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Until it Hurts

Mark Hyman

The following is an excerpt from author Mark Hyman's new book Until It Hurts, which focuses on the country's obsession over youth sports and how this impacts the development of our nation's youth. Read more about the book at www.untilithurts.com.
-Editor

Hostile Takeover

Dalton Carriker swung as hard as a twelve-year-old can swing. The baseball pinged off the metal bat and hung in the air for what seemed like an hour before disappearing over the dark green wall in right field. At a ballpark in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, forty thousand spectators screamed. A global television audience of 70 million sat glued to their sofas. Wearing a grin that exposed his braces, Carriker circled the bases, celebrating the home run that won his team the 2007 Little League World Series presented by Kellogg's Frosted Flakes.

Carl Stotz would have hated it. He wasn't a grinch. Nor was he was opposed to kids playing baseball for fun. Far from it. The founder of Little League Baseball had dedicated his life to that very proposition. As the story goes, Stotz was playing catch in his backyard with his young nephews when one threw a ball wildly. Stotz reached out for the baseball and caught a lilac bush instead. The shrub tore through his sock and skinned his ankle. When the ache subsided, what remained was a big idea: a little league for youth baseball players in which rules, equipment, and life lessons were designed to suit them.

Stotz started the first Little League baseball team in the spring of 1939. In many ways, he was an unlikely person to launch a revolution in organized youth sports. A bookkeeper for a lumberyard in Williamsport, he looked like a



UNTIL IT HURTS

*America's Obsession
with Youth Sports and
How It Harms Our Kids*

MARK HYMAN

Courtesy Beacon Press

man who spent most of his time indoors—thin and pale. A tuft of wavy brown hair perpetually rose from the top of his head. Though he enjoyed playing baseball as a boy on the local sandlots, he wasn't particularly athletic. His children couldn't even play in the youth baseball league he was creating because both were girls.

Stotz was a dreamer, though, and he needed to be. In his day, the idea of parents and other interested adults banding together to organize a youth sports league was decidedly rare and, in many towns in the United States, unheard of. Children played sports everywhere of course. (During Abraham Lincoln's term as president, a

group of boys chose the White House lawn for a game of baseball. Guards shooed them away but Lincoln invited them back.) Adults weren't necessary and, for the most part, were too busy to hang around and watch.

While parents were largely absent from the sports lives of their children, other adults—namely educators, recreation leaders, and youth counselors—were present. In the 1880s, athletics for children thrived in public schools, YMCAs, and under the auspices of other religious and public institutions such as the Boy Scouts and the Boys' Club. Dr. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, was associated with the YMCA of Springfield, Massachusetts, when he famously nailed up the first peach basket in 1891. (Thus, the National Basketball Hall of Fame is located there.) Naismith's purpose had been to create a game that would be played indoors and could hold the attention of young players over the winter months, enticing them to visit the YMCA year-round. These organized sports games were about fun and recreation and, for the winners, neighborhood bragging rights. But there were larger purposes, too. At the Young Men's Christian Association, or YMCA, it was largely about saving souls. Sports programs there were largely driven by Muscular Christianity, the notion that a boy's spirituality was linked to his level of physical fitness. The more baskets he shot, the more committed the young athlete might be to a pious life. Likewise, the YWCA used sports to reach out to young women and girls. In 1884, the Boston branch opened the first YWCA gymnasium. In Buffalo, New York, in 1905, the local YWCA featured a swimming pool, one of the first in the country for women only. And the YWCA of Washington, D.C., boasted all-female badminton as early as 1932. Yet throughout the early twentieth century, organized sports for children were overwhelmingly organized sports for boys. Girls were considered too delicate. Who knew what harm could come to

them shooting baskets or running track? They might develop muscles, certainly no advantage when the time came to find a husband. Some thought physical activity might even prevent girls from having their own children later in life. No joke. As late as the 1970s, Kathrine Switzer, the first woman to run in the Boston Marathon, claims she was confronted with the astonishing prediction that distance running might cause her uterus to fall out.

It was different for boys; boys were born to compete on the sports field and beyond. Every time they stepped onto a court they were honing skills that were necessary to succeed in what sports historian Allen Guttman refers to as "the breadwinner's struggle." Not so for girls.

"While clouting a baseball and dribbling a soccer ball were thought to be a useful preparation for careers in industry and commerce, middle-class women were excluded from these branches of endeavor, and few mid-Victorian moralists imagined a connection between ballgames and childcare," Guttman writes in *Women's Sports: A History*.

In the lives of boys, however, organized sports was more than training for an office job. America's cities increasingly looked upon them as a form of social engineering. "It's the football field, the diamond, the track against the party, the dance, the pool parlor, and the saloon," warned one New York state judge in 1909. The sentiment was shared by the archetypal outdoorsman of the day, Theodore Roosevelt. The former president argued that the way to cut the alarming rate of juvenile delinquency was to build more urban playgrounds. "The young criminals are created not by their school life, but by what is done in their leisure hours," the former president opined in 1926. "By striving for a proper opportunity from outdoor recreation . . . for all our boys and girls we will do a very great work toward cutting down crime."

The most successful youth sports programs resided in the public schools. In 1903, the first organized sports league for boys had its start in the schoolyards of New York City. The Public Schools Athletic League began with three hundred eager players. Seven years later, there were more than 150,000. The success of the school league was obvious in the numbers of both players and fans turning out for youth contests. Yet by the 1930s, educators had become concerned. The emphasis on winning was too great, they warned. And the physical and mental strain of playing for championships was unhealthy for the young players.

School sports programs were rethought and refocused. The old emphasis on competing and winning was replaced with the loftier goal of physical fitness for all students. Leagues withered and elementary schools and junior high schools dropped their competitive teams in favor of less competitive intramural sports. Into the void stepped parents. It was a profound moment and, argues sports historian Rainer Martens, “a gigantic blunder” on the part of educators.

“Ironically, educators suddenly found themselves no longer leading the movement they had begun. Instead of welltrained professionals guiding the sports programs of children, well-meaning but untrained volunteers assumed leadership roles. Sadly, educators were left on the sidelines shouting their unheeded warnings and criticisms,” writes Martens in his seminal book *Joy and Sadness in Children's Sports*.

No question, parents brought with them a different mindset. Unencumbered by academic perspectives about the damage that intense sports could inflict on children, they set up leagues that dialed up the competition. One of the earliest was Junior Baseball, a creation of the American Legion launched in 1926. The legionnaires liked baseball well enough. But like adherents of Muscular Christianity before them, they had a greater goal in mind. In the

years after World War I, they fretted about a crumbling of moral values among young people. They feared that someday the country would be turned over to a generation of weak-willed, apathetic adults unable to defend themselves against the worldwide scourge of Communism. The answer seemed obvious: baseball. They hoped the national pastime would promote patriotic values, sportsmanship, and fitness among teenage boys.

In 1929, the Junior Football Conference entered the picture. Later (and better) known as Pop Warner football, the league began as a crime-prevention program in a blighted section of northeast Philadelphia. It remained an obscure operation until 1934, when the legendary college football coach spoke at a league function and so impressed the audience that league officials renamed it after him. The 1930s wasn't a particularly promising decade to start anything, much less anything as novel as Little League Baseball. The Great Depression gripped the country. In 1933, when economic times were hardest, just one in every ten or fifteen high school graduates could find a job. A quartermillion children had no homes and drifted around the country in the hope, often futile, of finding places to live and work, according to Steven Mintz in his book *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*. Carl Stotz did not have an easy time feeding his family. In 1938, the year his Little League dream was taking form, he held four jobs, working at an oil company, as a landscaper, at a venetian blind manufacturer, and finally as a bookkeeper at a local lumberyard. Part of the year, he survived on the salary of his wife, Grayce, and his twice-monthly unemployment checks of \$12.10. In the spring of 1939, Stotz's Little League made its debut with teams, including one sponsored by a local pretzel company. The concept delighted the children and caught on with parents first in Williamsport and then elsewhere. Within a decade, Little Leagues

were operating in twelve states. By 1952, Arthur Daley, the esteemed and generally circumspect sports columnist of the *New York Times*, was extolling Stotz's creation. In one syrupy column, he referred to Little League as "the biggest thing to happen to the sport since Abner Doubleday outlined his baseball diamond in Cooperstown in 1839."

Not everyone was impressed. Inside the ivy-covered walls of American universities, professionals in youth recreation were troubled—not just by Little League, but the rising tide of leagues like it. As University of Washington historian Jack W. Berryman writes, beginning in the 1930s, academics issued "a steady stream of proposals, guidelines, speeches, manuals and periodical articles containing warnings against too much competition for elementary school children."

Those concerns are remarkably unchanged from ones that frame the debate today: youth sports were too competitive. Talented players got all the glory; weaker ones rode the bench, never developing skills or self-esteem. In 1932, an article in the prestigious *Journal of Health and Physical Education* warned of another potential harm seemingly stolen from today's headlines: early sport specialization. "Not only does [premature specialization] deprive the young athlete of the opportunity to brouse [sic] around and find his interests in the various sports and various positions, but it causes him to lose his adaptability," wrote the journal's alarmed editor. "Many athletic misfits are created."

Little League just kept rolling on. In 1947, Stotz presided over the first Little League National Tournament, a modest precursor to the Little League World Series. As his league was gaining a national profile, so was he. As early as 1952, Stotz attended the annual National Baseball Hall of Fame induction ceremonies in Cooperstown, New York, mingling with the sports royalty there. And as

the stature of Little League grew, he formed his own glittering guest lists to the Williamsport tournament. Most years at least one baseball legend attended. In 1952, Stotz escorted his special friend Connie Mack, by then the elderly eminence of the Philadelphia A's. Three years later, Stotz's companions included two inductees to the Baseball Hall of Fame, Lefty Gomez and Cy Young.

Charles Bucher was appalled. The New York University professor knew well what little children needed from their sports activities. What Stotz was offering certainly wasn't it. Bucher's credentials were impeccable. A tall, trim professor in NYU's School of Education, and later a delegate to President Eisenhower's White House Conference on Physical Fitness, he was a deep thinker about early childhood development. He had studied the issue from numerous angles, having also been an elementary school coach and athletic director. Clearly, he'd hung around his share of gymnasiums and athletic fields. He played golf, tennis, and enjoyed jogging. He believed in exercising every day. Later in life, Bucher even won the national championships in seniors doubles platform tennis.

Bucher entered the national debate through a side door. On September 1, 1952, he opened the *New York Times* and spotted a brief article on the paper's editorial page. It ran just 135 words and likely brought smiles to the faces of most readers. A few days earlier, the Little League World Series had crowned as its new champion a team from Norwalk, Connecticut. The *Times* cheerily tipped its cap to the winners before concluding: "The Little League has become a fixture in American life—and a valuable one indeed."

Bucher didn't think so. He fired off a letter to the newspaper published seven days later under the headline "Limiting Boys' Sports: Emphasis on Competitive Game for Children Criticized." In his response, Bucher listed reason after

reason why parents should be wary of Little League Baseball, then in its thirteenth season. To the professor, the entire enterprise was designed to please and entertain adults. Little about it struck him as right for adolescent boys.

Little League “is a highly organized competition and is climaxed by a World Series,” Bucher wrote. “Are youngsters from 12 years of age sufficiently mature and emotionally stable to the point where they should be engaging in an experience which has the potentialities for traveling 2,000 miles to play a game of baseball before eight or nine thousand spectators?”

The idea that boys would concentrate on one sport also troubled Bucher. He wrote, “The period 8 to 12 years of age should be an exploratory period when youth should be playing many activities . . . This is not the time to specialize too intensively in one activity. The child at this age needs experiences which involve the use of the whole body.” That viewpoint still reverberates in the youth sports debate today.

It was hardly Bucher’s last word on the excesses of youth sports. In July 1953, the professor took aim again in a *Look* magazine article bluntly titled “Little League Baseball Can Hurt Your Boy.” A highlight of Bucher’s piece—or lowlight, depending on the youth sports leanings of the reader—was the litany of horror stories chronicling deplorable behavior of coaches and parents. One story was of a father in Bucher’s neighborhood in Armonk, New York, who boasted to friends that one day his son would pitch in the big leagues: “He has sold the idea to the boy and to some of the neighbors too. Perhaps this boy will make it. But the odds are about 25,000 to 1 against him. When he discovers, as he probably will, that he is no budding Yankee or Dodger it may not do his ego much good. He may even feel he has let his father down.” Bucher was far from a lone voice and youth baseball was far from the only target of those questioning the role

of adults in organizing sports for children. By the mid-1950s, a full-blown debate had broken out among academics, physicians, and plain old adults arguing thorny issues such as who should be in charge and how competitive games for children should be. By then, a panoply of new leagues and national tournaments had cropped up. Pop Warner and Little League Baseball made room for Biddy Basketball, Pee Wee Hockey, and even Little Britches Rodeo, a competition for prepubescent cowboys that got its start in Littleton, Colorado, in 1952. In keeping with the times, all were for boys only.

The forty-six-page booklet was titled *Desirable Athletic Competition for Children*. The only thing dull about it was the title. On December 18, 1952, the National Education Association held a news conference in Washington, D.C., to discuss its new report, and a roomful of reporters showed up, including scribes from the Associated Press and the *New York Times*. Then, as now, what the NEA said about children mattered. Founded in 1857, the powerful and influential organization was a thoughtful leader in efforts to expand education and improve schools. Among its 3.2 million members today are elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, and school administrators.

The NEA report was a double-spaced demolition of youth sports. It panned the entire enterprise, concluding that “highly organized competition, patterned after high school and college sports, gives youngsters an exaggerated idea of the importance of sports and may even be harmful to them.” The report, which had taken three years to complete, urged adults to do away with “high-pressure elements” in their programs, including all-star teams and newspaper and radio accounts of games that included “individualized publicity about good players.” It recommended a total ban on tackle football for children not yet in the ninth grade. In short, the NEA seemed to be telling the organizers of Pop Warner, Little League

baseball, and other leagues to pack up their equipment and go home.

Bob Wolff remembers his reaction well. “I thought they were making a big deal about nothing.” At the time, Wolff was one of the most prominent sports broadcasters around. Beginning in 1947, he had been the radio voice of the major league Washington Senators. In the next six years, he would be at the microphone for Don Larsen’s World Series perfect game in 1956 and the Baltimore Colts’ sudden-death victory over the New York Giants in 1958, the National League Football contest dubbed “The Greatest Game Ever Played.” (At age eighty-seven, Wolff was still dabbling in broadcasting and writing a memoir.) In 1952, Wolff was also a staunch defender of bigtime youth sports, though he certainly hadn’t planned to be. He’d read an article about a football bowl game for youth players in Lakeland, Florida, called the Santa Claus Bowl, and he inquired about bringing a team from Washington to play in the game. Soon Wolff was leading a campaign to raise the \$3,300 needed to send twentyfive players to Florida. Publicizing the drive on his nightly radio show, Wolff recalls that the money was quickly raised. But the NEA report, released just seven days before kickoff, threatened to spoil the party. Wolff appeared on countless news programs defending the game and debunking the NEA. The day after Christmas, the game came off without a hitch, except that a number of the Washington boys came down with a stomach virus and spent the night before kickoff in a Lakeland hospital. Even that proved redemptive, though, because the boys met an elderly patient during their stay and, after winning the game, returned to the hospital to award him the game ball. Notes Wolff, “That was pretty good proof that those kids kept their balance.”

With educators raising questions, youth sports organizations were under pressure to consider

reform. There’s little evidence that they responded. In 1954, Little League Baseball’s president, Peter J. McGovern, appointed “a special three-man committee” to study the Little League World Series and recommend whether it should continue. “There has been some criticism of the Little League’s national tournament . . . because of the pressure and strain on youngsters participating in the title competition,” noted the *Sporting News* in a paragraph buried on page 36. Whether such a committee ever considered the issue isn’t clear. A half century later, I can find no other references to the issue. By 1957 McGovern was ready to change the subject, telling a reporter, “As for our critics, we have the research with which to tell them, ‘The charges you make just aren’t so.’ ”

The national debate about the alleged shortcomings of youth sports waxed and waned, but during the 1950s it never went away. In 1956 President Eisenhower established the first President’s Council on Youth Fitness and charged it with keeping the nation informed on issues pertaining to children and their sports lives. The first chairman was Eisenhower’s vice president, Richard Nixon, suggesting that a deep knowledge of sports was not needed for the position. The council’s early recommendation echoed themes from the NEA report. Namely, “Schools . . . should focus increased attention on children who are not athletically gifted, rather than on ‘stars.’ ” In June 1958, attendees at the American Medical Association’s annual meeting in San Francisco heard a similar rebuke of all “highly organized sports for children.” Dr. Fred V. Hein, an AMA official, told the group that structured sports leagues “shut out” all girls as well as boys who were not physically gifted. The system of catering to the most talented players “helps to perpetuate physical unfitness among the rest of children,” he said. It is a critique of youth sports that still holds. In local

rec leagues, talented children and their less athletic teammates share the same bench. But marginal players often make do with less of the encouragement and praise that result in esteem-building. Thus, one in three children quits a sports team each year according to a prominent study, a distressing rate of attrition.

Damon Burton, a University of Idaho professor, has studied why kids abandon sports for years. He has a plan to address the problem. Burton recommends equalizing playing time for talented and not-so-talented players, and insisting that coaches rotate children through all positions instead of relegating the less gifted ones to the athletic hinterlands also known as right field. “The key is to allow all players to feel a part of the action and to contribute meaningfully to their team’s success,” writes Burton in his article “The Drop-out Dilemma in Youth Sports.”

Stotz would have seconded that. In a cruel irony, the man who literally invented youth baseball lost a power struggle with the corporate types he’d invited to help manage the growing organization. He was ousted from Little League in 1956. He stayed on in Williamsport until his death in 1992, but never attended another Little League game. The reason for the messy split was Stotz’s alarm with Little League’s distressingly big ambitions. For the last four decades of his life, he railed about it in print any chance he got, which was often.

In 1964, the *Los Angeles Times* published a four-part series on the growing pains of Little League Baseball, probing everything from dysfunctional parents to the alarming incidence of pitcher’s elbow. The provocative stories, several of which ran on page 1, caused a stir. The most incendiary article in the series was one that featured Stotz, eight years after his ouster and as angry as ever.

“I discontinued my connection in 1955, when I saw the way things were going. The

national organization with headquarters here [in Williamsport] began developing into a Frankenstein. I became utterly disgusted. Originally, I had envisioned baseball for youngsters strictly on the local level without national playoffs and World Series and all that stuff. I still have kids in Williamsport playing baseball but not as part of Little League Baseball Inc. with its paid officials and a full-time research director.”

A loose, unofficial alliance of skeptics and dissenters was emerging: educators, physicians, a youth sports pioneer—and a major league baseball pitcher. For years, Little League Baseball pointed to Joey Jay for validation. As the first Little Leaguer (from Middletown, Connecticut) to graduate to the major leagues in 1953, Jay was living proof that the organization had, in a sense, arrived. Its former players now were grown men contributing to society and, in Jay’s case, leading the Cincinnati Reds to the 1961 National League pennant. In 1965, Jay was a twenty-nine-year-old husband and father living in a Cincinnati suburb. He signed up his seven-year-old son to play in a Cincinnati Little League and was surprised to find neither his wife nor his child happy. “My wife kept complaining that Stephan was coming home tense and exhausted. I went to one game and watched angrily while the coach made a tired six-year-old who just couldn’t get the ball over the plate go back to the mound and keep pitching until he was ready to collapse,” Jay said.

Jay wasn’t angry only about his son’s experience. In 1966, *True* magazine published his article “Don’t Trap Your Son in Little League Madness,” which decried the state of Little League Baseball everywhere. The article was part commentary, part diatribe. It challenged the qualifications of coaches and the motives of parents. It questioned the health effects of Little League on young bodies. As Jay saw it, kids were far better off learning and

enjoying sports on their own than being under the thumb of adult minders. “What happens today is that many Little Leaguers are burned out before maturity. I think this explains why Little League has had such limited impact on baseball, why it has failed to produce a gold mine of talent not only for the majors but for high schools and colleges as well. The fault lies in its concentration on immediate victories and premature glory, rather than on teaching basic skills and sound development . . . Championships seem to come first, the youngsters last.”

He called out “idiotic fathers” who made being the star of a Little League squad “a new status symbol not far below a Cadillac convertible.” Mothers were equally chastised for being caught up in the “Little Leaguer status race.” Jay (or more likely, Jay’s coauthor Lawrence Lader, with whom he shared a byline) wrote, “I saw one mother shout at her boy as he left the field after an error, ‘Don’t embarrass me again before everyone!’ Mothers from opposing teams often trade insults in the stands over their sons’ prowess. Neighbors end up feuding with each other . . . In their mania for victory, adults can wreck the whole concept

of sportsmanship.” Jay was appalled by “how many coaches are frustrated athletes, hell-bent on producing winning teams to recreate their own dreams of vanished glory. Many fathers take over their teams and consciously or subconsciously push their sons’ careers. Their driving ambition has produced a new medical ailment, ‘Little League elbow.’” Jay’s description was more caricature than anything else, but I knew from experience that the problem parents whom he described hadn’t disappeared from the bleachers. My son had the damaged elbow to prove it.

Fifty years ago, Little League Baseball’s founder knew something was dead wrong with the direction organized sports for children was taking—and he exposed it. So did a roster of college professors, professional educators, medical doctors, and at least one major league baseball pitcher. All were arguing their case before the American public in something like a howl. None could stomach the idea of kids programmed from the cradle to be sports stars with flawless backstrokes and untouchable fastballs. And they’d never even heard of Tiger Woods.