

Twenty years ago, Ila Borders broke gender barriers playing for the St. Paul Saints

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Image courtesy the author

When Ila Borders took the mound for the St. Paul Saints in 1997, people dismissed her as a publicity stunt, the latest in a series of quirky promotions hatched by the cheeky independent league team. But she was no gimmick; she was making history. That year, ticket holders to the sold-out season would bear witness to the first woman to play men's professional baseball since the Negro Leagues era.

In her new book,

Making My Pitch: A Woman's Baseball Odyssey

, Borders relays the struggles and triumphs of being a trailblazer of our national pastime. That includes being referred to as “that thing” by an opposing Northern League manager and receiving death threats.

“Anytime you’re a woman trying to break into a male-dominated field you spend time trying to prove yourself,” says Borders. “Once [my teammates] realized I wasn’t there to pick up guys or for the publicity -- I was just there to play baseball -- I’d see them diving for balls for me, encouraging me. They know how hard it is to play this game.”

Borders had a successful four-year career. Her best season came in 1999 while playing for Madison Black Wolf. There, she posted a 1.67 ERA in 15 appearances. “I loved the game, and never really felt like what I went through wasn’t worth it until my last year, and that’s why I decided to retire,” she says. “Mike Veeck [co-owner of the St. Paul Saints] offered me a job as a pitching coach, but I said no because my head wasn’t in it at the time. That’s the one thing I regret.”

These days, the 42-year-old Borders is living in Oregon and working as a firefighter and paramedic. She also coaches, and hosts clinics as often as possible, and is participating in MLB’s Trailblazer series, which mentors young women playing the sport.

“Women really have to fight to play baseball,” she says. “Girls play Little League, and then are transitioned into playing softball because it’s seen as the equivalent to baseball when it’s really a completely different game.” Statistics support this: According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, out of the approximately 100,000 girls who play Little League, only 1,000 or so go on to play high school baseball.

While Borders says she hasn’t watched

Pitch

, the recently canceled Fox TV drama following a fictional female pro-athlete, she believes that it's only a matter of time before a woman makes it onto a Major League team.

“I don't think the first female baseball player will come from the United States, though,” she says. “There are far more opportunities in countries like Canada, Japan, and Australia for girls to play baseball.”

While this year marks the 25th anniversary of

A League of Their Own

, the non-linear path for women in baseball continues.

Borders will be in town this weekend to sign copies of her book outside of CHS Field prior to the Saints game on Saturday, May 27, beginning at 4 pm. The book signing is free and open to the public. The first 1,500 ticket holders in attendance at the game that night will receive an Ila Borders bobblehead.

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