

Recession Means Big Problems for Little League

Economic Crisis Has Hit Little League Hard, Leaving Some Without Baseball

By SCOTT MAYEROWITZ * ABC NEWS Business Unit * March 16, 2009

Will America's pastime become a thing of the past for the next generation?

As families struggle to pay their mortgages and put food on the table, they are cutting back everywhere, including Little League -- a luxury many parents can no longer afford.

Teams from Florida to Illinois to California have reported a decline in enrollment as parents must decide between putting gas in the car or letting junior play baseball. Some leagues have stepped up to the plate -- so to speak -- and provided more scholarships during this recession than ever before.

But even the leagues are suffering because the car dealerships, pizza joints and hardware stores that once sponsored teams no longer exist or are holding on for dear life themselves.

Little League memberships suffer as sponsors and parents struggle to pay. Registration was down almost 25 percent this year for the Lehigh Acres Little League in Florida. The area has been devastated by the housing crisis, and the league decided to cut its \$85 registration fee by \$20. But that wasn't enough, and officials there ended up waiving the fee for 60 kids, up from 20 in a typical year.

"They just don't have the money to even do it for one kid," said Troy Floyd, vice president of baseball for the league, which is located outside Fort Myers, Fla. "They don't even have the money to drive the kids to the park."

Last year, there were 43 teams in the league. This year, there are 32.

The league also dropped its fees for businesses that want to sponsor a team from \$350 to \$200. Sponsors get their name on team shirts, a banner on the fences at the field and a plaque with the team picture. But Floyd said businesses are still balking, as they just don't have the spare cash.

Finally, the league has been hurt by declining sales at its concession stand. During the Feb. 28 opening day games, Floyd said sales were down almost 30 percent.



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Parents might be coming out to the games, but they aren't willing to shell out \$2 for a hamburger, \$1 for a hot dog or \$1.50 for a soda.

"I'm seeing a lot of people bringing coolers," Floyd said.

Kelly Clapper is a single mom with three boys in the Lehigh Acres Little League. She is paying the registration fees bit by bit by bit.

"The worst thing is: As soon as you're done with Little League, you have Pop Warner [football] coming up," Clapper said. "I just got the letter in the mail for that. That's \$125 per kid."

Clapper runs her own cleaning business but with the collapse of new home construction in Florida, she is struggling. She also had an adjustable-rate mortgage but couldn't refinance and ended up losing her home to foreclosure.

"You hate to take it away from the kids, but times are so tough right now," she said. "I couldn't tell you the last time I took my kids to the movies, roller skating. I haven't done anything activity-wise with my boys.

"The price of everything keeps going up," she continued, "and the economy is so horrible."

Little League Baseball Scholarships

In Illinois, it's a similar story. The South Elgin Little League has roughly the same number of players as last year but had to give out four times as many scholarships.

Parents there have "been out of work for, some of them up to a year, year and a half. It's not just one parent. Sometimes it's both parents in the household," said league president Greg Tredup. "The last thing you should do is cut out something for the kids so we're just accepting them."

Tredup is also struggling to get sponsors.

"They're telling us the same thing: They're having trouble with the economy," he said. "The car dealerships, banks, restaurants, that's how Little League survives."



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That money is used to maintain the fields, buy uniforms (several coaches complained that the costs there have skyrocketed), buy baseballs and softballs and pay umpires. That still often leaves parents having to buy gloves and cleats.

Tredup said that several surrounding leagues are facing similar cash shortages. This year, his league ended up donating used helmets and other safety equipment to a league in Michigan, which is in a more dire situation.

Steve Keener, president and CEO of the national Little League organization, said that it is too early to tell if this is a national issue but said that as of now, enrollment numbers are in line with past years. He said so far this year there has been "nothing out of the ordinary."

Any Little League team affiliated with the national organization must allow a kid to play regardless of a family's ability to pay, he added.

"One thing that we have always taken some solace in is that even in a rough economy, parents and communities want to make sure their kids have an opportunity to do the things they enjoy," Keener said. "Many leagues and communities and families will make sacrifices in other areas just to make sure that the kids can continue to play Little League baseball."

"They may give up the family vacation before they tell their children they can't play Little League this season," he said.

Recession Brings Plenty of Suffering for Young Players

While the national organization has yet to experience the economic troubles, there are still plenty of individual Little League and youth baseball programs suffering.

In Southern California, the La Verne softball program has seen its registration numbers fall. A nearby league in Whittier cut its registration fee from \$125 to \$75.



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And across the country, in **Jersey City, N.J.**, the local Little League decided last month to eliminate its fee after numerous families decided they could no longer afford to participate.

Last year, the league had 500 players. After waiving the fee this year, all 700 spots were filled.

"Today, we have a waiting list," said Daniel Rivera, president of the **Jersey City Roberto Clemente Little League**.

Rivera said the decision to waive the fees came after he saw a lot of former players on the streets and asked them why they hadn't signed up for baseball this year.

"My parents don't have any money for the registration," was the response he kept getting.

"The struggles are there. With the recession comes a lot of depression," Rivera said. "It's real easy for these kids to get lost in the city. It's real easy."

The league is managing to stay afloat with some donations from individuals, some help from the city and through cost-cutting measures like buying cheaper uniforms.

"We've covered the bases so far," Rivera said. But when the season starts April 4, he needs to have a fully stocked concession stand. That costs roughly \$4,000, money the league just doesn't have now. "We don't know what we're going to do."

