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# Big Dreams in a Little League: How Social Factors Influence Success in Competitive Youth Baseball

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Big Dreams in a Little League:  
How Social Factors Influence Success  
in Competitive Youth Baseball

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On February 11, 2015, Little League Baseball announced that Jackie Robinson West Little League from the South Side of Chicago would have their U.S. Little League World Series Championship win vacated. They had, according to an investigation spurred by an angry coach from a neighboring Illinois league, used players from outside their established geographical boundaries, breaking well-known rules regarding where players on the team could come from. It was a costly decision.

Why did the coach and league administrators do it? The obvious answer is that they did it to win. They valued winning above “equal” and “fair” play, and risked getting caught. This answer is not sufficient, however. That they would do this suggests more factors lurking under the surface. It suggests that Little League baseball on the nationally competitive level is not such an equal playing field. We may never know Jackie Robinson West's true motivations, but we can know that there are causes of competitive imbalance including race, class, and community involvement, through empirical and theoretical investigation.

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What the Little League World Series lacks in professional polish, it makes up for in national and international spectacle. Smooth double plays are a little harder to come by (but not completely out of the ordinary), but drama and plot lines are abundant. Little League baseball at the elite level is a natural home for human interest stories. Of

particular interest to the American public is what happens within American borders. The all-black team from Chicago overcomes the odds (but not without controversy). Mo'ne Davis paves the way for young female athletes. It is easy to be skeptical of sentiments like this being overwrought and fabricated by media to draw in viewers to an otherwise unorthodox (for national television) sporting event. However, there may be more to these sort of stories than our skepticism allows for. Predominantly, these types of stories hearken to the sort of sociological analysis that we can do on a national level. The relatively cursory glances at race, class, and community that the media takes, can be taken further to provide real, substantive investigations into how Little League baseball affects and is affected by society.

### **Thesis Overview**

The five chapters contained in this work have five distinct purposes. The introduction should foremost provide a primer on some of the major issues to be discussed further in the work. The second chapter is a substantive explanation of the theoretical framework behind the concepts surrounding sports sociology to be employed herein, as well a review of predominant themes in sports sociological literature. It examines the intellectual methodology that I will use to analyze the relationships between elite little league baseball and social difference.

The third chapter provides a data-driven approach to the social differences between different American Little League World Series teams. It uses demographics to

look primarily at race and economic class, based on geographic area. It then uses that information to draw theories and conclusions about how where a team comes from affects their ability to succeed at the highest level.

Following this, the fourth chapter examines more closely four instances of teams from across the United States reaching the Little League World Series, and how that effects and is affected by the community. These individual studies should provide indicators as to how communities support local youth baseball as well as how available resources (money, personnel), facilitate success. Finally, the conclusion will provide a lens to evaluate the thesis as a whole.

## **Major Issues**

### **Geography**

Little League has a number of defining characteristics in terms of its nature and operation that make it a unique entity among the youth sporting world. First among these, is its focus on geographic locality. Unlike youth club sports, which are typically viewed as the highest level of play for elite youth athletes, there are distinct geographic limitations. Club baseball may see players traveling long distances to play with the best of their peers. Players in a given Little League on the other hand must live within a given set of borders. This ties players to their direct community in ways that other youth sports organizations cannot. A league (and thus its given team of players who have an

opportunity to reach the Little League World Series), thus, is a representation of community in its most local sense. Richard Simpson claims that geography is the truest unifying factor in communities, and they become more and more stratified. He says, “[I]f the community is divided into subcultural groups and special-interest groups which have relations, separately to outside organizations but not to each other, it may be questionable whether a modern community *is* a unified whole in any real sense except that of geography” (Simpson 1974). It may also be interpreted that Little League serves as one of these “subcultural and special-interest groups.” If this is the case, then it is worth exploring whether these communities—player, coaches, and supporters—are still unified by geography. Chapter four will examine this issue.

Regardless, this has obvious implications on the eminent differences between leagues. If a league is comprised of players in its immediate vicinity, it is a representation of the socio-economic standing of its players, and their families. Thus, the resources of an individual league is restricted to the affluence of the community. This goes without question. However, one area that I will explore in chapter three is the practical implications of this. Mainly, I will examine whether there are linkages between a community’s financial resources (as indicated by mean income) and its team's ability to succeed on the highest level.

### **Prohibitive Costs**

With the notion in mind that different leagues have different economic means, it is



important to recognize why Little League baseball costs as much to run and participate as it does. Firstly, there are the costs associated with running the league. An individual league must face the cost of renting the playing facilities, as well as liability insurance, besides the flat rate that the league pays the organization per player (Littleleague.org). These costs are passed on to each player, who must pay the fee in order to participate. Moreover, a league must have sufficiently qualified administrators who are able to run it. This may be more difficult in poorer communities, as there fewer people who may have an administrative background, and have the time away from work in order to facilitate a league.

There are also other barriers to entry that may be more of a factor in poor and black communities. One such issue is transportation to and from practice and games. Unlike school, there is no institutionalized transportation like busing that is available to children regardless of background. In the case that the fields are not within walking distance to their home or school, they must instead rely upon car rides. These would be harder to find in black communities where car ownership is lower than their white counterparts. Gaultier and Zenou say that “Empirical evidence for the United States suggests that relative to white workers, African American workers... are less likely to own a car,” (Gaultier and Zenou 2010).

Additionally, there are non-obvious requirements for league participation. One common practice is for a league to require a player to engage in fund-raising in order to help subsidize the cost of playing. In more affluent leagues, there may be an option to forgo the requirement for a fee, or it may be included in the fee in the first place. Fund-

raising may also be more difficult in a poor community because citizens there have less discretionary funds in general.

Another factor that is influenced by cost is the availability for players to develop their skills in non-Little League settings. This includes such opportunities as winter ball, in which baseball is played during the off-season in an effort to fit more playing time in. Of course, there is also the possibility for players and their families to hire private coaches to help them become fundamentally better baseball players. Those who cannot afford such coaching are thus at a disadvantage to those players that can. The same disadvantage can be seen in cases when players cannot afford top-of-the-line equipment. A 2012 *New York Times* article estimates costs at around \$400 total for a quality bat, helmet, batting gloves, pants, socks, and cleats (Nytimes.com).

These aforementioned costs are only those associated with general participation in local Little League. The costs skyrocket when a team attempts to qualify for the Little League World Series tournament. One of the preeminent issues here is the cost of travel. A team, if they continue to win, will go through multiple local and regional stages until reaching the actual Series in Williamsport. Though Little League claims that it pays for costs associated with going to the Little League World Series for child (Littleleague.org), the biggest barrier that poorer participants face comes with the realization that these costs begin to multiply the more supporters come with the player. The costs for even two parents and their child begin to look more and more out of their means. Finally, adults must take into account time off for work, which may be more difficult for those in financial constraints. It is worth considering, however, that in certain

instances, crowd funding (in which individuals can donate money to a central fund), has aided families. Questions still remain whether this would be more likely to happen in more affluent communities, and whether crowd funding is a sustainable solution.

### **Community Involvement**

Any child who participates in youth sports has community factors other than cost that enable them to play and succeed. One of these factors is the attitude of the parents or guardians of the child. Players must come from a family that is both willing and able to put the child in Little League. We have already established that there may differences in the means of parents to have their child in a sport, but we must also examine the attitudinal differences that exist. Different communities may very well have different ideas as to what children should do with their time. The difference in attitude is evident in another phenomenon in which disadvantaged parents are less involved in their children's schoolwork. There are a number of barriers that these parents face to participating (Dauber and Epstein 1993). This lack of involvement would be just as evident in the parents' approach to what the child would do in extra-curricular situations. In this way, attitudes of parental lack of involvement contribute to a child's opportunity to even play Little League baseball. Poorer leagues would thus have a smaller pool of players to draw from.

Another prominent factor that may play a role in a team's ability to succeed is the availability of coaching. It is important to remember that in Little League, coaches are

volunteers. As such, it would follow that working class communities would have less potential volunteers to fill that role because of class differences. Not only would working class adults have less leisure-time, they would have less physical activity or related leisure activities. Mäkinen et al., explain that “Participation in leisure-time physical activity appears to follow a socioeconomic gradient. Low education (in years or qualifications) and occupational class as well as low income are associated with a low level of physical activity during leisure time,” (Mäkinen et al 2010).

Another way of examining community pride is looking at larger symbols of support. One of the ways that this manifests itself for teams that succeed at the higher levels is celebratory events such as parades. These are generally organized by city administrators as implored by the community at large. Large spectacles like this can both bring communities together around a team and demonstrate the concerted support for Little League baseball. The question regarding these spectacles is whether the support after the fact represents any sort of real support or is just what spectacle implies: purely aestheticism. Peter Goheen, referencing parades in Victorian Urban Canada, describes their nature. He says that they are “an important instrument that allowed for the expression in public of many values and viewpoints contending for attention in a dynamic urban milieu.” Furthermore, “The supposition behind parades as a form of collective action was, as it had long been, that social perception and purpose may be generated as much through collective experience of mass public assembly as through the intentions of private individuals.” (Goheen 1990)

Communities can also show support for their team through supporting the team's

fund-raising efforts. More specifically, in some instances of teams going to the Little League World Series, they will have crowd funding efforts in which they try to facilitate travel fees for supporters. These are, indeed, concrete fiscal ways of community support. However, the most evident form of support is direct funding by the city toward the league. This can include the city renovating fields or subsidizing player involvement. Issues such as these will be discussed in more depth in chapter four, with its focus on community.

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## Chapter 2: A Theoretical Approach to Literature on Youth Sports

In this chapter I will establish the fundamental relationships between sport—an action as well as cultural symbol—and community and sport and social difference. Additionally, I will investigate specifically how youth sports are influenced by racial and socio-economic background from a theoretical perspective. I will then proceed to examine some of the important literature on youth sports and its values and shortcomings in approaching the topic of social factors and success in Little League.

### **Sociological Paradigms**

Before delving into these issues, it is important to understand the frames with which sociology understands the function of sport. There are four of these that I believe are valuable to contextualize the subsequent analysis in this academic project. These include symbolic interactionism, interpretive sociology, culture and power, and racism and ethnicity. These frames will aid in comprehending the significance of sport to the sociological landscape.

First is the paradigm of symbolic interactionism. This is concerned with how sport creates the notion of player and investigates the relation of sport to the person engaged in it (Jarvie 24). This form of analysis is much more concerned with the personal. It is generally used as a way to examine how sport affects one's identity. This is of particular interest when one explores the specifics of an individual's background. An example is how sport interacts with the other factors that make people who they are. Symbolic



interactionism will be a useful tool in unpacking how sport influences and contributes to Little Leaguers sense of being, taken in relation to their social, cultural, economic, and geographical contexts.

The second paradigm that will be valuable in this work is that of interpretive sociology. It is in many ways similar to symbolic interactionism, and has many of the same intentions and methods. According to Jarvie, interpretive sociology is most often associated with thinkers including Weber, Simmel, and Giddens (Jarvie 25). It is best seen as a more extreme form of symbolic interactionism. One way this is evident is through its use of the concept of ethnomethodology. Jarvie explains that ethnomethodology functions by “examining the processes through which people sustain a taken-for-granted sense of reality in their everyday lives,” (Jarvie 25). The questions that it tends to ask are more abstract and post-modern. In many situations, I will use symbolic interactionism and interpretive sociology together as a way of delving into a particular topic.

Third is the paradigm of culture and power. The implications of analyzing sport in the context of this paradigm is often self-evident, but incredibly important. In order to understand culture and power, we must begin with the first term, culture. The relation of sport and culture are easily identifiable in examples. Jarvie points out a few: “working-class culture, men and women's culture, black culture, bourgeois culture and youth culture,” (Jarvie 28). Seeing how power emerges between and within cultures is incredibly valuable. Additionally, Jarvie notes that culture and power is important because it “allows the student to move beyond the conventional analysis at the level of

the state, or the ways in which, for example, governments use sport as an instrument of nation building, or as a facet of health policy,” (Jarvie 29). These examples show how we can extract meaning in both a functionalist sense, but can also move beyond it and examine its interpersonal implications.

The final paradigm which I will use is that of racism and ethnicity. While these are frequently used terms, it is worth presenting their definitions to be clear what we are addressing. Racism, according to Jarvie, “is any political or social belief that justifies treating people differently according to their racial origins” (Jarvie 31). In defining ethnicity, we see that it is a “combination of racial, cultural, and historical characteristics by which societies are occasionally divided into separate and often hostile political families,” (Jarvie 31-32). It is important to note that these two terms emphasize antagonism based on difference. When taken in the context of sports—particularly, as I will present in the case of racially diverse Little League teams—it will be important to look at how this paradigm allows us to see difference manifesting itself. People, whether players, supporters or the communities at large, are ultimately affected by difference, and proceed to act on it. However, it is worth looking at whether sport may, in fact, perform the opposite function and unify people and groups. Regardless, the racism and ethnicity paradigm is a key one.

### **Key Sports Relationships**

With these paradigms established, I want to explore two key relationships, both

interpersonal and conceptual, that exist in the larger context of sport which will be valuable in applying to Little League baseball. These relationships are sport and community, and sport and social difference.

However, community is notoriously difficult to define. Daniel Nathan, editor of *Rooting for the Home Team*, a collection of essays on sport and community, quotes sociologist Roland Warren who says that “The term... implies something both psychological and geographical” (Nathan 4). For our purposes, these two facets are key. The psychological refers to a more abstract sense of togetherness, while the geographical helps to delineate where communities form.

Nathan speaks to the way in which identifying with a particular team (though his work is largely in reference to professional teams, the same applies to Little League teams, which are perhaps even more linked to community because of their scale and locality) provides groups of people a way to unite over a common interest or aspiration. He says that “[c]learly, sport is a place where community and identity come together. Sports are a way that disparate communities define, understand, and represent themselves to themselves and others” (Nathan 7). First of all, this statement demonstrates one way in which individuals unite to form communities. But more than this, it shows how different communities can further solidify their sameness as they symbolically interact with other communities. Thus sport is unique insofar as it is a competitive process. In the case of Little League, we would see that a local community would unite around a team by the virtue of its geography and the given associations that it has to them. However, the act of competing against other teams (and therefore

communities), perpetuates those feelings. Sport as an active process of community building thus does not create communities but strengthens them. In fact, Nathan would argue that with sport we should examine its temporal implications on community. He says that “Sometimes a form of *communitas* can span and connect generations” (Nathan 4). In small, localized areas like the ones that I will examine in later chapters, success on the national level is something that is not quickly forgotten; it is something that remains ensconced in the area's unique history. I will examine in the coming chapters how communities form around these successful Little League teams.

Another way to examine the impact of sport and community is using the concept of social capital, from Pierre Bourdieu. Social capital, “refers to the collective value of all 'social networks' [who people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other” (Harvard Kennedy School). Jarvie claims that social capital is important in the context of sport as it promotes different societal aspects including social inclusion (Jarvie 333). It aids social inclusion because it helps create the aforementioned networks. In Little League, we see a network of players, coaches, families, and supporters. These networks allow for shared learning; people “learn more when they can draw upon the cultural resources of people around them,” (Jarvie 333). Thus the sport creates a sort of positive social capital which benefits people through networking, and culture is shared. Ultimately Jarvie sums up the benefits of sport to society in his claim that “it is the potential contribution that sport makes to civil society, the space between the state and the individual, that provides sport with the opportunity to promote a communitarian philosophy based upon mutuality and obligations rather

than individualism and some ideological notion of sport for all," (Jarvie 337).

The other relationship that I wish to examine is of sport and social difference. I will mainly explore two varieties of social difference in this thesis as they relate to Little League Baseball: class and race. As with the concept of sport and community, the idea of social capital can be applied here. Jarvie claims "from Bourdieu's work, it is clear that bodies are involved in the creation and reproduction of social difference... bodies bear the imprint of social class because of three main factors, [including] an individual's social location (material circumstances of daily life)..." (Jarvie 222). Social location in this case, is a direct analogue to class. There are a variety of commonly held theories regarding how class affects sports participation. For example,

Working class attitudes to bodies are marked by demands of getting by in life and the temporary release from the demands of everyday living. By contrast, the dominant classes are characterized as viewing the body as a project and have available resources to choose whether to place an emphasis on the intrinsic or external function of the body. (Jarvie 222)

The implications of this as they relate to this project are numerous. If this statement is true, then there should be a strong correlation between affluent teams in the Little League World Series being generally more successful, as well as teams from working class backgrounds generally being unsuccessful. While later, we will investigate how the numbers add up for American Little League teams, there is empirical evidence that in Canada this phenomenon is true, at least as regards participation. There, sixty percent

of children do not participate in organized sports while, while only twenty-seven percent of children from rich homes do not (Jarvie 336).

However, it is important not to generalize too much as regards class. Though, it is true that the working class does not have as much capital to put toward sports (Woods 247), there are intricacies that remain to be seen. It is key to also realize that groups of different social classes tend to gravitate toward different types of sports. The working class tend to play team sports as they are cheaper to put on and more players can play at one time (Woods 215). However, in the context of the Little League World Series, we must be wary of this assumption, as the teams that are successful require funding for such things as travel and the best equipment.

Community and class are only two social factors that are key to this study, the other being race. Ronald Woods believes unequivocally that sport has a positive effect on race relations and racial justice. He proclaims that "Sport at every level of competition can have a positive effect on the quest for racial equality in society" (Woods 215). He presents a number of different supporting factors to defend this. One is that youth athletes' self-confidence can easily be bolstered by succeeding at a given sport. (Woods 215). This statement's validity seems based on the fact that sport is one more outlet for minorities to succeed at. It relates back to sport as a form of self-realization for the individual. According to him, minority athletes have an outlet not just for sheer participation in sport but for tangible success.

These paradigms along with key sport and societal relationships should serve as an integral approach for analysis for how teams from the Little League World Series

embody and explain these sport and sociological phenomena. It is clear through this theoretical backing that there are a number of lenses through which to analyze sport as well as frameworks which can guide how we see sport in society. Future chapters will allow me to implement these tools to unpack the social meanings, constructions, and implications within the Little League World Series.

### **Important Literature on Families, Inequality, and Serious Leisure**

Two important areas of study which provide a key basis for study in the field of youth sports literature that contribute to the topic of Little League opportunities are those of familial context for players and inequality. One issue that arises that speaks to the importance of social factors such as race, class, and community on young athlete success is individual psychological influences from within the family. Jean Cote says that

On the basis of the existing literature on families and talent development, few suggestions can be provided as to how parents and siblings should support the performer in his/her pursuit of excellence and on the specific types of behaviors that a young performer may perceive as pressure or support (Cote 1999).

While Cote does not come to any specific conclusions on the way in which parents and family is key to individual excellence, I will examine it with more conclusiveness with the help of Annette Lareau's concept of "concerted cultivation," on which later I will

elaborate later in this work. It is also worth noting that the literature that Cote and others in the field of youth sports tend to discuss is that of the somewhat ambiguous term “excellence,” not in the collective team success as I quantify it.

A more specific area of familial relations in the youth sports world that some authors investigate is the issue of fatherhood. This tends to take the form more of a social examination than the psychological of Cote. Lucas Gottzen and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik say regarding fatherly participation “is understood to reflect a parental anxiety regarding the ability of their children to become members of the middle class” (Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik 2012). Thus, we see youth sports functioning firstly as a sort of socializing process, specifically pertaining to class. Furthermore, in their study, they determine that involvement in youth sports provides fathers the chance to operate as an influence to their children both in and out of classically masculine roles. They say,

“youth sports give men opportunities to spend time with their children and provide emotional support. The prevalence in our study of caring-oriented fatherhood through sports also resonates with Anderson’s (2009) argument that, while historically values connected to orthodox masculinity were endemic in youth sports, today this model of masculinity is being challenged by inclusive practices and values that oppose the central tenets of orthodox masculinity.” (Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik 2012)

While this analysis seems to steer clear from class-related influences, they conclude by determining that



Involvement in youth sports, thus, may be used to account for middle-class men not taking responsibility or being involved in other parenting practices and household tasks, while simultaneously enacting “good” fatherhood in line with cultural expectations for father involvement (Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik 2012)

In this way, class—specifically middle-class values—interacts with societal norms of fatherhood to influence their involvement in youth sports, a trend which I will examine in more depth in chapter four.

Research into amateur sports inequality has indeed been conducted in countries other than the U.S. Rob Beamish is one author who confronts the issue of amateur/youth sports and inequality in Canada, similar to what I am doing with American Little League baseball. In his 1990 study of a 1970s Canadian policy to create equity in elite athletic opportunity, he writes that the goal was to “create greater equality of opportunity for Canadians in amateur sport. The policy’s objective was to remove barriers to participation and thereby help develop a broad base of sport participants from which the best would rise to the apex of the sport pyramid in the proposed sport structure” (Beamish 1990). However, despite the government's efforts, Beamish claims that it failed to achieve success.

It is clear that despite the federal government’s activities in the high performance sport structure in Canada over the last 17 years, the government has not eliminated, or even ameliorated, the impact of Canada’s stratification system on the chances that various Canadians have to rise to the top of Canada’s high performance sport system as

athletes (Beamish 1990)

Finally, Siegenthaler and Gonzalez outline some of the social and psychological advantages and disadvantages (with a heavy focus on the latter) of what they call “sport as serious leisure,” a category into which high stakes Little League baseball fits. They claim that “Although sports involvement can be positive for children in providing them healthy avenues for investment of time and energy, it contains a backlash for many” (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez 1997).

There are two major applicable areas that Siegenthaler and Gonzalez say are areas that detract from youth athletes' experiences. The first is competitive parents. “The expectations parents have for their children to play flawlessly can cause unnecessary embarrassment, humiliation, and stress” (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez 1997). The other category is competitive coaches. They say that “Many youth sport coaches have difficulty making the distinction between youth players' need for patience, acceptance, and sensitivity, and their own need to emulate the professional coach” (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez 1997).

Perhaps no situation fits into the mold of overly competitive parents and coaches more than the case of Jackie Robinson West Little League. Critics—including President Obama—have commonly noted that the children in this instance have no blame in the controversy as they simply did not know what they were doing was wrong (ESPN.com). Everything happened on the local administrative level run, of course, by the adults. The intention there is to win at any cost, and that intention is held not by the players but by the coach and parents.

Siegenthaler and Gonzalez's solution is simple if naïve: "The organizational structure of youth sports can be changed so as to maximize fun" (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez 1997). The truth is, high level youth sports are not likely to get less competitive. The solution lies in equity, that everyone should have a chance at reaching the highest level.

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### Chapter 3: Little League World Series Demography

For the sake of the study, I will examine the past five years of American representation in the Little League World Series, which go back to 2010. Of interest to this study are the implications hidden in the demography of where the United States regional representatives come from. Each of the individual Little Leagues exists within its own microcosm. From numbers such as median income, and racial breakdown percentage (particularly what percentage of a community is white), we can extract a comparative analysis of these communities. In looking at patterns and trends, we can see what how these relate to a community's opportunity to reach athletic prominence. We will see what kinds of communities tend to reach an elite level, as well as those that tend to be underrepresented.

There are eight regions that compete in the American bracket of the Little League World Series (the winner plays the International winner, but we are not concerned with that particular outcome). These regions are Great Lakes, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, New England, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, and West.

There are a number of comparisons that I will make using this data. The first involve comparing the numbers to state averages. In juxtaposing the income and racial averages of the teams representing each region to the general state average, we will be able to see how they line up or differ from the geographic norm. Indicative in these comparisons will be whether there is something exceptional about these communities: is there an eminent social difference between them and others that would contribute to their ability to succeed in youth athletics?

Next we will look not at each regional representative team as equals, but take into account how they fared against each other. Instead of just comparing them indirectly against other teams in their state, we will see how they did comparatively within the group, and look for any emergent patterns there. We will then examine the data temporally, looking for any trends over the course of the five years. Mainly, we will be looking to see if there are increases or decreases in income in those teams that are most successful.

## **Results**

One of the most important issues that I wanted to examine with regard to the league averages versus the state averages is median income. We are looking for whether there is a distinct enough difference in income to draw a specific conclusion about the nature of income and the ability for a team to succeed in its geographic milieu.

One initial question about the nature of income in leagues against state averages, is whether there is a tendency for the league's median income to exceed the average of the state where they come from. (Note that all income information comes from the 2013 American Community Survey.) Of the thirty-eight teams in the past five years (the only two teams without census data available for its zip code were Billings Big Sky Little League in 2011 and Lynwood Pacific Little League in 2014), thirty exceeded the state average for median income. The teams that did not exceed the average were Auburn Little League (Washington), Keystone Little League (Pennsylvania), Harney Little League (South Dakota), New Castle Little League

(Indiana), Kearney Little League (Nebraska), Gresham National Little League (Oregon), South Nashville Little League (Tennessee; twice), and Universal Little League (Texas).

Out of these teams, there were five instances in which a team's median income was at least five thousand dollars less than that of the state.

Table 1

Year	League	State	Area Percent White	State Percent White	State median income	Area median income
2010	Tom's River National LL	NJ	90.7	68.6	\$71,629	\$76,202
	Waipio LL	HI	17.6	24.7	\$67,402	\$92,389
	Columbus Northern LL	GA	73.6	59.7	\$49,179	\$106,890
	West Side LL	OH	94.5	82.7	\$48,308	\$51,452
	Fairfield American LL	CT	93.2	77.6	\$69,461	\$128,558
	Plymouth/New Hope LL	MN	86	85.3	\$59,836	\$78,739
	Pearland White LL	TX	54.6	70.4	\$51,900	\$94,103
	Auburn LL	WA	58.1	77.3	\$59,478	\$56,809
2011	Keystone LL	PA	94.4	81.9	\$52,548	\$36,547
	Ocean View LL	CA	67.1	57.6	\$61,094	\$75,599
	Warner Robbins American LL	GA	64.6	59.7	\$49,179	\$51,739
	North Oldham LL	KY	87.5	87.8	\$43,036	\$68,181
	Cumberland American LL	RI	92.8	81.4	\$56,361	\$72,416
	Harney LL	SD	75.1	85.9	\$49,495	\$39,611
	Lafayette LL	LA	86.2	62.6	\$44,874	\$64,778
	Billings Big Sky LL	MT	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012	Par Troy East LL	NJ	56.7	68.6	\$71,629	\$78,253
	Petaluma National LL	CA	85.5	57.6	\$61,094	\$76,813
	Goodlettsville Baseball LL	TN	82.8	77.6	\$44,268	\$53,138
	New Castle LL	IN	94.3	84.3	\$48,248	\$37,734
	Fairfield American LL	CT	93.2	77.6	\$69,461	\$128,558
	Kearney LL	NE	93.1	86.1	\$51,672	\$48,949
	McAllistar Park National LL	TX	79	70.4	\$51,900	\$65,921
	Gresham National LL	OR	77.4	83.6	\$50,229	\$43,071
2013	Newark National LL	DE	82.8	68.9	\$59,878	\$51,322
	Eastlake LL	CA	50.2	57.6	\$61,094	\$94,665
	South Nashville LL	TN	60.9	77.6	\$44,268	\$43,251
	Grosse Point Woods-Shores LL	MI	88.2	78.9	\$48,411	\$91,782
	Westport LL	CN	92.5	77.6	\$69,461	\$158,713
	Urbandale LL	IA	90.4	91.3	\$51,843	\$69,282
	Universal LL	TX	73.7	70.4	\$51,900	\$27,854
	Eastlake LL	WA	75.7	77.3	\$59,478	\$143,686
2014	Taney Youth Baseball Assoc. LL	PA	68.7	81.9	\$52,548	\$60,400
	Mountain Ridge LL	CA	72	66.2	\$52,800	\$64,866
	South Nashville LL	TN	60.9	77.6	\$44,268	\$43,251
	Jackie Robinson West LL	IL	22.7	71.5	\$56,797	\$61,799
	Cumberland American LL	RI	92.8	81.4	\$56,361	\$72,416
	Canyon Lake LL	SD	88.7	85.9	\$49,495	\$57,368
	Pearland East LL	TX	54.6	70.4	\$51,900	\$94,103
	Lynwood Pacific LL	WA	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a



It is worth taking a similar approach to examining the teams that did exceed the state average for median income. After all, if teams were barely (say, less than one thousand dollars) above the state average, it would not represent any sort of significant difference. However, of the thirty teams, there were twenty-two which exceeded the state income by at least ten thousand dollars, giving us over half of all teams in the last five years to do so.

Table 2

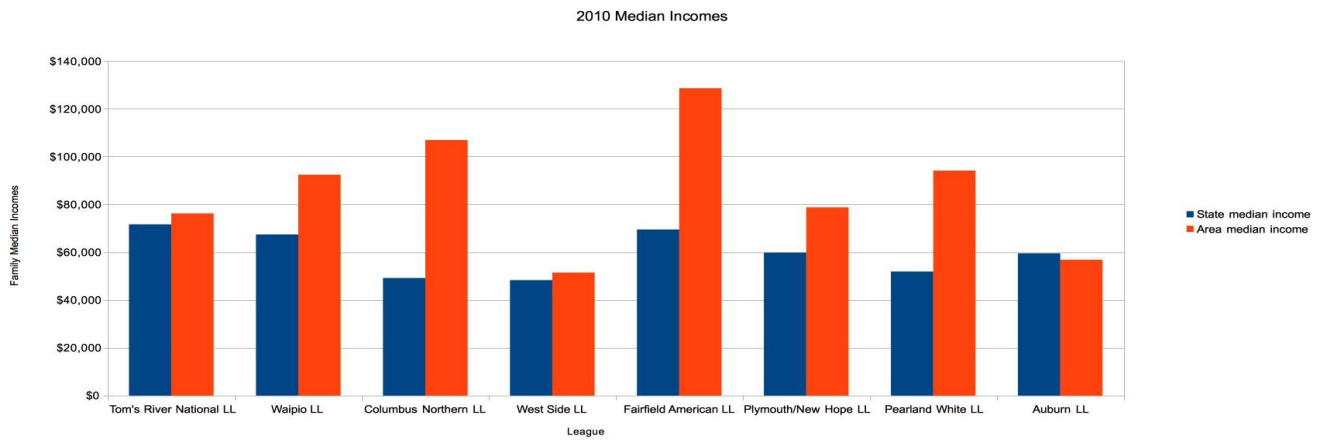
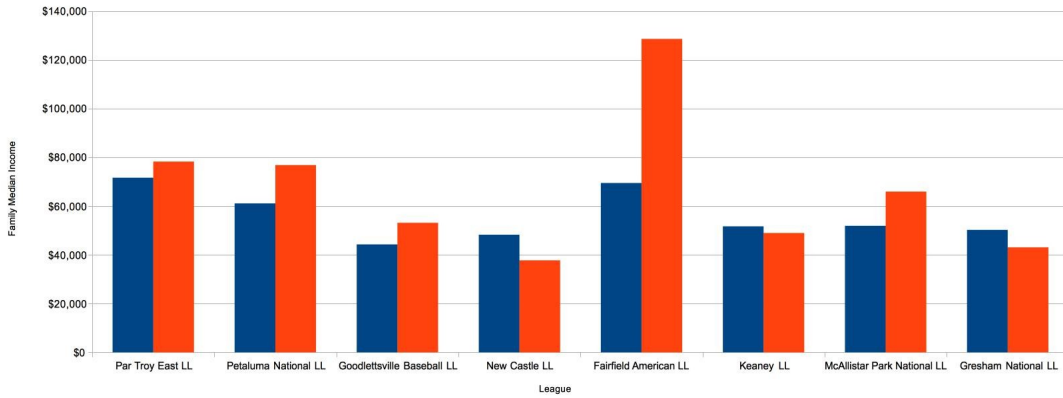


Table 3

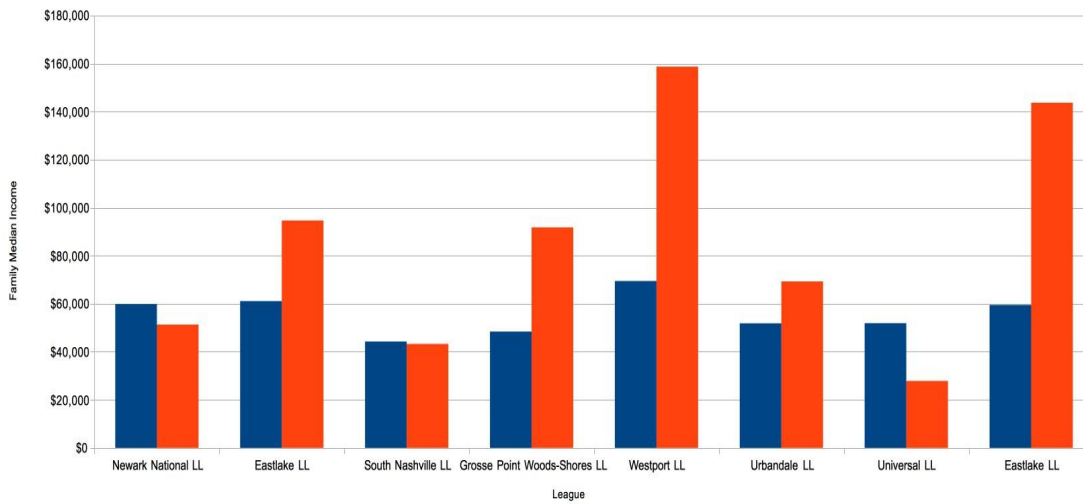


Tables 4-6

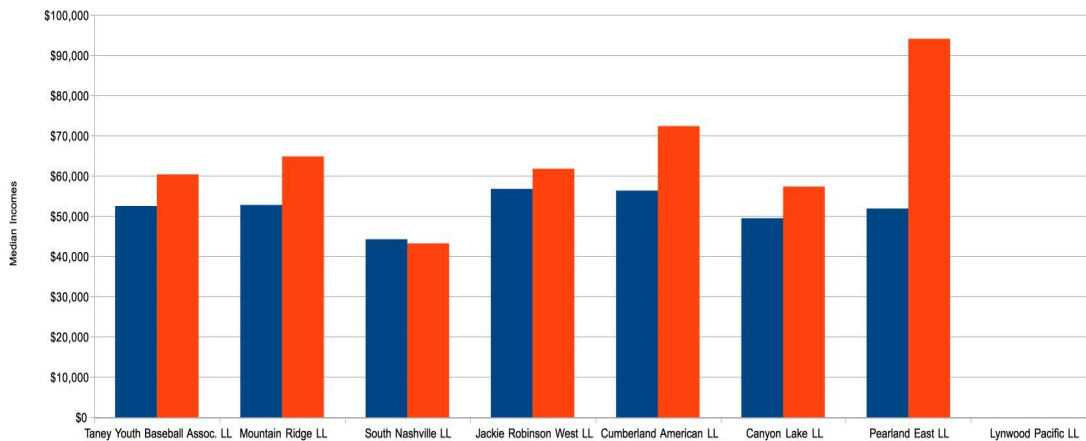
2012 Median Incomes



2013 Median Incomes



2014 Median Incomes



Now let us look at racial breakdowns of teams versus state averages. (Note that all race information comes from the 2010 Census.) The vital statistic that I want to examine is if the percentage of community that is white is more in these teams than the general state average. This will have significant implications on racism present in the institution. The results were interesting. Out of thirty-eight teams, there were only twenty-one which exceed the average of whiteness of the state, making for just over half.

Table 7

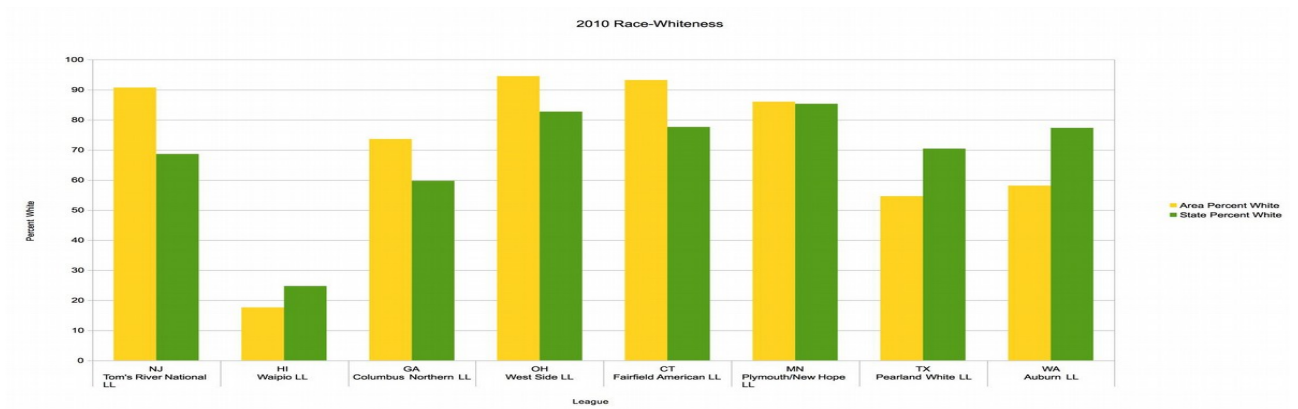
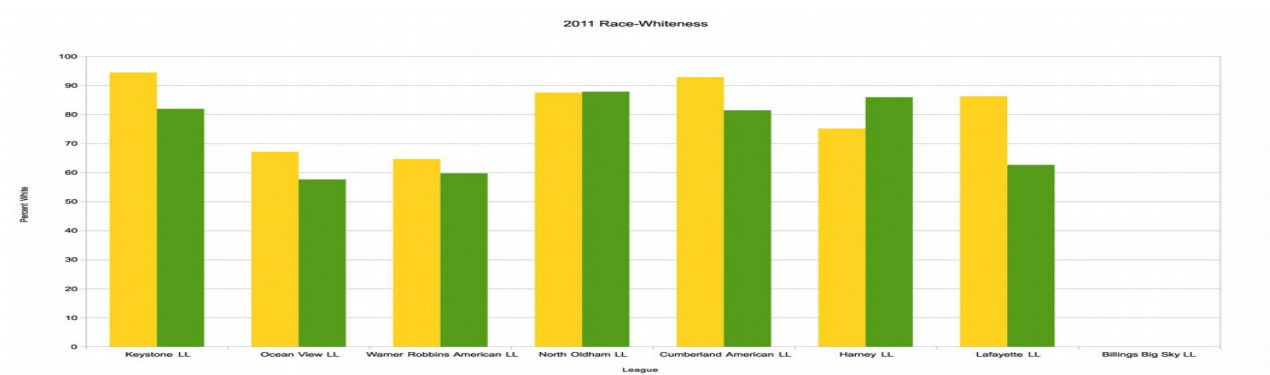
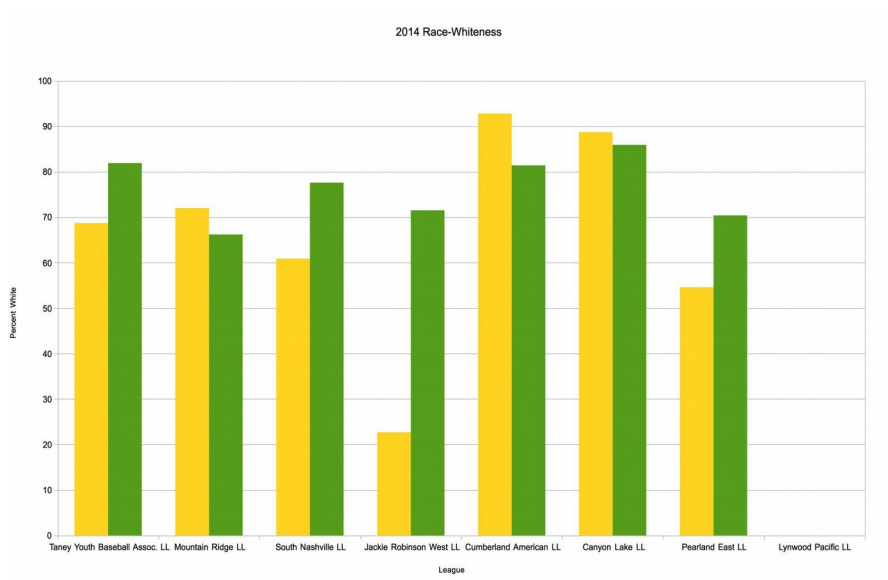
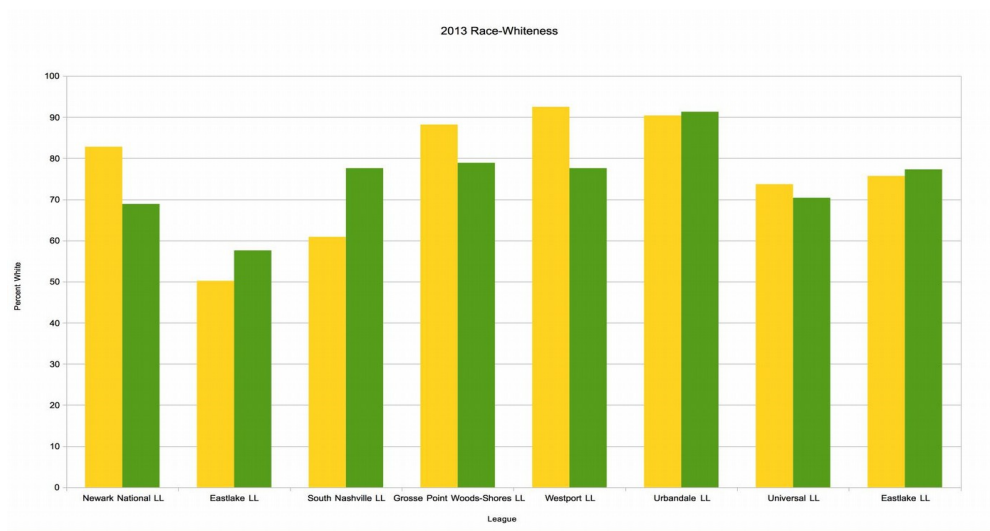
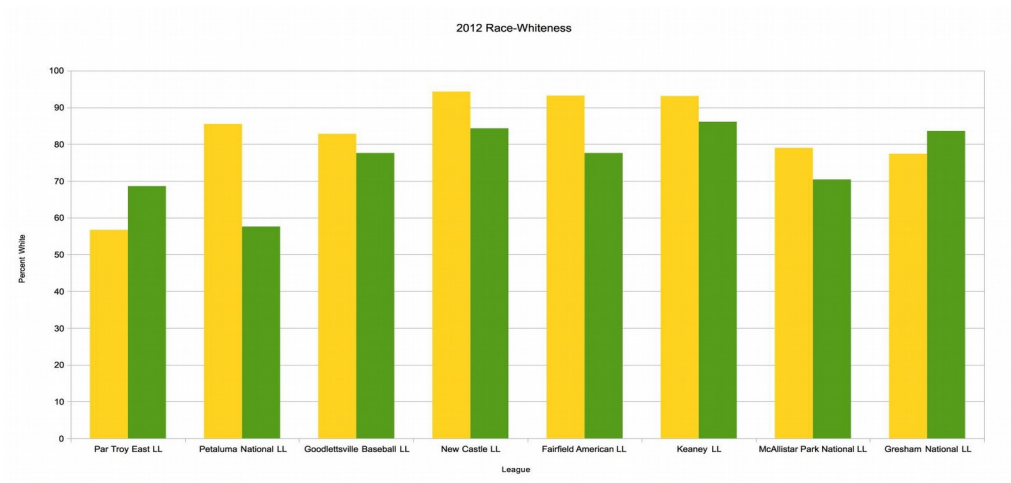


Table 8





Tables 9-11 The next step is to look at how the teams did against each other and whether this is affected by their affluence or racial breakdown. For this I will look at two teams from each year, the winner and runner-up of the American bracket, and examine how they fit in these categories relatively. By year the teams were: 2010—Waipio Little League and Pearland White Little League; 2011—Ocean View Little League (CA) and Billings Big Sky Little League (MT); 2012—Goodlettsville Baseball Little League (TN) and Petaluma National Little League (CA); 2013—Eastlake Little League (CA) and Westport Little League (CN); 2014—Jackie Robinson West Little League (IL) and Mountain Ridge Little League (NV). The first number I want to look at is how they ranked among their peers in median income and whether the winner or runner-up in these years stood out as either the most or least affluent in their respective year.

In 2010, the two teams, Waipio and Pearland, were ranked 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> respectively with incomes of \$92,389 and \$94,103. In 2011 Ocean View was ranked 1<sup>st</sup> at \$75,599, while Billings Big Sky did not have data available. 2012 saw Goodlettsville Baseball at 5<sup>th</sup> with \$53,138, and Petaluma National 3<sup>rd</sup> with \$76,813. In 2013, Eastlake was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> with \$94,665, while Westport was 1<sup>st</sup> with \$158,713. Finally, in 2014, Jackie Robinson West was 4<sup>th</sup> with \$61,799 and Mountain Ridge at 3<sup>rd</sup> with \$64,866.

These results demonstrate a few initial trends (or lack thereof). First, there are only two instances in which a team in the top two had the highest median income. One of these times, however, Ocean View (the top team both in competition and income) had an income which in most other years would be ranked somewhere in the middle. On the contrary, it is worth noting that no team in the top two was ranked less than 5<sup>th</sup> in

income.

In the same vein, let us examine if the two most successful teams each year tended to be whiter or less white than state averages, a similar exercise to the one that we did earlier except with a focus on achievement. These results seems to be rather inconclusive, with the teams being more white 5 out of 9 times.

The final run through of the data that I will perform is examining it temporally. I will examine first the average median income of the two top teams over the five years. The numbers for this are: 2010- \$93,244.5; 2011-\$75,599, 2012-\$64,975, 2013-\$85,069, and 2014-\$63,332.5. Given this data, there would indeed be an obvious downward trend (except for 2013 being an outlier). We will later examine if this has any significance.

## **Analysis**

To analyze the above data, I will be employing an interpretive sociological lens and examine it in the context of sport and social difference. Firstly let us take a look at the foremost (and one of the most important numbers that we examined), that thirty of out of thirty-eight teams exceeded the state average for median income, approximately seventy-nine percent. This is a significant enough number that we can draw definite conclusions from it.

This proportion seems to reinforce many of the factors regarding costs to success outlined in the Introduction. As mentioned there is the issue of league administration: successful leagues must have competent administrators. A good league

may be run in such a way that there are less intrusive barriers to child, parent, and coach alike wanting to join it. A more affluent (or at least, reasonably affluent league) is more likely to have someone with those skills as well as the necessary time to administrate.

Additionally, more affluent leagues are able to have more consistent practices because of easier transportation for players. As mentioned, the availability of cars for children above a certain socio-economic level allows for them to reach practice without fail. Other children have to worry about having a consistent ride for reaching practice. And, as is quite obvious, more practice allows for a better team. Besides practice, there are two other apparent advantages that richer teams will have. One of these is the ability to purchase more expensive equipment. While the difference in equipment may not be as important as a difference in skill, there may still be a marked difference. A more advanced bat (giving a few extra feet on a fly ball) or a more comfortable glove (allowing for an easier time taking a tough ground ball) are some of the small things that can change a close game. More importantly, having better equipment may imbue players with more confidence, allowing them to play to their highest capacity. The final, and perhaps most important (especially at the youth level) factor that may contribute to a more successful team, is better coaching, which one would see in a community where more parents have time to pursue these activities. This is not to mention the potential for private coaching afforded by ambitious and affluent families.

However, we cannot conclude definitely that money is the sole causal factor that leads to success in Little League Baseball. If it was, we would see an even higher

fraction of teams than three out of four reaching the Little League World Series with an income exceeding the state average. One way to look at this phenomenon is that money is *one* causal force leading to success. More money allows for more resources which means a higher chance to win.

However, a more accurate interpretation may be that it acts more as a barrier. There were, after all eight out of thirty-eight who succeeded without exceeding the state average. It may a case where they won *in spite of* the barrier. There may very well be other factors at play. However, it is safe to say that while money is not the only factor, it is indeed one of the factors that contributes to a team's ability to succeed on the highest level. Additionally, there was the general trend that teams' average median income has been decreasing since 2010 (besides 2013). This may not be enough of sample size to conclude that trend is definite, but it is indeed significant that of the five years studies, the highest average median income was in 2010 and the lowest median income was in 2014. It is worth noting that 2014 average, \$63,332, still sits above the national median household income of \$53,046 by about \$10,000. But while higher, this number does not seem so significant as to say that the communities reaching the little league World Series are by any means vastly more wealthy than the average American community.

The racial breakdown statistics are also incredibly interesting, The fact that only twenty one out of thirty-eight leagues were more white than their state seems to suggest that in terms of equality of outcome alone, the system of youth sports (at least in this instance) is not intrinsically racist. The best leagues in each state (assuming that the league is comprised of players that reflect its community racial breakdown) are more



diverse than the state average at a rate of just under fifty percent. This is, however, not to say that there are not racist tendencies in youth sports, as the paradigm of racism and ethnicity suggests. In fact there are many ways that race functions as a barrier in terms of access to sports. This data, however, suggests that in terms of success for Little League baseball, it may not be as prevalent as people tend to think. Again, however, it is possible that the factor of race, when taken in league with other factors, is not solely causal. In other words, it may be that race is still exclusionary, but other factors are more so that it is overshadowed.

However, in analyzing the racial components of the results in more explicit terms, it is important to remember that while it was just as likely that team that was less likely than the state average to make it as it was with the converse, if we reexamine the numbers, leagues are still incredibly white. For example, out of all the teams that made it, there are only two instances where whiteness was not the majority in the area: Waipio Little League (where the population was predominantly Asian) and Jackie Robinson West (where the population was predominantly Black). This tells us that while by US standards, the leagues and teams may be diverse, but realistically, there is still significant under-representation.

In addition, it is important to remember that this data is not suggesting that a team itself is composed of as many minority players as the percentages indicate, but that the league does. One criticism of this particular data analysis may be that I am conflating the specific team itself with the league, whose demography was extrapolated from the community's. The first obvious response to this would be that attaining that

data would not be feasible. It would require direct survey of the teams involved (which for our sake is forty). The only alternative, a very simplistic one, to this is to try to attribute the race of each individual on the teams based on the way they look and their name. We may see for example that the members of Jackie Robinson West are all African American, but it becomes much less simple when things are less obvious. The only reasonably scientific way to measure then becomes extrapolation based on census data, which I have implemented. Furthermore, measuring the league's success rather than the individual team is not detrimental because in terms of resources, the individual team is just an extension of the league from which they come.

The most revealing data comes from the temporal comparison. The first comparison, in which was measured the top two teams and how they ranked in median income for their respective year reinforces the idea that the lack of money is a barrier instead of excessive money being a causal factor for winning. There is no strong correlation between being the richest team and winning: as mentioned it only happened twice that a team in the top two was ranked first in income and one of those times, it was relatively moderate. However, the fact that no team that was ranked fifth or lower in terms of median income ever reached the American Championship, is quite telling. One interpretation of this fact is that there are a number of factors that contribute to a team's ability to succeed in a general sense, including reaching the Little League World Series, such as innate skill of the players and coaches. However, there is something extra required, an additional push that can only be achieved with a certain level of economic privilege.

Explaining these trends requires contextualizing them at the crossroads of class, race, and community. One possible avenue harkens back to the point of parental attitudes toward youth sports in the context of social stratification. Geoffrey Watson conducted a study looking at attitudes of the parents of youth baseball players from families that were both middle- and working-class through three different interpretations: interactionist, psycho-social, and spontaneous involvement. He approached Little League baseball as a means of socialization and a game in itself, hypothesizing “that middle class parents would evaluate the attraction of the game as an end in itself, while working class parents would evaluate the attraction as a means toward the attainment of community integration,” (Watson). Should this be true, it would indicate the middle-class families and players would approach the game as a game: something to be won. Those of that particular socio-economic status would be able to treat Little League baseball more seriously. Working-class families and players would be more inclined to accept absolute elitism. Success may come, but it is not the foremost goal. What Watson determined from his study was

that both classes evaluate the attraction of Little League as a means toward the attainment of valued goals: for middle class parents, as training in cooperation and adaptation to middle class values; for working class parents as training in learning to respond to authority and as a means toward attaining social integration. (Watson)

It may very well be that this difference in approaches can contribute—as a direct result of social location—to a team's potential to win.

It is important to acknowledge that this explanation thus extends beyond the idea that all players want to win equally and are only limited by their material and immaterial resources. Instead there may be intrinsic (as far as class is concerned) attitudes to a player of a given social class that affects how or why he plays the game.

In general, middle-class children and by extension the leagues and team that they inhabit have a host of advantages over working-class or poor players. One main form that this takes is through sociologist Annette Lareau calls concerted cultivation. As she says, "In this historical moment, middle-class parents tend to adopt a cultural logic of child rearing that stresses the concerted cultivation of children. Working-class and poor parents, by contrast, tend to undertake the accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau 3). This is an effort by parents to bring out all the talents of their children through a dedication to making them engage in a number of activities. In the context of Little League, this means first that these players start earlier, and by the time they reach 11 and 12 years old, are old-hands at the game. It also means that they have engrained in them a certain degree of competitiveness, knowing (at least subconsciously) that they are doing this all for a reason.

The ability for parents to engage in concerted cultivation emerges, as has been implied, in large part to their social-economic status. These efforts are hugely time-consuming for the child. "Organized activities, established and controlled by mothers and fathers, dominate the lives of middle-class children." (Lareau 1-2). But more limiting, there is an enormous time dedication required of the parent: "Children's activities create substantial work for their parents. Parents fill out enrollment forms, write

checks, call to arrange car pools, wash uniforms, drive children to events, and make refreshments” (Lareau 47).

Thus, we can see some examples of how communities that are at a disadvantage because of their social status are likewise at a disadvantage when it comes to athletic competition. These factors may not be solely influential in the end result (and there indeed examples that some teams overcome social barriers such as race) but they indeed play a role. In chapter five, I will explore some of the practical implications of these teams success on the lives of the players.

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## **Chapter 4: Case Studies**

The goal of this chapter is to take a closer look at the relationship of sport and community as embodied in the cases of American Little League World Series teams. I will once again be employing interpretive sociology as well as the paradigm of culture and power. The teams that I have chosen to study are 2010's Waipio Little League in Hawaii, 2014's Jackie Robinson West Little League in Illinois, 2014's Cumberland American Little League in Rhode Island, and 2014's Pearland East Little League in Texas. These teams represent a fairly diverse geographic, racial, economic, and cultural melange. Some of the topics which I will endeavor to explore include how the community supports the league and team (both economically and more abstractly), what the coaches' backgrounds are and what role they play in shaping the team, the role that Little League plays as an extra-curricular activity in the community, and what pride the community takes in the team. The majority of the information that I have ascertained about these teams is from local press outlets, with supplemental information coming from each team's website.

### **Waipio Little League**

Waipio Little League is located in the community of Waipio in Honolulu, Hawaii. As of the 2010 census (in its zip code) only 17.6 percent of citizens identified as White. The two other ethnic categories which made up the majority of the area were Asian (46.6 percent) and two or more races (27.5 percent). Based on median income compared to

the rest of the state, Waipio is a fairly affluent area in which households bring in \$92,389, almost \$25,000 more than the state average.

### *Coaching*

Waipio's head coach for their 2010 and 2008 runs was Bryan Yoshii. He is employed as an information technology vice president at a local Kaiser Permanente Hospital. In an interview with the *Honolulu Star Advertiser*, Yoshii listed two main motivations for coaching. The first was “give back to the community” after receiving superlative coaching in his youth. The other, which he listed as more important, was that he “wanted to build a relationship with [his] sons.” (Staradvertiser.com). He also discussed the importance of having strong assistant coaches, Jason Heleski and Kiha Akau.

### *Youth Baseball Culture/Pride*

When the team arrived back home in Waipio they were welcomed incredibly strongly by the community, as they were “greeted with an airport homecoming celebration, mobbed at a Labor Day autograph session in Waikiki, and cheered as they rode a vintage fire engine in the city-sponsored Parade of Champions”

([http://www.staradvertiser.com/columnists/20100917\\_Brian\\_Yoshii.html?id=103115459](http://www.staradvertiser.com/columnists/20100917_Brian_Yoshii.html?id=103115459))

The team also received a large contribution of money that was given to parents in order to offset travel costs that they experienced along the way to Williamsport. The First Hawaiian Bank created a fund which attracted approximately \$65,000 and



Governor Linda Lingle created a similar fund which garnered \$28,000 for a total of \$93,000. ([www.silive.com](http://www.silive.com)).

### *Administration and Sponsorship*

Waipio Little League has a reasonably large Board of Directors with adults in sixteen different positions. They include standard positions such as president, treasurer, secretary, coordinators for each division, and field maintenance. In terms of sponsorship, Waipio's website only lists a single organization, Hawaii Self-Storage, which dominates the page when seeking information on the subject.

### **Jackie Robinson West Little League**

Jackie Robinson West Little League is located in the south side of Chicago, Illinois. In its zip code, the population of white citizens is a meager 22.7%; black citizens comprise 74.6% of the area. Its median income sits approximately \$5,000 above that of the state average, but as indicated, is still significantly less than Waipio.

### *Coaching*

Jackie Robinson West was coached by Darold Butler, a locomotive engineer, with seven years of coaching experience ([Chicagotribune.com](http://Chicagotribune.com)). Like Yoshii, Butler began coaching as a dad and not specifically as a coach. ([Daroldbutlerbaseball.com](http://Daroldbutlerbaseball.com)).

### *Youth Baseball Culture/Pride*

The popularity of the Jackie Robinson West Little League and their success indicated a strong community connection, which is only getting stronger. Coach Butler indicates a number of ways that it is improving, including the fact that the city would give \$6.5 million to help renovate fields. When the players returned home, they were met, like other teams, by a parade. Impressive about this particular parade was that it was sanctioned by such a large city as Chicago. Mayor Rahm Emanuel said in a press release that “The excitement surrounding these remarkable young people has been palpable in every neighborhood of Chicago, and their spirit, positive attitude and success on the field illustrate why they are the pride of the City,” (Cityofchicago.com)

#### *Administration and Sponsorship*

Jackie Robinson West's website does not contain any information on who comprises the Board of Directors, information which was available for the three other teams. This may be due to the controversy surrounding the loss of the championship title, and the desire to protect the names of those involved. Their sponsorship section contains eleven different sponsors, which includes both individuals and local companies. They are also the only team with an option to donate located directly on their home page. Additionally, they have link to sell apparel with league logos, perhaps taking advantage of their recent popularity, from their Little League World Series appearance.

## **Cumberland American Little League**

Cumberland Little League is located in Northern Rhode Island and has been in existence for sixty-two years. The area is 92.8% white, with the largest minority group being Hispanic at 4.5%. It has a median income of \$72,416, about \$15,000 more than the state average.

### *Coaching*

Cumberland American Little League in 2014 was coached by David Belisle, who also took the team to the Little League World Series in 2011. He had a son on the team in 2014, as he did in 2011. He is most well known for his supportive speech to Cumberland's players following the team's elimination, which became viral. (Littleleague.org).

### *Youth Baseball Culture/Pride*

Some of the pride evident by the people of New England is actually evident in the reaction of Coach Belisle. In an excerpt from his speech he says, "You're going to take that for the rest of your life for what you provided for a town, you had the whole place jumping right? You had the whole state jumping. You had New England jumping!" ([www.wpri.com](http://www.wpri.com)). In this quote, the most indicative part is that he explicitly mentions the geographic locale. A member of that community echoed these words of pride. "Words can't express how proud of them we are. They represented us so well," said Cumberland resident Bruce Stanford. "Always came from behind, always fought hard,

never gave up. We can't be any more proud of these boys, they represented Cumberland so well." (Wpri.com). Additionally, a local outlet reported that

"Monday was the third time during the Little League World Series that the recreation department opened the park for a watch party... As the first pitch was thrown on Monday night, the town of Cumberland was on their feet cheering on their home team at Diamond Hill Park. Families, friends, and fans all joined together to watch the big game on a massive screen set up on the field. ([Wpri.com](http://Wpri.com))

### *Administration and Sponsorship*

Cumberland has nineteen people on their board of directors, which are organized into three subdivisions: executive board, commissioners, and directors. The executive is comprised of traditional positions such as president and secretary, commissioners all head up a certain division of baseball or softball, and the directors are in charge of such things as equipment and concessions. The league currently has fifteen sponsors and allows them the opportunity for signs at fields and/or direct team sponsorship.

### **Pearland East Little League**

Pearland East Little League is located in Southeastern Texas, near Houston. The area is only 54.6% white, but has a high median income of \$94,103, the highest in its year.

### *Coaching*

Pearland East was coached by Don Smith. Smith had extensive experience coaching at this level as he led a team four years prior to the American championship game. Like other coaches so far, he also has a son on the team. ([www.pennlive.com](http://www.pennlive.com))

### *Youth Baseball Culture/Pride*

Among the tangible ways that the community showed their support during and after the Little League World Series was invite the team as guests of honor at various events including the opening of the Pearland area's first hospital.

([www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com)). Perhaps more important was the fact that the team parents received over \$85,000 dollars to support travel costs, an amount similar to that raised by Waipio's supporters. ([www.chron.com](http://www.chron.com))

### *Administration and Sponsorship*

Pearland has a substantial twenty-seven people on their board of directors. Besides the executive positions, each division has a director; the league also has three maintenance directors, and certain positions which the other leagues with information on their Board did not have, including Purchasing Director and Information Director. Sponsorship appears to be very prevalent. Sponsors have the options of a banner in the outfield for three hundred dollars, their name on a team's jerseys for five hundred and sponsorship of a field for one thousand and fifty. Though there is no information on how much the league makes in sponsorship monies, pictures on the website show the

outfield wall of a field covered in banners, suggesting active participation.

### **Major Trends in Successful Youth Sports Community**

There were a few major trends that I examined through the local media coverage of these teams. These included the fact that many of the coaches were often motivated by factors other than winning. The exception to this is of course the case of Jackie Robinson West and their manipulation of the boundaries for the sole purpose of winning. The rest of the coaches, however, had more benevolent (and ethical) intentions. Another general aspect of these communities was the enthusiasm that they displayed for their local team. Though the concept of community pride may seem abstract, there are definite ways in which it manifests itself.

Looking at coaches of these winning teams, we can see foremost that they tend to be both males and fathers with a son on the team. In some cases, as in Waipio's Brian Yoshii and Pearland's Don Smith, they even coached multiple Little League World Series teams with different sons. In Darold Butler's case, he had joined as a coach solely because of his son, not because he felt he was a qualified coach and wanted to be part of a winning team. Likewise, Yoshii said that part of why he coached was to be with his son. This idea that elite coaches are motivated by a desire to be involved in their sons lives' goes against the conception that they are necessarily attracted to the best teams to begin with. This seems to suggest a more happenstance nature to how a team winds up with the kind of talented coach needed to reach the Little League World

Series. This is reinforced by the fact that coaches are (except obviously, in the case of Jackie Robinson West, an anomaly) are coming from the same boundaries that the players are coming from. In other words, it is not some coaching talent pool that is attracted to wherever the player talent is, it is a team utilizing whatever coaching talent is in the area.

It is also important to recall that this trend of fatherly involvement is most likely the result of class factors (middle-class socialization) and societal norms of masculinity. That all the cases of success match up with these expectations suggests that these fathers are acting (and succeeding) in securing their respective sons and teams into the middle-class, in ways other than a sheer display of income. Coaching these teams into high-level competition may thus be motivated intrinsically by a desire to enter or reinforce a high class standing.

Another factor that plays in role a coaching motivation is a sense of wanting to contribute or give back to the community. This trend in coaching seems to indicate that one of the factors for a successful team is a coach who is not necessarily the best tactician or a former player (though this may help) but someone who cares on an emotional level about what he is doing. This again reinforces the idea that teams are successful solely because of their economic resources, but require the communal factor of a dedicated, emotionally involved coach.

The pride common among these teams' communities is sometimes vaguely defined, but other times took the form of monetary support. Take Waipio's team: the community (and additional supporters from across the country conceivably) showed

support for families by crowd-funding money in order to facilitate their travel plans. As I've indicated, the costs can often make it incredibly difficult for families to travel to Williamsport in order to watch their child compete. The community responded with a resounding sum of money. In the case of Jackie Robinson West, the city acknowledged the team's success as well as the impact that baseball had on the community allocated money for fields.

There were also non-monetary instances of support that showed a connection between the teams and the community. As mentioned there are often visual displays of pride such as parades or large gatherings at the airport to greet the team when they arrive home.

One reasonable question to consider is whether much of the support from the community is causal or correlational. It may appear that these communities only rally around their team when they win, not before. However, I contend that, while community support is most visible when it takes the form of money or large-scale support, there is something intrinsic about the nature of these communities that in part enables a team to succeed. This is especially true of coaching, but indeed also true of a community that is willing to stand behind its team.

### **The Phenomenon of Sport and Community**

Sports, even youth sports, as we have seen, have the potential to have distinct effects on the communities in which they are from. David Nathan, in *Rooting for the*



*Home Team*, says that “In some instances, sports appear to be (or are constructed as) a kind of social glue that holds together heterogenous and contiguous communities” (Nathan 2). But why is this the case? Nathan contends firstly that sports “provide... people and communities with common reference points and can foster solidarity and the creation of social identities, things that many people need and cherish,” (Nathan 2). Next, he says that “Rooting for local athletes and home teams often symbolizes a community’s preferred understanding of itself, and... doing so is an expression of connectedness. It’s an expression of public pride and pressure, a source of group and personal identity” (Nathan 2). This reinforces the idea that all the Little League teams that we have examined in closer detail come from communities with a sense of self, defining features that they believe represent them. They even use words like “represent” to describe what the team does when it goes out and plays in this high level tournament; they are a representation, a sample of a community’s metaphoric grit and hustle, win or lose: “Clearly sport is a place where community and identity come together. Sports are a way that disparate communities define, understand, and represent themselves to themselves and others” (Nathan 7).

One of the striking things about this phenomenon is how it is intrinsically tied to place and identity. We saw this in the way that coaches would explicitly mention their communities when interviewed. They talked about ways in which they were connected with the people around them and the area that they lived. Coach Yoshii listed it as part of his motivation for coaching, while Coach Belisle talked about the way in which the team had New England excited. They were concerned with the sense of place and the

relationship they and their respective teams had with where they came from and represented. It is important to note that this demonstrates that the sense of relation between community and team is not one directional. In other words, it is not just a community that throws a parade for a team when they get home. There is a mutual relationship: the teams and coaches actively reinforce the relationship in the way they act, and as we have witnessed, in what they say.

Nathan also describes through the essays he included in his collection, the way that a community comes to rally around a figure or team. One piece describes the way that Lowell, Massachusetts and surrounding areas came to support Micky Ward, about whom was made the famous film, *The Fighter*: “The cult of Micky Ward, rooted in the Boston area, is one of many local or regional cults that spring up around a sports figure understood to embody virtues especially tied to a place” (207). The author also discusses how these communities are portrayed in the media. To most in America when they witness media surrounding an area like Lowell—or for our sake, let us say, the South Side of Chicago—they are presented as “strange and ancient places, like Jerusalem or the cities of the Silk Road” (Nathan 214). Like those in Lowell become tied to their idol of Ward, many Little League communities become to their local youth baseball heroes.

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## Chapter 5: Concluding and Moving Forward

Given our goal to determine how factors like race, class, and—as an extension of those two—community affect the opportunity for youth athletic success in the Little League World Series, it is crucial to look at why we are doing this. In concluding this work, I will examine a few of the reasons why it is important to have these conversations over athletic opportunity and success, in addition to what action is and should be taken in order to ensure more equity in Little League baseball and youth sports in general.

### **What did we find and what does it mean?**

There are a few major takeaways from the demographic and community studies that I've conducted herein. In the case of the former they are an interpretation of statistical research, and the contextual literature which primarily considers the affect of class on opportunity. In the latter, we can interpret how community support and reaction influence or are influenced by a team's winning.

The first major finding that the data suggests is that socio-economic resources, while not the ultimate causal force in contributing to success in the Little League World Series, still act as a barrier to less affluent teams. In ranking the teams each year by median income, we saw that it was not necessarily the most well-off team that won, but that the less-well off teams were never the winners. Additionally, the nearly three quarters of the teams that qualified for the Little League World Series were above the

state average for median income.

Race provided more surprising results as far as the whiteness of the teams was concerned. While the communities of the teams were indeed quite white (as one would expect given the overall demographics of the United States), in about half the cases, the communities that the teams came from were less white than the state average, one metric that I used to provide context. While this result does deviate from my expected result, there is still much evident racism contained in the sporting world, even if it isn't always blatantly evident. Income does not always tell the whole story. For example, when Gautlier and Zenou posited about the likelihood of individuals owning cars, they specified that it was associated with African-American workers, not with low-income workers. Ultimately, however, the comparative numbers in chapter three do not seem to indicate as large a discrepancy as we would assume. Inequality in youth sports concerned specifically with race would be an area of study that would benefit highly from further research.

In terms of community, we found the effects of success on community pride and related to how localities and communities become enamored with a team in their geographic area. In all cases of teams making it to the Little League World Series that we examined, communities supported the team not just through more abstract support (e.g. showing "pride") but through monetary support as well. This ranged from subsidizing travel costs for parents and supporters, to the city providing more funding for facilities.

Also we found that as regards coaching, motivation to coach is often not

motivated necessarily by a desire to win at the highest level, but by a desire to contribute to the community and to be a stronger part of their sons' lives. From this, we concluded that those who coach the best teams are generally not attracted from other areas and move to a district, but are drawn to a team because of familial bonds. However, it is also worth noting that on another level, fathers may also be motivated by a desire to socialize their children with middle-class values, or follow along with prescribed norms of masculinity associated with involvement in or coaching of youth sports.

### **Why is Winning Important?**

During this work, we have indeed examined *how* certain factors translate into opportunity and success for Little League players. We saw a primary barrier being income and determined that while race itself was not one of the factors determining success, there is in fact an overall lack of diversity in the elite Little League World. We also saw how strong community support was correlated with success. But why does it matter if a team actually ends up winning? The vast majority of players who may be on any given Little League World Series are not going to end up playing professional baseball. However, winning is important for what it represents: success and advancement within society, given a particular set of circumstances.

But first, let us examine the practical implications of belonging to a successful team. In returning to Lareau's concept of concerted cultivation, she claims that the

different approaches “lead to the *transmission of differential advantages* to children” (Lareau 5). Similarly, she points out that “Many studies have demonstrated that parents' social structures location has profound implications for their children's life chances” (Lareau 29). As Lareau discusses, the attitudes that leads to these different approaches is very much determined (or at least influenced) by socio-economic status. In relation to winning teams, this is relevant because those teams are embodiments of those differential advantages.

A successful baseball program is indicative of an organized experience that children can benefit from. For example, “Organized sports... with their mandatory tryouts and public games, can help prepare participants for performance-based assessment at school” (Lareau 61). Additionally, “Although it is less obvious to both parents and children, skill acquired in organized activities will continue to be useful when teenagers or young adults.” (Lareau 62). While one interpretation of her conclusion may be that there is a strict binary between a child participating in organized sports or not, I contend that actually degrees of success make a difference. Lareau examines the idea of “public games,” and how this may benefit a child's ability to be self-confident.

The case of Jackie Robinson West can indeed show us in practical terms why winning is important. Firstly, it resulted in more community support, through both funding and awareness. It rallied the community, resulting in pride in the area. That administrators were willing to risk the ramifications of cheating suggests that they were aware of the benefits of winning, not just for winning's sake. The players, regardless of scandal, had their social standing promoted through their success, concertizing



Lareau's theories. Though minorities, their social mobility has increased with as their opportunities (an extreme example being meeting the president) grew.

### **Are Youth Sports Meritocratic?**

One question that arises in discussions of sport equity, as far as success is concerned is whether youth sports, specifically Little League Baseball, are meritocratic; that is to say whether or not the potential to win is affected by factors other than natural skill. The response that my findings indicate is a resounding “things are not that simple.” There is a definite advantage to having a team where the players are simply the best. Having a gifted, dominant pitcher makes the journey to the Little League World Series championship much easier. But it is not as simple as all communities and their team have the same opportunity to have one of the precocious players. As Lareau indicates, middle-class families tend to foster their children by putting them in organized sports, meaning that the chance of a child emerging as a star is much more likely in one of the middle or upper class communities than a poor or working class community where their talents would otherwise go unrecognized.

There are also, of course, the advantages that richer communities have in terms of developing talent. The access to private coaching, better equipment, and even simply the ability to be exposed to other good players, plays a large role in making good players the best. As we've concluded, a higher socio-economic status is not the sole determinant but it is a definite facilitator. Thus Little League baseball is only a

meritocracy insofar as the best will win; being the best however is subject to circumstance.

### **Working toward Little League Equality**

As Beamish indicated, there is empirical evidence that attempted governmental intervention in promoting amateur sports equality is insufficient. With this precedent, it comes down to the individual sports organizations to do so. With this said, Little League has at least, in part, recognized some of the inequalities that exist within their organization and is working toward bridging the gap between teams' opportunities. They have done this primarily through what they call the "Urban Initiative," which started in 1999 ([www.littleleague.org](http://www.littleleague.org)). They have now expanded the reach of the program to more than 200 leagues, and affected about 52,000 players in 2014. The program functions by "provid[ing] assistance packages for eligible leagues that aid the local volunteer group with equipment acquisition, capital improvement cash grants, field development and renovation, access to Little League Baseball and Softball Education and Training programs, advocacy, and networking." It has a long list of well-known benefactors including Major League Baseball, Honda, nine different major league teams, and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. The system besides giving funding, allows for teams to travel to different "jamborees" across the country, tournaments meant specifically for Urban Initiative teams.

At least initially, the success of Jackie Robinson West served as an indication

that teams from working class, urban communities were being positively affected by movements like the Little League Urban Initiative. A headline for the *Washington Post* proclaimed that “Chicago’s journey to the U.S. Little League World Series final could be good sign for baseball’s inner-city initiatives” (WashingtonPost.com). The controversy surrounding their practices having players from outside the established boundaries, however, casts a shadow on this assertion (www.espn.com). While it is feasible that the team may still have done at least reasonably well had they only had players from within their boundaries, it is almost certain that they would not have done nearly as well. Thus, we are confronted with the fact that besides Jackie Robinson West, no other Urban Initiative team has reached the same level. How do we fix this balance? I believe the answer lies simply in a continuation of the program, with more funding and more leagues affected. For example, the more jamborees that are held, the more teams will be exposed to higher level tournament play. The more teams overall which are receiving training, practice, and resources, the more likely that more will rise to the prominence of Jackie Robinson West, except legally.

A program similar to Little League's Urban Initiative is Major League Baseball's Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI). RBI was started in Los Angeles in 1989 with meager results but has since grown dramatically, now reaching over 200,000 children in 200 cities. It receives much of its funding Major League Baseball and individual teams, who have given over \$30 million since it began.

How RBI differs from the Urban Initiative is that while the latter focuses exclusively on competition, the former also pinpoints life outside of baseball. Some the

areas that the program focuses on include drug use, alcohol abuse, and staying in school (attendance in class being requisite for being on an RBI team). In many ways, RBI is about socializing youth from an urban environment with middle-class values. This is functionally the same as what parents strive to do through their placement of children in youth sports and what high level competition does.

Little League Baseball is on the right track, and it must stay the course to work toward equality of opportunity, and equality of success. One indicator of this will be when there is no distinguishable pattern of association between income level and race level with success, which is empirically examinable through the methods contained in this work. Only then, will there be any signal that this youth sports organization is reaching a level playing field.

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