

# Play Ball, Alta Weiss!

## (1890-1964)



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Alta Weiss was born on February 9, 1890, in Berlin Heights, OH, a small town in Tuscarawas County. She was the second of three daughters of Dr. George Bitikofer Weiss and Lucinda Zehnder Weiss. In 1895, the Weiss family moved from Berlin to Ragersville, where her father established his medical practice.

Alta enjoyed an array of outdoor activities and sports growing up, but baseball was her passion. She began pitching at an early age, and it was clear that her ability to play and compete in baseball was phenomenal. Her skills exceeded those of more than a few male players who considered themselves accomplished athletes.

Dr. Weiss encouraged her to play baseball and treated her like a son. He was instrumental in planning Alta's education and athletic life. In 1905, Dr. Weiss established a local high school so that Alta could play on its baseball team. He also built Weiss Ball Park, where she played on the town's younger "second" team.

Even though she was a full-time student and played baseball only in the summer, he made sure her pitching skills did not get rusty in the off-season. He had a heated gymnasium built onto his barn so that Alta could practice in the winter.

One of his employees, who was a good baseball player, practiced with Alta all winter. To develop her physique, Dr. Weiss outfitted the gymnasium with body-building equipment, basically treating her like an athlete in training. Working hard to market Alta's baseball image, he created a folklore around her extraordinary pitching ability.

By age 14 she was pitching for boys' teams, but her baseball career didn't officially kick off until 1907, when she was 17. While on vacation with her family in Vermillion that summer, Alta was playing a game of catch with some of the local boys when then Mayor H. R. "Squire" Williams noted her abilities. Williams suggested to Charles Heidloff, who was the manager of the semipro Vermilion Independents, that she join the team. Although Heidloff initially refused the suggestion, after he saw her play (striking out 15 men in the first game and 9 in the second of two exhibition games arranged by the mayor), he wasted no time in signing her. It didn't take long for Alto to gain the respect of numerous pro and semipro teams and players throughout the state as well as the attention of fans and sportswriters alike.

Dr. Weiss was very successful in promoting his daughter, and in 1907, she became the Independents' star pitcher. Alta became a celebrity in the Cleveland area when she made her pitching debut with the all-male, semiprofessional Vermilion Independents on September 2, 1907. More than 1,200 fans attended the game in which Weiss pitched 5 innings, giving up only 4 hits and 1 run. By the time Weiss made her second appearance on September 8, she was already being hailed as the "Girl Wonder" in the press.

According to *Vermilion News*, so many fans wanted to see Weiss play that special trains had to be run to Vermilion from Cleveland and surrounding towns. Weiss pitched 8 games for the Independents during their 1907 season. More than 13,000 fans saw the games, including a season high of 3,182, who witnessed her debut at Cleveland's League Park on October 2, 1907. At least a dozen newspapers covered the story.

Realizing his daughter's economic potential, Dr. Weiss bought half interest in the team, at the end of the season and renamed it the *Weiss All-Stars*. He changed the team uniforms to white for the men and black for Alta. (When she took the mound for her new team, Alta wore bloomers rather than a skirt.) Usually, he had Alta pitch five innings and then play first base the other four.



### **The 1908 Weiss All-Stars Semipro Players**

Back (L-R): Roth (c), Grill (1b), Tischer (rf), Miss Irma Weiss (Alta's sister), Meyer (lf), Murphy (c), Hobart (2b). Front: Hoffman (2b), Lehman (3b), Chas. Heidloff (mgr), Miss Alta Weiss (p), Ebner (ump), Langenhan (cf), Sonnendecker (ss). Absent: Reynolds (p), Zmich (p) and Winchester (c).

Photo Credit: Ohio Historical Society via Vermilion Views

The press loved Alta and enjoyed making her a celebrity. She was lauded for her extraordinary ability and phenomenal pitching.

Touring Ohio and Kentucky, the Weiss All-Stars played to record crowds of appreciative fans, many of whom tossed money onto the infield after particularly good plays. Every evening, one of her two sisters reportedly rub Alta's pitching arm with arnica, a plant extract used to treat sprains and bruises.

Following the summer of 1908, Alta attended the Wooster Academy in preparation for college. Two years later, she entered the Starling College of Medicine in Columbus (now The Ohio State University Medical College). The funds from her baseball barnstorming days paid her way through higher education.

During these years she played some baseball, but after 1910 her pitching appearances became fewer. College and the death of her sister Irma, who had provided companionship during the travel, had both been factors. Alta graduated as a Doctor of Medicine, in 1914, the only female in her class. She maintained a medical practice while playing baseball until 1922.

From 1925 to 1946, she practiced medicine in Norwalk, Ohio. She married John Hisrich in 1927, though the couple would eventually separate. Upon her father's death in 1946, she returned home to Ragersville, Ohio to take over her father's medical practice.

Alta Weiss was an eccentric personality (she owned 10 cats, drove a 1940 Buick for decades, and read no less than 3 newspapers daily). She never lost her love of baseball, though, encouraging neighborhood children to play the sport.

Weiss passed away in 1964 at the age of 74, and is buried in Winesburg, OH. She truly helped paved the way for women in baseball, and was a local woman in a league of her own.

### **More on Alta Weiss and the Weiss All-Stars**

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