Baseball: America’s PAST Time?

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Abstract
Baseball has always been known as America's game and has been embedded into our society for decades. Unfortunately we have seen a swing that has led America's youth to abandon the game that has been cherished by so many before them. Youth athletes have been switching to sports that they are finding to be exciting, something that has been missing from the sport of baseball in the United States for some time now. This paper looks to address the question: what factors contribute to youth baseball players leaving/quititng the sport? From the research I have conducted I have found that kids are switching to faster paced sports such as lacrosse, soccer and even action sports such as in line skating. It has also been discovered that competition from these sports as well as basketball and hockey summer leagues have taken away from participation number in the sport of baseball as well. Motivations of youth athletes in today's era also include fast paced and physical sports (such as lacrosse and soccer), having fun in the sports that they are participating in, parent influence and finally achievement in sports for elite athletes. I expect my research to lead me to the conclusion that kids are leaving the game of baseball because they find it boring. They are opting for activities that are going to excite them and for activities that their friends are participating in. Unfortunately, if this trend continues we can officially say goodbye to referring to baseball as Americas Pastime and can just start calling it another sport.
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Introduction

Baseball has always been known as America’s game. For many years children have flocked to their local baseball diamonds, abandoned lots or even the streets to play the game until the streetlights came on and they couldn’t see the red laces on the ball anymore. Every Saturday and Sunday morning cars would drive past their local little league ballparks and see children partaking in an organized version of the game and families in the bleachers cheering on their loved ones, well into the late afternoon. The birthday of America, the Fourth of July goes hand and hand with baseball, whether it is high-schoolers participating in an American Legion game, the neighborhood kids getting a pickup game together, families having a cookout and a softball game, all the way up to the pros playing all throughout the day, baseball was a symbol of this country. Unfortunately, we cannot say that baseball IS a symbol of this country anymore; today the more appropriate phrase would be that it WAS a symbol of this country. There aren’t as many kids playing ball in the street or organizing pickup games with their friends (Ogden, 2002). There also aren’t as many games going on at the local little league level; in fact there has been such a decline in youth baseball that there just aren’t as many little league organizations around as there used to be (Sports Business Research, 2011). Larry Felser of the Buffalo News even went as far as to say that youths in America view baseball with the same tolerance they have for the music of Irving Berlin (Felser, 1995). Baseball is hanging on to prominence with an aging fan base while the countries youth are fixated on other sports, proving the “national pastime” is in trouble (Hruby, 1999).

Due to all of these circumstances my research begs the question: What factors contribute to youth baseball players leaving/quitting the sport? My research will not only look to answer this question but it will also discover the motivations that affect youth’s decisions to participate
in youth sport. Years ago baseball was something that everyone would participate in, now it seems as though it is hard to find anyone interested in participating.

**Literature Review**

**Youth Motivations for Sport**

One of the great motivators for participation in youth sport is peer influence (Joesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011). At a young age kids want to participate in something that his or her friends play, and the opposite can also be true, no kid wants to play a sport that none of their friends participate in. A group of researchers, Joesaar, Hagger, and Hein performed a study that’s purpose was to test a motivational model in sport that measured perceived peer motivational climate from achievement goal theory. The results of this study underlined the importance of peer influence on children, and pinpointed peer influence as a major reason as to why children start, continue, and quit youth sports (Joesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011). Kids are always looking to fit in and find satisfaction and acceptance from their peers. If all of the boys in a grade start to play lacrosse it is very unlikely that one or two of those kids are going to go against the group and continue to play the game of baseball. This study suggests that one key to getting kids back involved with the game of baseball is to get a big group back involved with the sport and try to swing participation back that way.

Another study was done on a group of youth athletes who excelled in the sport of baseball by researchers Defrancesco, Pugh, and Wolff. The study tested 12 volunteer 11 year old male baseball players who were on a team that qualified for an all-star international baseball tournament. The study examined four research questions: Why do elite youth athletes play baseball? What do elite youth baseball athletes perceive as a source of stress in sport? What do
elite youth baseball athletes perceive as attributes of a good baseball player? Finally, what changes would these youth athletes recommend to improve the youth baseball experience (Defrancesco, Pugh, & Wolff, 2000)? The data revealed that the subject’s motives for participating in the sport were fun, socialization and challenging their abilities. The main source of stress reported by the subjects were verbal instructions and criticisms, whether that was by parents, coaches or even teammates, as well as performing poorly in competition. The athletes also recommended changes focused on practice procedures, including making them more exciting (Defrancesco, Pugh, & Wolff, 2000).

A study done by Bollok, Dobay, Kalmar, and Takacs also looked to find both the internal and external motivations of youths for participating in sport. The results of the study found that athletes participate in sports for the competition, contest, victory and beating their own benchmark. Also, to some degree athletes participated in sport because of the importance of healthy living, physical strength and because sport gives them a better appearance. Youth active students also believed that sport performance would lead to better success for them later on in life as well (Bollok, Dolbay, Kalmar, & Takacs, 2011).

Specializing in one sport seems to becoming more and more prominent within youths in today’s day and age. There are a number of motivations that are considered when a youth athlete decides to specialize in one sport. One theory that has been accepted by many people is that in order to achieve elite status in a particular sport, there must be specialization at an early age (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011). Data and case studies suggest that either specialization or sampling between different sports yield elite status in a number of different sports. Although specialization can result in high performance of the athlete, it can also lead to higher attrition as well as adverse mental/physical outcomes. Specialization could be a possible reason as to why
participation in baseball is down. Playing one sport could potentially be taking away a number of athletes from the baseball diamond (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011).

There are both supporters and critics of specializations among youth athletes. Supporters of specialization bring up the advantages of specialization including increased chances for a college scholarship, refined skills in a sport, and a desire to achieve excellence (Hensch, 2006). The critics counter these arguments by stating disadvantages of specialization including athletic burnout, exploitation of young athletes by coaches primarily concerned with winning, and the creation of a professional atmosphere too early for athletes in life (Hensch, 2006). The most important evidence against early sport specialization is that it does not seem to be an essential ingredient for exceptional sport performance as an adult. Involvement in a number of sports is actually more beneficial for developing intrinsic motivation required during later stages of development when training becomes more structured and effortful (Baker & Robertson-Wilson, 2003). Specialization will always be a point of contention among sport researchers. Some will always argue that specialization is essential to future success, while other will argue that participation in a variety of sports is more effective for developing multilateral physical, social and psychological skill (Baker & Robertson-Wilson, 2003). The decision to specialize in sport often does not lie with the athlete themself. Most of the time the youth athletes parents will approach the athletes coach with the question, should my son specialize in this sport (Bodey, Hoover, & Judge, 2013)? Bodey, Hoover and Judge suggest that coaches can potentially have a huge part in whether an athlete specializes. These three gentleman write than when a coach is approached by a parent about specialization it is their job to simply guide the parent and make them aware that specialization does in fact have its place in sport, but also let them know that many factors such as physiological, psychological, social consideration as well as family
disruptions and financial considerations can occur because of specialization. In the end the coach must realize that the answer must come from the parent themselves (Bodey, Hoover, & Judge, 2013).

One of the great motivators of youths participating in sport is and always will be fun; in fact, children often say the primary reason that they play youth sport is to have fun (Holt & Strean, 2001). Researchers Kreisel and Wankel performed a study in 1985 that found that factors that were found to be intrinsic to the sport activity including excitement of sport, personal accomplishment, improving ones skills, testing skills against others, and just actually performing the skills as being most important to athletes (Kreisel & Wankel, 1985). On the other hand the two found that extrinsic factors such as pleasing others, winning rewards, and winning the game consistently related least important (Kreisel & Wankel, 1985).

Boyd and Yin suggested that more elite athletes have found that they are more competent in sport, and those who self-related more task orientation in sport, expressed greater levels of enjoyment than their counterparts did. Sport enjoyment was also associated with number of years of participation as well (Boyd & Yin, 1996). In another interview conducted by researchers Holt and Strean, they found that primarily all groups seemed to associate games (even competition in practice) with being the fun part of sports, while drills in practice were considered boring (Holt & Strean, 2001).

Obviously, there are a lot of different perceptions of what is fun in youth sport, and the results are most likely going to vary from kid to kid, that is where coaches and parents come in to ensure that their kids are enjoying the game. Unfortunately, it can be difficult for adults to actually understand and promote fun for kids, which was shown in a study by Bengoechea,
Strean, and Williams. The results of their study revealed three themes through the eyes of youth baseball coaches: the apparent conflict between fun and skill development, the different meanings of fun, and promoting of fun as a matter of being and doing (Bengoechea, Strean, & Williams, 2004).

Parents can make sport fun for kids is to make sure that sport is for and about the children, and ensure that participation actually be fun and not put pressure on the participants (Baron, Fine, & Sachs, 1999). Of course, this isn’t always easy to do as there are a number of facets to youth sport including awareness of not only of the sport itself, but also the psychological and political factors. This delicate balance suggests that not only do participants actually have to enjoy the sport that they are participating in and in most cases be successful in it, but they also have to enjoy the social aspect and atmosphere of the sport including their teammates and coaches, a hard balance to find for youths (Baron, Fine, Sachs, 1999). Parents have actually said that although they have many joys in watching their kids participate in sport, there are also many challenges including providing support for their children in their respective sports as well as observing the pressures and demands that are put on children that come with participating in youth sport (Fifer & Wiersma, 2007). If parents are growing tired with overly enthused coaches and criticizing teammates they may be inclined to pull their children right out of organized sport, especially if they are not enjoying participating in the sport (Fifer & Wiersma, 2007). In fact, researcher Futterman suggests that parents don’t want their children to play because they don’t want to just watch them standing around waiting inning after inning for their kid to actually get the chance to do something (Futterman, 2011). He also suggests that baseball is too slow and too boring for not only kids but also the parents. When parents drop their kids off at soccer practice they know their kids are going to be running around getting a
good exercise in, but when they drop them off at baseball practice, it is possible that they won’t even come back to the car with a sweat going (Futterman, 2011). Parents will always be a big part of the motivation for kids to play sports, and ultimately the repercussions of them not wanting their kid to continue on participating in a sport could lead to a decline in participation numbers in youth sport, including youth baseball.

**Changing Interests**

A misconception among some is that the decrease in youth baseball participation could be attributed to the lack of funding for little leagues around the country. Little Leagues across the country aren’t worried about not having enough money in order to keep leagues afloat, they’re more worried about gaining enough of an interest and enough ball players to keep leagues from going under. The decline in baseball amongst youths can be attributed to a lack of parent enthusiasm, competition from other baseball leagues, time in front of computers, as well as too many activities as a whole vying for children’s time that seem to have more of a grasp on their interests than the sport of baseball does (Starr, 2005). These other activities include the rise in year-round soccer, tennis, and lacrosse leagues that children have been opting for in the summer as opposed to the more traditional summer option, baseball (Starr, 2005). Leagues all over the country have been facing this problem, including one in Kitchner-Waterloo, where participation in its local little league was down 250 people over the span of just two years. League directors say that the decline is mostly down because of youth soccer whose registration numbers are approaching 9,000 and lacrosse becoming more and more popular as the years go on (Tong, 2002). Waterloo Red Dogs pitcher Andrew Putnam says that he has definitely noticed a decline in the sport and even said that athletes know that they have a better chance of succeeding in another sport. Red Dogs players also participate in hockey, badminton and golf but do not let
their participation in other sport take away from the dedication of baseball making it hard for them to pinpoint why more athletes cannot do the same (Tong, 2002).

Signal Mountain Dixie Youth Baseball, a 50 year-old baseball association is now experiencing dramatic decline is participation like many of the baseball leagues around the United States as well. The President of the league, Lee Dyer attributes this decline to not only the increase in soccer leagues in the summer and how youths seem to be flocking to that sport, but also the trend of parents in Chattanooga having their kids specialize in the sport of soccer at a young age, a trend that Dyer does not necessarily agree with (Woodbery, 2008). Some say that finding a balance between sports is not possible. Mac Helms, president of the East Ridge Soccer Association, noted that competitive soccer teams often require year-round commitments, ruling out the possibility of other sport (Woodbery, 2008). East Little League in Washington experienced a 25-40% drop in participation in just one years’ time. Not only have video games and other sports taken away from participation numbers in this league but there are also five other little leagues operating within the city limits, and just a year prior there were six total in operation but since then one league was shut down (Calderon, 2006). Back when participation numbers were high, these leagues were all able to co-exist with each other and handle the competition, but now that baseball has been put on the back burner for most kids it is going to become harder and harder for all of these leagues to compete with each other and stay afloat. East Little League President Hector Almanza believes that the key to getting participation numbers back up is going to be going out in the community and to schools and recruiting kids to play baseball again (Calderon, 2006). In some areas, particularly in the aging suburbs of major cities such as Philadelphia, the Little League drop off has been steep. Little League Direct Supervisor Jim McDonald suggest that it’s the older kids, the teenagers that really see a drop-off.
When kids get moved from the 60-foot diamond to the 90-foot diamond, kids who are marginal don’t even both to make the jump, and at that time Little League is competing with the mall, computers and other sports (Fitzpatrick, 2001). According to the sporting goods manufacturers study, baseball now ranks behind one time fringe sports such as volleyball and even skateboarding in terms of participation. While there are 10.9 billion ballplayers in the United States, there are 10.8 million in line skaters and 30.3 million golfers. Officials continue to point to part of the problem being lacrosse and soccer competition, where they say that if those two sports were not directly competing with baseball you would not see a decline at all. Youth lacrosse leagues that were virtually nonexistent just a decade ago are now so popular that it is even hard for baseball leagues to find practice locations (Fitzpatrick, 2001). In addition to these possible culprits, Little League officials also point their fingers at Major League Baseball’s image problems, which started with the labor problems and the cancellation of the 1994 World Series (Fitzpatrick, 2001).

Hutton, indicates just how far the sport of baseball has fallen by saying that nearly one million fewer children signed up to play the sport in 2003 than they did in the five years prior to this article being written (Hutton, 2003). This drop in participation has allowed baseball to slip to number four on the list of most popular sports falling behind basketball, soccer, and in line skating, with scootering just trailing baseball. Kids are obviously starting to flock toward the more fast paced sport such as the non-traditional sports like in line skating for more of a thrill and more action (Hutton, 2003).

Not only is the sport of baseball now competing with other sports for youth athlete attention, they are also competing with video and computer games as well (Rittenberg, 2003). A study done by Ferguson and Olson revealed that video game use is becoming more and more
common among adolescents and that it is even considered a social activity now (Ferguson & Olson, 2013). Social play was mainly predicted by motivations such as socialization, fun, and challenge of the video game and as a stress reliever. The finger is mostly pointed at everything from the recession to competition from other sports, experts increasingly are blaming children’s habitual video game playing as a key reason as to why kids are ignoring America’s number one pastime (Mikus, 2010). The better children get at video games and more used to the fast paced action they get, the less likely they’ll give them up to play the real game. Rich Honack a professor at Kellogg School of Management says that people can continue to expect kids to sit in front of a computer and play a video game as opposed to actually going out on the sandlot and physically playing the sport of baseball (Mikus, 2010). Today’s children spend more time glued to the screens than any of their predecessors. Not only do they have televisions and computer games, they have the worst of all time wasters: video games (Shefchik, 2000). An argument can be made that video games are so addicting that manufacturers of these games have internationally yet secretly enslaved a generation of children to a sedentary lifestyle of thumb-jockeying (Shefchik, 2000). According to Shefchik the blame for the ball diamond being empty can be attributed to video games as well (Shefchik, 2000).

**African American Participation**

Specifically there has been a large decline in youth baseball within the African American community. This decline can be attributed to a number of factors including an overall lack of resources to promote the game of baseball within this community. Fields cost too much to build and maintain, there is a shortage of volunteers to coach and organize teams and leagues, and unfortunately there are too fathers present that are willing to pass the game down to their sons (Singleton, 2008). Participation has fallen so far within the African American community that
African Americans actually comprise less than three percent of players at the highest levels of youth baseball and only three percent of NCAA Division I players (Hilt & Ogden, 2003). They also constitute less than five percent of spectators at some Major League parks as well (Hilt & Ogden, 2003).

Many experts believe that a lack of funding and support from athletic departments are the primary threats to African American college baseball. Houston Astros scout JD Elliby believes that college administrators have actually given up on baseball programs. Former New York Mets standout, Mookie Wilson also believes that rekindling the passion for the game, especially within the black community will eventually boost the staggering participation numbers. He also believes that the main key to getting African American youths back involved with the game of baseball is establishing a relationship with the sport (Johnson, 2006). One African American youth who has been playing baseball his whole life said that his decision to drop out of baseball was due to the fact that he thought it was boring, there was no contact and he got very little action at his center field position (Vaughn, 2008). The athlete also believed that he had a better chance to go play the sports basketball or football in college which made him quit baseball in order to train year round for those two sports (Vaughn, 2008). This cultural shift from baseball to basketball and football has been brought about partly through the process of cultural identity. Cultural identity involves the absorption of cultural traits by an individual in the formation of self-identity, suggesting that African American youths are more apt to gravitate to basketball and football rather than baseball because of the cultural premium placed on the former (Hilt & Ogden, 2003).

Milloy actually takes a different look into the reasons as to why baseball is striking out with the black community, and suggests that baseball is a generation to generation game, and
that kids need to be taught the sport at a young age (Milloy, 2012). He also backed up the point made by Singleton in suggesting that there aren’t enough resources poured into the sport of baseball in the African American community in order to let it thrive. Milloy also brought up the point that the Washington Nationals promised to have a baseball camp for inner city children every year since the team arrived in Washington in 2005. Unfortunately, there has still been no progress made to this promise and backs up Milloy’s thinking that not enough time, effort and resources have been used in order to let baseball thrive there (Milloy, 2012).

**Efforts to Improve Participation**

Not only have Little League programs around the country noticed the decline in participation in baseball, Major League Baseball has also noticed this decline and both have decided to team up and try to take action in order to get participation numbers back up. In Brooklyn, NY a partnership between private and public enterprises has teamed up together and raised more than $12.5 million to renovate parks in the Brooklyn Area (Lufrano, 2004). Parks where former pros Joe Torre, Manny Ramirez, and Joe Franco got their start on the diamond have been the focal point for these people making the effort to restore baseball fields for the public. Franco admitted that there was a problem with the participation amongst youths in baseball and said that these types of efforts need to take place more often in order to gets kids back interested in the game he loves (Lufrano, 2004).

The RBI program, a Major League Baseball sponsored program that has been created to give kids the opportunity to learn more and participate in the game of baseball came up with a program in Oakland that gave kids the opportunity to do just that. The program not only gave hundreds of kids in Oakland the opportunity to sharpen their baseball skills, but their academic
skills as well. RBI teamed up with a local area college in Oakland and came up with a program where kids will go through a free six week camp. In the morning of this camp the kids will attend classes at the college and in the afternoon they will be put through a baseball camp, an opportunity that most inner city kids don’t often get offered (Murphy, 2008). Not only has Major League Baseball been doing their part in trying to uplift the game, but big leagues themselves are trying to increase participation as well. Former Major Leaguers Mookie Wilson and Gary Sheffield attended Metropolitan Junior Baseball Leagues All Star Game held in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida in an effort to raise some excitement over the game as well as try to get encourage kids to get back involved with the sport (New York Amsterdam News, 2012).

One little league baseball organization has even began to offer to pay for kids that cannot afford to play the sport in order to get their leagues participation number back up. Bob Foreman, President of the San Pablo Baseball Association is at a loss for answers on how to get kids back involved with the sport. He’s not interested in finding out why kids have stopped participating, he sees soccer continue to grow and he realizes that kids would rather play video games than go outside and play the game of baseball, what he is really searching for is how to get these kids back involved. He stated that money is not an issue within his league; he finds ways to get kids to participate if they cannot afford it, but unfortunately that still has not helped participation numbers in the San Pablo Baseball Association (Treadway, 2008). Obviously there are no easy answers or simple solutions on how to increase participation numbers in leagues such as this one, and all these league officials can hope for is that kids suddenly gain the interest to participate in the sport again.

One success that Little League Baseball has found in the past few years is their coverage of the Little League World Series. Each year in the month of August eight teams from the United
States and eight more teams from across the world come to Williamsport, PA to try and capture the title of the best Little League baseball team in the world. Every game throughout the tournament is either carried on ESPN or ESPN 2 and practically takes precedent over Major League Baseball highlights for the two weeks that the tournament is in play. The Little League World Series has even been referred to as one of corporatized sports greatest spectacle (Choonghoon, Fielding, Laucella, & Woo-Young, 2009). This tournament not only generates mass amount of media from ESPN and all other major sport channels but people from all over the country and the world come to Williamsport to witness this event. Admissions to the games are free and it is said one of the more enjoyable sporting events that a sports fan can attend (Choonghoon, Fielding, Laucella, & Woo-Young, 2009).

**Methodology**

**Research Tradition**

When trying to understand the reasoning for America’s youth shifting away from the game of baseball, the interpretivism approach was the best way to uncover the reasons. I wasn’t looking to find any certain truth or facts, but rather gain some understanding and some insight onto why baseball was becoming such dying bread in the sports world among youth athletes (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2006). Picking a sport to play can be a decision that is based off of the athlete’s emotions and feelings, as well as outside influences, such as what sports the athletes friends are playing. I wasn’t interested in understanding how many athletes switch sports in terms of numerical data, but rather I wanted to gain an understanding as to why youth athletes were leaving the sport of baseball (Gratton & Jones, 2010). In order to get a real answer to this mystery, I needed to really understand youth athletes and get a feel for what they wanted to do with their free time, and what type of interests that they had. This measurement was done using
words and statements (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2006). I also found in my research that each youth athlete is different. I didn’t have one definite truth or answer as to why athletes are switching out of the game of baseball. The reasoning behind an athlete’s choices in sports weren’t going to be the same, and they weren’t going to be able to be measured in numbers, but rather with words and emotions, leaving the interpretive approach as the best way to conduct my research (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

Within my paper, there were some concepts that have significance to my research that needed to be defined within this section. The first concept is sport specialization. Specialization in sport refers to an athlete playing only one sport, and spending all of their time in athletics working on one given sport, as opposed to playing a number of different sports and spreading their athletic talents out evenly (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011). Specialization usually occurs when an athlete believes that they have a good chance to excel in a given sport which may eventually lead to, for example a college scholarship amongst other potential accolades. Specialization was an important factor to my research because this specialization could potentially be leading athletes away from the sport of baseball.

Another concept that needed to be defined within my paper was the concept of “youth motivation in sport”. Motivation in sport for youth athletes simply referred to what is causing athletes to choose the sports in which they are participating. For example, one of the great motivators for participation in youth sport is peer influence (Joesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011). A study performed by Joesaar, Hagger, and Hein underlined the importance of peer influence on children, and established that it is a major reason for youth athletes joining, continuing on in, or
Another motivation for youth athletes to participate in youth sport is simply to have fun (Holt & Strean, 2001). Fun will always be one of the great motivators for youth sports, and if an athlete isn’t having fun playing a sport they most likely aren’t going to participate in the sport (Holt & Strean, 2001). Simply put, motivations in sport are basically the interest of the youth athlete. In terms of my research, youth motivations in sport are extremely important because it seems as though youth motivations have changed in recent years and these motivations for sport no longer match the motivations necessary to have a youth athlete participate in the sport of baseball.

Finally, the concept of organized sport needs to be defined. Organized sport is an athletic activity that is governed by a set of rules and often played competitively. Organized sport is usually a sport for which the participant needs to register. The teams and participants usually have uniforms and have officials present at their games as well. Organized sport differs from pickup sports, in that pickup sports are more spontaneous and based around fun rather than competition. Unorganized sport or pickup games can be played anywhere, even on a field that is not officially authorized for a given sport. Organized sport was important to my research because that is where my participation numbers came from. Participation is not measured in terms of unorganized sport, or how many youth athletes participate in pickup baseball on the street, but rather the number of youth athletes that sign up to play organized baseball. At the same time if more youth athletes started playing and enjoying the game of baseball in unorganized sport, it could potentially lead to these athletes signing up for organized baseball.

There are a number of reasons as to why this research was significant. First of all, this is in fact America’s Pastime. The United States is known around the world for this sport, and not too long ago people would gather around their television and radios every night and watch/listen
to every pitch in every inning with great attention. If we know why youth athletes are starting to get away from playing the sport, maybe there is a way to improve the participation numbers. The first step in fixing a problem is always identifying why the problem is occurring. By discovering the motivations of youth athletes, it is possible that baseball could be slightly altered in a way to try and gear the sport more toward the motivations of today’s youth athletes.

Possibly the most significant reason for this research was to make people aware of the decline of this sport, and that it could potentially happen to any sport. Youths are changing their interest and what they like to do on a daily basis (Starr, 2005). If a sport that was as deeply entrenched into the American culture is capable of taking a nose dive in participation, it should serve as a warning to other sports that it could be just as likely to occur to them as well. Athletic directors and league presidents need to be alert and in tune with youths interests all the time, and they need to be prepared to alter their sports without drastically changing the game or the history of it, but just enough to keep youth athletes interested in their game and ensure that their sport doesn’t have to face the problem that youth baseball is facing today.

Theoretical Framework

There are a number of hypothesis as to why baseball has dropped off in popularity among youth athletes, and throughout my research I found a number of trends as to why this decline in America’s former pastime may have occurred. The decline in youth baseball could potentially be attributed to a lack of parent enthusiasm, competition from other baseball leagues, time in front of computers, as well as too many activities as a whole vying for children’s time that seem to have more of a grasp on their interests than the sport of baseball does (Starr, 2005). Starr goes on to suggest that activities such as competition from other sport like year round soccer programs, tennis, and even lacrosse leagues that children have been opting for in the summer is why
participation numbers in baseball has struggled recently (Starr, 2005). Another hypothesis that I developed for why participation in baseball has decreased is that athletes believe that they have a better chance of succeeding and getting college scholarships in other sports. A pitcher for the Waterloo Red Dogs admitted that he has seen a decline in the sport that he loves and also went on to say that he believes athletes think that they have a better chance of succeeding in other sports (Tong, 2002). One youth athlete who had been playing baseball his whole life said that he based his decision to quit to the sport of baseball based off of him believing that he did not have a chance to get a college scholarship in the sport of baseball. He believed he had a better chance to play football and basketball at the next level and decided to focus his training of those two sports (Vaughn, 2008).

It has also been found that there have been changing interests among youth athletes in what they look for when they participate in a sport. The same athlete that quit baseball to participate in basketball and football year round also attributed his decision to quit the sport because he thought baseball was getting too boring. He said that there was not only very little action at his center field position, but also there was no contact within the sport (Vaughn, 2008). Also, not only is baseball competing with other sports for the attention of youths, they are also competing with video games and computers for the time of youths (Rittenberg, 2003). A study done by Ferguson and Olson revealed that video game use is even considered a social activity now (Ferguson & Olson, 2013). All of these different factors have definitely contributed to the decline in baseball in one way or another in terms of its participation numbers.

Although there are a number of different hypothesis and potential reasons that researchers have suggested as to why baseball has experienced its decline in participation, there is not one concrete theory that everyone can agree on. With all of these hypothesis tied together we started
to get an understanding as to why youth athletes participate in sports, but there is yet to be one concrete theory that all researchers have agreed on.

**Design**

I sent out a survey tailored to gauge the motivations and interests of former youth athletes, and will attempt to uncover why baseball participation has decreased. The survey had 12 questions that included a series of yes/no questions as well as strongly agree-strongly disagree questions. There were a number of questions that asked for the participant’s motivations and what they think is most important while participating in youth sports. I sent out my survey to the undergraduate student body at St. John Fisher College with the help of Dr. Harrison (Chair of the Sport Management Program) who had access to the all undergraduates email addresses. The survey can be found in Appendix A. Because I tested be testing for former youth athletes feelings and opinions I used a cross sectional approach to my survey. This approach best assisted me in getting the necessary data that I needed such as getting a full understanding for why youth athletes choose to participate in the sports that they do, and also the opinions of former youth athletes as to why they think the sport of baseball has experienced a steady decline.

**Procedure**

Obviously with any survey there were a number of things I needed to take into consideration and a number of variables that I needed to control. One of the variables that I had to control is if someone filling out my survey has never even participated in the sport of baseball at any time in their life. If that was the case I asked them why they have never participated in the sport of baseball, and then I still had them answer a series of different questions such as which attributes are most important to a youth athlete when choosing a sport. I also had them answer
questions on why they think the sport of baseball is struggling. Another variable that I needed to control were females filling out my survey. I only wanted male participants so I simply had the first question of my survey be to indicate gender and if they were a female they were directed straight to the end of the survey. Now instead of limiting my survey I controlled these variables and still getting responses in which I could use and take into consideration when analyzing my data. Another variable that I had to control for was a baseball player that stuck with baseball until they no longer could play anymore, because they either were not good enough to play at the next level of competition or if there were no more leagues to participate in because they were too old. In this case I had these participants provide information on why they stuck with the sport and what drew them to the game of baseball over other sports. These participants also answered all of the other questions in the survey, such as why they thought the sport of baseball is struggling.

Before sending out my actual survey, I performed a pilot test in order to get a feel for what I need to improve in my survey. In my pilot test I found about 10 participants who were both baseball and non-baseball players to not only take my survey but also provide me with feedback for things that I could have done better and ways I could improve my survey.

In order to have my survey reach the entire undergraduate class at St. John Fisher College I sent an email to the previously mentioned Dr. Harrison, that he would eventually forward out to the undergraduate class at St. John Fisher College. My initial email to Dr. Harrison that he sent to the student body at St. John Fisher College can be found in Appendix B. In Appendix C, the actually forwarded email that he sent out can be found there. Because I did not have access to all of these email addresses as a student at St. John Fisher College I did not send out a pre-notice or follow up email. Even though I as unable to do this, I still received good feedback.
In terms of interpreting and analyzing my results I used the Independent Samples T Test function in SPSS. This method of interpreting allowed me to not only compare means, but also put my survey results into two groups. One group was the group that participated in youth baseball as a youth athlete and the other group was the athletes or participants in my survey who never participated in youth baseball. I was able to sort their answers to questions such as why they think the sport of baseball is struggling in terms of participation at the youth level, and see if participants who played baseball as a youth athlete have different answers from those who haven’t participated. This T Test indicated the significance of each question and what questions the two groups actually answered similarly too. Of the questions that I ran through this T Test only two had significance and that were the answers of specialization and peer influence to play other sports to the question that had survey participants indicate what degree those factors played in the decline of youth baseball. Along with an Independent T Test, I also used the Cross Tabulations function in SPSS to compare survey answers from the two groups and really provide me with a breakdown of the numbers from each groups answers.

**Findings/Results**

**Sample**

As previously stated my sample was made up of St. John Fisher College undergraduate males. I was able to access this sample by sending my survey to the Chair of the Sport Management Program Dr. Todd Harrison, who then proceeded to forward the email to the rest of the undergraduate class at St. John Fisher College. Overall I received 281 responses to my survey in which 267 of those surveys were completed. Any survey that was not fully completed was tossed. I also had 134 female respondents to my survey, all of which were also thrown out because I was only measuring male participant responses. After all of my tossed data I had 127
male respondents to my survey which were broken down into two groups: Respondents who have participated in youth baseball in the past, and respondents who never participated in youth baseball. Participants were broken down into these two groups with the purpose of comparing the two groups answers and outlining the differences between the different groups answers to questions such as what they believed the primary motivation for youth athletes was for participating in sport, which attributes were most important to them when deciding which youth sport to participate in, and which factors do they believe have led to the decline in youth baseball.

**Analysis**

The first thing that I tested was what participants believed to be a primary motivation of youth athletes to participate in sport. One-hundred-one of my respondents participated in the sport and 63% of them said that fun was the primary motivation for youth athletes to participate in sport. While 38% of the respondents who didn’t play the sport of baseball said that fun and competition and improvement of skills were the three primary motivations of youth athletes in sport. What I was able to draw from this crosstabs test was that even though the two groups may have differed in that some of them participated in the sport of baseball and others didn’t, they still believed that fun was the primary motivation of youth athletes. Unfortunately, because of the small sample size that I had in my survey some of the choices that were given to respondents did not meet the assumption of 5 responses or answers to each question. Because of this, I was not able to run an Independent Sample T Test and find any statistically significant evidence from this question.

The next set of results that I compared was what the respondents believed to be the most important factor to them personally in choosing a sport to participate in. Once again the two
groups (survey respondents who had participated in youth baseball in the past, and respondents who never participated in youth baseball) had similar results, as 70% of participants who played baseball said that the sport that they enjoyed the most was the leading factor and 65% of respondents who didn’t participate in youth baseball agreed with that answer. Once again some of the choices given to the survey participants did not reach an assumption of 5. Due to the small sample size that I had and the extremely small size of the group that was sorted into the respondents who didn’t participate in youth baseball, I was not able to run an Independent Sample T Test and find statistical evidence to this question.

Finally, I wanted to see to what degree the respondents of my survey believed speed of the game, lack of physical contact, competition from other sports, specialization in other sports, peer influence, lack of overall participation in sports from today’s youth, and mastery being easier achieved in other sports had on the decline of youth baseball. Not only did I use the Cross Tabulations function in SPSS to show the breakdown of the numbers for each group, I also ran an Independent Sample T Test to show the significance of each of the answers given by the two groups (survey respondents who participated in the sport of youth baseball and survey respondents who did not participate in youth baseball). By using an alpha of .05 I was able to test and see if any of the factors that could have potentially led to the decline in baseball had any statistical significance between my two sample groups.

In terms of the speed of the game being a factor in the decline of baseball the majority of respondents “Agreed” with this answer, 44% of respondents who participated in baseball “Agreed” with this answer while 38% who never participated in the sport did the same. Although the two groups may have had the same majority answers, overall the two groups did not agree
with each other. After running an Independent T Test I found that p equaled .220 indicating that the two group’s answers were distributed differently.

For the answer of lack of physical contact, the leading answer for those who participated in the sport was “Disagree” with 34% of them using this answer, while for those who never played baseball 34% of the respondents “Agreed” with this answer, making it the most popular response among their grouping. After running an Independent T Test I found that p equaled .413, once again indicating that the two groups in the sample overall did not agree with each other and did not have their answers distributed evenly.

In terms of the answer of competition from sports the majority of the respondents in both groups “Agreed” with this answer. In fact, 50% of respondents that played the sport of baseball “Agreed” while 61% of respondents who did not play also “Agreed”. After running a statistical comparison of the two groups answers through an Independent Sample T Test I found that p equaled .179, once again indicating that the question was not significant.

For the answer specialization in other sports 47% of respondents who played baseball “Agreed” with that answer and 72% of respondents who didn’t participate in the sport also “Agreed” with that answer. After running an Independent Sample T Test I discovered that p equaled .000, for the first time indicating significance in the question. From this statistical comparison I was able to see that the two sample groups agreed with each other and distributed their answers out evenly.

The answer peer influence also had the majority of respondents in both groups answering “Agree”, with 47% of respondents who played the sport selecting that answer and 58% of respondents who didn’t play the sport also selecting “Agree”. After running a statistical
comparison of the two groups I found that \( p = 0.018 \), indicating significance in the question for the second time.

The answer of a lack of participation in sports from today’s youth, once again had both groups agreeing with each other, and once again had “Agree” as the most prominent answer with 48% of participants who have in fact played the sport of baseball selecting that answer as well as 42% of respondents who haven’t participated in the sport. After running an Independent Sample T Test I found that \( p = 0.746 \) indicating that the question had no significance and that the two groups did not agree with each other and did not evenly distribute their answers.

Finally, for the last answer of mastery being easier achieved in a different sport the majority of respondents who have in fact participated in the sport of baseball, in fact 31% of these respondents disagreed with this answer, and also with the majority of respondents 46% to be exact who haven’t participated in the sport of baseball noted that they also disagreed with this answer. After running an Independent Sample T Test for this answer I found that \( p = 0.088 \), once again indicating that there was no significance in this question.

Overall from this question, once again using an alpha of 0.05 I was able to see that only specialization and peer influence to play other sports had any significance. This could potentially be due to the two samples being extremely different in size and the group that did not participate in youth baseball being so small.

**Conclusion**

From my survey I found that the primary motivation for participating in sport for both groups was fun and that the attribute that was most important to respondents when choosing a sport was the sport that they enjoyed the most. When participants were asked to what degree they believed a number of given factors have led to the decline in youth baseball, survey participants
in the two groups of the sample (respondents who participated in youth baseball and respondents who have not participated in youth baseball) only agreed with each from a statistical standpoint over two answers: specialization and peer influence to play other sports. After conducting an Independent Sample T Test I found that these two answers were the only statistically significant answers.

From my literature review I found in a study done by Holt and Strean that fun and enjoyment in sport will always be one of the great motivators for participation in sport for youth athletes, so I was not surprised that survey respondents indicated that fun was the primary motivation for participating in sport and that the sport that they enjoyed the most was the attribute that was most important to them when choosing a sport to play as a youth athlete (Holt & Strean, 2001).

I was also not surprised to find that statistical significance was found between the groups for specialization and peer influence in terms of these factors having led to the decline of baseball. Capranica and Millard Stafford outlined the growing trend of specialization in sports in their 2011 study (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011). While Joesaar, Hagger, and Hein underlined the importance of peer influence on children, and established that it is a major reason for youth athletes joining, continuing on in, or quitting sports (Joesaar, Hagger, & Hein, 2011).

**Future Recommendations**

This study takes an in depth look at previous research that was conducted on the decline of youth baseball and also includes new primary research that was conducted by myself through my survey. Unfortunately, there was a major limitation in my research, which was my small sample size. I did not receive the amount of survey responses as I was hoping for and that shows through my small sample size. The group that makes up the survey respondents who never
participated in youth baseball is much too small at only 26 respondents. Because of this large discrepancy between the two group sizes (101 respondents who did participate in youth baseball) it was hard to compare the two groups and really draw any concrete conclusions from their answers to my survey questions.

In terms of future research, more survey respondents are needed, especially in the group of respondents who haven’t participated in youth baseball. My research has built a foundation for future research to compare the opinions of baseball and non-baseball players on the differences of their motivations to participate in sport as well as why they believe the sport of baseball has experienced a decline in participation. With more respondents in each group, stronger conclusions will be able to be drawn from this research. Unfortunately, there is still one major unanswered question: and that is, what can be done to improve participation in youth baseball? In order to answer this question a research paper and survey design would need to be centered on finding suggestions to improve participation in youth baseball and find ways to make it more enjoyable for youth athletes. In terms of my research question, what factors contribute to youth baseball players leaving/quit the sport of baseball? I have found an answer and have developed some research that can build upon in the future.
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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey

Project Title: Decrease in Participation of Youth Baseball
Researcher: Kevin Sullivan
Advisor: Katrine A. Burakowski
Email: kts04289@sjfc.edu

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this study is to discover what motivations in youth athletes have caused youth athletes to drop the sport of baseball, ultimately leading to its participation numbers decreasing. As a participant in this study, you are being asked to complete a survey that addresses what the reasons why the sport of baseball has experienced a recent dip in participation at the youth level. For example, you will be asked the question, what motivations do you believe are most important for youth athletes when picking which sport to participate in. This survey will take approximately 5-7 minutes to complete.

The information you provide may assist experts in not only discovering the reasons as to why baseball participation has decreased at the youth level, but it may also pinpoint which motivations/attributes are most important to youth athletes when deciding what sports to participate in. Responses to this survey will be kept confidential and results will be presented in an aggregate form. Names or contact information will not be included in the presentation of the results. Some of the risks that come along with this survey include your peers potentially seeing you participating in this survey, and even knowing some of your answers to the survey. If this occurs, they may reveal not only your participation but your answers to others.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participating you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Please complete the survey if you would like to participate in this research.

By completing the questionnaire, you will give me permission for your participation. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact my research advisor or me.

☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
Please indicate your gender below.

- Male
- Female

Based on your own personal experience with youth sports, what do you believe the primary motivation is for youth athletes to participate in sport?

- Fun
- Competition and improvement of skills
- Socialization
- Exercise
- None of the above

Have you ever participated in organized baseball?

- Yes
- No
If no, why have you never participated in the sport?

- Lack of interest in baseball
- You participated in another sport that took place during the same season
- You specialized in a particular sport other than baseball
- Other

If yes, what was the highest level of baseball you participated in?

- Elementary School
- Junior High
- High School
- College
What caused you to leave the sport of baseball?

- Lack of interest in baseball
- Participation in another sport that took place during the same season
- Specialization in another sport
- Reached your abilities ceiling in the sport
- You still participate in the sport

Which attributes were most important to you when deciding which sport to participate in as a youth athlete?

- Physical and action packed sport
- Influence from friends
- Whichever sport you were best in
- Sport you enjoyed the most
For the following answers please indicate to what degree you think these factors played a part in the decline of youth baseball:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Disagree nor Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speed of the game</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of physical contact</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition from other sports</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialization in other sports</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer influence to play other sports</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of overall participation in sports</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery is easier achieved in other sports</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you believe that baseball could ever return to being one of the most popular sports amongst youth athletes again?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.
To all undergraduate students,

I am conducting a survey related to the recent decline in the participation of youth baseball. This survey will specifically be looking at youth motivations for participating in sport, as well as survey participants opinions as to why there has been a decline in the sport of baseball. This survey should only take two-three minutes, and your participation would be greatly appreciated and a big help to me in answering my senior thesis. A link to my survey can be found below, and once again I thank you for your time and assistance.

Survey Link: https://sjfc.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_7ZHRH9SNaOcPXdH

Kevin Sullivan
St. John Fisher College
Sport Management Program
SPST 495
Appendix C

Email that was sent to Undergraduate class at St. John Fisher College

Sent on behalf of Kevin Sullivan as part of his SPST 495, Senior Thesis project. Your assistance in completing his survey is very much appreciated.

To all undergraduate students,

I am conducting a survey related to the recent decline in the participation of youth baseball. This survey will specifically be looking at youth motivations for participating in sport, as well as survey participants opinions as to why there has been a decline in the sport of baseball. This survey should only take two-three minutes, and your participation would be greatly appreciated and a big help to me in answering my senior thesis. A link to my survey can be found below, and once again I thank you for your time and assistance.

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