

LITTLE LEAGUE'S GREATEST CHALLENGE

**By
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A penetrating study and current analysis of the manager's role, responsibility and position of leadership in Little League. The late Dr. Esslinger, who for many years was recognized as one of the nation's foremost authorities in his field, was Dean of the School of Health, Past President, American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation and a long-time member of the Board of Directors of Little League Baseball / Softball.

It has always been disturbing to me that when Little League people get together they spend their time discussing everything about the program except what is most important. The usual topics of discussion at Little League Congresses as well as smaller local meetings are rules interpretations, baseball techniques, duties of district representatives, tournament play, financial matters, insurance, player selection, etc. Little consideration is given in these discussions to the Little Leaguer – how the program can better help them, what mistakes we are making, the best methods of handling children, the criteria of a good manager, selecting and training the manager, how to eliminate factors detrimental to Little Leaguers, and the like.

In the final analysis what happens to the Little Leaguer him or herself is the major objective of this huge operation called Little League Baseball/Softball. The ultimate criterion of Little League is; is the youngster a better person as a result of experiences in the program? Have the children learned some lessons and acquired some habits and attitudes which will make them more effective in future work, better parents and finer citizens? Beside such a criterion such factors as the number of games won and lost, the leading hitter and pitcher, the league championship, tournament play, etc., are all very minor considerations.

As I see it the real challenge of Little League is not to create more leagues, larger tournaments, develop better players, make more money, etc., but to make the program more qualitative – to make it better, more wholesome and enriching experience for the youngsters. This objective is exceedingly difficult to attain. Merely to involve over 3 million children in a program is not enough. Most people believe that participation in baseball is a fine thing for youngsters. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The game is not automatically a desirable experience for youngsters. It might be under some circumstances, but under other conditions it could be positively detrimental. We have all seen Little League teams where children learned more undesirable habits and attitudes than desirable.

A TWO-EDGED SWORD

Whether or not Baseball/Softball is good for children who participate depends upon the total effect of the game upon them. Certainly, all children will benefit from vigorous outdoor exercise. However, they derive more than exercise from baseball or softball. Their minds and emotions are involved in the game as well as their muscles. From the manager, teammates, opponents, officials, and spectators they learn many things. While they are acquiring the skills of the game they are also learning many habits and attitudes in regard to themselves and other people which are extremely important to their future success and happiness. They can learn to win and to lose graciously or ungraciously, to be loyal or disloyal, cooperative or uncooperative, courteous or discourteous to opponents and umpires, prejudiced or unprejudiced to those of different color, race or creed, to swear or not to swear, to be considerate of those with lesser ability, to develop self discipline and to subjugate their selfish desires for the good of the team. The game is a two-edged sword. As a result of the experience, a child may acquire positive attributes.

The game is like a package of TNT with its potentialities for constructiveness or destructiveness – for good or for evil. The crucial factor in the situation is the leadership which is available. The heart of Little League is what happens between manager and the player. It is your manager more than any other single individual who makes your program, a success or failure. They control the situation in which the players may be benefited or harmed. We have all seen managers who exerted a wonderful influence upon their players – an influence which was a fine educational experience as any child might undergo. Unfortunately, we have also observed a few managers who were a menace to children.

If Little League is to become qualitative then we must do something positive about improving the quality of leadership in its day to day operation. This assignment is made more difficult by two factors. The first of these is that we lose many of our experienced personnel every year. Many parents stay in the program as long as their children are in it. Then, when they have gained invaluable experience and acquired some of the ideals of the program we lose them. What would be the quality of teaching in our schools if our teachers turned over as rapidly as our managers?

As president of your league, the second handicapping factor is that many managers are untrained in youth leadership. Experienced youth leaders (in physical education or recreation) receive a four year college program of preparation. There is a vast amount to be learned before a person can become an excellent Little League manager. Just because an individual is willing to devote the time to managing is not enough of a criterion upon which to base selection. Just because he or she knows something about baseball or softball is likewise an inadequate basis for selection. Even a person of integrity, sincerity and high idealism needs other qualifications. All of these considerations are important but there is far more involved in being a successful Little League manager. Your manager needs to know the purposes of the program and how to evaluate progress toward attaining them. The manager should be acquainted with the best ways of imparting the players what he/she knows about baseball/softball. Then too, there is the critically important matter of understanding children and how to relate to them most effectively. Finally, there is the matter of exemplifying all the desirable things in Little League.

My contention is that from the league president's point of view, your manager is the most important person in the Little League program. A variety of reasons support this contention. A very important factor is that a child of Little League age wants to emancipate from his primary identification with his/her parents. Up to this time he/she has lived in submission and obedience to them. Although not in a state of hostile rebellion, the child is nonetheless experiencing pangs of doubt about the all encompassing wisdom of his/her parents. As doubts continue, an increasing distance between parent and child develops and the child turns toward those of his/her own age as the ultimate determiners of their society.

Mohr and Despres express it this way:

*“The child seeks to discover meanings about himself and others through experiences that largely exclude his parents. This is a major psychological feature of the pre-adolescent. Up to this time, identification with the parents and dependence upon their approval and support have been paramount. Now, however, others begin to play more significant roles and serve in important ways to influence the outlook, feelings, and values accepted by the child.” **

* Mohr, George and Despres, Marian *The Stormy Decade: Adolescence*. Random House, New York. 1958.

The child now seeks for other persons to typify the ideals and virtues that once used to be represented by the parents. This is an age of hero worship. If the child chooses as a model an adult who represents the highest ideals of gentlemanly behavior and clean living both the child and his parents are fortunate. Children

of the Little League ages are strongly influenced by their peers. It is a tragic fact that peer standards frequently are anti-social, destructive and immoral.

Many a fine child has been led into almost unbelievable behavior by peers. In this situation a youth leader – a YMCA physical director, a Sunday School teacher, a Scout leader, or a Little League manager can win the confidence of the peers and divert their energies into constructive channels. Parents have a difficult time controlling their children at this stage of their development and when their child becomes influenced by an adult whose ideals and aspirations are similar to theirs it is godsend. Parents desperately need help and Little League managers can provide it.

IDOLIZE THE MANAGER

Because baseball/softball means so much in the lives of American youth they idolize those who are their managers. The influence of these leaders upon these impressionable youngsters is very great – so great in fact that no community can afford to have anything short of the finest type of leadership. Through the medium of baseball/softball the manager can reach these children and profoundly affect their future behavior. It is through the manager that all our hopes and ambitions for the players will or will not be realized. Whatever good comes out of Little League will be the result of the manager's leadership. In other words, the program is as good as the manager.

As important as the manager is to the program, how much attention do we give to his selections, orientation and training? Is there not in most leagues a naïve assumption that any volunteer will suffice. A district representative related the following incident to me:

A league president was presiding at an organizational meeting. He said: "We need six managers. Who will volunteer?" The six who volunteered first were selected even though the president had never seen four of them previously.

We make a lot of claims about the wonderful benefits of this program for the participants. When managers are selected as indicated in the above example the chances are 50 -50 that the children will be benefited adversely – that the program will have undesirable effects upon them. Women who volunteer as troop leaders for Brownies must take 16 hours of training – preferably before they undertake their responsibility. At each successive stage in the Girl Scout programs, volunteer leaders must participate in a training program. Similarly, the non-professional leaders in the Boy Scout program are required in some Councils and expected in others to undergo training and indoctrination for their assignments. The Boy Scout program has found from bitter experience that their adult volunteers do not provide the desired leadership unless they have been trained. Even volunteer workers in the Red Cross get more indoctrination and training than most Little League managers.

Little League has had many managers of the finest caliber. It is often surprising that we have had as many excellent managers as we have had. But despite our good managers we are all forced to admit that we have had too many poor ones. Many have done harm to their players and have given critics an opportunity to blast our program. They constitute the greatest threat to our program. Our procedures in regard to managers is the Achilles' Heel of Little League Baseball/Softball.

We have stimulated the imaginations of 3 million children to come into this program. Yet for their leadership we have largely trusted to luck of the draw – to mere accident. The least we can do for all of the youngsters is to try to find them a good manager and once selected provide the manager with some indoctrination and in-service training. This, it seems to me is a solemn obligation. The quality of leadership represents our biggest problem, and until we solve it, we can never realize the full potential we have.

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