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Big Price Tags Attached to Even the Littlest Leagues

By MIKE TANIER

Youth baseball and softball seasons are opening across the United States. It is a time for youngsters to field grounders and work on their swings while their parents determine whether they need to take out a [home-equity loan](#) before heading to the sporting goods store.

If you have not outfitted a little slugger lately, prepare for sticker shock. The youth baseball circular for one major retailer advertises bats in the \$219.99 to \$249.99 range. There's a \$129.99 glove, perfect for digging grounders out of dandelion patches.

A batting helmet protects tiny heads for \$39.99. A pair of Nike Jordan Black Cat cleats will make your child fast and fashionable at \$51.99 until he or she grows out of them, probably in late June. Batting gloves cost \$19.99, and there is no need to worry about Junior getting a hernia from lugging all that precious equipment if you buy a \$44.99 wheeled bat bag.

Of course, these prices represent one side of the market. Deals can still be found. But the emergence of high-end junior league gear suggests that youth baseball is yet another frontier of the commodification of childhood, alongside budget-busting test-preparation courses and lavish birthday parties and bar mitzvahs.

Mike May, the director of communications for [the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association](#), said that high prices and seemingly limitless equipment options could be a burden for a parent. "It's dizzying at times," he said.

When today's parents played in youth leagues about 30 years ago, they typically showed up for games run by the local parks and recreation department, often outfitted with little more than a glove and the clothes on their back. They now register their children for leagues run by independent local boards, which sometimes control huge budgets with little or no municipal oversight.

In most parts of the country, the old parks and recreation leagues are long gone. John Engh, the chief operating officer of [the National Alliance for Youth Sports](#), said the combination of slashed municipal budgets and the push to involve children in organized sports at a younger age

resulted in the current system.

“It’s been a gradual process, driven by the concept of all-stars and travel,” he said.

Some parents now pay tens of thousands of dollars a year for youth sports.

“I think of it as the [global warming](#) of youth sports,” said Mark Hyman, the author of “The Most Expensive Game in Town: The Rising Cost of Youth Sports and the Toll on Today’s Families.”

Fran Dicari, the host of the Web site [StatsDad.com](#), said he spent \$11,704 on fees, equipment and travel expenses for two children last year, with baseball accounting for about a third of it.

“Looking back on it, you would not think that we were sane people,” said Dicari, who lives in the Cincinnati area. “But in the circle we were in, we were normal.”

Travel costs for high-level leagues represented a high percentage of Dicari’s expenses, but those costs would be even higher if travel teams were not partly subsidized by the registration fees at lower competition levels. Engh said that it was not unusual for 50 percent of registration fee revenue to be funneled toward travel expenses for all-star teams. Parents of 5-year-old T-ball players are essentially bankrolling out-of-state bus trips for a handful of 12- to 16-year-olds.

“It’s very common for boards to look at the budgets of their masses as a way they can support their travel leagues,” Engh said.

Budgets for local youth athletic boards, which usually receive operation permits from municipal governments, can swell to more than \$1 million for a city of 100,000, all under the direct control of a board described by Engh as “a contractor, a plumber and somebody’s mom, with an accountant as the only paid employee.”

Once registration fees are paid, parents rush to the sporting goods store with credit cards at the ready. Some have future scholarships in their eyes.

“Increasingly, some parents see their kids’ sports life as a career path,” Hyman said.

Others just need to keep up with the Joneses or enhance an already expensive experience in any way possible for their children.

“There are a lot of forces nudging you toward the more expensive end of the scale,” Hyman said. “All around, other families are making big investments.”

Baseball and softball equipment accounted for \$488 million in wholesale sales in 2010, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association.

Cleats and uniforms drive the total sales over \$1 billion. Youth equipment represents the highest percentage of sales, particularly bat sales, as the parent willing to buy a \$200, 28-inch bat for a 9-year-old is likely to pay the same price for a 30-inch bat for a 10-year-old the next season.

May, of the sporting goods association, noted that there were alternatives to high-end items, that \$40 bats were just as beneficial for casual players as \$220 ones and that it was still possible to show up at the field with just a glove and some enthusiasm.

“Cost should not be a reason why you do or don’t play baseball,” he said.

The National Alliance for Youth Sports recommends that leagues make every effort to recruit across the entire community, even if it means reducing rates for needy families. Many leagues comply. The Greenwich Village Little League in Manhattan charges a \$200 registration fee, but the league provides scholarships, paid for by donations and city grants, to any family in its district that applies.

“We ask applicants to pay what they can,” the league president, Daniel Miller, said. “If it’s nothing, it’s nothing.”

The Greenwich Village Little League also actively recruits disadvantaged families by hanging fliers and holding registration sessions in housing developments. As a result, 10 percent to 20 percent of league members are on scholarship, Miller said.

Not all leagues are so inclusive. Engh said some leagues would invite out-of-town players to participate at higher registration fees instead of offering services to disadvantaged local youths.

“There’s no loyalty,” Engh said, adding that he believed municipal governments needed to take back some oversight and control. “They need to make sure that the kids who use those fields are really from that community.”

With increased expenses inevitably come increased pressures. “The greater the financial investment, the greater the emotional investment,” Hyman said.

League schedules have grown longer, sports specialization has increased and overuse injuries and burnout have become problems for some young athletes.

For parents like Dicari, youth sports become a way of life. “Some people have vacation houses or boats,” he said. “I don’t. This is how I choose to spend my money.”

Dicari has noticed that even parents at his high commitment level are balking at some expenses

and canceling costly trips to tournaments.

“There’s a lot of people hurting financially and still trying to do this,” he said.

When balancing the benefits of organized sports with the rising costs, many parents err on the side of going the extra mile, or dollar.

“It’s very difficult to tell whether you are really advancing your kid’s sports life,” Dicari said.

“The simple way to solve the problem is to hand over your credit card.”

Dicari is not tallying his 2012 expenses, but he has no regrets about the tens of thousands of dollars he has spent during his three children’s formative years. “It comes and goes before you know it,” he said.

It is no wonder that some parents stretch the budget in an effort to make the most of the youth sports experience, for their children and themselves.

“The accessories make the experience more complete,” May said. “Parents want their kids to look like Derek Jeter.”