

Politics of Innocence: Major League Baseball's Attempt to Make Game “Kid Friendly” through Its 2017 MLB Little League Classic

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Abstract: This paper was originally a short presentation made at both the 23rd Annual Baseball in Literature and Culture Conference at Ottawa University in Ottawa, Kansas, in April 2018 and at the 35th Annual Conference of the Sports Literature Association at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas, in June 2018. The theme of the presentation is my personal argument of how Major League Baseball in its 2017 MLB Little League Classic, held at the Philadelphia Phillies A-level minor league Bowman Field in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and televised on ESPN during Little League World Series, co-opted childhood innocence as a marketing ploy. The ploy was to get viewers, sell merchandise, and please advertisers by romanticizing the ideal of baseball as just a kids' game in the backyard when it mingled Major Leaguers with Little Leaguers in the cozy minor league ball park. I maintain that 2017 MLB Little League Classic was weak staging of a neighborhood, sandlot game in how it presented/ESPN televised the event. Outside this event, MLB's regular operations and its on-field product undercut childhood innocence, ironically eclipsing many real, beautiful moments of family enjoyment in the stands. Additionally, I argue that youth sports are often quite politicized and costly to parents and local communities. News and commercial web sites are referenced to confirm specific information about the event as well as other stated facts.

Key words: 2017 MLB Little League Classic, politics of innocence, youth sports, sports television marketing/advertising to youth

1. Introduction

On Sunday evening August 20, 2017, ESPN's Sunday Night Baseball featured the Pittsburgh Pirates hosting the St. Louis Cardinals at Bowman Field in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in what was titled MLB Little League Classic. The game was part of a four-game series between the Pirates and Cardinals in Pittsburgh, with the final game played in Williamsport's A-level minor league park as a partnership with the Little League World Series, which was taking place at the time. Major League Baseball and ESPN marketed the game as an opportunity for Little Leaguers to rub elbows with Major Leaguers, and for Major Leaguers to revisit their baseball beginnings, particularly in wearing Little League styled uniforms and shaking hands at home plate after the game (Brown, 2017).

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2. Body

I guess Major League Baseball deserves some pat on the back for having two Major League teams play each other at the Little League World Series, in a single A minor league ballpark spiffed up and renovated for the event ("Bowman Field Shines," 2017; Brown, 2017) in front of all the Little Leaguers and their families. Yes, the MLB players spent the morning with the kids and watched some of the games played, even sitting right beside some of the Little Leaguers. Yes, the kids even were permitted to participate in the Cardinal/Pirate game, from the ceremonial first pitch to an Australian Little Leaguer being guest PA announcer. Yes, Cardinals Tommy Pham and Carlos Martinez treated all the kids at the game to snow cones (Chesterton, 2017), like everyone was at some minor league carnival event. Pham, genuinely to his credit, even went the extra mile by wearing cleats he had allowed two children undergoing cancer treatment in St. Louis to decorate (Perry, 2017). And, yes, the players at game's end even lined up like Little Leaguers and shook hands at home plate.

Commissioner Rob Manfred and both Pirates and Cardinals managers and players extolled over how wonderful an event it was. Fans at home probably enjoyed watching the game on TV since it was not a typical game at a typical ballpark televised by ESPN on a Sunday night.

However, I can't get over the contrived nature of it all. Major League Baseball was trying to exploit what might not even exist anymore: the innocence of youth athletics — in this case Little League Baseball.

I do concede, later in this paper, that there is some innocence even in a Major League Baseball park. Yet, most people know that there is a whole lot of politics in youth sports too — between parents and coaches, coaches and officials/umpires. There's the politics of kids making all-star teams at the local levels. There's the politics of Little League, as well as other youth sports organizations, policing managers/coaches not to burn out players, especially pitchers, often in their quest to win rather than create a fun environment.

Also, don't forget there is absolutely politics of money. There are billions of dollars generated by youth sports — from what parents spend on equipment, participation fees, and travel (Barone, 2017), to corporations that manufacture equipment and clothing, to those involved in the construction of facilities (most used only a couple of months, then left dormant the rest of the year).

Also, don't forget MLB's eye on the international market for baseball. MLB has had teams play spring training games in Mexico City, but would like regular season games played there too (Giglio, 2017). Many may remember back to 2000 when the Cubs and Mets faced off in their season opener in Japan (Vecsey, 2000). There has been talk of trying to place another Major League team, besides the Blue Jays, outside of the US (Crasnick), such as Tokyo, Mexico City, London, or another major international city that has enough fans interested in watching American baseball for six to seven months. Consider this quote from the manager of the Little League team from Italy interviewed at the Little League Classic regarding the popularity of American baseball around the world: "All of my players think it's amazing to see Major Leaguers. Although baseball isn't that important in Italy yet, all of my players watch the major leagues on TV and play baseball on Xbox and PlayStation" (as cited in Mock, 2017, para. 9). Baseball won't supplant soccer in Europe in the near future, but that won't stop Major League Baseball from trying to extend its market base there or in Asia.

More specific to baseball is the problem I see in their trying to market the game to kids, which is what Major League Baseball was trying to do to through this event (Mock, 2017). First, the cost of going to a Major League game is expensive. A family of four could easily drop a couple hundred dollars for an afternoon at the ballpark. Major League Baseball would probably argue that going to the ballpark is no more expensive for a family than

their taking one trip in the summer to a large, regional amusement park. True. But for those on a tight budget, that is a lot of money for the average American family to afford more than once in a summer.

Two, whatever sportsmanship both the Pirates and Cardinals displayed during the Classic likely disappeared not long after. In fact, only the day before MLB umpires were protesting with white wrist bands what they felt had been excessive verbal insults from players and managers ("MLB Notes: Umpires", 2017; Nathan, 2017). It's certainly commendable that the Pirates and Cardinals were on their best behavior in Williamsport for the kids to see what they always should see from Major League players and managers during ball games, but how many games went by before the players and managers reverted to their old cussing ways?

Three, Major League baseball really doesn't promote the game itself to kids. Consider that most all games are televised at night and end long after any child twelve or younger should be in bed. When games end at 11:30 or midnight, Major League Baseball cannot expect to attract many young viewers. Few kids could have enjoyed the ending to the Cubs victory over the Indians in game 7 of the 2016 World Series.

As stated earlier, that's a significant reason why Manfred and MLB decided to play a game in Williamsport, as he stated to a reporter there: "[T]hese young people playing this game are the core of our next generation. Anything we can do to get them more engaged in the game is worth the effort" (as cited in Mock, 2017, para. 16). I'm sure part of what he means here is getting all little boys outside playing the sport and away from their video games. I'm sure, though, he also wants a new generation of baseball viewers for networks and corporate advertisers.

Major League Baseball's sole purpose, like any other entertainment industry, is marketing an image. Get people to the ballparks or to turn on their TVs and watch at home, pleasing the corporate advertisers. Advertiser money based on television ratings has always been a big deal. The 2016 World Series drew big ratings for Fox (Battaglio, 2016), but in other years, depending on which teams played, the ratings weren't always a boon for Fox. Over the last decade baseball, unlike the NFL, has seen mixed viewership. ESPN, along with all the other networks that televise Major League Baseball, was complicit with the big money paid to MLB for the rights to televise this and the other Sunday night games.

This, to me, all adds up to a marketing spin that at the very least brings complications (at most blatant corruption) of capitalism/commercialization upon the concept of childhood innocence played up by this event. Men playing a little boys' sport. The summer joy of a backyard, pickup game by little boys (and girls) free from adult intrusion. Manfred and others even mentioned the idea of "giving back to the community." But that's just a lavishly window dressed positive image for the business of the game that tries to over shine any of the negatives — like million-dollar athletes with little or no true connection to the cities they play in, publicly funded sports complexes with questionable return to the communities that funded them, unsportsmanlike treatment by managers and players at umpires at a time when such behavior in real life would receive dismissal from a job or even jail time. Yet, baseball fans want either to ignore it — or see more of it — since it's what they grew up with or saw when they played the game.

Despite my cold, cynical view of the MLB Little League Classic as exploitative marketing, I do recognize there to be moments of genuine childhood innocence at an average MLB game. Writing his piece a day after Houston's victory over the Dodgers in game 7 of the 2017 World Series, Rivera (2017) echoes one sentiment of genuine childhood innocence, a big-league player during pre-game post season series playing ball with his sons as any other father would with his kids. From the fan's angle, I have viewed weekday games at Wrigley when the camera zooms in on a couple with a darling baby sitting in Momma's lap wearing a Cubs bonnet and bib. It's hard

not to see innocence radiate when seeing little kids with their gloves wearing the home team's hat and shirt hoping for a rare, miraculous foul ball. Even players signing autographs for kids before a game (free, of course) when there are no cameras around, and the players more than happy to do it.

All those are picturesque examples of childhood innocence existing in the Major League game because they're real — un-staged. As opposed to the players wearing uniforms styled more to the look of the Little Leaguers' uniforms — staged. The Australian boy who was guest PA announcer — staged. All sixteen Little League teams involved in the ceremonial first pitch — staged. The Cardinal and Pirate players shaking hands after the game at home — very staged! The players and managers on their best behavior so as "not to do in front of the kids" their typical cussing and berating the umpires after a close third-strike call to the joy of soused, vulgar fans — staged!

3. Conclusion

I guess what baseball did in the MLB Little League Classic (also suggesting a long-standing tradition, which it hasn't been) resembles the divorced, non-custodial parent who sometimes splurges for his/her child to rectify long absences, but otherwise isn't meaningfully, deeply involved in the child's life. In that sense, all of us are the child, never really sure if Major League Baseball's occasional sparkling gestures are truly genuine, or that we're really special in Major League Baseball's money-making operation.

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