

Mary Combis



At 4-foot-11, **Mary Combis** was small in size — in fact, her nickname was "Pee Wee" — but she towered over the competition back in her athletic days.

Combis was one of the top female athletes in Norwalk during the late 1930s and early '40s, excelling on softball diamonds and bowling alleys locally, around the state, and even at famed Madison Square Garden.

Born and raised in South Norwalk, Mary Urban graduated from Ben Franklin Jr. High and Norwalk High School at a time when sports weren't offered to girls. But by her late teens, she was well known in local sports circles and quickly made up for lost time.

"She was one of 14 kids, but only two of them played sports," her son, Harry 'Hoppy' Combis, Jr., points out. "They all had to work, but Mom and my Uncle Mike got

some special privileges and were allowed to play sports. My Uncle Mike was older so he kept an eye on her."

Quite a few more people watched her as she carved out a reputation as an excellent third baseman and hitter on many Sunday afternoons at Duffy Field. In 1937, at the age of 17, she played softball locally for the state champion Jeffersonian Club, who became the Howard Girls in '38 and included such standout players as Mary and Helen Buschbaum.

"But Mary could hold her own with any of those players," said Bob Smith, a member of the Norwalk Old Timers committee who remembers watching Combis play. "She was an excellent fielder and could handle the bat."

"She was one of the top hitters on the team and always put the ball in play," added Old Timers president Ferd Gottscham. "She was little, but she was big at the plate, and very fast. She could really move. She was one of the best."

She proved that on the night of May 18, 1938 when women's softball made its debut at the old Madison Square Garden located on 50th Street and 85th Avenue in New York City. As the sport became more and more popular with the public in the late '30s, the famous arena was transformed into a softball diamond as MSG officials decided to make women's softball one of the main attractions of the summer season.

Many of the outstanding teams in the United States and Canada were invited to play at the Garden, including the world amateur champion Num-Num Girls of Cleveland, the Kaufman Maids of Reading, PA, the Montreal Maroons, champions of Quebec, and the Toronto Maple Leafs. And, of course, the Howard Girls of Norwalk, CT.

In fact, the Norwalkers had the honor of playing the feature game on the inaugural night of softball at the Garden against the Eastern Women's Softball team, one of the top teams in the country at the time. But the Howard Girls were up to the task and before a crowd of over 12,000 fans, including a number of Norwalkers who made the trip, the Easterns barely held on to beat the locals 6-4 in a game that saw Mary Buschbaum strike out 17 batters and Mary Urban lead the offense with three hits and two runs scored.

And if that wasn't enough, later that summer the *New York Daily News* ran a picture of Urban on its back page of her stroking a game-winning hit to right field.

The year 1938 was a big one for Urban in more ways than one. It was also the year she married Harry 'Hoppy' Combis, a pretty good softball player in his own right with the East Norwalk Eagles Class A team. Combis caught and played right field for the Eagles, and one season batted a team-leading .462. He also played quarterback for the Eagles AC football team, and was also honored by the Norwalk Old Timers in 1976.

Their only child, Harry Jr., was also an excellent athlete who pitched at Brien McMahon High School in the early 1960s and got as far as Double A ball in the Kansas City Athletics organization. And he says he owes a lot of credit for his success to his mother.

"She used to catch me, right up to when I was pitching in the Pony League," he recalled. "I was throwing over 80 miles an hour when I was 14 and she was able to catch me. That's what really impressed me. There were not many guys my age who could catch me, but she did."

Softball wasn't the only sport Mary Combis started in, however. During the 1940s and early '50s, she was one of the top duckpin bowlers not only in Norwalk but in the state. Combis was a fixture in the Norwalk Girls Club Bowling League with the C&K team and later the Volunteers. She also bowled in the Elite Ladies League at the Norwalk Alleys with such teams as Phillip Morris, the Camels, and the Ramblers, as well as the Question Marks in the Westport Girls Bowling League.

But no matter where she bowled or what league, Combis was always among the top bowlers and on a number of occasions owned the high single, high triple, and highest individual average.

The bowling team she's best known for, however, was the Star Laundry Girls of Norwalk, along with other top local bowlers such as Naomi Wargo and Jean Hoyt to form one of the best semi-pro teams in the entire state.

The 80-year-old Combis also had the pleasure of watching a third generation of athletes in her family. Her two granddaughters, Missy and Christine Combis, both played softball and swam at Norwalk High, while her grandson, Jason Combis, was an outstanding hockey goalie at Brien McMahon High School, where he also played baseball.