

THE WAY



WE WERE

LESBIAN MILESTONES IN SPORT, PHOTOGRAPHY, MUSIC AND MAGAZINES.

IN A LEAGUE ALL HER OWN

Dot Wilkinson is one of the greatest women's softball players of all time. But her story is only now being told.

BY LYNDSEY D'ARCANGELO

In October 1960, *Sports Illustrated* ran an article titled "A Female Yogi Berra." It was about a talented softball player named Dot Wilkinson.

Dot—you might say—as in Dottie, from the hit movie *A League of Their Own*?

Not quite.

Yes, there was a fictional character who played catcher in the movie and her name was Dot. But the real Dot never played in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), even though she is widely considered to be the greatest women's catcher of all time.

In 1933, the real Dot was only 11 years old when she joined the Phoenix Ramblers of the American Softball Association (ASA) as a bat girl. She played for the Ramblers until 1965—that's 32 years of catching, running bases, hitting, sliding, arguing with umpires, arguing with fans, winning championships, taking long road trips in packed cars (without air-conditioning), playing doubleheaders (and more), playing seven days a week, staying in fleabag motels, tripling up in hotel rooms, playing through injuries (sometimes even on broken bones), and doing it all for the simple love of the game.

The real Dot once caught 47 innings in a single day. Followed a male heckler into the men's bathroom after a game and smacked him with her glove. Cut out the stuffing inside her chest protector because it was uncomfortable. Played in the first Women's Softball World Championship Game, held

at Soldier Field in Chicago. Met the Rockettes. And was booed by men at her Arizona Hall of Fame induction speech because she was a woman. She casually quipped, "Thank you—now I feel at home." And at the end of that speech, she received a standing ovation.

The real Dot is also very humble and private. She did most of her talking on the softball diamond, especially while squatting behind home plate. Even though she is a 19-time All-American and a three-time World Champion, until recently the world outside of diehard women's softball fans didn't know who she was. Perhaps that's why in the annals of lesbian history her incredible story had somehow slipped through the cracks—until five years ago, when she met the best-selling author and filmmaker Lynn Ames.

"I met Dot when I was doing a television show about extraordinary lesbian women," says Ames. "I interviewed her and Billie Harris, a former softball pitcher for the Ramblers."

The two women began meeting for lunch on a regular basis and enjoyed long conver-

sations together.

After hearing Dot's tales of the glory days of women's softball, Ames knew this was a story that needed to be told. She approached Dot with the idea of writing a book of historical fiction loosely based on Dot's own recollections of women's softball during the 1940s. The result was *Bright Lights of Summer*, which won the 2015 Golden Crown Literary Society (GCLS) Award for Best Historical Fiction.

Ames didn't stop there. She also produced a short documentary about Dot, *Extra Innings: The Real Story Behind Bright Lights of Summer*. It was the first time Dot had spoken openly in a public forum about her life experiences and her extraordinary softball career. According to the documentary, the real Dot was offered a contract to



play in the All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBL), but turned it down.

"They wanted to pay me \$85 a week to come play in this league," Wilkinson explains in *Extra Innings*. "But I didn't want to leave the Ramblers. I didn't care about the money. I just loved playing ball."

The AAGBL contract stipulated that all players adhere to strict rules, which included no fraternizing with other teams, no drinking, no smoking, and no crossing state lines without permission. Players also had to dress properly, in skirts and dresses, take etiquette classes, wear makeup, and attend charm school.

Ames surmises that these stipulations were intended primarily to maintain a certain image for the league, so that the women weren't perceived as lesbians.

"The AAGBL was developed by Philip Wrigley as a way to entertain baseball fans while the men were off fighting the war," Ames adds. "It was a gimmick. They recruited some of the best softball players in the country. But a lot of the best players stayed right where they were, including Dot."

Ironically enough, Dot is a lesbian. She

and her partner, Estelle "Ricki" Caito, were together for 48 years. Caito was an exceptional softball player in her own right, and her picture is featured on the cover of *Bright Lights of Summer*, and is the color photo on the previous page. The two women spent their lives playing softball and dabbling in real estate. They flipped houses for a living, before flipping houses ever became a thing, and did all the work themselves. Caito passed away in 2011 at the age of 85.

The real Dot Wilkinson turns 95 this October, and she's still as scrappy, witty, and golden-hearted as ever. She lives in Phoenix, Ariz., where she has lived all her life, in the same house that she once rehabbed and shared with Caito. And every once in a while, she still gets the urge to go out and play catch.

"I gave everything to the game," Dot says. "And the game gave everything to me."

It doesn't get more real than that.

For more information on *Bright Lights of Summer* go to lynnames.com.

