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Downers' Koehn in a league of her own

Plenty of fond memories playing professional baseball

By Tim Egan

Lately, Downers Grove resident Phyllis Koehn, has been quoted in newspapers, appeared on television and featured on radio.

And her phone is still hopping off the hook.

When Koehn was 20 years old, she began a trip toward fame in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League.

Little did she know that the early tastes of stardom would never compare to what would happen 40-plus years later.

"A League of Their Own," a movie about the league, has opened the eyes of those who never knew of its existence and the door to the memories of those who were involved.

"I'll tell you something," said Koehn, whose last name is pronounced "cane." "It's crazy. My phone hasn't stopped ringing. We didn't get a whole lot of attention until this movie came out. Everybody wants to know about the league now."

The league ran from 1943 to '54 and has finally been brought to immortalization by a box-office smash starring Madonna and Geena Davis.

"It's not a documentary," Koehn said. "But it gives you a pretty good idea of how things were."

Koehn, known as "Sugar" on the ball field, spent seven seasons with the Kenosha Comets, one of the four original teams to play in the league. And all this came through a way to kill time.

"I think all of us who played in the All-

American," she said, "grew up in a neighborhood where it was all boys and played right with them. It was either play baseball, football or whatever was in season or you didn't do anything. You learned to play ball."

Before the league, Koehn, 69, played for the Kennedy Dairy team, which won state softball championships in 1938 and 1941 in Wisconsin.

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Phyllis Koehn
Ex-professional baseball player

"I was having the time of my life," she said. "Then my father told me about a professional baseball league he read in the paper. My father thought I was the best player to ever walk the planet, so he wanted me to go down (to Chicago) for a tryout."

On May 1, 1943, Koehn and the other league hopefuls gathered at Wrigley Field and went through a "grueling" tryout.

"I thought it was great," she said. "I was offered \$60 a week in my first contract."

Then her life as a professional athlete began and so did the memories.

"Something that's funny is when I was fined a couple of times," Koehn said. "One time, I missed a bunt sign and hit a double. The next girl up to bat got a hit and as I was rounding third our coach (Marty McManus, a major league in-

fielder in the 1920s and 30s) said, 'That'll cost you five.' But that's not the end of the story."

"The next day I was in left field and at the park in Kenosha, the wall down the line was separated in certain places. The ball was hit foul and I started after it. I ran as hard as I could and when I went through a separation, my spikes hit concrete and I went flying. And so did a few folding chairs."

"I wound up sitting on the ground, with my arm in the air and the ball in my glove. The crowd went crazy. When I went back to the bench, I had never seen that big of a smile on (McManus). He came up to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Forget about the five bucks from yesterday.'"

The league's daily routine of attending charm school was portrayed in the movie.

"It wasn't as bad as the girls in the movie made it," said Koehn, an outfielder/pitcher. "They wanted us to be feminine. I think most of us knew how to get up from the chair and what fork to use. Every morning, we'd go to practice and have our hair in rollers. You had to be proud to be a part of this. It really was something special."

"We liked everything about the league."

Koehn is quick to prove that the league had the first teams to play under the lights in Wrigley Field on July 1, 1943.

"What do you have to say about this, Chicago Cubs?" she said as she popped open a three-inch scrapbook with clippings of the game results. "That's a little jab."

In 1988, the league was given a place in the Baseball Hall of Fame. And they have a motion picture dedicated to that special era of American



Downers Grove resident Phyllis Koehn in her playing days for the Kenosha Comets of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League.

sports.

It took the "First Ladies of baseball" over 30 years to be honored as they should, but now Koehn has a calendar booked with days marked for interviews and publicity event.

All except for a few.

"Nobody gets my golf days," she said, proving the always active lifestyle of a true athlete.