a Miami Marlins community

S ON SBNATION

Memorable W

Marlins beat Phillies on Opening Day, 5-2 ×

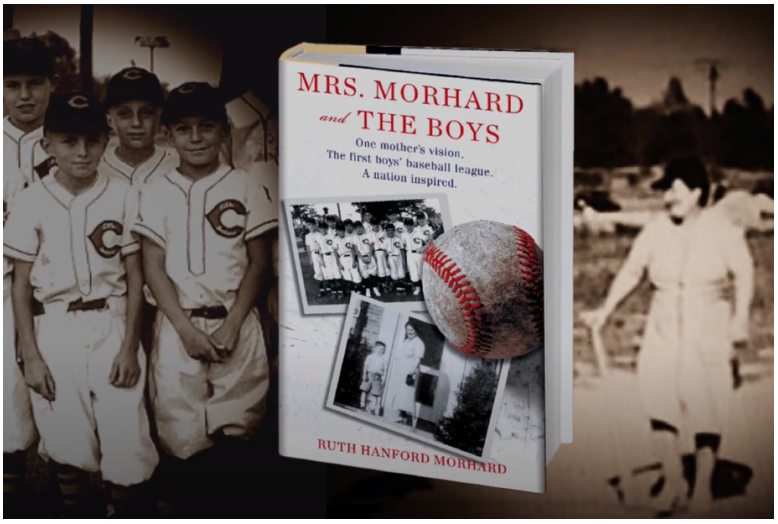
NON-MARLINS

Reviewing Mrs. Morhard and the Boys

3

Author Ruth Hanford Morhard shares the unforgettable story of her mother-in-law, Josephine, and the youth baseball players she impacted.

By Old Gator | Jul 24, 2020, 11:05am EDT



Baseball levitates on its foundation of myths like

Lando Calrissian's Cloud City. Once its legends take root the game surfs them no matter how many times the narratives get debunked. Moreover baseball, even to kids, is a territorial phenomenon. Teams belong to their communities, even if those communities are less than centralized. Most fans root for their local teams, of course, though there are extended communities—"Red Sox Nation" is a good example of one—wherein one may root with local fervor for a team which is anything but close by. Take the fan from rural Maine who has never been to Boston yet experiences it as a lived reality, if not more than lived—imaginatively supercharged like some fantasy kingdom, populated above all by the Red Sox and actuated by all their myths, legends, and stories.

These are, as Benedict Anderson described them in his classic about how we confabulate worlds to live in, *Imagined Communities*. Take myth and graft it to any locale and you've got a fabricated reality so cogent you could easily bang your head against it. Even Cleveland perspicaciously established the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame there, as if we were meant to suppose the music was born on the site where Howard the Duck fell through a dimensional warp. But you know how a legend persists, right? With each successive induction of

another legendary performer, the idea of a Hall of Fame for Rock in Cleveland becomes a little less preposterous. That's how you imagine a community and flesh out its details.

If major league baseball fans look to their distant Meccas like Yankee Stadium, Fenway Park, Wrigley Field, or, here in Macondo, Macondo Banana Massacre Field (which at the moment is distant because we can't attend it), even kids' baseball has its Brigadoons. In Japan that would be Koshein Stadium in Nishinomaya near Kobe, home of the annual Japanese High School Baseball Championship which routinely packs it out game after game to its full 80,000 seat capacity. When Japanese children pronounce "Koshein" their faces illuminate beatifically. From the day they pick up their first bat and glove they are drawn to it like the little homunculi to the Overmind at the conclusion of *Childhood's End.*

For the American Little League, that field of dreams is Williamsport, Pennsylvania, home of the Little League World Series and where, you doubtless heard, Little League Baseball was born. But it wasn't. The myth of its origins in Williamsport will doubtless be told and retold as long and as often as the myth of Abner Doubleday's creation of baseball in Cooperstown, New York. At the time major league baseball was congealing into a

company, as it were, and needed a myth to power it. Before Marshall McLuhan was, these guys understood the power of myth to market. The Dauphins of Baseball (it was a little too early to start calling them “lords”) and their wealthy backer, one Albert Spalding, whose name you may know, co-opted the gunnery commander who legend has it fired the first artillery round back at the Confederate forces from the parapets of Fort Sumter. They baptized him the game’s progenitor and the story sticks even though repeatedly debunked.

In fact, though, there was a little league—an organized network of leagues, Little American and Little National—years before Williamsport, during the late 1930s in, of all places, the adjacent eastern suburbs of Cleveland, University Heights and Cleveland Heights. Perhaps the city wouldn’t even have needed the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame if Williamsport hadn’t stolen its bragging rights to the origin myth of Little League. One never knows, do one?

The first little league was, in fact, the brainchild of a middle-aged depression era butcher and meat dealer named Josephine Morhard. Mrs. Morhard had urgent reasons to found her first teams. Her young son Junior had been emotionally scarred by his absconded alcoholic father’s rages and horrible fights with his

mother. The boy seemed headed for trouble himself, and she cast about desperately for something to which he could devote his misapplied energies and keep him sane. When she realized how much she and her son both loved baseball her ideas were cast and needed nothing less than her formidable willpower to set them in motion. As this elegantly written book tells us, it all began with a vacant, weed-choked, and garbage-strewn lot belonging to the suburb of Cleveland Heights.

Her daughter in law, Ruth Hanford Morhard, details Josephine's undertaking across several years of steps forward and backward, through the city's and then a shopping center developer's repeated acts of generosity and retraction, against odds that would have broken many resolutions less indomitable than hers. That she found ways galore to fund and promote her league is a big part of what makes the book so engaging. Her son and his friends were playing in dirty lots, using makeshift bats, taped-together baseballs and various and sundry sticks and old bats. Never deterred, her gambits included browbeating donations of land from suburban mayors and then from the developer, even cajoling one mayor to send his municipal construction equipment to clean up and grade the lot for the kids' ballfield, soliciting contributions of money, material and carpentry

skills to build the kids their own fields of dreams (yes, she pulled this off multiple times in multiple locations) and setting up a shop-to-doorstep meat delivery system sixty five years before Grubhub. What she accomplished would have been tough enough in a normal economy but this all happened during the Great Depression, beginning around 1936. What a thesis topic for an MBA student! For our present purposes, though, it is noteworthy because it made possible Mrs. Morhard's keeping the meat business she won in divorce proceedings from Junior's father alive so she could pay her mortgage, and at the same time buy bats, gloves, and uniforms for her young charges.

Cleveland Indians star pitcher Bob Feller | Photo by New York Times Co./Getty Images

But it went beyond that. Eventually the steamroller she set in motion expanded to a dozen and a half teams from across northern Ohio, and drew in the ownership, management, and players from the Cleveland Indians franchise itself. Some of the names of the players will be familiar to you. Hall of Famer Bob Feller, catcher Luke Sewell, hitting stars

Earl Averill, Hal Trosky, Jeff Heath, and others. Hal Lebovitz, the Cleveland Plain Dealer's baseball writer, became one of the league's most enthusiastic sponsors. The Indians' manager, Ossie Vitt, and their head of scouting, and a handful of major league umpires, all became active participants in helping Joesphine form her league. These players, whom the kids idolized, gave hours of their time teaching their young wards to hit, field and pitch. Now come on. How badly would you have liked to have Bob Feller teaching you to pitch when you were ten years old? The boys became so proficient adult sportswriters, from around the country, came to see them when in town for Indians games and remarked in their columns how remarkably well they played. The pinnacle of her achievement was the first Little World Series, played in the league's mini-stadium in University heights. Eventually the kids were invited to play games in the big league environs of Cleveland's League Stadium. The author describes this stirring tournament with a sharp eye to history and sensitivity to the thrill those kids must have felt. They had risen from the streets, and the vacant lots, and the wooden grandstands of their little fields, to play their championship in a real big league park for the first time in history. Ruth Morhard makes you see and feel what they felt.

Now the first half of this book, detailing Josephine Morhard's difficult early life, two failed marriages and financial struggles in the depression, might not appeal to you if your interest only picks up when the kids' leagues were formed. The author's agenda includes mapping her family history and this she does in remarkable detail, drawing not only on the trunks in the attic after her mother-in-law's passing but, thusly inspired herself, from an impressive list of journalistic and civic records she hunted down and digested for this book. That first half is also elegantly and cleanly written. If you skip it Mrs. Morhard's steely resolve will seem perhaps a bit less convincing to you if you don't understand where and what she came from. The concluding chapter, wherein her "boys," now grown adults, return to throw her a reunion party in 1968, when she was in her 80s and a full thirty years after the boys' leagues were first organized, is wonderfully touching.

After contributing hugely to local moral while World War II was raging, Mrs. Morhard's boys' leagues were disbanded after 1944, when many of "her boys" were teenagers and the war had sapped so many resources it became impossible to perpetuate. And the "official" little league web site continues to insist on the myth of Williamsport, despite how influential Mrs.

Morhard's boy's leagues were as the later iteration of Little League Baseball was formed. A documentary film about the boys' leagues, to which members of the Indians and the local newspapers contributed, was requested by the nascent Williamsport group in the early 1940s and Mrs. Morhard sent it to them happily. And yet, the site doesn't even mention the first boy's league, which not only thrilled the fans of Cleveland but, as the nation lurched from depression to war, inspired so many far beyond the civic boundaries of Cleveland. I don't like them anymore.