

LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

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BACKGROUND

The official Little League Inc. was founded in 1939 by Bert and George Bebble and Carl Stoltz in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. It was partly constructed in the image of big league baseball. The official Little League Inc. achieved Federal Government recognition on July 16, 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a public law, which gave little League a federal charter of incorporation. The charter gave the official Little League organization tax exempt status. In return for the charter, Little League, according to the law, is expected to promote Americanism in thirty countries besides the United States. There are now over 10,000 "official" Little Leagues sanctioned by the Williamsport headquarters and there are three times that many including leagues sponsored by parks and recreation centers. All official Little Leagues pay approximately \$70 a year, depending on the number of teams, for the privilege of calling themselves "Little Leagues." Almost a million dollars goes to the headquarters in Williamsport each year.

All the Little League Inc.'s affairs are administered by a board of directors of fifteen men. These men are responsible for governing a large corporate entity that also encompasses a conglomerate of businesses. The operations of these businesses include: the collection of royalty fees for the use of the official Little League emblem used on bats, baseballs, and equipment, . . . , the management of boys' summer camps throughout the country and the printing of the Little League manuals in various languages every year. Also, Little League Inc. has a real estate company that cares for land donated to the organization and a Little League Foundation that has more than one million dollars at its disposal to perpetuate Little League baseball.

PARTICIPANTS

Little League Inc. is merely the base of the organization. The participants of Little League make up the other parts of the system. The players, coaches, parents, spectators, and umpires have different roles and functions in this system. Each function has its rules that

clearly define its place in the organization.

The coach, who is usually a former baseball player, must know a set of rules to perform his job. He must know the rules set for the League by the board members. He must be familiar with how to organize a team. The official Little League manual is a guideline for how the game is played and it is understood that the umpire is the ultimate enforcer of these guidelines. The coach must have his own order of discipline. Also, he must work out his own system to determine who plays what position and when each boy may play. The coach may encounter some rules that he is expected to abide by even though they are unwritten rules. For example, some supporters expect the coach to argue with the ump on bad calls. This is not an "official rule," however, many times it is a role he is expected to play to show support for his team. A coach who will not stand up to an umpire.

The player has another set of rules to follow which define his behavior in the system. He is to know the rules of the game and realize that the umpire is the administrator of justice on the field. The coach will set standards which the team will be expected to adhere to. For example, the number of practices to be held and at what times they will be held are aspects of Little League the coach sets for his team. The player must follow a general code of ethics that defines much of his behavior during stressful periods of the game. Lastly, he knows what his parents expect of him. The expectations also influence his actions and role as a player.

The umpire is usually an explayer or former coach. Since he gets paid a minimal amount per game to be an umpire, it is obvious he is not participating in Little League for the money. Men usually become umps because they enjoy the kids and want to keep a connection with baseball.

The job of the umpire is to enforce a justice system throughout the game. He must qualify for the job according to requirements set by the League board members. He uses the official Little League rules in the manual for guidelines for the game. His major responsibility is to make judgement calls on plays and to set

punishments if rules are broken. He has the power to suspend a player from the game, put a team or player on probation, or insist a team forfeit a game for its behavior.

The umpire may also encounter unofficial codes. He is expected to allow coaches and spectators to protest calls, however, he must not let the situation get out of control.

The parents and spectators are basically supporters of the players and coach. Their observation as an audience gives the player the feeling of being on stage. Their attention is on him and his team. Parents are responsible for getting their child to practices and games on time.

CONFLICTS

Many conflicts are found in Little League baseball. By breaking this system down into parts, defining each part's role, and observing the goals involved, the origin of problems in the system can be detected. When the origin of the problem is known and what the causal factors are, it is much easier to solve.

By looking at some real situations, we will detect why problems came about in these instances. The first example involves a youngster who lost his temper due to what he thought was a bad call by the umpire. He went over to the umpire to protest the call with a bat in hand, very angry. The umpire suspended the boy from the game for his threatening behavior. The player violated the code of ethics defining correct behavior during a game. If the umpire's call was truly incorrect, this is an example of the breakdown of judgment or of the rules determining his call. The breakdown of the code of ethics and/or in the judgement of rules caused a problem in the system.

Another instance showing problems with rules deals with the spectators of the game. One game was greatly disrupted by angry spectators, some of whom abandoned the stands in protest, because of a call made by the umpire. When the truth of the matter was known, the umpire had made the call correctly according to "official" Little League rules. The majority of the spectators were unaware of differences in Little League rules and baseball rules they were accustomed to observing. Ignorance of the rule caused this problem.

Other problems can be caused by the forsaking of original primary goals for secondary

personal goals. Examples of this can be seen repeatedly in Little League baseball by all parts of the system. A coach, who originally started working with a team for the sake of benefiting the children, can easily get sidetracked by other goals.

PRIMARY GOALS

The primary goal for parents and coaches participating in the Little League program is to benefit the children through sports and competition. They want the children to have fun, get exercise regularly, improve and develop baseball skills and help them to learn to work as a team. A boy can make new friends, learn to relate to peers and to adults, and develop a good sense of self. These opportunities are destroyed when parents, coaches, and the players do not participate in Little League with these goals in mind. Some coaches get so caught up in the winning, they forget that they are there to benefit the children. This secondary goal to win at all costs can destroy the primary goals.

When winning is the main concern, children who rank low in skills will not get to play. What kind of self image does a body develop if he sets on the bench most of the time because he is not "good enough" to play? Another example of when winning became detrimental to a game was when a coach let a boy with a broken finger pitch in a play-off game because he wanted to win the championship. The coach put winning as a priority higher than the welfare of his injured player.

At times fathers, who have played baseball in the past, want to push their sons to the top in baseball. This kind of man continues to play vigorously through his son. With his own motives in mind he may put his son in a pee-wee baseball league at the age of four or five to get him started on this baseball career. This kind of father will not hesitate to do a little on-the-side politicking with the coach or the board members of the League to assure his son gets to play or hold a particular position. Pitcher is the most popular position fathers want their sons to play.

When primary goals are ignored and everyone goes in a personal direction, there is a breakdown. The system itself, may not be destroyed but it will degrade in function and lose its quality.

Solutions to these problems include defining roles and goals more clearly. The league team should write out the responsibilities of each person and what is expected from him. The reasons for the establishing of the league team should be determined and the goals based upon those reasons. The goals for league play need to be well defined to all participants and agreed on by all. If a coach, parent, or player has other motives for participating he should redirect his goal or find a more suitable organization.

This approach has been tried in a baseball league sponsored by a parks and recreation center. The board members and director of the program specified the rules and goals of the league to each person participating in or volunteering services to the league. The main goal of this league was to provide learning experiences for the children in an atmosphere of fun.

DISCIPLINE

This system also encountered problems with deviations from the goal structure. Any social system will encounter problems of this sort since its parts are made up of people and people tend to be very human. However, the parks and recreation league had a system of dealing with deviations from the goal structure which led to problems.

One coach strayed from letting the children have a good time to pressuring them to win the game. He started pushing the boys, and would get angry and yell at them for bad plays. When the director of the league observed his behavior, he pulled him aside after the game and talked to him. The next time the coach lost control and severely belittled his team for their performance in a game, the director suspended him from coaching duties. This was embarrassing for the coach, but, it made him realize he was blowing the winning factor out of proportion for little league-aged players. Later, the coach was allowed to return to participate but only after reevaluating his reasons for wanting to be there.

By defining the rules and goals more specifically, participants knew what the purpose of the league was and what their own role entailed. Suspending the coach was an example of enforcement of a common goal. In this case, the league rules were enforced like other official rules. A system can have a well defined

structure without being rigid. Flexibility must be allowed in any social system since people make up these systems. People change continuously. It is important to review the roles and goals of the system to assure the changing needs of the people are met within the structure.

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