

Too Much Baseball is Not a Good Thing

(Note: This column by Little League International President and Chief Executive Officer Stephen D. Keener, is reprinted from the 2005 Little League Baseball World Series Program.)

Each August, the Little League World Series celebrates children playing baseball, and families and fans of Little League Baseball come to Williamsport to trumpet the success of these champions, but the final score and world championship banner are certainly not the most important things.

Little League is about playing, having fun, and learning some of life's lessons along the way. Too many times in recent years stories have been told about children playing and sacrificing for baseball where the only thing that seems to matter is the outcome.

That is most definitely not what Little League is about.

Terms like "overuse," "burnout," and "epidemic," have been unjustly linked to the Little League program when these stories surface involving children as young as 10 who are playing dozens and dozens of baseball games during the summer and continuing throughout the year.

Too often, the tradition and worldwide respect Little League Baseball and Softball has established has created the misconception that all youth baseball is Little League Baseball.

To the contrary, Little League remains true to its values of character, courage, and loyalty by regulating its program to create an environment where children from any walk of life can participate.

Throughout its 66-year history, Little League has been fortunate to have volunteers who join the program to do their part in nurturing future generations. Building strong citizens and improving the quality of life for families in their communities is paramount.

Regrettably, there is another cross section of society that seems aimed at profit and self-satisfaction that is fed by a twisted sense of commitment to children. These people look like Little League volunteers. They may even talk like Little League volunteers. But, their willingness to disregard the dramatic difference between "play" versus "work" for nothing more than a chance to exploit the children they are entrusted to mentor, has the potential to cripple the future of youth athletics.

The evolution of ultra-competitive, excessively-expensive, and loosely-regulated "travel ball" has brought Little League unwanted and unwarranted criticism, especially at tournament time.

Because of the misleading comparison between tournament-hopping travel teams, and the "Road to Williamsport" traveled by Little League International tournament teams, critics claim the tournament is detrimental and contradictory to Little League's mission.



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In reality though, those who support travel ball are in many cases fulfilling a self-serving goal by seeking out a "higher level of competition" for the expressed purpose of supposedly increasing their child's chances of landing a major college scholarship, or professional contract.

The intent of the various World Series tournaments is, and has always been, to reward local players and leagues for their participation in the Little League program. No local league is obligated to play in these tournaments, yet most do. Why? Because it's fun.

In the Little League division more than 7,000 teams play in the World Series Tournament that concludes here at Howard J. Lamade Stadium with 16 teams vying for the title of Little League Baseball world champion. Yet, 90 percent of the teams entered in the World Series tournament are done playing in the first three weeks.

In years past, Little League's critics have called the tournament too long, too stressful, or too competitive, but now come horrific reports of children and teenagers enduring arm and shoulders surgeries to repair ruptured tendons and broken growth plates as the result of playing too much baseball.

Little League's mission has always been to create an environment that promotes a healthy, fun experience, and never has it been about grooming Major League prospects. As noted author, and Little League volunteer, Stephen King once wrote, "A Little League field is a place where excellence should always be applauded, but never expected."

Do we expect too much of children today? For the parents who each year spend hundreds of hours traveling to "elite" tournaments, and thousands of dollars for private coaches and the like, these questions have to be asked: What's important? At what point does the child, who is playing several games a week, in different baseball programs, have to take a stand and say enough is enough? Should the child have to say anything, or is it time for the moms and dads to cast off the unfulfilled dreams of their youth, and focus on what is in the best interests of their children?

Little League is unyielding when protecting its players and adult volunteers. Whether governing the number of innings a player can pitch in a week, conducting background checks on volunteers, enforcing mandatory play rules, or requiring a player to solely commit to a Little League International Tournament team, all Little League rules and regulations are rooted in what is collectively believed to be most beneficial for local leagues and their participants.

Little League cannot manage, and is not responsible for, the operation of other youth baseball programs. Instead, the parents of the players who play on these travel teams are responsible. Moms and dads must in turn hold these people accountable and evaluate why they feel it is necessary for their son or daughter to be there.

It was not long ago when such specialization was frowned upon and diversity was in. Playing multiple sports made for well-rounded athletes with balanced skills, and an energy level that was peaked by new teammates, different challenges and variety of competition.

New York Yankees pitcher Mike Mussina, who is on our Little League International Board of Directors, grew up minutes from Williamsport in Montoursville, Pa., and he was a three-sport athlete. Mike has reminded me during several conversations on the subject that the cream of crop is destined to rise to the top regardless of how hard he or she is pushed at 9 or 10 years old.

In today's society so much is based on numbers, so the numbers I use when describing the long-range prospects of any youth baseball player go like this ... For the five million children playing baseball in the United States, 400,000 will play ball in high school. Of those 400,000, around 1,500 will be drafted by a professional baseball team. From those 1,500 or so, 500 will play two seasons or less in the minor leagues. Of the 500 in the minors, 100 will reach the Major League level, with one making it to Cooperstown, N.Y. and the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Travel ball is the latest degree of separation between the haves and the have-nots, but is it best for the children? Little League does not think so, and for that reason will not subscribe to the interpretation that the Little League program is too competitive, or not competitive enough, because being a Little Leaguer is not simply about competition.

This is the time to relish youth. The best way for grown-ups to respect the next generation of Little League coaches and volunteers is through their involvement, and understanding of what it means to be a role model to the children of today.

In life, perception too often is reality, and if a parent perceives his child to be a prodigy, then that child must prove that to be true, or not. If the answer is the latter, isn't a life-altering injury too high a price to find out, especially for a pre-teen?

I thank you all for coming to the 59th Little League Baseball World Series, and wish you an enjoyable time while you are with us in Williamsport.

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