I get it.

When Dorris says in the 1992 film: "they always made me feel wrong, like I was some sort of a weird girl or a strange girl or not even a girl, just because I could play. I believed them, too, you know? But not anymore. I mean, look, there's a lot of us. I think we're all alright":

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## **(Some) Crying in Baseball**

I do my best to try and remember that any rewatch comes filtered through the events that have transpired in the time that's lapsed. In this case, I re-watch the 1992 film *A League of Their Own* knowing Maybelle Blair - the inspiration for Madonna's character 'All-the-way-Mae', publicly came out as a lesbian aged 95, during a promotional tour for the Amazon Prime series. In 2019, Netflix aired *A Secret Love*, a documentary about the relationship between former All American Girl Pro Baseball League (AAGPBL) player Terry Donahue and her lover of 65 years, Pat Henschel. I want to be generous, and understanding. I'm conscious it was 1992, and that set against our contemporary cultural backdrop it's easy for the film to appear extra heterosexual. But there were lesbians in 1992. In fact, there were lesbians in 1943. They were playing in the AAGPBL.

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While my own lesbianism had played an integral role in my being at each match, I hadn't considered that this may be the case for hundreds of other women too. Suddenly the often unrelenting feeling of loneliness that accompanies my lesbianism was dissipating. Of course, it makes sense: while homosexuality in men's football remains what feels like an impossibility, being a lesbian in women's football is not just tolerated, but celebrated. After watching England beat Spain in the knockout stages, I turn to my sister and joke about the number of lesbians in attendance. A stranger behind us quips, "That's the best part though, isn't it? Half the fucking team are lesbians."

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