American Legion Youth Baseball
Part I: The State of the League

Much as Major League Baseball has begun to reflect on the rules and regulations that govern play, this is also a good time for American Legion Youth Baseball to reflect on its history and the state of today’s game of youth baseball. Some of the information included herein comes from a variety of articles regarding youth sports in general as well as youth baseball specifically.

Despite Little League baseball reporting a decrease in participation from a peak of over three million players in the 1990’s to approximately 2.4 million in 2017, American Legion Youth Baseball (Danville, IL) has seen overall player registrations remain steady from 2009-2018 with an average of 395 registered players per summer season. The peak during this time period was 432 registered players in 2014. One possible explanation for Little League Baseball’s report of declining numbers is the emergence of competing leagues such as Cal Ripken Baseball as well as the increase in the number of travel baseball teams. However, many communities across the country are reporting sharp declines in the participation in their youth baseball programs. Here are just a few of the reported factors contributing to those declines:

**Baseball is too slow for a generation of kids raised on TV and video games.** Baseball involves a lot of waiting. Waiting for a turn to bat. Waiting in the outfield for the ball to come your way. Waiting for someone to finally hit the ball or to strike out. Baseball is also a thinking game. In some ways it requires more patience and concentration than football or basketball. There’s less hustle and more calculation. For kids used to instant entertainment and near constant stimulation, baseball can seem boring.

**It’s expensive to play baseball.** Bats, gloves, helmets, shoes. All that adds up in a hurry. Then there’s the cost of travel depending on the structure of the league.

**The way kids play has changed.** It’s easy to blame video games, but the way kids play has changed for a lot of reason. Parents today are far less likely to send kids out into the neighborhood to play unsupervised for hours on end. And school recesses are much shorter and more controlled than ever before. It might be possible in twenty minutes for kids to run a few football plays or a play a quick game of basketball. But it’s not likely that they will have enough time to organize and execute even one inning of baseball.

**Many players quit around the age of 10 as the sport becomes more difficult.** The further you go up in skill level, the interest goes down.

**Baseball is competing with other sports such as soccer.** While some would agree with this, many argue that it is baseball that is hurting baseball. Major League Baseball for years has also not helped the younger generation become hooked on the game. They have insisted to play their marquee events in “prime time”. World Series games start about 8:30, not ending until midnight. Contrast this to the most popular professional sports league, the National Football League. The majority of their contests conclude by 8:00 on Sundays. Their playoffs are contested during the afternoons and early evenings, with their championship game, The Super Bowl, finished by 10:00.
Now that participation in youth baseball has been discussed, it is time to dig a little deeper and look into the quality of play, namely that in recreational leagues. Looking solely at American Legion Youth Baseball (Danville, IL), those that have been involved with the organization over the last several years have seen the overall decline in quality of play firsthand. One of the first arguments you will often hear is the effect of travel baseball. Travel leagues, ones that can sometimes cost thousands of dollars, have crept into increasingly younger age groups, and they often take the most talented young athletes for their teams. The children left behind either grow unsatisfied on regular recreational teams or get the message that the sport isn’t for them. However, travel baseball is not the only factor to consider. While some travel baseball players also play recreational baseball, there are some players that play only recreational baseball but have (or nearly have) the talent that would qualify them for consideration on a travel baseball team. Recreational coaches fortunate enough to have one or more of either types of these players are faced with a dilemma when making the lineup and determining where each player will play. A less talented player can’t always be placed in right field where he touches the ball once or twice a game. That’s not the same level of excitement as you can get on a video game. However, it now becomes a safety issue as the less skilled non-travel players may not be equipped to defend themselves when a talented and powerful travel player uses one of their high-powered (and high cost) composite bats to launch a screaming line drive back towards them.

Recreational baseball leagues often have anywhere from a 14-18 game schedule. Because they are waiting to maximize registration, leagues try and hold off on forming teams until they feel all of the potential players have registered. Team practices are usually scheduled to start soon after and depending on the date of Opening Day and the rainy spring weather, team practices can be few. Once the season starts, there are two games per week on average and with the travel players being involved in their other team’s practices and games at least 2-3 days per week, as well as field time being at a premium, it is nearly impossible to hold effective practices during the season. Very rarely do you drive past a baseball field and see kids just having a pick-up game with their buddies, so the only time they play baseball is when it is organized and scheduled. Coaches soon begin to realize that they really can’t make these kids better even if they wanted to. Without effective practice time, a coach can get maybe 30 minutes prior to a game that they can get in a
batting cage, where each player gets maybe 12-15 swings each. If a coach is lucky before their game starts, they may get 5 minutes to do a quick round infield/outfield practice. Other than that, it’s real tough to teach the intricacies of the great sport of baseball between pitches and innings during the game. And remember, many of the non-travel players generally don’t touch their glove or bat until they show up for the game.

So, let’s summarize. If I’m a non-travel, lesser talented player, I get stuck in the outfield, which is boring, and usually have to sit out a few innings. If I do get one ball hit to me, I have little chance of making a play since the only balls hit to me I’ve seen all week were the two the coach hit in warm-ups. Since the only batting practice I get is the dozen swings before the game, I also have little chance of getting a hit, especially if one of the travel kids is pitching. So at the end of the day, I sat 3 innings, got stuck in right field and made 2 errors and struck out 3 times. Where do I sign up for soccer???

Lastly, one subtle factor in regard to why kids leave or do not get involved in the sport of baseball has to do with coaching. Recreational baseball leagues often have a mix of coaching quality, from those with a lot of experience as former players, to parents with little practical experience who are trying to learn on the fly and help out because their kid is on the team. While American Legion Youth Baseball has many coaches that return from year to year, filling all coaching spots in all age divisions normally comes down to the last minute as there are always more spots to fill than those that indicate head coaching interest on their player application. Finally, coaches vary in how they balance winning and player development and if their approach is too one sided and does not line up well with the expectations of the player and parents, the player may look elsewhere for a summer activity.
Part II: Looking Ahead

Now that we have identified some of the challenges facing youth baseball today, this section will explain how American Legion Youth Baseball will address some of those challenges. As with any past changes or modifications ever made involving the ALYB Program, it has been and will always be the sole goal to provide the best possible experience for the young players and their families.

Challenge #1 – Increase Pace of Play

Our focus for this first challenge begins with the 10U Division. This is the first age division where player pitching is introduced and some coaches can find it challenging to identify and develop an effective staff of 3-4 young pitchers. This can make for some long half innings and games that sometimes go no deeper than 3-4 innings within the time allowed. Once players reach the 12U Division, they have normally developed better pitching skills and coaches find it a bit easier to manage a pitching staff.

Here are the modifications and points of emphasis for the 10U and 12U Divisions which will aim to increase the pace play:

- Mandatory courtesy runner for the catcher when there are two outs. This ensures that the time between half innings is not extended due to waiting for the catcher to put on their gear.

- Enforcement of the 1-minute time allotment for pitchers to warm up between half innings and the defense to be ready for the start of the inning.

- Enforcement of the rule requiring that the batter remain in the batter’s box with at least one foot throughout the at bat unless any of the listed exceptions occur.

- In the 10U Division only, establishing a set of rules defining the maximum number of runs that a team can score in a half inning. This new set of rules was tested during the Fall 2018 Season with great success and are as follows:
  - In the 1st, 2nd and 3rd innings, the maximum number of runs scored per ½ inning is five.
  - If a team is trailing in the 4th inning at the time their at-bat begins, that team can score an unlimited number of runs that inning until their run total is 5 more than the other team.
  - If a team is leading in the 4th inning at the time their at-bat begins, the team is limited to five runs that inning.
  - In the 5th inning each team can score an unlimited number of runs.
Challenge #2 – Increase Team Practice Opportunities Prior to Opening Day

With the quality of spring weather being very unpredictable, some teams can be challenged to get much on-field time prior to Opening Day. For some players, organized practices are their only opportunity to practice and develop their baseball skills. The following accommodations will be made in regards to team practices:

- Team practices will be allowed to start earlier in the season despite the risk of poor weather.
- Team practices will be allowed to start prior to a team knowing its final/complete roster.

Challenge #3 – Better Define Goals/Expectations of Each Age Division

A detailed list of goals and objectives for each age division was previously developed and made available to all coaches. These lists will be reviewed and specific goals and objectives given greater emphasis. In addition, rules addressing certain aspects of gameplay in the 10U Division have been developed and tested during the Fall 2018 Season. The ALYB Board feels that these rules are better at creating a game atmosphere that puts a greater focus on the basic skills of baseball and run scoring methods.

- The stealing of home in the 10U Division is no longer allowed.
  - Previous rule modifications at this level identified specific conditions where a runner at third base could steal home. These rules could often be confusing to players and coaches and sometimes challenging for umpires to enforce.
  - The ALYB Board would like to see team runs scored through more conventional methods, most notably by putting the ball in play.
  - No player, coach or family member wants to watch an already struggling team give up more runs by not being able to prevent numerous runners from stealing home.

- A runner that draws a walk in the 10U Division is no longer allowed to immediately advance beyond first base (unless there is a play on a runner at another base).
  - On many occasions, especially when there is an existing runner on third base, an aggressive team will direct their batter that has just drawn a walk to immediately advance to second base. This tactic is not common or taught at the higher levels of play and thus will be restricted in the 10U Division.

- With the 10U Division being the first level where player pitching occurs, opportunities will be developed where 10U Division participants will be provided with free instructional pitching sessions prior to Opening Day.

- Age Divisions will be given titles that better identify them:
  - 6U Division will be the Introductory Division
  - 8U Division will be the Instructional Division
  - 10U Division will be the Developmental Division
  - 12U Division will be the Majors Division
• Despite competitiveness and the goal of winning being inherent to any sport regardless of age level, the ALYB Board would like to see a greater focus during the regular season on player development and opportunity.
  o Awards and the recognition of a regular season champion will no longer occur in the 12U, 10U and 8U Divisions.
  o Tie-breakers for determining post-season tournament seeding will no longer involve runs scored or runs allowed.

Challenge #4 – Increase/Maintain Interest in the Higher Age Divisions

History has shown that player interest begins to decline beyond the 10U Division. As noted in Part I of this report, this can be due to several reasons such as gaining a greater interest in another sport or having had a less than positive experience in the ALYB program. ALYB will continue to play its part by continuing to focus on creating balanced teams within each age division. This process will continue and develop in such a way that:

• The ALYB Program will be a non-recruiting atmosphere.
  o Team creation will be the sole responsibility of the ALYB Board, with no player drafts taking place or pre-formed teams being allowed into the 8U-12U Divisions.
  o Teams formed or created by personal selection or through tryouts will be reserved for those players that prefer to play on travel teams and school supported teams.

• Player evaluations will continue to be mandatory from coaches at the end of each summer and fall league.
  o New players to the league will continue to be evaluated in the spring.
  o Late player applicants for which the ALYB Board does not have a player evaluation on file will not be assigned to a team until having gone through a player evaluation.
  o Player evaluation information will be the primary method for which teams within each division are formed.

• The number of travel baseball players on the same team roster will be limited.
  o History has shown that when it becomes necessary for the league to schedule rained out games and this happens to occur on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday, it can sometimes create a challenge for a coach to field a legal team when the travel baseball players have other commitments. Coaches will continue to be reminded of the league regulations that provide for the ability to borrow up to three players in order to field a legal team.
  o An abundance of travel baseball players on the same team could contribute to a team having a competitive advantage with other teams in its division.

In addition to these things that the ALYB Board can do to address this challenge, there are also things that the ALYB Board can do for its coaches that will help in providing a positive experience for all players regardless of talent level.
Challenge #5 – Better Educate/Support Coaches

As reported in Part I, ALYB coaches at all levels often have a varied background when it comes to the knowledge of baseball rules, knowledge of effective practice plans and personal approach to how the game should be played. The ALYB Board relies heavily on all coaches to share in the same goals and objectives of the ALYB program in order to ensure that players and families have the most positive experience possible.

- Effective with the 2019 Summer League, all coaches must go through an application process on an annual basis.

- All coaches will be provided with a clear list of responsibilities and expectations as it relates to the overall ALYB Program and their age division specifically.
  - For example, coaches will be required to continue to offer team practices at the ALYB facility after the start of the regular season. These team practices will take place regardless of the number of players attending.

- Coaches will be required to view a series of short training videos prior to the start of team practices.
  - These training videos have been created by playball.org and Little League University.

- Coaches will be encouraged to give all players an equal opportunity to play a variety of positions that are of interest to them, keeping in mind that safety at all times is a priority.

- A head coach’s initial point of contact with families must occur via telephone within 72 hours of official rosters being released.
  - While future contact can occur through texts and emails, initial contact must be direct. This will allow for the opportunity for any questions or concerns that either side may have about the upcoming season.

In conclusion, we would like to see players, families and coaches have an experience in the ALYB Program that is remembered in the years to come. Not because of how many games were won or lost, but what was gained through the experience of being on a team and striving to work toward being a better player and individual. Your feedback, both positive and negative, is welcomed at any time throughout the year so please feel free to share your thoughts and comments with us.