

Ex-Major League Pitcher Criticizes Little League

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BY PATRICIA McCORMACK, NEW YORK (UPI)

When a little league game heats up, mothers scream, fathers grow purple, the family dog strains at his leash and yelps.

Little brothers of the stars, confined to the spectator section, cry they “wanna play, too.”

And down on the field, sweaty in their suits, the pint-sized players give it all they have – lest the family be ashamed of their performance.

This great American outdoor game, baseball, is open to tykes on an organized basis when they reach the great big age of seven. That’s the magic age for eligibility for a little league farm team.

While the kids are taking swipes at the ball with their bats and the normally serene parents toss temper tantrums over the umpire, psychologists would like to call little league out.

Donald F. Schwertley, assistant principal of Thomas Jefferson High School, Council Bluffs, Iowa, makes that point in a report in today’s education journal of the National Education Association.

He agrees with psychologists who say little league creates too much pressure and tension for participating youngsters.

JAY CRITICISED PROGRAM

“Former Major League Pitcher Joey Jay, the first little league graduate to reach the major leagues, says he feels the program is too ambitious, with far too much parental activity and supervision,” Schwertley said.

What Jay said about little league goes like this:

“I am certainly not in sympathy with the little league program the way it has developed. Perhaps it was not intended to be this way but it is not serving the purposes it claims to be and I don’t think it is helping baseball.”

Jay is particularly critical of the parents’ role in the program.

“Others agree,” Schwertley said. “It is frightening to watch a normally serene parent transformed into a raging wild man while watching his 10 year old son compete in a little league game.

“The amazing thing is that this same parent seems to be a wholesome, if somewhat vocal fan when cheering his 16 year old on the local high school team.

“What causes this transformation? The answer seems to be in the organization, supervision and purpose of the little league program. While educators question organized inter-school competition below the seventh grade the little league program has farm teams for the first grader.

STUDENTS FIRST

“And even though school coaches and physical education instructors are often overly ambitious with their programs, they are educators first and coaches second. Also, their programs are under the watchful eye of professional supervisors...who are careful to see that intra-school athletics remain a part of the total education program.

“Consequently, while children in a school athletic program may not seem aware of it, they are usually conscious of the fact that they are students first and athletes second.”

Swertley suggests that little league organizers examine the results of the program in the light of the expressed purpose.

“They need only to observe the actions of the spectator parent to realize that little league activities are not developing healthy values,” he said.

In a report on “Desirable Athletic Competition for Children of Elementary School Age,” the American Academy of Pediatrics and other groups said “Examples of appropriate sports for children of elementary school age are archery, boating, bowling, golf, skating, swimming, tennis and track.” Notice? No Little league-or baseball of any kind.