

Coronet

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The girl who struck out Babe Ruth

by Jack Orr



Virnie Beatrice "Jackie" Mitchell,

THE YEAR 1931 was perhaps no dizzier than any other year in that wild era of U.S. history. It was the year flagpole-sitting and the marathon dance craze were introduced—and it was also the year Babe Ruth was struck out by a pert, snip-nosed, pretty young girl of 17.

Joe Engel, a clever minor league showman, had become owner of the Chattanooga Lookouts. A week before the Yankees were to play an exhibition game in Chattanooga, Engel announced that he had signed Virnie Beatrice "Jackie" Mitchell, 17, a left-handed girl pitcher, whose ambition was to strike out the Babe.

A sports writer who hustled out to Jackie Mitchell's house found a shy schoolgirl with blue-gray eyes, flat brown hair and a boyish figure. She threw unusually hard for a woman, but her fast ball didn't look as if it could break a pane of glass.

When the big day arrived, more than 3,000 fans turned out. Clyde Barfoot started pitching for the Lookouts while Jackie warmed up on the side lines, dressed in a costume specially created for her by A. G. Spalding & Bros.

Earle Combs, leading off, cracked a double off the wall. Lyn Lary singled him home. And up stepped the Babe. At a signal, Jackie walked to the mound, and the Babe gallantly tipped his cap. She wound up as if she were turning a coffee grinder

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Babe Ruth struck out



and pitched. The Babe swung gloriously—and missed by a foot. The next two pitches were wide, and Ruth had the umpire throw in another ball. The Babe swung again and missed. On the next pitch, he let the ball go by. The umpire said, “Strike three!” and the Babe went back to the bench, shaking his head.

Gehrig came next and took three mighty swings and sat down. Lazzeri swung and missed one pitch, fouled another and eventually drew a walk. At this point, Jackie was taken out of the game—to roaring applause.

There were wide repercussions. *The New York Times* asked, “Whither baseball?” “Maybe her curves were too much for them,” suggested a Cincinnati newspaper. “Or was it just the spring?”

Jackie never pitched again professionally. She pitched exhibition games, billed as “the girl who struck out Ruth,” and then disappeared. Recently, someone discovered her working at a diaper service where she still was telling the story of her moment of triumph over the great Babe Ruth.

