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Danny Almonte: Little League Fantasy and Reality in the Age of the True Freshman

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It has happened. A second birth certificate has turned up and it is the one Little League Honchos are accepting as valid. Danny Almonte is fourteen. Or so it seems today.

Tomorrow, who knows? There could be a third birth certificate turned up by a Dodger scout showing Danny is really sixteen. The Comish hisownself, Bud Lite, then issues a ruling that in the best interests of baseball Danny is sixteen, has been sixteen all along. However because the Dodgers may know someone who produces birth certificates they will not be allowed to sign the young phenom.

No it will be the Brewers who will give Danny the \$6M signing bonus and the \$1.5M for three years. Some grumble that Danny hasn't been enrolled in school for over a year, but few seem to care, especially his accountant and agent.

Does this seem any more improbable than what happened over the past weeks? Danny Almonte pitched a perfect game striking out sixteen to open the Little League World Series against the eventual U.S. Champion. He pitches his team into the U.S. Little League finals and he is called "the Little Unit" and his team "The Little Bronx Bombers." After their defeat they are on-field guests at Yankee Stadium, they are greeted by the mayor of New York, and they are hailed as this week's greatest thing in the history of sport.

Add to all of this the fact that Little League coaches in the New York area had hired private detectives earlier in the year to investigate Danny's age, and you begin to get a feel for the levels of silliness in this story. You also realize that the private investigator was not very good.

I don't want to excuse the cheating that went on over Danny Almonte's age. I would also not want to overlook the excesses that were perpetrated over the past weeks in the name of Little League baseball. Parents sitting in the stands during a game got a phone call when a replay showed a runner missed a base and they shouted to the manager who appealed the play at second. A new use for the cell phone is born. Progress comes in many forms.

The appearance of national television cameras at regional finals, the use of three to five person on-air crews by ESPN and ABC television, the pre- and post-game interviews in which 11 and 12 year-olds toss clichés like grizzled veterans of Bull Durham, all of this gave me pause. Then I saw the topper while channel surfing one night. There was a Little League home run hitting contest. Really!

To add to the air of unreality ABC and ESPN asked all the players what their favorite X-Game is. Like this is something they think about. No, it is in fact something that the Disney owned networks were televising that very same week. How fortuitous. How exploitative!

The uproar over Danny Almonte's age should be given one other small bit a comparative perspective. In many American homes young boys are held out of school an extra year so that they will be larger and stronger than the students of their grades. This, we are told by thoughtful parents, will make them more competitive for athletic scholarships and hopefully for professional contract signing bonuses.

Have you ever heard the term "true freshman" applied to a college athlete? This is a term that has been created to distinguish that athlete from a "red-shirt freshman." Red-shirt athletes are those held back a year so that they have time to mature as players, and of course as students as well. Perhaps Danny Almonte should claim that he was a red-shirt Little Leaguer. He wasn't too old, he had just been held back to mature as an athlete.

So it would appear that in the business of age and athletics there are different rules and different standards for different folks and different sports. In Little League age is an issue as the more mature youngsters have a clear physical advantage over the less mature. Why is this not the case in the NCAA or in many levels of youth football? In major league baseball the opposite issue is a concern, as major league teams are not allowed to sign anyone under sixteen. This has led to fraud to increase, rather than decrease, age.

When there is so much money at stake people may do anything. And when there is so much ego at stake adults may do anything to win, including manipulating documents and rules and the moribund spirit of fair play. They may even

manipulate and exploit their own children, or at least allow others to do so.

Unfortunately this is one of the basic lessons that those who view the events of the last few Little League weeks may take away from the experience: This despite the fact that the players themselves, as well as some coaches, displayed wonderful examples of sportsmanship.

There is just too much more on the line in Little League baseball and in many so-called youth sports than just competing and winning. It's time to get the parents out of youth sport and to disorganize the organizations that are the breeding grounds for the destruction of youth sport.

It is time for the children to reclaim their games.

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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