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# Why Children Are Abandoning Baseball

Major League Baseball is strong, but the casual young player is vanishing, threatening the sport's future

By **BRIAN COSTA**

Updated May 20, 2015 5:21 p.m. ET

*Newburgh, N.Y.*

The ball fields at Delano-Hitch Park were covered in snow when Jim Wilson launched a campaign to keep them in use. As president of the City of Newburgh Little League, he had seen participation numbers plummet to the point where the league was in danger of folding. Now, he and the league's board of directors were calling parents one by one, asking if their children would play this spring.

"We kind of felt like telemarketers," he said.

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Some parents told him their children were more interested in lacrosse. Others cited a preference for basketball or soccer. Many didn't respond to voice mails at all. When

the season began last month, the league had only 74 players spread across four age groups, down from 206 in 2009. "Over the last couple years, it's dropped like a rock," Wilson said.

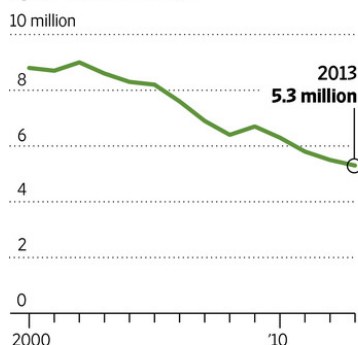
This working-class city of 28,000, along the western banks of the Hudson River, is on the front lines of the fight for baseball's future. As nationwide participation numbers continue to decline, some local youth leagues are reaching a breaking point.

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Unable to field enough teams to form a self-contained league, they face a choice between playing teams from surrounding areas, merging with nearby leagues or disbanding altogether. Either way, the game becomes less easily accessible to the casual player, a dying breed in an era of specialization in youth sports.

### Losing Interest

U.S. youth baseball participation ages 7 to 17, in millions:

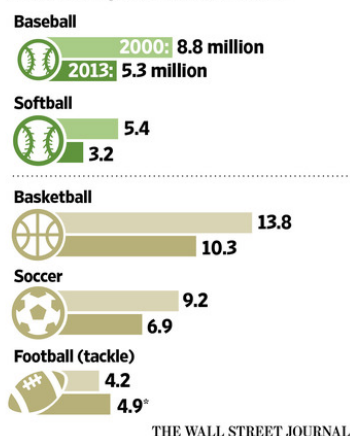


\*Football participation is down from 5.4M in 2006

Note: all figures cover both male and female participation in each sport

Source: National Sporting Goods Association

U.S. youth sport participation ages 7 to 17 change from 2000 to 2013:



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This shift threatens to cost Major League Baseball millions of potential fans, raising concerns about the league's future at a time when revenues are soaring and attendance is strong.

"The biggest predictor of fan avidity as an adult is whether you played the game," MLB commissioner Rob

Manfred said. An MLB spokesman cited fan polling conducted by the league last year as proof. When asked to assess the factors that drove their interest in sports, fans between the ages of 12 and 17 cited participation as a major factor more often than watching or attending the sport. That was particularly true among male fans in that age group, 70% of which cited "playing the sport" as a big factor in building their interest.

Since replacing Bud Selig in January, Manfred has been especially focused on increasing youth interest in baseball. The league recently began working with ESPN to prominently feature local Little League teams during Sunday Night Baseball telecasts. MLB brings the teams to the games, and ESPN shows them during the broadcast. An MLB spokesman said the league also plans to announce a major youth initiative in the coming weeks.

But MLB faces headwinds that have been years in the making and forces that are outside its direct control. In 2002, nine million people between the ages of 7 and 17 played baseball in the U.S., according to the National Sporting Goods Association, an industry trade group. By 2013, the most recent year for which

data is available, that figure had dropped by more than 41%, to 5.3 million. Likewise, youth softball participation declined from 5.4 million to 3.2 million over the same span.

Other popular sports, including soccer and basketball, have suffered as youth sports participation in general has declined and become more specialized. A pervasive emphasis on performance over mere fun and exercise has driven many children to focus exclusively on one sport from an early age, making it harder for all sports to attract casual participants. But the decline of baseball as a community sport has been especially precipitous.



A third-base coach for the Dodgers, one of the City of Newburgh's Little League teams, during a recent game against the Red Sox. PHOTO: JEFF BUSH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“I never thought we’d be closing leagues,” said John Lacey, the administrator for New York’s 19th Little League district, which includes Newburgh. A Little League Baseball spokesman declined to specify the number of leagues that have folded in recent years. But Lacey, who has spent the last 42 years working in youth baseball, said one league in his district closed last year. And he is recommending that an additional five of the 28 he oversees, including the City of Newburgh, either fold or merge after this season.

To understand why, consider the matchup in Newburgh’s 9-to-12-year-old division on a recent Monday. At the edge of a 26-acre city park, the Red Sox played the Dodgers—as they do in every game. There aren’t enough participants in that age group to field more than two teams.

“If you play the same team three times a week, then what interest do you have in playing ball?” Lacey said.

In more affluent areas, the best alternatives are merely inconvenient. Nearby towns pool teams together for an interleague schedule or merge their leagues outright. At its entry level, the sport requires players to leave their communities

for games more often than before.

But in poorer cities such as Newburgh, a viable, self-sufficient league is necessary to keep some children from abandoning the game. Many parents lack the means to easily transport them to and from neighboring towns.

Beth DeGroat, whose 12-year-old son, Joshua, has been a Little Leaguer since tee ball, said she doesn't have a car. "My son has a passion for the game," she said. "But it would be difficult for him to play anywhere else."



Jim Wilson, who is fighting to keep the league alive. PHOTO: JEFF BUSH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Roughly two-thirds of Newburgh's Little Leaguers are minorities. When youth baseball dries up in a place like this, it pushes the sport even further in the direction it has been headed for years: richer, whiter, smaller.

While neighborhood games become increasingly scarce, year-round travel teams have never been more prevalent. The U.S. Specialty Sports Association, the dominant organizing body for travel baseball, said it has around 1.3 million players spread across 80,000 teams, more than double what it had 10 years ago. The company's website includes national rankings for teams in age groups that begin at "4 and under."

Ismael Gonzalez, who manages the Miami-based 9-and-under team MVP Juniors Elite, said his team travels throughout the Southeast, playing more than 100 games a year and practicing two or three days a week. "These kids work like machines," he said. "This is not just for fun. This is their lifestyle."

But the cost of that lifestyle—thousands of dollars a year in many cases—puts it out of reach for many parents. It skews heavily white: A 15-year study of travel teams by Nebraska researcher David Ogden found that only 3% of players are black. And its popularity has made baseball more of a niche sport, precisely what MLB wants to avoid at the spectator level.

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“The kids who have been playing baseball since they were 18 months old, they’re going to be baseball fans,” said Mark Hyman, a George Washington University sports management professor and author of three books on youth sports. “But MLB can’t rely on them exclusively. There needs to be opportunities for kids who are not going to be Willie Mays and don’t even want to be Willie Mays.”

In Newburgh, the task of preserving such opportunities is left to Wilson, a 57-year-old retiree who has been involved with the league for 24 years. He applied for grants from several companies last winter, hoping to eliminate the need for registration fees, but was turned away. He slashed the fees to \$25 for this season, which means the league loses money for every child that registers, after uniform costs. And while that has sapped the league’s cash reserves, it has helped boost its head count. The number of players increased to 82 in early May.

“We’ll do whatever it takes,” he said. “We don’t want to shut down.”

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