

A Team of Their Own

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Kate Maston takes off from third base, barreling toward home plate. Waiting for her arrival is the opposing catcher, a 12-year-old boy who is a year older and almost a foot taller than she. He's also in her way. No big deal. She's quick and she's nimble. She's also unafraid. In a race to beat the throw and the tag, Maston instinctively gets low as she closes in on home plate. So low that she slides her slender 5'0" body feet-first through the catcher's legs. A cloud of red dirt engulfs the catcher and Maston as she touches the plate, setting off an explosion of deafening cheers. High-fives all around. Maston just gave her team a 7-6 lead in the top of the fifth inning.

"I'm probably going to lose my voice after this game!" Maston's teammate Sammie Singh yells from the dugout.

Maston is a baseball player. But unlike most stories you hear about girls who play baseball, she is not the lone girl on the team. She's not [Mo'ne Davis](#) or Ginny Baker from Fox's short-lived baseball drama *Pitch*. In her dugout is an entire team full of girls. They are part of [Girls Travel Baseball](#) (GTB) and have come to Miami from all over the country to play in the [SummerSlam youth baseball tournament](#) against teams full of boys. Maston's efforts put GTB ahead of Genesis, a local and noticeably bigger team in the 12-and-under division (GTB played with 10- and 11-year-olds for this game). Maston was the leadoff

hitter for GTB. Her head didn't clear the Genesis catcher's shoulders. Looking on from the dugout as the Genesis players warmed up, the GTB girls had noted his size.

"I think he has a mustache."

"That kid is not 12."

"He's not a kid."

It didn't matter, though. Despite the game being GTB's third matchup in less than 24 hours (the girls lost the first two), the team had no plans of backing down against older boys on that balmy June afternoon.

After Genesis jumped out in front with a 6-0 lead in the first inning, the girls' bats got hot in the third. They scored three runs, followed by another three in the fourth. GTB was pumped and chatty. The excitement of the comeback vibrated through the dugout. "You look like you ate six energy bars," a coach told one of the girls. Maston's slide into home plate only increased the jubilation.

This is youth ball, so the game has a time limit. In the bottom of the fifth, Genesis tied the game. Then in an act of redemption, the Genesis catcher smacked the ball deep into center field to drive in a runner for an 8-7 win. Time was up.

But Miami is still a win. Every tournament is. Most girls who play youth baseball are steered away from the sport before they reach double digits in age. As the only all-girls youth travel baseball team in the country, comprised of players from different states, each time GTB takes the field the girls prove it doesn't need to be this way. Ultimately, GTB wants to create a pipeline to the [United States women's national baseball team](#). But it also gives these girls the confidence to dream bigger. Maybe they'll play high school or even college baseball. Or perhaps, one of them will make the majors. For the girls of GTB, their gender doesn't hinder them from believing in the possibilities.

Aubrey Evans is sitting in the lobby of GTB's hotel on the morning of the first day of the tournament. Her socks are pulled up to her knees, she's wearing a Dirtbags baseball T-shirt and on the brim of her GTB baseball hat sits a pair of sunglasses. Behind her, some teammates are playing catch.

She knows she's there to be quizzed about baseball. She sounds like she's answered all these questions before; she probably has. Nearly every member of GTB has had a profile published in their local paper and a few have done radio spots or TV hits. Reporters pop up every so often to ask them about being one of a few girls who play the nation's pastime. Maybe that is why Evans is gruff but patient, not quite bored but not far from it.

Her mood changes, though, when she talks about what it's like to be on an all-girls team that plays teams full of boys. A sly smile crawls across her face, a corner of her mouth kicking up, as she says: "Everyone looks at us weird, and they're like, 'Oh, a bunch of girls. We can beat them.' Then once they see us actually beating them, they start to get scared." She loves that feeling, when the boys realize their level of competition. "Feels great," she says. "Because they're all crying when we strike them out or tag them out. [They] throw their helmets and everything."

"They're so emotional," Grace DeVinney adds. The girls laugh.

Evans, 13, has been playing baseball since she was four. She is only 5'1", but she is built for the game. There's a [video](#) of her at age 11 in Marlins Park, participating in an event with dozens of boys. She stands out because she hit a ball 227 feet into left field. Later that night in Miami, her cheeks streaked with eyeblack, she scores the team's only run in the first game of the tournament.

Like almost every GTB player, Evans is on another travel team, one located in her hometown of Apopka, Florida. She plays with all boys on that one. There are thousands of these youth baseball travel teams throughout the U.S., and most get together regularly to practice and then play in tournaments. GTB doesn't work that way. It has a much smaller pool of potential players because of how girls are [squeezed out](#) of baseball. They either get shuffled into softball—a fine sport but one that is different from baseball in mechanics, strategy and rules—or they quit baseball when they are left sitting on the bench.

GTB, however, makes space for girls. The team is run by CEO Robert Saven and Josh DeVinney, the director of baseball operations. The two met and hit it off nearly four years ago because both have daughters who play baseball. When Saven proposed an all-girls travel team to DeVinney, GTB was born. Its vision is simple: Form a team of the best girls out there and let those girls compete at the highest level. The organization will celebrate its two-year anniversary later this summer.

The original team had eight girls and two boys. GTB now boasts 42 players, all girls between the ages of nine and 16. They are divided into three teams: Maston and her teammates play on an under-11 team nicknamed the Young Guns, Evans and her teammates are on the U13 team called the Prime Team, and there is a U15 team. The organization is constantly expanding and right now, DeVinney has a database of 70 girls. He's hoping to create a U9 team soon.

This system has its drawbacks. Unlike most youth travel sports teams, these girls do not all live in the same place. To get to Miami, they flew or drove from all parts of Florida, Georgia, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Massachusetts, New York and California. The roster is never the same, with school schedules and individual travel budgets determining who can show up each time. Parents are responsible in most cases for paying their kid's way, and GTB plays in a tournament at least once every two months, if not more. Just two weeks after the Miami trip, they met again in North Carolina, where the Prime Team won the championship in its division in the Top Gun baseball tournament. There is chatter about possibly heading to the Bahamas to play later in the summer.

Teams only get to practice together the night before a tournament starts. Sometimes that doesn't work well. The Prime Team couldn't find its rhythm or figure out its chemistry and struggled defensively until about halfway through each game during the SummerSlam tournament. But that same team, then a U12 squad but with a roster similar to the one that traveled to Miami, beat the Puerto Rico national boys team last summer at the Baseball Youth Majors tournament in Kissimmee, Florida. Puerto Rico was the odds-on favorite, the most athletic and experienced team in the division. GTB got down 4-0 in the first inning. But in the top of the fourth, it hit back-to-back home runs. With GTB ahead 5-4, Evans went into the game to pitch. She threw 18 pitches, all of them strikes, across two innings, and GTB came away with a hard-earned win. Since its inception, GTB teams have a combined record of 36-33 with two championships captured by the The Prime Team.

The time and money investment (\$200 for uniforms, about \$50 per tournament, plus travel and lodging costs) is worth it to parents because of what GTB has meant for their daughters. Travis Aldrich, whose daughter Chloe plays for the Young Guns—her base hit drove home Maston—has seen a change in his daughter over the last year since she joined GTB. "She's definitely much more of a leader," he says, because "she sees that she's not such a unicorn at things."

The night the tournament ends in Miami, everyone who is staying at the hotel is at the pool. Most of the parents lounge around on the deck and order all kinds of food; delivery people arrive in a steady stream over an hour or so. Evans is running around, her eyeblack wearing off but still visible. There are water guns, games of chicken, dashes between the hot tub and pool and people getting tossed into the water. Just inside the building, on the tiled hallway floor, three of the Young Guns—Marnie Baxter, Sarah Langlie and Sadie Zion—have created their own Slip 'N Slide. After a couple of hours in the water, a group of the Prime Team players go inside, gather on chairs in the lobby and chat as they mess around on their phones.

DeVinney says his daughter, Grace, is always melancholy for a few days after each tournament. Zion's mother, Laurette, knows the Miami trip will end with a tearful goodbye. "[Sadie is] gonna be hysterical, crying going home tomorrow on the plane," she says.

The friendships the girls build and the acceptance they feel as part of GTB are important elements of their experience. Maston's dad, Rich, says that in his daughter's hometown division in Coral Springs, Florida, they've never seen another girl. "What I liked about [GTB] was introducing [Kate] to other girls like her," he says. "I don't think she thought they existed until she met the team." Abygale Souza, who plays on the Prime Team, has never even met another girl in the state of Massachusetts who plays baseball at the level she does.

This is a big part of why the organization is so important. "You get along, and you can talk normal," Evans says. She immediately adds: "Well, I can talk normal with the guys. But it's not that connection." Some of the girls explain that GTB removes the feeling of always being on the outside looking in, the oddball in the mix. Sometimes they use vague language, saying the other girls "know what we've been through together" or "you feel more comfortable playing with people like you."

There's one other thing about bringing an all-girls team to baseball tournaments, where there are rarely, if ever, any girls playing: It's important for the boys to see it. The night of the first game, as Evans and the rest of the Prime Team played, a boy from another team who had played earlier in the day was standing around, watching GTB. Suddenly, it dawned on him what he was seeing. "Oh, it's girls playing against boys?" he asked loudly and apparently

without first thinking about who could hear him. Heads whipped around. He seemed to realize the importance of his next words. "Oh," he paused. "Awesome."

It's the second game of the tournament for the Prime Team, and they're playing the Commanders. GTB starts smoothly, ending its first defensive inning with a whip-fast double play at first and second. The next time the Commanders are up to bat, they smash the ball deep into left field, and the runner on third has a clear path home. Instead of just running across home plate, though, he slows down about six feet out, practically walks in, shuffling across the plate.

There is immediate anger and chatter throughout the dugout.

How disrespectful. Of course he did that to us.

This kind of thing always happens when we play.

We should hit him the next time he's at bat, show him how we respond to such treatment.

The girls of GTB are always on the lookout for the hate. They never know if what they are getting is simply bad sportsmanship or if it's intentional because they are girls. Either way, they are always on alert. They once played a tournament in which three teams dropped out when they found out they'd have to play an all-girls team. For a while, GTB submitted rosters with only the girls' first initials and their last names. The girls describe how often they get hit by pitches while at the plate or hit by balls while running the bases (they can't prove they get hit more than the boys, but they all believe it to be true).

The hate doesn't just happen on the field. After the first game the Prime Team played in Miami, Julie Clines, whose daughter Olivia plays on the team, saw a grown man standing near the field, flapping his arms around, mimicking the girls, saying "I'm a girl ballplayer." Clines told the tournament director, but there was nothing he could do. "We're used to it," she said, angry but resigned.

The girls use this type of behavior as motivation. Olivia Clines, 12, loves proving the naysayers wrong. "I like beating the boys. I like shoving it in their face when they say, 'Girls can't play baseball,'" she says. "Then we come out and pitch a no-hitter against them, and they're like, 'What?'"

The Sunday after the tournament, the girls from both GTB teams are standing on the warning track in Marlins Park. They are all wearing their bright green jerseys and dark blue GTB baseball hats. Only a few feet away, some of the Chicago Cubs are warming up. Even though they've been instructed not to bother the players, some of the girls can't resist calling out their names. They wave, take pictures and post on Snapchat.

GTB is there to be honored by the Miami Marlins, who are using the home game to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *A League of Their Own*, the fictional 1992 dramedy about the first female pro baseball league, which operated in the U.S. from 1943 to 1954. Lori Petty, who played Kit Keller in the film, throws out the first pitch. The girls of GTB are splashed across the Jumbotron as the announcer explains how they are an all-girls baseball team, the legacy of the women from the movie.

As they waited to be on screen, the girls shoveled dirt from the field into their pockets. Afterward, while walking to a meet-and-greet with Petty, 11-year-old Sadie Zion, says: "I brought home a souvenir. It's called dirt." When asked what she will do with the dirt, her teammate, Felicity Fonseca, answered matter-of-factly, "Put it in a jar."

One day, maybe, one of them will return and stand on the field as an MLB player. These girls, however, know what they are up against. The youngest of all the GTB girls is Savannah Strickland, who turned 10 in February. She lives in Tallahassee, Florida, and like all her teammates, she is the only girl on a local travel team. When asked how long she's played baseball, she thinks about it and then says, "For as long as I can remember." Strickland pauses and then asks, "Can I say something else?" Confidently and unprompted, she says, "I will want to play baseball until I'm not allowed to play anymore."

She's only ever known baseball, and she already knows one day someone will stop her from playing.

But GTB gives these girls hope. Cristen Cox, the mom of 11-year-old Marnie Baxter, said her daughter has played with GTB for four or five tournaments now. "In the past she's always talked about, maybe she'll play for the high school, maybe she'll try out, maybe she'll keep up with it," she says. "Now, she goes around town saying, 'I'm gonna play for the high school.' I hear her telling adults, people at the batting cages, anyone who asks her."

Maston wants more than that, though—she wants to play in the major leagues. Her dad says that's tough to hear because he knows the odds are slim. She's not deterred. When he tells her, "Babe, there's never been anyone that's done it," she responds, "Good. I'm going to be the first."

Evans is right there with her. "I want to make MLB. I know that's a big dream, but I know we can," she says. "We can do it."

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