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Little League and the Death of Play

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

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There has been a commercial running on the tube the past few months in which a young father is sitting at a Little League baseball game with a cellular telephone. After the kid comes to bat and gets a hit dad dials up mom and passes on the news. High tech has come to Little League baseball. Dad can connect Mom to the game instantaneously, and of course in the World of TV the news is good. The kid gets a base hit. In the next version mom will run to the computer and send the news to grandma on the Internet.

This little TV melodrama sent me back to something I have been thinking about a great deal lately, and that is just how much sport for kids has changed in the past forty years since I was Little League age.

In fact I never played Little League baseball. It was a suburban phenomenon in my area, and I was a child of the city. When I played baseball as a child it was at the park. In summer I, along with several friends, would go off with glove and bat and ball to an empty lot or a park where we would play baseball. We walked there. No one's mother had to give us a ride. Sometimes others would join us, and at times there were enough players for six or seven to a side and we would play a game. If not, we would take our turns pitching, hitting, and fielding, often for hours on end. In winter the pattern was replicated for hockey.

There were no parents, no coaches, no uniforms, no sponsors, no spikes, no Gatorade, no parents, no noth'in. Just a bat, a ball, and some kids. It was fun. It was challenging. There were pressures to perform better than one's peers. There were arguments:

It was a strike!

Was not!

Was too!

And it could deteriorate from there.

When we were a little older, thirteen or fourteen, there was a coach and even a uniform, while playing for the primary school team. There was a little more pressure, but again, mostly it was fun. There were even a few parents, but no one paid much attention to them and mostly they did not make fools of themselves or embarrass their children.

It was largely disorganized sport. And mostly it was fun.

What has happened to that world? It is still there, certainly in the inner city with basketball, but in the middle class world of America, it is gone. Replaced by Little League with its uniforms, sponsors, multiple coaches, screaming parents, the obsession to win, rules and regulations, and documentation. District, regional, and national championships are the oversight responsibility of district, regional, and national officials. There is even television, the ultimate validator of the modern sporting experience.

All of which increases the pressures on ten, eleven and twelve year old kids, and gives ulcers to their parents. What happened to the older world? It is gone. The victim of modern society with all of its attendant problems.

The idea that kids could go off on their own without adult supervision for a day to a public park is nearly unthinkable. The fear of child molesters, drug dealers, kidnappers, and assorted perpetrators of evil is so great that parents would not think of letting their children go that far from home without adult supervision. The dangers of modern urban living, or at least the fear of those dangers, are just too great.

The notion of spontaneous play has nearly gone out of our world. If it's not organized, not scheduled, does not register in the standings nor lead to a championship, it no longer seems worth doing. Is this the thought pattern of the modern child?

Whatever the case may be, something has been lost, and I think mostly that something is fun. Sport should first of all be playful and fun, before it becomes structured and organized. And each child should have an opportunity to experience sport at that level.

Recently my brother-in-law took his six-year-old to a basketball activity at a local gym. The assumption was that the six-year-olds would get their introduction to the game. Presumably they would learn the fundamentals of passing and dribbling, and get some instruction on shooting and rules.

Instead what they got was a highly structured clinic of complex passing, driving, and shooting drills directed by a gung-ho high school coach. And the topper was that the session ended with shooting baskets. Well, not just shooting. Shooting for dollars. Dollars! Six year olds! Shooting for dollars!

They never did this on Walton's Mountain, and we never did this in my neighborhood.

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