

# Book Review: Mrs. Morhard and the Boys

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Every year, as spring gives way to summer, I like to dust off my favorite baseball movies and watch them all for the umpteenth time. Movies like *The Sandlot*, *Little Big League*, and *61\** are staples in my repertoire, and I always have a blast revisiting them along with so many others. There's nothing quite like a great baseball story to put me in a good mood.

While there are dozens of excellent baseball movies out there, some of baseball's best stories have never had the chance to grace the silver screen. In fact, some of the most interesting baseball stories I've ever been exposed to have come, not from movies, but from books. During the past few years, I've been reading more and more baseball books and it's been an incredibly fun journey. I've learned a lot about the game's history as well as its greatest teams and players.

Until recently, however, I had never had a chance to read about the history of youth baseball. That changed this past week when I sat down and read Ruth Hanford Morhard's exceptional book, *Mrs. Morhard and the Boys*. In this colorful, inspiring new book, Ruth Hanford Morhard tells the

story of how her mother-in-law, Josephine Morhard, helped spur the development of organized youth baseball and, in the process, revolutionized American sports. It's a book that you'll definitely want to check out for yourself, and one that I'm excited to review for you today.

## **The Woman at the Heart of Boys Baseball**

The first half of *Mrs. Morhard and the Boys* focuses on the life experiences that molded Josephine's worldview. Born in 1891, Josephine was the eleventh of Joseph and Elizabeth Mathey's seventeen children. The family was originally based in Poland, Ohio, but Josephine's father moved the Mathey clan to Bessemer, Pennsylvania in the hopes of finding financial security.

When she wasn't fishing with her siblings or adventuring in the woods, Josephine was working hard on the family farm. In fact, Josephine quickly developed a reputation for doing more work than all of her brothers and sisters. She was also known for being something of a tomboy, a girl who could do anything that the boys of the family could do. While Josephine loved helping her parents, she began to resent the unreasonable expectations that her mother and father had placed upon her. At just eleven-years-old, worn out from long days of manual labor, Josephine ran away.

Amazingly, Josephine proved to be quite capable of taking care of herself. After leaving the family farm, she moved in with the Kerrs, a wealthy, childless couple in nearby Boardman, Ohio. Josephine's time with the Kerrs provided a much-needed repose. She was finally free to be a child. She no longer needed to care for younger siblings and work for hours in her father's fields.

As Ruth Hanford Morhard points out, though, Josephine's lifelong "lust for freedom" could never be quenched. Eventually, she left the comfort of the Kerr home to carve her own path. She took difficult jobs and steadily built a successful career. In 1915, at twenty-four-years-old, Josephine settled in Cleveland. She couldn't have known it at the time, but soon she would be using baseball to instill her respect for hard work and personal responsibility in the city's young boys.

## **Baseball Becomes an Escape**

A few years after moving to Cleveland, Josephine endured some terribly bad luck. In 1926, her seven-year marriage to Jerry Gerau ended after Jerry became a chronic alcoholic. Josephine's second marriage, this time to Albert Morhard, was also disastrous. Like Jerry, Albert was eventually consumed by an inability to control his drinking. He began to physically abuse Josephine in front of their son, Junior, on a regular basis. In 1936, when Junior was seven,

Josephine filed for divorce. Life was difficult for Junior, who was struggling at school and getting into trouble with his friends. Josephine was a loving mother, and she was afraid that her isolated son was losing his way.

Fortunately, baseball offered an opportunity for Josephine and Junior to bond. Author Ruth Hanford Morhard tells us that mother and son began listening to Cleveland Indians games on the radio during these darker days. Soon, they were both falling in love with the team. Indians stars like Bob Feller and Johnny Allen became Junior's heroes, and baseball became his passion. Unfortunately, there were no baseball leagues for boys Junior's age in 1937. He could play pick-up baseball with the neighborhood kids, but there was no structure. Josephine always wanted the best for her boy, and soon she had a revolutionary idea.

## **Building a League**

The second half of *Mrs. Morhard and the Boys* focuses exclusively on Josephine's quest to build the first boys baseball league in Cleveland. Initially, Josephine's goal was to simply organize a team for Junior and his friends. She managed to secure a patch of land for a field, authentic Cleveland Indians uniforms for the boys, and some basic equipment. Junior and his teammates dubbed their team the Little Indians, and Josephine started searching the area for teams that the boys could play.

The problem was that there were very few youth baseball teams in Cleveland. The boys teams that she did find were unreliable and unorganized. Summoning her signature determination, Josephine started a bigger project. She needed to create a real boys baseball league. She worked hard to organize what she called the Junior American League. Joining the Little Indians were the Little Yankees, Little White Sox, and many other "Little" versions of Big League ball clubs. As her league expanded, Josephine ensured that the focus remained on developing the boys into responsible young men. Good sportsmanship was ingrained into the league's culture. As she had her whole life, Josephine placed a premium on determination, hard work, and respect for others.

Within a few short years, Mrs. Morhard and her boys had transformed youth baseball in Cleveland. In 1941, Josephine unveiled a Junior National League with its own set of teams. At the end of the season, the champions of the two leagues faced off for the Little World Series crown at the actual Cleveland Indians home field, League Park. Ruth Hanford Morhard covers the championship game in exciting detail toward the end of the book. Her exceptional storytelling brings the Little World Series to life for readers.

## **The Pros Play Their Part**

Throughout *Mrs. Morhard and the Boys*, Ruth shines a

spotlight on the people who helped Josephine turn her dream into a reality. Interestingly, some of the most important promoters of the Junior American and National Leagues were the actual Cleveland Indians.

Besides allowing the boys to use their field for the Little World Series, the Indians organization encouraged its players to personally support the league. Bob Feller and several of his Indians teammates even attended the boys' games during the summer months. It's not hard to imagine how excited Junior and his friends must have been when they saw their baseball heroes cheering them on from the bleachers.

Connections with the Indians gave Josephine's league real gravitas. Baseball fans all across the country could follow the league in their newspapers. Calls came in from excited parents who wanted to start similar organizations in their own towns. The most significant call came from Carl Stotz, a young man from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Stotz had started his own youth baseball organization in 1939 and dubbed it "Little League." Inspired by Mrs. Morhard's accomplishments in Cleveland, Stotz would take the concept of competitive, organized youth baseball to new levels in the following decades.

## **The Verdict**

I can confidently say that *Mrs. Morhard and the Boys* is a spectacular baseball story. Charmingly written, powerful in its message, and interesting in its subject matter, Ruth Hanford Morhard's book deserves to be counted as a gem in the genre of sports literature. This is the perfect book for anybody with an interest in youth baseball or baseball in general. The author sprinkles in plenty of excellent information on what was going on in the Major Leagues during the period under review, and Yankees fans will particularly enjoy the praise given to the great Gehrig-DiMaggio teams of the late 1930s. If you're looking for a great baseball book to read while the pros are on hiatus, I'd highly recommend that you pick up a copy of *Mrs. Morhard and the Boys*.

*Mrs. Morhard and the Boys* is available in print and digital formats from [Amazon](#).