

# Little League

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The Little League World Series is often the occasion for comment but usually it involves subjects such as rabid parents or hyperventilating coaches. This time the comments coming out of Williamsport, where fracking rather than baseball usually dominates the landscape, had a feel good aspect to them.

The print and electronic press has been all over the emerging legend of Mo'Ne Davis and the USA champions from Chicago. Both stories gave baseball people reason to smile at the time when many have been agonizing about the troubled sport.

Two questions appeared in almost every discussion of the new Baseball Commissioner. Can baseball reconnected with the youth of America? Can baseball attract African American players to the game?

Let's start with the second one. The USA champions from Chicago and the Jackie Robinson Little League seem to answer that second question in the affirmative. What is shown here is that if given the opportunity to play Little League and given the proper organization of Little League in African American communities, young African Americans will play baseball.

This does not mean that these players will go on to play baseball at a higher level. Some may not have the talent for that, some may prefer to specialize in football and basketball, and some may think there are more important things to do with your life than play sports.

As Gerald Early wrote several years ago maybe there has been a decline in the number of African Americans in baseball because they simply don't want to play the game. In point of fact African Americans are less underrepresented in baseball, than they are in Congress, in board rooms of major corporations, or in the ownership of sports teams.

If however the under-representation of African Americans in baseball seems like a problem and it does for many who have written about it in the last two weeks, then I direct you to Chicago. Go look at what the Jackie Robinson Little

League has done to build itself up as a community institution and then emulate their approach. It seems to be a model that could work elsewhere.

It has been a great time for Chicago and the nation particularly with the shooting of Michael Brown dominating the news cycle, a much too common story in which there is no issue of under-representation of African Americans in the statistics.

Turning then to Mo'Ne Davis the thirteen year old pitcher for the Philadelphia Little League team, the media frenzy has been at levels of near hysteria. Mo-Ne Davis is an African American girl who is an excellent pitcher. Television ratings for her games have been higher than for major league baseball ratings.

It seems to me that the major point of interest over Mo'Ne involves her gender. I don't recall seeing a lot of stories about Mo'Ne Davis solving baseball's problems among African Americans. Given all that has been written on the subject in connection with the Chicago team this seems a bit peculiar.

The big thing about Mo'Ne is that she is a she. A girl is pitching against boys and striking them out in large numbers. A girl is on the mound displaying talent and poise. There are no tears. Mo'Ne is cool, calm, collected. Many in the press seem surprised by this, some shocked by it.

Mo'Ne Davis has been on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. The newly elected Commissioner of Baseball Rob Manfred had his picture taken with Mo'Ne Davis. Why? Did her team with the Little League Championship? No. What moved her to the cover of SI and to national celebrity is the fact that girls and women across the country saw her doing something that young girls have not done very often. They have been inspired by her and they hope this will represent a change in America's sport culture.

Years after the passage of Title IX much has changed. More women are involved in school and community sport than ever before. Nonetheless there are many doors still closed and many attitudes bogged down in the Victorian legacy.

Two things are particularly striking about the Mo'Ne Davis story. First, this is an unusual story because young girls are not encouraged to participate in baseball or in Little League. Young girls with baseball skills are encouraged to take up softball. In some places they are still excluded from participation in youth leagues and middle school and high school baseball.

I have seen very little mention of this exclusion or this discouragement for girls who want to play baseball. There are many locales where Mo'Ne Davis would not have been able to display her baseball talents, not because of the color of her skin, but because of her gender.

If the baseball commissioner would like to foster some change in this area he might speak out on the this issue, and more important he might let it be known that under his Commissionership women will not be blocked from the ranks of umpires or from professional baseball.

Second the Mo'Ne Davis story has been finessed by some reporters who apparently fear that some significant change is about to come. I have seen comment in which it is pointed out the Mo'Ne Davis has a great advantage as a thirteen year old girl in Little League. Davis, it is said, has already physically matured while the boys she is striking out have not.

This means that in a few years the boys will mature physically and sweep past the Mo'Ne Davises of the world in size and strength. These commentators seem to be saying, don't worry men of America this is a peculiarity of physiology and not something that will change the sports culture in America.

It's as if these commentators and all those striking out are being reassured. Change is not coming. Male dominance is safe.

Yikes!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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