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Alison Gordon

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
February 14, 2015

Over the past ten days there has been an avalanche of deaths of major sports figures. The obituary writers have been kept busy and tributes have been coming from all directions in sportsworld. The death of Dean Smith attracted the attention of sports writers and social commentators across the country. A few days later tributes came for Jerry Tarkanian another legendary college basketball coach. The passing of Charlie Sifford, golf's Jackie Robinson led to reflections on the central place race has played in the world of sport. So too with the death of Ernie Banks came a reminder of the segregated past of baseball and those who pioneered in baseball towns and cities across America in the 1950s.

In addition to the deaths there have been other major stories that have occupied considerable attention and consumed considerable amounts of space. The total collapse of Tiger Woods' golf game remains a remarkable story. The excellent play of Serena Williams in Australia where she added yet another grand slam title to her resume was given considerable notice. Then this week came the news that the feel good story of last summer in Little League baseball may not have been quite as feel good as it seemed. The banning of adults from children's sport may prove to be the only sensible conclusion to draw from this fiasco.

All of these stories have had considerable play and any one of them would be worthy of further consideration. However the story that caught my eye was the report on Thursday of the death of Alison Gordon. Like Robinson and Banks and Sifford, Alison Gordon too was a significant pioneer in sport, and like Robinson and Banks the sport was baseball.

In 1979 Alison Gordon became the first female beat writer in major league baseball history. She was working for the *Toronto Star* and the Toronto Blue Jays were her beat. Her memoir of those days, *Foul Ball!: Five Years in the American League*, won awards and remains one of the very best baseball books on the life of a beat writer as well as the life of a female in an all male baseball world.

Gordon became the first woman to be admitted into the Baseball Writers Association of America although her credentials listed her as Mr. Alison Gordon. To say that

she was unwelcome by some would be a bit of an understatement. She arrived as a reporter shortly after the courts had opened the locker room to all reporters.

One writer declared that being able to "piss in a urinal" was a requirement of the job. The Baseball Commissioner, the arrogant, pompous, and often supercilious Bowie Kuhn said that letting women into the locker room "would undermine the basic dignity of the game," a task Kuhn fine tuned during his time as Commissioner.

Some players treated her well while others did their best to make Gordon's job a form of torture. Often while conducting an interview another player would try to distract her by slowing parading by in his birthday suit. She described one player as taking "longer to get dressed than anyone I have ever encountered, before or since." Some players protested the presence of women in the locker room on religious grounds, others on the grounds that a locker room was a male province.

Crude remarks and intimidation greeted her in many major league ball parks. In Texas the Rangers tried to deal with the issue by banning all reporters from the locker room. That lasted one day.

Gordon and other female reporters were referred to as "pecker checkers" and at one point she was given special recognition and backhanded respect when Baltimore manager Earl Weaver reportedly declared that Gordon, whom he admired, "ain't no pecker checker."

Over time she gained acceptance of most of the Blue Jays locker room because she was an excellent reporter, an accomplished writer, and she simply did her job as well as anyone ever did and better than most. Above all Alison Gordon loved baseball and she wrote with a lyrical beauty akin to that of Thomas Boswell and Roger Angell.

Most significantly she paved the way for the many women who followed as sportswriters and sportscasters. She was not alone in her ordeal as many other women in baseball and in other sports were harassed and humiliated by athletes suffering from the deadly mix of insecurity and testosterone overload. She was a pioneer and she knew that she had to be not just good, but better than others in the

field so that other women could enter sportsworld without facing the hostility that she experienced.

By the end of her first season in baseball her talent was being recognized by many of her male colleagues and by many of the Blue Jay players. Her love of baseball, tenacity, and good humor carried her through the difficult days.

After five years on the baseball beat Alison Gordon returned to real life and turned to fiction. She wrote murder mysteries set in the world of baseball and enjoyed considerable success.

Sportsworld is now replete with women in all capacities and for that we owe a debt to Alison Gordon.

One other quick note: Roger Goodell, who apparently is denser than many thought was possible, this week appointed Dr. Elizabeth Nabel as the NFL chief health and medical advisor. In a time when brain injury and concussions are a major issue facing the NFL, the appointment of a cardiologist may not be the best possible choice. However, Dr. Nabel is president of Boston's prestigious Brigham and Women's Hospital, a partner with the Kraft Group. Several members of the Kraft family have served on boards at the hospital (Richard Sherman take note). It should be pointed out that having a cardiologist in this position is an upgrade from the rheumatologist who served as head of the NFL's Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee appointed by Commissioner Paul Tagliabue in 1994.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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