

## THE CHALLENGES OF AMERICAN LEGION BASEBALL PAST AND PRESENT

American Legion Baseball began in 1926, like any new idea it started slowly that first year. The first challenge that the fledgling program had to overcome was that no one had ever tried to put together a volunteer national baseball program before. That first year 15 states organized, local teams were organized and sponsored, schedules put together and tournaments were held.

In 1927 The American Legion held its convention in Paris, France. Obviously, it was very expensive and there was no money for a Tournament to name a winner. The future of American Legion Baseball looked grim. In 1928 Americanism Director Dan Sowers was determined to raise \$50,000.00 to support the tournament. This is when Major League Baseball began to support Legion Baseball, this program still supplies Major League Baseball today with many quality ball players.

Although it was looking pretty good for American Legion Baseball there were still major hurdles to overcome through the years. In 1933 the great depression created very tough financial times for the program. MLB was forced to stop sponsoring American Legion Baseball and that left Mr. Sowers again to "hit the road" to look for money to hold the tournament. He found it in a most unlikely group, newspaper publishers across the country came to the rescue. Mr. Sower's determination paid off and is a testament to his dedication and American Legion Baseball's success locally and nationally. There were other challenges that presented themselves even a World War. American Legion Baseball persevered through all these trials and continued to grow and prosper despite these roadblocks that presented themselves. I imagine that baseball being the "national pastime" and the good that it has done for many youths kept the program moving forward.

In research of this article I came across an article that was written in July of last year it was titled "American Legion used to own summer Baseball It has lost a quarter of their teams in ten years" The article showed a map of the United States which was color coded by state to show where those losses were taking place. It stated that the source was the American Legion. The statement is probably true, but the article goes on to explain why The American Legion Baseball is in such a decline. The article states that ball players are joining Elite or Travel teams to gain better exposure to College and Major League Baseball scouts. New Jersey was used as an example with the highest loss of American Legion Baseball teams. The other reason is that the membership in The American Legion is way down.

These may be contributing factors, but this is a community-based program that has very little to do with decline of National membership in The American Legion. Obviously, I disagree with this assessment, it is not that simple, and I believe there are far more reasons for this decline than the two that is stated in the article mentioned.

I have been in the Recreation field for 40 years I can tell you that today there are far more reasons why there is a decline in all team sports across this country.

Let's start with the amount of eligible players that are available today. School enrollments have been predicted to have smaller and smaller enrollments for years now, as a matter of fact New Jersey school enrollment numbers for the last ten years is 21.5 % lower today than it was ten years ago. In 2004 until this past year the high school graduating class in my town of 10,000 have been cut to less than half of what it once was in 2004. Maine's school enrollment numbers show a similar decline at almost 19%. This leads me to believe that there are a lot less players to fill those rosters than there once was. I agree that Elite and Travel teams are competing to fill the same rosters as American Legion Baseball but what about all those other recreational opportunities that are out there to compete with summer baseball? Lacrosse, Soccer, basketball, football, tennis, golf, track etc. all have summer programs that compete with, you guessed it summer baseball. What about all the club sports for those serious sports participants that make a choice to play one sport year-round these are people that make a commitment to one sport or the other. We can't forget about electronic and technological advancements with games or computers which even gives that young man even more choices for their recreational time.

In today's society the average teen needs to make money. Maybe to help with college, pay monthly phone bills, cars, insurance well, you get the idea. This means a job and that puts even more constraints on time that might make a young man think twice about that commitment to play ball four games a week.

In conclusion the decline in American Legion Baseball is due to several reasons and these are many and varied depending on the players priorities. First is teens that are available to play, there just aren't as many as there once was and next we have all of the constraints on time in this day and age. I will make a statement that before American Legion Baseball becomes insolvent there will be a lot of other leagues that will be extinct before them. It has provided more support to the MLB than any other League and provided more development to the players and let's not forget what it does for the community and the Post. American Legion Baseball may not be as large as it once was, but I will bet that it is functioning well into the future. American Legion Baseball will continue to furnish many Major Leaguers as long as there is Legion Ball and continue to build character in those players for a very longtime.

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