
Play Ball?

Reflections on My Father's Youth Baseball Experiences and Why They Matter

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The author uses his father's autobiographical writings about the small-town, baseball experiences of his youth as background for discussing the significant cultural shifts that have dramatically changed the nature of the game from a free-play experience for neighborhood kids to an organized youth-league sport. In contrast to his father's day, the author claims that the playfulness of youth baseball has become nearly extinct. After a brief overview to define the essence of play, the author explains how his father's kind of free, unstructured, deliberate play has been diminished by complex cultural and social shifts such as rationalization, suburban sprawl, and changing child-development philosophies. He concludes that the continual decline these forces have created in free play will not only significantly influence the future of baseball as a sport but also the quality of children's growth, development, and health. **Key words:** changes in children's free play; sandlot baseball; unstructured play; youth baseball

Introduction

IN THE SPRING OF 1991, John J. Kimiecik, my late father, wrote a series of reminiscences about his life's journey through "nine innings" of baseball called "Touching All the Bases" for a local newspaper. In this series of eleven stories, beginning with a section entitled "Warm-up" and ending with one called "Extra Innings," my father revisits his baseball experiences from youth to adulthood. He writes: "The journey—a kind of a game—will be 'played' in nine innings. Those innings will touch on items ranging from equipment, ball fields, the players, to disbanded teams and leagues and perhaps a few other hot-stove topics. Although this is my look back, many of you will see yourselves and relive your own similar experiences."¹

My rereading of these recently republished stories in *Touching All the Bases, Places, and Faces* served as the catalyst for this article on play and baseball,² and

my father's recounting in the early sections—innings—of his youth baseball experiences prior to high school serves as the primary background. The first innings focus on the baseball game itself, baseball equipment, fields, and finally on playing hooky from school to attend a Brooklyn Dodgers game with his friend, Bosco. Later innings of his memoir describe his playing and coaching experiences in Florida, New York, with the Legion Post 1250, the Florida Comets, and the Seward Spartans (the local high school baseball team). To demonstrate how deeply ingrained “Kimiecik” was in the local baseball scene, four Kimieciks made the Seward starting line-up in 1948 when the newspaper headline read: “Kimiecik [my uncle Rudy] stops Valley String at 36 as Paulmen [Alex Paul was the coach's name] Win 2nd Straight.”³ My father played catcher in that game.

John J. Kimiecik was born in the winter of 1933, in the middle of the Great Depression. During his youth, he and his older brothers helped his Polish American family raise onions in the fertile black dirt on the outskirts of Florida, a rural Hudson Valley village about sixty miles north of New York City. Other than a two-year stint in the U.S. Marines and one year of teaching in upstate New York, he lived out his life in his hometown and taught English at Seward for twenty-nine years before retiring in 1988. He then wrote hundreds of articles for local newspapers about Seward's sports teams, its local history, and its small-town life. Before I delve into my father's youth baseball stories and their connection to play, let's take a look at the nature of play itself.

The Essence of Play

One central aspect of play involves freedom. People choose to play of their own free will. When they play, they feel free. In *Homo Ludens*, Dutch philologist Johan Huizinga wrote, “First and foremost . . . all play is a voluntary activity . . . it is free, in fact is freedom. . . play to order is no longer play.”⁴ Freedom as an essential ingredient of play opens us up to our possibilities and is life transforming.⁵ Connected to this experience of freedom, play is intrinsically motivated⁶—something you do for its own sake.⁷ As Huizinga states, “The need for [play] is only urgent to the extent that enjoyment of it makes it a need.”⁸ When a play participant considers an activity intrinsic, the outcome of the experience matters less than the experience itself. This internalization frees the participant to experience what Hungarian psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow* states—states characterized by focused concentration, deep absorption, openness to feedback,

time warp, and joy. Csikszentmihalyi's research suggests that flow leads to a variety of positive outcomes such as positive emotions and quality performances.⁹

In essence, the feel of freedom, intrinsic motivation, and flow are core characteristics of play. Play theorists have introduced and discussed different typologies and definitions of play. Peter Gray defines free play as “play in which the players themselves decide what and how to play and are free to modify the goals and rules as they go along.”¹⁰ This view of play resembles historian Howard Chudacoff's notion of unstructured play characterized by self-construction, self-direction, and improvisation.¹¹ Similarly, Jean Cote, a Canadian scholar of sport psychology, coined “deliberate play” to describe children's physical activities characterized by intrinsic motivation, informality, and an emphasis on immediate enjoyment rather than performance.¹² Deliberate play may differ somewhat from free or unstructured play as it displays more organized and unique behavioral patterns and, thus, includes such activities as pick-up baseball, backyard soccer, and street hockey.¹³ However, in each of these forms of play, the participants can make (and break) the rules at their own discretion through negotiation with other participants. The experience is also informal (for example, the players may or may not keep score). With free, unstructured, or deliberate play, participants develop flexible and creative strategies (e.g., using a tennis ball to play basketball in a garage with a fishing net as the hoop) without—or with minimal—adult supervision or coaches. In contrast, we do not consider organized youth sport free, unstructured, or deliberate play because adults serve as coaches, rules are rigid and explicit, and the play takes place in a specialized facility.

Although subtle differences may exist among free, unstructured, or deliberate play, I will use these terms interchangeably. Whatever term is used, research suggests that these kinds of play enhance creativity, problem solving, initiative, appreciation of beauty, moral development, and healthier living.¹⁴ For example, notions of fair play are more likely to emerge within free play than in an organized youth sport where outcomes such as winning are emphasized.¹⁵

Before the development of organized youth sport in the United States in the mid-1900s, unstructured play was the dominant form of physical activity for the young before they entered high school. In fact, Chudacoff labels the first half of the twentieth century as the “The Golden Age of Unstructured Play.”¹⁶ During this period, boys in particular seemed to “flourish in an independent, alternate world of urban and rural environments where values of loyalty, physicality, and competitiveness prevailed.”¹⁷ Boys organized their own games, made

their own fields, and had neighborhood teams and leagues that they created without adults. At the time, playing youth baseball proved very popular, coinciding with professional baseball's rise as America's national pastime. Journalist David Halberstam wrote in his *The Summer of '49*: "The pace of life in America had not yet accelerated as it was soon to do from the combination of endless technological breakthroughs and undreamed-of affluence in ordinary homes. The use of drugs seemed very distant. . . . Baseball was rooted not just in the past but in the culture of the country. . . . When a poor American boy dreamed of escaping his grim life, his fantasy probably involved becoming a professional baseball player."¹⁸

In this cultural context, my father grew up playing baseball in the late 1930s and 1940s. He recalls these baseball experiences in his "personal memoirs of old-time baseball, especially the local variety, from childhood to adulthood."¹⁹

My Father's First Three Innings

In the early innings of *Touching All the Bases*, my father's youth baseball experiences ooze with rich descriptions of unstructured play. Kids in his village gathered voluntarily and played baseball of their own volition. The kids themselves generated and created the entire baseball experience—no leagues, no adults, no coaches, and no fans to speak of—until they entered high school. In this unstructured play paradigm embedded in the culture of the times, my father and his friends played for themselves and for and against other neighborhood teams on fields carved out of pastures or meadows with no scoreboards or bleachers anywhere in sight.

"First Inning—The Ball"

It seems appropriate that my father chose to begin his memoir writing about the ball itself, without which there would be no baseball game. Baseballs of any kind were hard to come by in a poor farming village, and the only new ones the kids in Florida could afford had straw or dust centers that quickly disintegrated. To play at all, they had to find or beg for discarded balls with loose or torn covers from the local town team. The baseball they used was typically "tar-taped, seamless, no longer round, and several ounces heavier than it was originally." Games ran long—twenty inning games were not uncommon—and lasted until every ball in their arsenal was lost or had completely unraveled. Then, as my father describes, "we trekked home—game called—no more baseballs."

My father and his friends appreciated the baseball because they rarely played with a new one. When on a rare occasion they landed a brand new baseball, the kids saved it “for our official Saturday games against another neighborhood team.” Because new balls were as scarce as a Brooklyn Dodgers World Series championship, my father appreciated the beauty of the ball. “The usual everyday ball was one that had started out as a standard ball but through constant use and abuse had been reduced to a mere shadow of its original beauty. And beauty is not too strong a word, for what is more beautiful than the look and feel of a new baseball?” This feeling of beauty in the ball stayed with him for many years. “In later years, I had the pleasant task of opening many boxes of new baseballs. . . . I’d lift the tab of that orange and red box and remove the ball, still wrapped in crinkly tissue paper . . . savoring the experience . . . rubbing off the shine of a new ball was an unforgettable experience.”²⁰ An unforgettable experience from the rubbing of a ball?

As I mentioned, unstructured play has many benefits, but its aesthetic quality is not always considered one of them. The eighteenth-century German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller suggested that beauty underlies all aesthetic qualities. He argued that “man plays with beauty . . . and is only completely a man when he plays.”²¹ A century later, philosopher Karl Groos wrote that play is essential for the utmost aesthetic satisfaction.²² Related to beauty is a feeling of awe, which people typically experience in response to such asocial stimuli as natural wonders, panoramic views, and stunning art. Social psychologist Paul Piff and positive psychologist Dacher Keltner summarized in *The New York Times* one benefit of awe: “Participants who reported experiencing more awe in their lives, who felt more regular wonder and beauty in the world around them, were more generous to the stranger.” They also suggested that our culture today is awe deprived.²³ The nature of my father’s unstructured baseball playing experience instilled in him an aesthetic appreciation of beauty and awe for something as mundane as a new baseball. He chronicles similar experiences from his deliberate baseball play in the next sections of his memoir.

“Second Inning—The Bats, Gloves, and Other Equipment”

My father describes broken Jimmie Foxx bats fixed with nails and tar tape and old baseball gloves worn on the wrong hand or too large or too small. His most prized possession was his new catcher’s glove:

That glove served me well. Brass-buttoned by the wrist band over the handle bars of my bike, that glove was my entrance to many pick-up

games. Who else had a catcher's glove, who else wanted to, or was foolish enough to catch behind the plate without protective equipment? . . . That early catcher's glove did a lot to shape my life as well as my baseball "career." Although I did play other positions as well, that glove marked me, damned might be a better word, as a catcher. Not many other boys opted for that position, a position, which to me, was the ideal place to learn the intricacies of the game.²⁴

"Third Inning—The Ball Fields"

In my father's day, there were no T-ball or Little League fields, no stadiums, no batting cages. He and his friends did not seem to mind. They created their own.

My favorite field of dreams was really less than a quarter of a field. Though not really a diamond, it was still a precious gem situated alongside Quaker Creek on Pumpkin Swamp Road. At one end of Bill "Bosco" Turchen's driveway, we had built a sliding pit with a single burlap-covered base. This base, which we painted white, was in the middle of a cut-out section of lawn.

We mixed screened top soil, black dirt, and various other soils for the skin area. Thirty yards or so behind the base we erected a high wall of bundled onion crates, thus creating our version of Fenway's Green Monster. We pretended it was the wall at Ebbets Field though, home to our beloved "Bums," the Brooklyn Dodgers. Few cars traveled Pumpkin Swamp Road after 10 p.m. in those days, but those that did invariably slowed down to a crawl on certain summer nights. If the Dodgers were playing a night game in St. Louis, for example, we would turn up the porch radio to hear Marty Glickman's re-creation of the game as it came in by ticker tape. Those were the days of radio sound effects, the crack of the bat, the roar of the crowd. We would roar right along with them and play our own game.

A long extension cord, an old floor lamp with a 200-watt bulb, and Quaker Creek Stadium was lit up. That single base became an entire infield. We would practice throws from home plate (the other end of the driveway). We would work on our double play pivots, and, most of all, we would work on our sliding prowess. No wonder cars slowed down. For some strange reason, my parents seemed to tolerate my

coming home at midnight, covered with sweat and grime—a coming home that would be repeated in similar fashion for many years.²⁵

The baseball experiences my father re-creates in his first three innings fit the characteristics of unstructured physical play: voluntary, free, intrinsically motivated, and flow-like. Some of the natural benefits of this play include the development of an appreciation for the beauty of the game and its equipment, of creativity from building makeshift fields, of adaptability from fashioning a sliding pit, of initiative and hard work from making the sliding pit, of risk taking from catching without protective gear, and of leadership from making and coaching their own teams. My father and his team, the Swamp Road Gang, played against other neighborhood teams on more than a half dozen homemade fields spread around the village: “Each neighborhood boasted of a baseball field and its own home team. These fields had no dugouts, no fences, unless it was barbed wire, and no bleachers. What they did have was a lot of playing time. . . . No umpires, no grownups, lots of arguments, lots of fun.”²⁶

My father’s love affair with baseball continued into the late 1940s and early 1950s with his participation in high school baseball. After college days and his stint in the marines, he settled back in his hometown in 1959 to play with and coach the local American Legion and Rookie leagues teams and to coach our high school team for nine years. My older brother and I were lucky enough to be two of his players in the mid-1970s.

By contrast, in 2000 my son, born in 1995, started T-ball at age five, progressing to machine pitch, kid pitch, Little League, travel ball, and high school baseball. His entire baseball experience was structured, organized, and coached by adults. In a span of about sixty years and three generations, my father’s brand of youth baseball had been replaced by organized youth sport. What happened?

Cultural Shifts, Play, and Baseball

Despite the developmental benefits of unstructured or free play—as evidenced by my father’s experiences and by scholarly research—adults have systematized, professionalized, and regimented youth baseball into organized sport, gradually diminishing the element of play and the quality of the experience for its participants. American philosopher Douglas Anderson has recently observed that physical, unstructured, free play is dying in our culture,²⁷ and he is joined

by a cadre of historians and child and human development experts who agree with him.²⁸

In 2015 most children did not participate in physical play as my father and his friends did—or even as I did growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in small-town America. For today's youth, free physical play has been replaced by sedentary play (e.g., video games) or participation in organized youth sport (e.g., travel ball). Between 1997 and 2003, children's time spent in outdoor activities decreased by 31 percent, and children's unstructured playtime dropped by 25 percent from 1981 to 1997.²⁹ Also, in the 1990s, the number of elementary schools offering recess decreased from 96 percent to 70 percent, a trend that continued into the twenty-first century with only 40 percent of school systems having an explicit recess policy.³⁰ Today's kids may no longer experience play the way I did as a fifth grader at St. Joseph's Elementary School when playing baseball during recess was the highlight of my day. Our games were unsupervised, deeply engaging, and so hotly contested that sometimes we played past the recess bell.

The loss of physical, unstructured play, which typically occurs outdoors, decreases creativity, initiative, appreciation of beauty, motivation, and the quality of the physical experience itself.³¹ Kids who do not play reflect a society that emphasizes productivity and efficiency at the expense of meaning, purpose, and joy. A 2009 Gallup Poll demonstrates that 50 percent of students in grades five through twelve are not engaged in school and feel stuck or discouraged, lacking the ideas and energy needed to reach their goals.³² Perhaps it is no wonder that a 2011 Gallup poll shows that 71 percent of adult workers are either “not engaged” or “actively disengaged” in their jobs.³³ As sociologist Richard Mitchell writes, “Society without play grows stilted and stunted. When members are discouraged from spontaneous expressivity in play, they may overlook other possibilities.”³⁴

The decrease in unstructured or deliberate physical play comes as no surprise. Huizinga observed that the play element in our culture “has been on the wane ever since the eighteenth century.”³⁵ But the speed at which this transformation has recently taken place might give one pause. In the span of about seventy-five years, the baseball experience has gone from kids organizing their own games (my father) to Little League (me) to travel baseball (my son), which involves tryouts, weekend tournaments, hours away from home, eighty to one hundred games a season, and costly expenses for the players' families.³⁶ There is now even a leisure category called “youth sports tourism,” a seven-billion dollar industry.³⁷ My father's form of leisure travel, as he describes in the “Fourth Inning—The Radio Was Our Ticket,” was to skip school, ride the bus, hop the

train to Hoboken with his best friend, Bosco (whose relatives in Brooklyn would send him game tickets), and navigate some subways to watch his beloved Brooklyn Dodgers play an afternoon game at Ebbets Field.³⁸ I do not know if my dad told his parents about such field trips, but I can not imagine kids even thinking of doing something similar today.

Today's youth baseball requires a level of organization that takes the initiative from kids and puts coaches, instructors, and parents in charge. Coaches and instructors lead all training sessions, practices, and games. Within this highly organized, outcome-oriented context, unstructured, free, or deliberate play gets relegated to the sidelines. Movement of the body becomes more structured and deliberate for the primary purpose of better performance and winning. The mechanics of game skills may be improved, but without the play element, what are the human costs of developing such technicians? Joseph Ellis and Hemant Sharma write: "Informal play is perhaps the hallmark of adolescent maturation because it forces one to deal with a whole host of problems without a central authority and then to work those problems out for oneself."³⁹ Professor of child development David Elkind suggests that a structured, organized approach to the body reduces playing in a natural, creative way.⁴⁰ Kids can still have fun, of course, but when unstructured play is minimized, there is less opportunity for creativity, joy, leadership, and the development of moral judgment. Young people are now overscheduled miniadults with less and less unstructured leisure time to create and perform physical play in the kind of sandlot or pick-up baseball games that my father played almost exclusively until age fourteen. If pick-up baseball games are not dead, they are a rarity—even in Cooperstown. According to the former baseball coach at Cooperstown High School, "I invited a bunch of kids down to a nearby field for some pick-up games in the evenings during the summer. I was expecting anywhere from seven to twenty-five. One kid showed up. There's no such thing as pick-up baseball anymore."⁴¹ I hope young people are organizing themselves somewhere with a bat and a ball, but in the twenty years of daily runs (now jogs) through my community park, I have never witnessed kids playing a pick-up baseball game on our immaculate ball diamonds.

As I have suggested, the reasons for this shift—from kids playing pick-up baseball to participating in organized youth baseball—are connected to complex cultural change. Sociologist Richard Mitchell proposes, "Western civilization is now in the throes of a great realignment of social and economic patterning," which he describes as "the infusion of the scientific method, technological improvement, and rational management into all areas of human endeavor."⁴² The

twentieth-century social theorist and political economist Max Weber called this cultural change “rationalization . . . accompanied by a rejection of the impractical and spontaneous in favor of the measured and purposeful.”⁴³ This process of rationalization has seeped into all aspects of society, including physical activities, whereby organized youth baseball emphasizes efficiency and high performance to optimize winning. There is little room for unstructured or free play in such a sociocultural context.

Sprawling housing developments are another aspect of cultural change that limits free-play opportunities by reducing young people’s access to open, public spaces. Baseball needs relatively large playing areas, and these have begun to dwindle. As public land becomes more privatized, kids can no longer appropriate a few acres for their own diamonds to play against other neighborhood teams, which is now considered trespassing. So neighborhood teams such as my father’s notorious Swamp Road Gang have become extinct.⁴⁴

Parental concerns over the well-being of children as well as liability issues have also reduced unstructured play.⁴⁵ Kids now have to roam farther to find a game, which makes parents and adults nervous about their safety. Changes in family dynamics also contribute to safety concerns. In 1960, 65 percent of all children under fifteen were raised in two-parent families where one parent was the primary breadwinner compared to just 22 percent in 2012.⁴⁶ The emergence of dual-income families and the loss of neighborhood communities creates parental anxiety about children’s safety since no adults are home to supervise. Parents, no longer able to trust someone will be looking after the welfare of their kids, seek structured, outdoor physical activities with established supervision (such as organized youth sport) to replace unstructured play experiences.⁴⁷

Dr. Benjamin Spock in the 1950s and 1960s set the stage for new child-development philosophies that touted the need for children to feel safe and secure in their play, which in time fostered alterations in the approach to youth play—like adding new controls to make it protected and purposeful. These notions of control—combined with other sociocultural trends such as suburban sprawl, urban population shifts, and changes in family dynamics—led to organized activities supervised by adults replacing free play directed by the children themselves.⁴⁸ Child development was now too important to be left in the hands of children. Dave Barry, the humorist, addresses this shift in parental philosophy by observing the difference between his parents’ approach and parenting today: “They didn’t worry that their children would get bored, so they didn’t schedule endless afterschool activities and drive their kids to the activities

and stand around with other parents watching their kids engage in the activities. Instead they sent their kids out to play. . . . We never stop parenting. We are all over our kids' lives."⁴⁹

Today, we as a society place more emphasis on the importance of providing youth with opportunities for character development and personal growth. Free play does not stand a chance within these rationalized, cultural mores. As Mitchell asserts, "Rationalization drives people from the field of play altogether"⁵⁰ and, thus, organized youth sport has stepped in. Communities built pristine parks and ball fields on which children are allowed to practice and play only during set times and only under adult supervision.

When adults entered the picture and organized youth baseball, the slow death of free play predicted by Huizinga began to move at the speed of a major league pitcher's fastball. Our culture rushed from child-centered physical play to adult-centered, organized youth sport. Upon reflection, I realize that during my childhood, I watched my father play organized sports, such as Legion baseball and fast-pitch softball, whereas my parenting life revolved around coaching or watching my son participate in organized youth baseball games. Sports historian David Wiggins reports that between the founding of Little League in 1939 and the latter half of the 1960s, organized youth programs exploded exponentially. He suggests that one of the reasons for this growth was that adults and parents believed that organized youth baseball was just better for kids than informal or sandlot games organized by the youngsters themselves.⁵¹ Anyone who has watched the movie *Sandlot*—where a new boy in town plays baseball with the neighborhood kids and learns many life lessons—knows this can not be true. In addition, the increased concerns about child safety (e.g., abduction) combined with increased traffic and the disappearance of safe play areas has meant that many children no longer experience the freedom to play in a way that anyone over the age of fifty remembers. Also, an emphasis on academic performance by schools and parents led to a 14 percent increase in children's study time from 1997 to 2003, a continuation of the upward trend from 1981 to 1997.⁵² The pressure on kids to perform well in school has led to more homework and more structured activities, limiting free playtime outdoors.⁵³

Ironically, adults who create and organize youth sport activities may actually be inhibiting or deterring the very traits they want to promote and develop—wholesome character and enabling youth to make the transition from childhood to adulthood.⁵⁴ But the organized youth sport does not foster these benefits, the play itself does. When kids pursue baseball and experience it as unstructured,

free, or deliberate play such as that described by my father and others,⁵⁵ the participants feel freedom, intrinsic motivation, and flow. When the experience of playing is the goal—not the outcome or the desired scholarship or the pleasing of someone’s parents—the results are self-expression, adaptability, flexibility, improvisation, ingenuity, curiosity, initiative, and a tight-knit social bond among the players. These desired characteristics result not as the main objectives—as stated by organized youth sport enthusiasts—but as wonderful by-products of the play experience.

Implications for Baseball and Beyond

So what will happen to the game of baseball as a result of this dramatic shift from youth experiencing baseball as free or deliberate play to kids participating in organized youth sport? Is the worry that physical play is dying a serious issue or just nostalgia?

A good chance exists that, with the loss of free play, baseball as we know it will die as well. It is already happening. Kids are losing interest in participating. According to youth sport surveys, 8.8 million individuals between the ages of seven and seventeen participated in organized youth baseball in 2000. By 2013, that number was down to 5.3 million, a 41 percent decrease. The City of Newburgh (New York) Little League, for example, had 206 kids participate in 2009 and only 74 for the 2015 season. The league was close to disbanding.⁵⁶ As more activities compete for youths’ time and attention, baseball fits poorly the modus operandi of those attracted to the adrenaline rush of action-packed video games. Psychological disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, depression, or generalized anxiety also leave little space for baseball in a kid’s life. According to the best estimates, based on data from clinical questionnaires, psychological disorders are five to eight times more prevalent in young people today compared to fifty years ago.⁵⁷ Baseball can be difficult to learn, and it requires focus and concentration: Ted Williams once famously described hitting a fast-pitched baseball as the hardest single thing to do in a sport.

Wall Street Journal sportswriter Brian Costa suggests that this reduction in participation could have implications for Major League Baseball (MLB). He reported on a MLB poll of professional baseball fans between the ages of twelve and seventeen that found 70 percent cited “playing the sport” as the major factor in building their interest. MLB commissioner Rob Manfred observes, “The

biggest predictor of fan avidity as an adult is whether you played the game.”⁵⁸ Kids are beginning to drop out of organized baseball at an alarming rate, and no data suggests that they are replacing the experience with sandlot or pick-up games. In addition, minorities are not playing organized baseball. Although travel baseball participation has doubled in the past ten years, only 3 percent of the players are black. The interest is not there, and the cost is prohibitive. Youth baseball has become an organized, elitist game for white, middle- to upper-class kids, a far cry from my father’s twenty-inning games pitting neighborhood teams against each other played on handmade diamonds in the twilight of the onion fields. To counteract the reduction in participation at the youth level, MLB has recently launched the Play Ball initiative designed to encourage more children to take up more informal and unstructured forms of baseball activities, such as wiffle ball or stick ball.⁵⁹ But the reduction in interest and participation is not just an American issue. Children are abandoning baseball in other countries as well. In Cuba, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, baseball is being replaced by soccer as the sport of choice of young people. In Japan, the number of boys playing baseball for their schools dropped by 28 percent from 2009 to 2014.⁶⁰

A reduction in free or deliberate play may not be the only reason for—or even the cause of—these dramatic reductions in youth baseball participation around the globe. But what is clear is that in our present cultural milieu, a young person has to really like baseball to play it, and the chances of this happening are diminishing in each subsequent generation. Children today are more likely to have a utilitarian attitude toward their experiences. They view participation as kind of a duty, or habit, not necessarily free, fun, and enjoyable.⁶¹ For performance development and long-term health, this outcome-oriented approach to the use of one’s body may not be optimal. One study found that the amount of time baseball players from ages six to twelve spent at deliberate play related positively to the amount of specific baseball training they were willing to undertake after age thirteen.⁶² These players were more motivated to train because they had built a foundation of enjoyment and interest. In addition, players who became elite—and stayed healthy doing it—had more deliberate play experiences as a youth than those kids who specialized early through an organized sport supervised by adults.

Research on exercise motivation suggests that both kids and adults who approach their physical activity primarily as an extrinsic exercise or for utilitarian purposes (e.g., weight loss or reducing the risk of disease)⁶³ are less likely to work out on a regular basis than those with an intrinsic orientation (e.g.,

pleasure and enjoyment).⁶⁴ Children who participate in unstructured or free physical play can create the powerful intrinsic base—a desire to do something for its own sake—that promotes flow and motivation that may last through adulthood. A study found that adults who had engaged in more active play as children had better health and engaged in more regular exercise as adults, while those reporting restrictions on play were more likely to be overweight and have less healthy lifestyles. Also, adults who had engaged in more creative play when they were children were more likely to have a healthy diet and active lifestyle in later life. As the lead author of the study, Tony Cassidy suggests: “Having the freedom and opportunity to play is important for all aspects of child development and is a right that is often overlooked. It is something most children want to do, and do naturally, but its importance is not always recognized by adults, particularly policy makers.”⁶⁵ Without the experience of unstructured or deliberate physical play, youth will have difficulty adapting to new situations and taking initiative. This inability becomes apparent as they move into young adulthood. One of the more significant declines in physical activity and exercise patterns occurs when making the transition from adolescence (ages thirteen through eighteen) to young adulthood (ages eighteen through twenty-nine).⁶⁶

I have argued that baseball and other forms of organized youth sport have sprung from a cultural shift moving from child directed to adult directed. Within this newer paradigm, well-meaning adults and parents do not trust children and youth to direct their own play. The literature I have discussed on free, unstructured, and deliberate play suggests otherwise. Gray proposes that all children have a drive to play freely; and when this drive is taken away—for example, through today’s adult-directed baseball programs—the physical body may not die, but the spirit is killed and mental growth stunted.⁶⁷ Chudacoff seconds the idea that we (adults) prescribe too much at the expense of free play: “We do not trust children to learn and understand how to control their use of such toys and games.”⁶⁸ As a result of play vanishing from kids’ lives, he concludes: “Today’s children seem reluctant to try things on their own: children, respondents tell me, crave and demand explicit instructions, prescriptions even, because they (the kids) are so programmed to achieve success that they are anxious about failing, even if failure might give them an object lesson.”⁶⁹ Adult-organized baseball (similar to other organized youth sports) is not the culprit, but the victim, a victim of a culture that has shrunk children’s free play to near extinction. The smack of ball hitting bat is growing silent—even in Cooperstown. The only way

to get that sweet sound back is to begin chanting the mantra that my father and many of his generation lived by:

“Let’s *play* ball!”

NOTES

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