

Stealing home: How travel teams are eroding community baseball

David Mendell May 23, 2014



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The shortstop ranged nimbly to his right, scooped up a sharp grounder and unleashed a strong throw to first base. Seeing the athletic play by my son, a burly fellow leaned against the chain-link fence.

"You've got a nice little ballplayer there," the man, Mike Adams, told me. "You should think about getting him into a full-time travel program. The sooner, the better."

I was a neophyte in the byzantine world of youth baseball, and Adams's husky voice carried the resonance of a father who had logged many hours behind caged dugouts. Yet I had to chuckle. "Mike," I said, "Nate's just 9. Full-time travel baseball, really?"

In the past three years, as an assistant coach with the youth baseball organization in Oak Park, Ill., and as manager of one of its part-time travel teams, I've watched more than a dozen kids my son's age follow the route suggested by Adams. Lured by a chance to compete at a more elite level, they've left local baseball for various full-time travel teams in Chicago's suburbs. Full-time travel baseball means many more practices and many more games — many of them far away. To rise in rankings and win tournaments, some teams, especially in warm climates, play nearly year-round, competing in as many as 120 games per year, more than most minor league players.

Travel ball is not new — it's been around for a couple of decades. But participation in full-time travel baseball has exploded in recent years. For example, in 2000, Atlanta's first All-American Wood Bat Classic tournament opened with about a dozen teams. This Memorial Day weekend, nearly 100 squads from half a dozen states will descend on fields throughout metropolitan Atlanta to participate. The players range in age from 8 to 14. Rebecca Davis, executive director of the Atlanta-based Youth Amateur Travel Sports Association, estimates that there are tens of thousands of travel teams in Georgia and Florida alone. "The fast growth absolutely blindsided us," she conceded. "Those days of rec ball and local Little League, or just going to the park and playing ball — those days are nonexistent. They're gone. Now, it's all about travel."

That's an overstatement. Yes, Little League enrollment has declined 20 percent since its peak in 1997, from 3 million to 2.4 million. But 2.4 million players hardly suggests that community leagues are disappearing. And many young travel team players also play on their local teams.

Still, it's true that the playing field for youth baseball has changed dramatically since Little League was founded 75 years ago. And with the loss of so many players and their families to travel teams, our community league games have lost a certain sense of community.

[Carl Stotz started Little League](#) as a program that would teach sportsmanship and teamwork to preteen boys in his home town, Williamsport, Pa. The first game was played on June 6, 1939, when Lundy Lumber defeated Lycoming Dairy. The local business sponsorships helped keep participation costs low and root the teams in their communities. To this day, defined areas from which each local league can draw prevent teams from poaching good players from one another.

Travel ball, by contrast, is not cheap — participation fees average about \$2,000 per player per year. And teams may invite players from anywhere in the region. Since tournaments and games are usually in other towns, players and their parents must spend many hours commuting.

Some travel ballplayers resemble professional athletes: Year by year, they go from one travel team to another, switching teammates and uniforms, with the name splashed across the front of the jersey usually signifying something other than their home town.

"Where's the local pride gone?" asked Tim Dennehy, pitching coach for Oak Park-River Forest High School's varsity team. "By the time my teammates and I got to high school, we were like family. We were already a team, picking each other up, playing for our community. Now, guys arrive from a bunch of different teams, and they know guys in the other dugout better than they know each other."

There have been concerns about the competitiveness fostered by youth baseball since Little League was in its infancy. As far back as 1957, [Sports Illustrated](#) wrote: "The two basic arguments which strike at the roots of Little League pop up year after year: it puts too much competitive pressure on the children; it brings out the monster in too many parents and adult leaders."

That description reminds me of my part-time travel team's first tournament victory in July 2012. The pugnacious coaching dad of the opposing team was so angered by an intentional walk I called, in hopes of setting up a double play, that he refused his second-place trophies and verbally threatened one of my assistant coaches. (I'll admit that it was probably poor form to intentionally walk a 10-year-old.)

But full-time travel teams encourage pressure, and negative character traits, of a higher order.

Dennehy, who pitched in the Yankees system, worries that they are breeding a more selfish mind-set, with some players far more concerned about their individual statistics than team performance. Their teams, after all, are ever changing.

And, of course, the whole system is based on the idea that travel teams offer elite athletes more professional coaching and more

competitive play. While the expansion of travel ball may have diluted the level of competition somewhat, it's indisputable that travel players, who log so many more hours at the ballfield, tend to pick up both fundamentals and sophisticated skills at earlier ages. They're graduating from youth play to high school throwing pitches at a higher velocity than ever, and fielding and hitting with more proficiency than in eras past.

But Stephen Keener, president and chief executive of Little League International, questions whether travel ball is the key to something more. "There's this belief that a travel team and a higher level of competitive play will propel a child to a higher place. That belief is misguided," he told me. "There is something to be said for high-quality instruction, but at the end of the day, the player and his personal desire and his athletic ability will determine how far he goes in baseball."

As a parent, though, it's hard to resist the implications of the travel-team Web sites listing alumni who have gone on to college and pro teams. Who wouldn't want to give their child the best chance at success?

But there are physical and emotional costs.

Major League Baseball officials are looking at why higher numbers of budding pitching stars, such as Stephen Strasburg and Jose Fernandez, have [suffered severe arm injuries](#) in their early 20s. To a youth-coaching dad like myself, the answer is plain: overuse at young ages.

"I'm doing more and more operations on younger and younger arms

every year," said Timothy Kremchek, head physician for the Cincinnati Reds, who specializes in Tommy John arm surgeries. "These kids are being overused and abused. They are playing on too many different teams and throwing too many breaking pitches. It's something we know about, but the abuse goes on. The parents are chasing some sort of dream. It makes me sick."

Kremchek has been instrumental in instituting pitch limits and banning breaking pitches in youth baseball in Ohio. And teams affiliated with Little League Baseball have implemented pitch limits nationwide, which is a start. Still, as Keener notes, many Little League participants also play on travel teams outside their local leagues, while others are on full-time teams, making it impossible for governing bodies to police how much baseball a kid is playing each year.

Travel ball also amplifies the risk of mental burnout.

"For too many kids, the genesis of a kid's passion for playing baseball is being lost in the full-time travel movement," laments Jim Donovan, a Chicago area baseball instructor and former University of Illinois second baseman. "It really troubles me when parents and coaches intervene in the process to the extent that kids just aren't enjoying the game anymore. And believe me, I see this all the time — kids who grab their gear bags, and the bags look so heavy on their shoulders, you know? And the kid's face, it just looks blank.

"The games have become so serious, and so many kids aren't enjoying it. It just breaks my heart when I see a kid reacting like that to the game that I love so much and have put so much faith in."

My son is now 12 and, although we've toyed with the idea of full-time

travel ball, he has stuck with our local league (which is community-based but not affiliated with Little League) and part-time travel, progressing nicely as a shortstop and pitcher. Primarily, he wanted to keep playing with his friends. He was also deterred by the intense schedule of practices and games. "The travel kids are always talking about how much they practice, like every day, even in the winter," Nathan told me. "If I went to a travel team, I think my pitching arm would fall off."

I'm glad he's stayed, because I think the most significant missing element in professionally coached travel ball is the father-son experience. No other American sport seems to bond fathers and sons as securely as baseball. There's something about the pacing of the game, the long season, the buildup to dramatic late-inning heroics on steamy summer days and nights.

Take the trophy ceremony on one of those hot nights in 2012. As I was passing out the first-place hardware to my players, lined up down the first base line, my son's turn arrived. I had fist-bumped each player before him. But when Nate jogged up to me, I seized him in a bear hug. A lump formed in my throat that surely was visible from the parking lot.

All the work that we had logged in the batting cages and on the practice fields rushed through my head, as did the sacrifices to my career and aging body. As a tear rolled down my left cheek, Nathan looked up at me and said: "Dad, you gotta let go now. Everybody's watching us." I could have held my 10-year-old boy in that hug forever. No amount of paid coaching could buy that moment.

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