

SPORTS

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WOMEN'S SPORTS / *Progress hurt, not helped, by baseball team*

Silver Bullets speeding on train to nowhere

Sometimes, boldly going where no woman has gone before can be a step backward.

The Silver Bullets, an all-female professional baseball squad, has probably been the only team in history to lose so badly to so much applause. Fans, writers and even opponents are happy to overlook the 15-0 losses and hail the Bullets as conquering heroes simply because they are invading one of the last bastions of manhood.

In the process, the team is on the verge of wiping out every inch of progress women's sports have made in the past 15 years.

Women have been well-represented recently in sports highlights. The U.S. soccer team won the first Women's World Championship in 1991. Women's tennis, despite recent bad publicity, is a strong sport.

And only a few weeks ago, North Carolina's Charlotte Smith hit a 3-pointer to give the Tar Heels the national basketball title and put the finishing touches on a thrilling tournament. It wasn't a novelty, it was a great sports moment that had ESPN's Keith Olber-

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mann drooling on the *SportsCenter* set.

Women have even had some success competing against men. Lyn St. James is sixth on the Indianapolis 500 qualifying grid, ahead of such luminaries as Nigel Mansell. Manon Rheume and Erin Whitten have become competent minor-league goaltenders in hockey.

But throwing hastily converted softball players onto a baseball diamond against men who've been playing the game their whole lives is not the next step forward.

Baseballs fly toward infielders a lot harder than softballs. Hitting a curveball is perhaps the most difficult feat in sports, and it requires a sound grasp of fundamentals. Throwing a curveball can't be learned in a

month, either.

Yet these women, whose actual baseball experience came at such an early age that the toughest pitcher was a batting tee of the wrong height, are now learning these facts in the toughest possible way — under scrutiny.

After five games, the Silver Bullets have scored exactly one run. Their biggest accomplishment was a 2-0 loss to an over-30 men's team in which their only two hits came against a sports talk show host.

And so, the public image of women's sports changes, much for the worse. Instead of Smith's game-winner, we see a shortstop trying to handle grounders that look like missiles to the softball-trained eye. Instead of the fleet-footed U.S. soccer team, we see batters whiff helplessly at curveballs thrown by a junior-college pitcher.

And all this sponsored by a beer company. Isn't this a male chauvinist's dream?

Some seem to think the Silver Bullets will build a groundswell of support for a pro wom-

en's league along the lines of the World War II-era league immortalized in *A League Of Their Own*. If the public will support it, great, but this touring travesty is an unlikely and embarrassing way to go about it.

Compare the Bullets to women's basketball. Women in the United States have played basketball long enough to win world championships and gold medals. College basketball produces a new generation of female stars every year. The best players find professional careers — overseas. Despite the boom in women's basketball that has produced marketable stars such as Sheryl Swoopes and Jennifer Azzi, efforts to form an American pro league have been very weak.

And now, the fans and media are fawning all over a bunch of women who are doomed to fail. Successful women in sports are shunned until the next Olympics, while we glorify other women's incompetence.

What does this say about us?

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