

SPORTS

WHERE ARE THEY NOW: DOLLY BRUNFIELD

Nobody would have believed she was a professional baseball player

By **Bill Plott**
News staff writer

Practically nobody at Alabama College (now the University of Montevallo) knew how Dolly Brunfield was spending her summers in the 1950s.

"If I had told them, they wouldn't have believed it," said the former infielder-outfielder in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League. Now Dr. Delores Brunfield White, she was back in Montevallo recently to accept the physical education department's Alumnus of the Year award at Homecoming and speak to a gathering of UM athletes.

"I played in the league for four years before I went to Montevallo and three years while I was there. But only my family members and two girls from Montevallo — my roommate and my senior (an upper class adviser) — ever saw me play," she said.

"Most of my classmates didn't have any idea what I was doing. I'd come back to school and they'd all have their stories about camps where they had been counselors and little songs from camp. I had a lot of little songs, too, but I couldn't sing them here! They came off of those bus trips."

If it had not been for the 1992 movie, *A League of Their Own*, White doubts if many people would be aware of the women's pro league today.

Although she financed much of her



NEWS STAFF PHOTO/BERNARD TRUNCALE

Delores Brunfield White looks over memorabilia from her playing days.

college education by playing baseball, she said the existence of the league was hardly known outside of the handful of midwestern cities with franchises.

"You didn't come home and share it. It was considered very socially acceptable to be a girl athlete in those days, and they wouldn't have believed it anyway. It was so foreign.

The movie has done a great job of educating people," she said, adding that, like most of the other former players, she's loving the attention the league is getting today.

White was one of only two Alabamians to play in the league. The other was Margie Halgerson, now deceased, who played with Rockford. White's best year was 1953 when she hit .332, second highest average in the league.

A native of Prichard, White grew up watching shipyard workers play baseball at a playground near her home.

"They took a special interest in the little girl who was always hanging around the schoolyard while they were playing and sometimes they'd let me fill in when they didn't have enough.

"We had a neighbor, Grady Branch, who had no kids who also took a special interest in me. He really taught me a lot of the skills. He played on a church softball team and he and his wife would take me along to his games. He worked in the paper mill and when he would come home in the afternoons I'd be waiting for him usually.

"We'd go out to the space between the houses — it was maybe 10 or 12 feet wide — and we'd play pitch and catch. He's long since gone, but he was a special person to me. He encouraged me. My father was an automobile mechanic and always very busy. But I loved playing ball. I'd go to school early and play ball, go to recess and play ball. After school, play ball."

Her love of the game and growing ability did not go unnoticed. At the urging of some of the shipyard players, White's mother and grandmother took her out of school and over to Pascagoula, Miss., where the AAGPBL was making a stop. That was in April of 1946.

Her tryout had league officials excited until they found out she was only 13 years old.

The following fall, when she was a ripe old 14, she was invited to go to Havana, Cuba for the league tryout. She was one of 30 invited from a pool of over 300 girls.

"I quit school, with the principal's permission, and went to Havana. I made the team and turned 15 while I was with South Bend the first year. I was so, but the principal agreed that it was a wonderful opportunity for me. It certainly has influenced the rest of my life," she said.

Through a combination of tutors and understanding teachers, White eventually graduated from Murphy High School a semester late.

How much did *A League of Their Own* resemble the real league, which operated from 1943-54.

"Most of the characters were a collection of the 500 or so people who played in the league, but the Ma-onna character was partly accurate. There was a girl who was always different. Skirts were to be worn a certain length, so hers was different. You were supposed to wear the cap a certain way, but hers was different.

"My manager Jimmy Foxx was

nothing like the Tom Hanks character, thank goodness. Jimmy Fox was a big burly guy, little bitty legs, big chest, big heart. He was very good to me."

The discipline and the dress code were very realistic, she said. There were chaperones, dates had to be approved, and skirts had to be worn at all times, on and off the field.

"If you got off the bus in the middle of the night you had to have a skirt. I leaned to the skirts and I still do," she said, smoothing a wrinkle in her magenta pantsuit.

And while it was great fun, it was also work.

"The first year I made \$55 a week, which was good money for women in those days. But we worked seven days a week with doubleheaders on Sundays and holidays. We had two hours after a game to shower, get something to eat and be in.

"My problem was I was so young. It was hard to find places to eat at 1:30 at night that didn't serve alcohol. They'd say, 'You have to be 21 to come in here.' Well, I retired (from the league) at 21!"

Most of the players stayed with individual families rather than in boarding houses like in the movie, she said.

"If they did that, it was before my time. There was a beauty school, but I missed all that. I joined up four years after the league started. I was lucky. I had the best of times and got to play ball before thousands of people," she said.