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Making My Pitch

Ila Jane Borders

Jean Hastings Ardell

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MAKING MY PITCH

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A WOMAN'S BASEBALL ODYSSEY

Ila Jane Borders with Jean Hastings Ardell

Foreword by *Mike Veeck*

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln & London

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Delores Ann Carter

June 22, 1930–April 14, 1980

This book is for you, Grandma. I grew up to become a baseball player and, later, a firefighter and paramedic. I couldn't save you on that awful day in 1980, but I have learned how to save myself, and others.



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Foreword | Mike Veeck

AUTUMN 1999. Riding through Washington, DC, in the back of a cab in the middle of the night, I felt my eyes beginning to close. All of a sudden the Corcoran Gallery of Art came into view. Photographer Annie Leibovitz had a show there. On the facade of the building was a twenty-foot image of Ila Borders at the top of her windup.

“Stop! Stop the cab,” I yelled at the hack. “That’s Ila. Stop right here.”

The cabbie was frightened. “You owe me thirty-five bucks,” he said.

“Keep the meter running,” I said. “Just stop. I have to get out.”

I had been looking for a ballplayer like Ila Borders for much of my life. I joined my father, Bill Veeck Jr., who then owned the Chicago White Sox, as the club’s director of promotions in 1976. I remember our hosting a softball game and picnic for the front office staff. During the game, a woman who worked in the accounting department launched a triple off the left-field wall. Dad and I immediately looked at one another with the same thought: Somewhere out there, in Keokuk, Iowa, perhaps, was a woman with the talent to play professional baseball.

If only we could find her.

Twenty years later I did.

In the spring of 1997 I was running the St. Paul Saints of the independent Northern League, when our pitching coach, Barry Moss, called. Barry also scouted for us in Southern California. He wanted me to know that he had found a young woman who was, he said, “the real thing,

competitive and talented.” Her name was Ila Borders. Should we give her a tryout? If she made the team, she would be the first woman to play men’s professional baseball since the 1950s, when Mamie “Peanut” Johnson, Connie Morgan, and Marcenia “Toni” Stone played in the Negro Leagues, most notably with the Indianapolis Clowns. With a smile and a glance heavenward, where my father now dwells, I picked up the phone.

Ila flew into town on May 14 and came straight to my office. In my most avuncular manner, I said, “Let’s take a walk around the parking lot.” That was the only place we could get away from our cramped quarters in the front offices of Midway Stadium.

“Ila,” I began, “we are about to embark on a great adventure. It will be fun. It will be all that we both could hope for. But it’ll have its moments.” I struggled to find the appropriate words. “You will be castigated, ridiculed, and called ‘a promotion,’ even though the Saints are already sold out for the season.”

I had been raised to think of women as equals but knew it would take a strong woman in every sense of the word to play professional baseball. Breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball is considered one of the defining moments in American history. I had never forgotten the stories Dad told me about his signing of Larry Doby in 1947 and the indignities the young center fielder had suffered as the American League’s first black player. Perhaps it wasn’t going to be the same scope for Ila, but the heckling, the name-calling, and the sexist comments that would come her way meant that she needed to be mentally and emotionally stronger than nearly anyone else who was going to set foot on the field that season.

Very quietly, very kindly, Ila responded. “Mr. Veeck, I know exactly what we’re in for. I have been cursed, spat upon, beamed, and hit with all manner of missiles. I’m not afraid. I know what we’re up against. Do you?”

She said it so softly, I wasn’t quite certain I had heard her right. I laughed—what else could I do?—and said, “I guess this walk wasn’t really necessary.”

She waited; I whimpered. I had grown up one of nine children in a household with four opinionated sisters—one a child psychologist, one

a writer, another an artist—and I was asking whether Ila could hold her own? Hey, women have survived us men for ages.

Eventually Ila smiled and said, “I just want to play ball, Mr. Veeck. Thank you for giving me the opportunity.”

When Ila made the team out of camp, the reception she got from young girls—not just in the Twin Cities but around the country—was unlike anything I’d ever seen. Here was this woman who had a goal, something no female had ever done, and despite all the doors that had been slammed in her face prior to her time in St. Paul, she never gave up. What Ila did for girls all over this country was create a tremendous connection. That the St. Paul crowd gave her a standing ovation time after time is something I will long remember. She was the embodiment of strength and courage. People said I exploited her—there’s no question about that—but as I have pointed out, she exploited me, too, because no one was standing in line behind me. Yet to me she was a ballplayer first and then a woman, and I think she responded to that.

At the time of her signing, I recall that my daughter, Rebecca (before retinitis pigmentosa robbed her of her sight), would flip through the newspapers, especially the sports section.

“What are you looking for,” I asked her.

“I’m looking for Ila,” she said matter-of-factly.

Rebecca was looking for the picture of Ila in uniform with her ponytail—and goodness knows my daughter was extremely upset with me when I traded Ila a few weeks into the season. After all, Rebecca was only six years old, too young to understand that St. Paul had become a media circus with Ila in the center ring, or that the Saints were in the pennant race, while Duluth was not. So I thought Ila would get more playing time in up there. But she wasn’t just a role model for young girls everywhere. She was the ideal role model for anyone who has ever had a dream but took the easy way out and didn’t see it through.

Not Ila. She had developed a sort of polyester finish: the hard stuff just rolled off her back. She had almost flawless mechanics, some of the purest I’d ever seen. Yet I recall that she could have a problem with her fastball. It wasn’t her out pitch. I thought she needed to find one of

the Niekro brothers and learn the knuckleball, or track down Gaylord Perry and learn the spitball. She just needed a variety of pitches to go along with her willful determination. And the guys she reached, she taught beautifully.

MAY 31, 1997. Ila Borders . . . first appearance . . . Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Sitting on my porch in St. Paul, staring at my radio.

“What do you think, Libby?” I asked my wife.

“I think it’s great . . . and exciting,” she responded.

“Now pitching, Ila Borders,” is what I heard in the background on the radio broadcast. I could hear that everyone in the stands stood to cheer this courageous young person. It seemed like the whole world was cheering, and most were. However, Ila got roughed up that day.

She kept on pitching.

Ila Borders. St. Paul . . . camera crews everywhere. Leno. Letterman. *The Today Show*. She turned them all down. She just wanted to pitch. We didn’t need her to sell tickets. I just wanted her to pitch.

And she did. For four seasons she not only played professional men’s baseball but also did it with dignity and class.

Somebody was paying attention. *Women in Baseball* is one of the most visited exhibits in Cooperstown’s National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Over the years, Ila’s memorabilia—her cap, jersey, and baseball from her days at Southern California College; the uniform she wore in her debut with the St. Paul Saints; an autographed baseball, the lineup card, and a ticket from the game that was her first win for the Duluth-Superior Dukes against the Sioux Falls Canaries—have been displayed at the museum.

I think that speaks well for having a woman play in the majors. I think it’s going to happen. I think it should happen. Women are a source of new talent. This book is an extraordinary addition to baseball history. It should be read not just by young women who dream of playing hardball and by women fans but also by the men who run the game.

I’ve always been an Ila Borders fan and suspect that I always will be.

Acknowledgments

Jackie Robinson had Branch Rickey to thank for opening his way into the game. Throughout my years in baseball, there have been many Branch Richeys. No matter how many people said no, there was always one guy who stepped up and said yes at an important point: first, my father, who thought it perfectly fine and good that I wanted to play baseball; my coaches in Little League; coach Rolland Esslinger, whose steady encouragement at Whittier Christian Junior High School meant so much; coaches Tom Caffrey and Steve Randall at Whittier Christian High School; coach Charlie Phillips, who signed me to a baseball scholarship—and with it, a college education—at Southern California College (now Vanguard University); and Coach Jim Pigott of Whittier College, who made me feel welcome on and off the field during my last year of college baseball.

I am grateful to scout Barry Moss for recommending me to the St. Paul Saints and for teaching me more about pitching technique than some players learn in their entire careers; to Marty Scott, my manager at the Saints, who put me on the roster in 1997; to Mike Veeck, the owner of the Saints and my ultimate Branch Rickey, who took a chance and signed me to the professional baseball contract I had dreamed of; and to Al Gallagher, my manager at the Madison BlackWolf, whose encouragement restored my confidence.

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Ila Jane Borders

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When I attended Ila's first college game in February 1994, I knew that I wanted to follow her baseball story all the way through. The support from my husband, Dan Ardell, and my family for a book that would require more than twenty years to see completion has meant everything.

Jean Hastings Ardell

Note to the Reader

In the preface to her book *Koufax*, Jane Leavy writes, “You don’t need to know everything to write the truth. You just need to know enough.”

This is a memoir, so it is a book that relies on my memories of what happened on and off the field over the years that I played baseball. In the Game Day sections, I have reconstructed the inning-by-inning events, particularly the pitches I made, from those memories to the best of my ability. These memories were sometimes corrected by the game notes provided by the front office of the Fargo-Moorhead RedHawks. I also checked the statistics provided by Baseball Reference, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Library, and individual clubs. I have also checked with family members, friends, coaches, and others in baseball whose lives touched mine, so as to provide the reader with an accurate account.

MAKING MY PITCH

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PROLOGUE

JULY 30, 1998. I'm in the back of the bus, heading down the highway that goes from Winnipeg, Manitoba, to Fargo, North Dakota. This afternoon I'm the starting pitcher for the Duluth-Superior Dukes against the Fargo-Moorhead RedHawks. Last week I finally got my first win as a professional baseball player. I was in the zone that day, throwing six scoreless innings, giving up three hits and two walks, with two strikeouts against the Sioux Falls Canaries. So they tell me, because everything from that game is a blur. But my record is even now at 1-1, I'm pitching well, and I can feel the confidence of my manager, George Mitterwald. Today I'll start against the first-place team. If I do well again, maybe no one will say last week's win was luck, that I'm a novelty.

Though "novelty" is one of the nicer words used to describe the women who have fought to play professional baseball. Take Lizzie Arlington, who pitched in the minor leagues in 1898. The headlines were all about what a "sensation" she was, this "most famous lady pitcher in the world." After that, no woman played a season of pro ball until the early 1950s, when Mamie "Peanut" Johnson pitched and Connie Morgan and Toni Stone competed in the Negro Leagues. The word on these women, though, is that they were signed only to boost sagging gate receipts as the Negro Leagues faded into history once Jackie Robinson had integrated major league baseball in 1947. So no matter where I've played, from Little League on, people have been on my case. I still try to win them over, to change

their minds about what a woman can do—not just in baseball but also even in life. Trying to win everyone over, though, has been a losing game. What matters most to me now is that my teammates respect me. And, hey, now I have a win on my record.

It's a blistering summer day, but inside the bus it's nice and cool. It's true what you hear about bus rides in the backwaters of baseball. In the Northern League, the rides can be up to fourteen hours long. We cross the Canadian border to play in Winnipeg and Thunder Bay, Ontario; we travel west to Fargo; southeast to Schaumburg, Illinois, and Madison, Wisconsin, and southwest to Sioux City, Iowa, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. To pass the time I journal, read, listen to music, or watch a movie—*Tin Cup* and *Bull Durham* are usually the only ones on the bus, and I bet I've watched them a dozen times.

We all try to rest, but for me it's hard to fall asleep next to a teammate, never knowing if I might drool and provide a photo op for him to post in the locker room. Usually I stretch out in the aisle or on the floor between the seats, despite the empty beer cans that roll around on the floor. Then I wake up smelling like beer and sweat. Well, that is baseball in the Northern League.

I jam my headphones into both ears and throw a towel over my face, trying to ignore the guy next to me, who is watching porn on his laptop and seems to be enjoying it very much. The guys across from us are in a farting contest—how many can you belt out in sixty seconds? I tune my radio to a sports talk show and suddenly hear Doug Simunic, the RedHawks' manager, talking trash about “the woman pitcher.” He is going off about how he will put his pitchers in the outfield, or only play his second string, or maybe just forfeit the game if I play. It turns out he's complained to the commissioner of the Northern League about me.

“There comes a time when you have to stop and take a look at the big picture,” Simunic told a reporter for the *Winnipeg Free Press*. “But I guess the league thinks she's a good idea.”

The league, it turns out, does think I am a good idea. According to the *Free Press*, the league commissioner, Miles Wolff, had responded to Simunic's complaints by sending a memo to all the clubs “reminding

them of a league rule to field their best squads and compete at the highest level possible.”

Listeners call in. It sounds like the entire town has gone ballistic over me pitching. Some say that I’m bringing down the game by playing men’s baseball, the idea being if a woman can compete in a man’s sport, it must not be much of a game. One caller gets bleeped, but a few say, “Give her a chance.”

A chance is all I’ve ever wanted. Growing up, I read every book I could find about misfits like me who found the way past survival to success. Last season, just after I made the St. Paul Saints, Neal Karlen, who was writing *Slouching toward Fargo*, a book about the ball club, gave me Jackie Robinson’s biography. “Read it,” Neal said, “because I think this is the only thing that is going to give you advice and courage for what you’re about to go through.”

I read it in a day. I remember my surprise that Robinson felt the same emotions I was feeling—that sense of being cowardly, because you can’t fight back against the naysayers. Back then, his skin, to Organized Baseball, was unacceptably black; my skin was white, though shaped around the less-than-acceptable form of a female. I wished I could have talked to Robinson about his experiences as the man who desegregated the modern game. He had to be so strong. I just wish I were as tough on the inside as I show on the outside. It’s hard to hear people I’ve never met say they hate me—and all because I’m a woman who pitches in the Northern League. Playing in this men’s independent league—it’s outside Organized Baseball—is like skipping rookie ball and going straight to Class A ball. We have former Triple-A players trying to get their careers back on track, unsigned high draft picks like J. D. Drew who want to prove they are worth a bigger contract, ex-major leaguers like Jack Morris and Darryl Strawberry who want one last chance, and misfits like me. Call us the outback of pro ball.

But castoffs and misfits play well in the media. Who doesn’t like a come-from-behind, against-all-odds story? So Mike Wallace’s television crew from *60 Minutes* is on the way to Fargo to film the game. Wallace is doing a piece on me—and how many people ever get to experience

that? I should feel grateful but can't get past the nerves. Like there isn't already enough stress in a league like this, because if you don't perform, or even if you do, you can be let go at any time. Now, courtesy of *60 Minutes*, I'll be on a national stage. Mike has turned out to be one of the kindest interviewers I've faced, but I know that the message in his story will be that I'm a sensation, a novelty. I'm also worried about the lumps I just found on the back of my neck, which I haven't told anyone about except God. And I worry about what the people of Fargo will do when our bus pulls into town. I remind myself that God approves of me, and that's all that matters, but right now He feels far away. The stress is the worst it's ever been. I'm twenty-three years old and wonder how in the heck I came to be on this bus filled with two dozen randy guys.

When our bus arrives at the parking lot of Newman Outdoor Field, fans and reporters surround it. "Good luck, Shorty," says one of the veterans. "Glad I am not you."

Then my best friend on the team and last summer's boyfriend, Dave Glick, puts his hand on my shoulder, and says, "We're all behind you, Ila. No matter what."

I grab hold of his words. I'll play them in my head all through the game.

"We're behind you." I first heard those words from Dad. That's what he has always said. He meant it, too, except when he couldn't or wouldn't or didn't back me up. But baseball's a game of failure, of errors large or small, and I learned early that having backup is a sometime thing. I learned it from my father, who was also my mentor, coach, agent, and nemesis.

As we exit the bus, people are yelling, "Go back home—we don't want you."

One man waves a sign: "Go back to the kitchen, Ila."

Can't you show more imagination? I want to say, though I don't. This is the same stuff that umpire Pam Postema heard in the minor leagues a few years back—"stick to doing the dishes." One day Postema arrived at home plate, and there was a frying pan. No wonder she called her memoir *You've Got to Have Balls to Make It in This League*.

Other fans reach to shake my hand or push baseballs at me, asking for an autograph, or they pull at my clothes. In the parking lot, people are

already tailgating, and a few drunks are spraying beer all over. Some of my teammates form a human wedge around me as we move through the crowd. It feels good that they think to do this without my asking. Even though I have my teammates' support, I still feel alone in this quest. If I mess up I'll be letting down the cause of women everywhere. There's always a host of ghostly expectations out on the mound with me.

Shuffling along inside the wedge toward the locker room, I notice the RedHawks out on the field, taking batting practice. I see their manager, Doug Simunic, glaring at me.

Suddenly a cameraman appears from behind me: "Hello, Ila. We're from *60 Minutes*. Where can we set up?"

What I want right now is to be left alone. It's game day, and like every starting pitcher, I want my game face on. Where can I hide? I flee into the stands and find a women's restroom. So here I am, sitting in my uniform on the toilet with my feet up, so no one knows I'm here. Head down, I whisper a prayer. "Lord, give me the strength to do my best, to be focused, and let me reap what I have been working so hard for. Please be with me."

I want this win so bad. When we beat the Sioux Falls Canaries last week, we were at our home ballpark. Now I'm on the road facing the best team in the Northern League. Unlike the Canaries, the RedHawks have been bad-mouthing me. I want to shut Simunic and all the other critics up. So the inner Ila emerges—a controlled, competitive rage comes alive. I charge toward the bullpen like a soldier ready for battle. I've been criticized for the stone face I show when I pitch. Some have said, "You're a girl; smile."

Well, screw that. I'm an athlete here to win. Now get the hell out of my face. Would you tell a guy to smile? Growing up, I heard all about Don Drysdale, the Los Angeles Dodgers' star right-hander of the 1950s and 1960s. I was crazy about Drysdale, who everyone said was the nicest guy around—except for the days he pitched. Then, nobody went near him. Did anyone tell Drysdale to smile? So hell no—no smile. I've been fighting for this since I was ten years old.