

Is Little League is the Youth Sports Program for Your Kids?

Recently our Little League has had to contend with players / parents making an either / or decision to participate in Little League or local Club / Traveling Team program.

As a new President of the local Little League, I was not sure why this distinction was being made and why, other than scheduling issues, we wouldn't welcome a tie to Club Teams that had good quality players.

At the next board meeting I asked the question '*Are Club Teams Competition for Little League*' and I was not prepared for the emotion that filled the responses. Long time board members expressed a decided opinion on the issue and the District Administrator had suggested that Little League did not acknowledge club teams nor would they promote or affiliate with club teams in anyway.

I then asked, what are the differences that Little League might express that speak to parents as to why they would direct their kids into Little League vs. the Club Team system. I was surprised by the silence that followed. Clearly responses were rooted more in emotion than reason, at least no reasons that a dozen grown men & women could articulate. Because of the emotional response, I determined to do my own research.

I started by finding out how kids joined a club team. It turns out that the process of joining a club team was by invitation only. The modus operandi seemed to be that a Club Team coach would become active in a local little league and eventually ask only the best players in the upper divisions of the league to join his club, purportedly because the club system offered a more competitive level of play. I also admired the forethought that Club Team Coaches must go through to execute a multi-year strategy to assemble a 'competitive' team.

I began to wonder if the Little Leaguer in my house might be club material. Perhaps I feared that they weren't 'good enough'. I recognized that the Little Leaguer that lives in my house is probably an average player that demonstrates skills that improve year to year, but a big part of the improvement was dependant upon the skills of the coach. Naturally, some of his friends are better players, and likewise some are worse. Regardless of skill level, Little League gives them all a chance to play a wonderful game together as friends and teach them all that winning / losing is a team effort; it's a lesson that carries them throughout their life.

I began to see the club program as missing the element of community and comradeship that the game of baseball generally and Little League specifically promotes. What I found was that the only similarity between Little League and Club Teams was that they sought after the same base of players. I began to see that Little League was about the community and Club Teams were primarily about winning.

Little League is an international volunteer organization aimed at teaching kids and molding their character to be the leaders of tomorrow. Coaches are instructed to exemplify the tenets of Character, Courage and Loyalty as they teach them the basics of the game of baseball. Winning is great, as a 'High-A' type individual, I like nothing more than playing a winning game, but Little League is NOT about winning all your games. It's about learning the skills to win the games of life.

I began to see a pattern emerging and it led me to create the following table that compared the two programs. On one side I detailed what I saw as the virtues of Little League and on the other I laid out what I saw as the Club team response to that. It is biased toward Little League, not doubt about it. I've decided that the Club Team responses are likely to be a continuing work in progress; I haven't been able to establish why they exist, other than to serve the egos of the organizers and promoters.

<i>Little League Program</i>	<i>'Club / Traveling Team' Programs</i>
No child is excluded from being able to participate for ANY reason (no exclusion based on skill level, financial, etc.)	Intentionally excludes players & families that promotes elitism
Manager/Coach Education Program, Safety Program (ASAP), Emergency Management Training Program and Challenger Division for mentally and physically disabled youth.	No consideration for player safety, community education & involvement or recognition of special needs. Other than athletic talent and an invitation, there is no other qualifier
Promotes character building through tenets of fair play and teamwork	Emphasizes competitive aspect of sports and winning, other morals / lessons left to the whim of the coach
Local Little Leagues are a semi-autonomous organization operated by volunteers from within the community, with the betterment of the community as the goal.	No such goal / foundation.
Community-based program, well accepted and recognized worldwide in over 140 countries	Based on single individual and personal network
Promotes community in a specific neighborhood / geographic area	Seeks venues & community outside the neighborhood, sometimes at a distance
Nationally competitive program with opportunity for television exposure	Local, Regional no national exposure, no television
It's About The Kids	It's about competition, winning & whatever the coach determines (Religion, Self-respect, etc.)
Adhered to standard, international rules	Rules may vary game to game, depending on sponsoring organization (see below for examples of Team Clubs affiliations)
Founded in 1938, unique recognition in a Charter of Federal Incorporation passed by Congress in 1964	Founded as of the time players are 'invited' from existing Little League programs in the community
Chartered Little Leagues receive tax exemption assistance from federal and state taxes.	No tax-exempt status with out 501(c)3 filing
All parent have a voice by democratic procedure in regard to changes	No voice offered by other than participation
Shared costs by the community	Financial burden on family
Accepts burden of field maintenance for the community	No financial participation in maintenance of field
Player insurance effective for all LL activities	Not required in all venues
No formal fees other than initial registration	Tournament fees of \$400+
Celebrations that encourage community	Established on the difference that divide community and promote elitism

Examples of Club Team organizations - Super Series Baseball of America, AAU, NSA and USSSA, Top Choice Baseball, etc.