



The Dilution of Elite Youth Baseball

- Posted by [Bill Stanton](#) on November 18, 2013 at 4:00pm
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A friend shared this article with me and I think it's very relevant to many of the CheckSwing discussions we have. Do you agree? Disagree? What are some solutions?

The Dilution of Elite Youth Baseball

<http://www.tipsfromthecoach.com/the-dilution-of-elite-youth-baseball/>

Years ago, all youth sports clearly developed in two main directions. One is the traditional recreational leagues and teams, designed to provide simple instruction and a place where everyone who wants can find a spot. But many traditional leagues and organizations are finding growth and even maintaining their numbers difficult with the allure and explosion of elite youth teams.

Just a decade ago, the landscape of elite youth baseball was very different than it is today. In the summer in every area of the country there were perhaps a handful of elite teams. Depending where you live, these might be called premiere, prospect, travel, elite, select, all-star, tournament, or showcase teams. If a ballplayer earned a spot on those teams, especially in their high school years, it was an accomplishment.

For many reasons, the market has changed. More young players wanted to have the experience of playing baseball through the summer. If you love baseball, then why not spend more days enjoying it? Many, many teams and organizations sprouted up to fill this demand. This is a double-edged sword. Now more ballplayers can enjoy playing more ballgames over a longer season than their local league provided. However, obviously **with so many teams for each family to choose from for their ballplayer, the level of talent has generally become diluted for every team, organization, and league in the country.**

As an example, from 2005 through 2008, a team called the Houston Banditos Black (their 10U team which eventually aged into 13U) won an incredible 155 games in a row. This was not accomplished by intentionally playing inferior competition. This was a carefully selected, frequently-practiced and well-coached team that won every local, state, regional, and national tournament they played for nearly three years. This record is considered to be the longest winning streak of any sports team at any level, and brought much attention to their organization. This brought inquiries from the families of youth players of every age, so they began a 15U-18U showcase program in 2008. This growth has continued to accommodate the demand of parents to

have their son be a Bandito. As of September of 2013, there are 24 Banditos teams headquartered in Houston and Austin, Texas.

On Long Island in 2005, there were approximately 30 12U travel teams, and less than half of those traveled out of state, according to Lou Maietta, long time youth and school coach and owner/operator of the Long Island Baseball Academy. Now there are over 200 teams playing at that age.

“So now, of course, the players are spread out,” said Maietta, who is passionate on the subject. “So good players are playing against inferior competition. Those ground balls through the infield that count as base hits would have been fielded by better players. So all stats and team records are misleading. And as far as developing players, there are now 200 coaches of all levels (of knowledge) coaching just this age level.”

“I probably saw a difference around 2003 or 2004,” explained Craig Everett, Head Baseball Coach at Concordia College in Bronxville, New York. “I saw more people wanting to be in showcases and showcase tournaments than players or teams actually trying to win.

“When I first started coaching summer baseball, it was team oriented. Now it seems to be all about the individual,” continued Everett. “If a player or their family have a different opinion of what the organization or team philosophy is, I’ve seen many dads start their own teams. Also, I’ve seen coaches post an innings chart at the beginning of the weekend, making sure that kids have equal playing time. But I believe that its hard to compete that way.”

Everett’s experience is typical for a college coach. Like many of his peers, he feels that the talent is spread so thin, it’s almost impossible to see all of the kids he might want to see.

“I feel like its so diluted now,” stated Rob Savarese, pitching coach at Briarcliffe College in Bethpage, New York. “The overall quality of baseball is down, especially in respect to the players knowledge of the game. I mean knowing the situations of the game. The mechanics have gotten better, but the knowledge is not nearly as good as it used to be.”



Bruce Lambin brought travel/select baseball to Texas. In 1984, his team of twelve-year olds won the first Continental Amateur Baseball Association World Series, first national tournament for independent teams.

“Since then, travel baseball became a big money maker,” explained Lambin. “The number of teams exploded and they diluted the quality of the players on the teams. I started the Lone Star Baseball Club, the first high school-aged travel team in Houston over two decades ago. Back then, all my players went on to play college or pro or both. But a few years ago, because there were so many teams (for these players to choose from) I felt that the talent on any team was diluted. There were maybe three potential D3 players on our team. I walked away.”

Lambin stressed that **learning the game and practicing and playing the game will determine a player's ultimate level of success**, rather than the team whose uniform he wears.

“There are no shortage of organizations/teams who will take your money with the delusion that the fact that because you are a Bandito or a Tornado that you are good and will get to play at the next level,” said Lambin. “They just want your money.”

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Comment by [LmbrdSteve](#) 5 hours ago

I recently talked to someone who runs a travel program and he told me, since they are non-profit, they will have as many teams at an age that they can field, if it means giving kids a chance to play (who want to play). So, they have an A, B and C...and, of course, the level of play at the B and C levels are not the same as the "A" team.

On the flip side, you have some organizations who are for profit and will put together teams and fill them with any semi-warm body...just to get enough to fill a roster, field a team, and collect money from the players/families in the process. And, many of these players are those who cannot make a travel/select team somewhere else.

When you combine these two drivers, it helps explain why there is an expansion of these types of teams.

Does this dilute the talent? Perhaps - but, is it a bad thing that so many want to play baseball?

Also, while it may be conventional wisdom, would not the weaker players washout as they get older, much like minor league players who cannot succeed as they move up?



Comment by [Michael Paes](#) 5 hours ago

I think there are several problems:

1. Too many parents think their kid is "a prospect". They put their kids in travel/select/premiere ball, thinking that little junior is going to be a star/get a scholarship. Many of them aren't doing it for their kid, but to live out THEIR dream.
2. People are feeding that dream, especially since they can make a buck.

I think it is harmful for a player to specialize in one sport. If the player has talent, it will rise to the top, even if he is not playing seven days a week. Look at some of the best athletes - Bo Jackson, Michael Jordan, Jim Brown, Jackie Robinson, John Elway, and I could go on.

The fact is, you have no way of knowing when a player is 8, 12, 15, whatever, of whether the player has the talent/drive/physical build to make it. Even back in the "good old days" of travel ball, most of the players did not get a scholarship and/or play pro ball. Some players are late bloomers, some just develop faster. It is a shame that in too many towns, they have the high school team all picked out before the players even make it to the full sized field.

There is nothing wrong with players wanting to continue to play ball through the summer. But far too many parents take it way too seriously. The fact is, the majority of the players get forgotten, and most of the players who go hard on the travel track just get burnt out.



Comment by [Jonah Bayliss](#) 5 hours ago

I couldn't agree more. It stems from the one little line in there that mentioned,

"If a player or their family have a different opinion of what the organization or team philosophy is, I've seen many dads start their own teams."

That's where things have changed, in my opinion. Whatever happened to respect for the game, and your coaches?



Comment by [LmbrdSteve](#) 5 hours ago

A lot of the "dad's starting their own team" thing stems from them wanting to make sure their kids, and/or their buddies kids, get perks and playing time. There's a ton of "daddy ball" out there on some of these travel/elite teams.



Comment by [Juan Borque](#) 5 hours ago

I thought the idea of youth baseball was to give everyone an opportunity to play and enjoy the game they like for as long as they can. When my son was younger I did not have the money to spend on travel teams or showcase teams, but I knew he was good enough to play at the next level. My son ended up playing varsity in high school, which would not have been available if he just quit. When the time came for college he was an "unknown" commodity due to low exposure, so he went the route of community college. My son is a pitcher, so when he met with the college coaches for a workout he was throwing 90 mph and they asked me where the heck he came from, and he was 17. Now that he is 19 and ready for a four year college he is getting more looks than he ever has in his life because he is throwing right around 93-94 MPH with some nasty off speed pitches. None of that would have been possible if not playing in some of these "watered" down leagues.

Just my humble opinion of what some of these leagues could do for kids. Let's be frank about this, some kids mature at different times and who knows what would happen if they stick to it. My sons issue was not only low exposure, but also he is usually the youngest in his class because he started school early, so it took him some time to get up to speed, and he still has a lot more to go.



Comment by [Ken Williams](#) 4 hours ago

I wholeheartedly agree with what is being said. I have been officiating baseball for almost 20 years. I was there at the start of "elite" summer baseball and over the years I have seen the steady decline that the article discusses. One of the most disheartening things that I have seen was when I was calling an "elite" team, in January, in Texas. I could tell my catcher, and most of the kids, really were not into the game. In talking with my catcher, who was doing a pretty good job for his age, I asked him how long it had been since he had a weekend to himself, where he didn't have to play baseball. He had to think about that. He told me it had been at least 18 months. That's a year-and-a-half without a break. Even the pros don't do that. They take time off to heal and let the muscles and body recuperate. But not these kids. Daddy kept them on the field 52 week out of the year. Sad.....is all I can say. And.....when I asked the catcher if he was going to try out for the high school team in a few weeks, his answer was an emphatic NO. Can't blame him either.



Comment by [Kyle Nelson](#) 3 hours ago

If more kids want to have the opportunity to travel around the region/state and play other kids from other areas, more power to them. But people have to begin to realize that playing "travel" baseball no longer means that one is elite. A few years ago, we had 2 "travel" teams in our small community. Add those 26 players to the 8 who were playing "travel ball" other places and we had 34 kids who were coming having played "elite" baseball. 18 of those kids made the freshmen team, and only 8 ended up playing varsity baseball.

I'm not sure if people will ever catch on that "travel" no longer means elite. If they are in it for the experience... great. I had a blast playing travel ball in the mid 90s, and I'm sure it can still be a great experience even though the competition is watered down. But the article is correct, it no longer means elite.



Comment by [Brad Brock](#) 3 hours ago

I always wanted more than the annual 20 games offered by the league when I was a kid and that's how my son got started. He was/is good and filled in for some Select teams during the spring league season. At the end of the season a league coach held a tryout for a Select team and he has played Select ever since. Two seasons he played over 100 games and wanted more. No kid was over pitched. He plays football and basketball and take 3-5 months off per year from throwing, but hits year round. Tournament ball has three levels based on skills. And too many kids play up higher than their skill level due to the reasons listed in other comments above. League ball is dying and instead of competing against Tournament ball they should embrace it. At the end of the season of league ball players who what more should do what my son did - have a coach hold a

tryout and make a tournament team(s) based on skill level and play in one of the three tournament levels. Baseball is too much fun to only play 15-20 games per year, imo!



Comment by [Bill Stanton](#) 1 hour ago

Thanks Brad. I was waiting to hear a pro-travel ball perspective. We have these discussions and most everyone always talks about these "other baseball families" who play 100+ games a year and how this is too much. It sounds like you found a good balance for you and your son.

I am just starting out, as my son is only 7. I have very mixed feelings about this and will take it a season at a time and see what happens. I'm not jumping into the 8U travel league just yet with him even though he ready to play there.

The reality is that there are thousands of families with sons playing 100+ games a year and only playing baseball. The idea is that this will increase their son's level of play, get them the exposure to get a scholarship or to get drafted. I want to hear from these families. I know some of you are reading this. I'd like to know if this is working out for you or not. Have some tried it only to have their son say they want to play another sport or do something else with his time? Did it work? Any other outcomes?

No judgements please. We all have to make decisions about our kids activities.



Comment by [Bill Stanton](#) 1 hour ago

Let's drop the word "ELITE" from youth baseball. Just play. Everyone knows that there are different levels and some players are more skilled than others. It drives me crazy to see so many travel baseball teams with "elite" in their names.

Comment

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