



Memorial Little League Case Study

How a small community-based league created a baseball participation movement

Summary

Memorial Little League, in Omaha, Nebraska, was experiencing a decline in enrollment in the league 10 years ago. Memorial's board of directors had begun planning how to disband the league until six volunteers made a renewed commitment to rejuvenate the league. Enrollment increased over the following years, but like many youth league programs, Memorial saw increased competition from select teams for its best players. In an effort to provide a home for baseball players at all skill levels, in 2012, the Skills Program was formed to provide additional programming and playing opportunities to players who preferred a more competitive schedule than what the league had traditionally offered. Since the inception of the program, enrollment in the league as a whole and in the program itself has steadily increased. The retention of players in the league has also increased over this time. The following report outlines the background, challenges, approach, results, and implications of the Skills Program for Memorial Little League.

Background

Established in 1973, Memorial Little League is a youth baseball and softball organization based out of Omaha, Nebraska. The league is chartered with Little League International, and the officially-sanctioned boundaries of Memorial LL, as recognized by Little League International, can be seen in the map.

Memorial Little League serves the neighborhoods of Memorial Park, Gifford Park, Dundee, Walnut Hill, Prospect Hill, and Adams Park. The major schools in the area include Central High School, Creighton Prep High School, Brownell-Talbot School, Lewis and Clark Junior High, St. Margaret Mary Catholic School, St. Cecilia Catholic School, Harrison Elementary, and Dundee Elementary.



(Memorial Little League, n.d.)

In the 2015 season, Memorial Little League served roughly 400 boys and girls players ages 5 to 18. The league is a small, inner city league with limited access to resources and no home field of their own. Because the league does not have a field of its own, they have partnered with a nearby league, Hillside Little League, to use their field for the majority of the league's games. These fields are located 6 blocks out of Memorial Little League's district.

The area in which the league is officially sanctioned is roughly 6 square miles in a midtown area of Omaha. Geographically, the area is fairly centrally located within the city. The footprint of the area is roughly 30 city blocks by 30 city blocks. Within this area, the population of males between the ages of 5 and 14 is just over 2,300. The average annual household income is roughly \$51,000 over a total of over 13,700 households. Of these household, over 9,200 have an annual income of under the average of \$51,000, with 3,000 of those households having an annual household income of under \$15,000. To put these numbers in perspective, the average annual household income for the United States is just over \$50,000. This data shows that the area in which the league is officially sanctioned is mostly below the average income not only for the area itself, but for the nation as well.

As is the case for most local leagues, the league is funded through registration fees and relies heavily on community support in terms of donation of field time. Because the league is located in Omaha, they have a good relationship with the College World Series and has received donations from the tournament in many years to support Memorial's outreach program to low-income families in North Omaha.

Challenges

As with many local leagues, Memorial Little League was experiencing a loss of players to select or travel teams. The ages at which players were leaving the league were getting younger and younger each year, with players as young as 8 years old leaving the local league to join a select team. Often, the reasoning was to search for higher levels of competition than what the league offered. The area's best baseball players left the league by the age of 10 to join a select or travel team, leaving the players who were not as developed in baseball in the league. As a result, the experience for the players remaining in the league suffered. The players that stayed often quit playing baseball in the league by 10 years old as well due to feeling that they may be better suited to another sport.

This trend is not unique to Memorial Little League, as this is also the national trend. Not only are the participation numbers for local baseball leagues declining, but participation across all forms of baseball in the country are declining as well.

Not only were players leaving the league, but the league also had no home field, no financial stability, and was in need of people willing to serve on the league board of directors.

Because of this issue, enrollment in the league dropped 10 years ago. During formal discussions regarding whether the league should be disbanded, a group of parents committed to providing more energy and stability to the Board of Directors. Through their leadership, registrations improved and the league's financial situation improved. However, Memorial's teams often struggled in post-season play, particularly at the Little League state tournament, due to the attrition of its best players.

Approach

As part of the plan to retain players and encourage new players to enroll, Memorial Little League started the Skills Program. Founded in 2012, The Skills Program is offered in addition to each player's regular season with the league. Players who participate in the Skills Program go through a 7 to 10 week pre-season training program located in several indoor facilities, including one at Creighton University. The training sessions are offered once a week and last for an hour to an hour and a half.

The Skills Program begins after an evaluation day is held to assess the players. As this is a no-cut program, the players are each placed on teams that match their age group as well as their skill level. Jay Slagle, a coach at Memorial Little League, claimed that "if a player is willing to invest in the time to get better, we will place them in a group that fits their capabilities" (J. Slagle, Personal Communication, October 7, 2015). Occasionally, players who develop skills at a faster rate than their peers can be moved to a higher skill level team during the program.

For the players who are 7 to 8 years old, the Skills Program is a 7 week pre-season training program. At the conclusion of the program, the teams in this age group scrimmage each other, and then begin the regular Little League season on their designated teams.

For players who are 9 to 12 years old, the program is an 8 to 10 week pre-season training program. Once the Little League season starts, each player plays on their designated league team, in addition to the Skills Program group also playing additional games during the week together. The league games are scheduled early in the week, and the games for the Skills Program teams are scheduled on Thursdays or Fridays. The Skills Program teams play against local travel teams sanctioned by USSSA for their additional games during the week. These games are scheduled through the coaches of the Skills Program and the local travel teams, whose contact information were found in a local message board. The coaches of the Skills Program teams determine which level their team matches within the USSSA competition structure, and contacts coaches with teams the same competition level. As a result, the Skills Program teams tend to play against A and AA ranked teams in the USSSA system. Through this format, the players who are in the Skills Program not only play in the normal Little League amount of games, but also play in an additional 5 to 16 games during the season through playing the local travel teams.

With the increased amount of play, monitoring pitch counts for players is imperative to Memorial Little League. The league tracks all pitch counts and follows Little League’s pitching rules across the regular season and the Skills Program. As the league is playing from a developmental standpoint instead of a purely competitive standpoint, the majority of players have the opportunity to pitch. The coaches, players, and parents, must communicate the pitch counts for pitchers to coaches for the regular season and the Skills Program, so that pitchers do not overthrow during the week. The league has found that parents of the Skills Program players stay up to date on their child’s pitch counts and would provide that information to the coaches of the regular season team their child also plays for. The coaches also stay involved in monitoring the pitch counts across the two programs as they will call the parents during the week and discuss how much the player has thrown.

As the Skills Program is an additional playing opportunity, there is a fee for participation. For the 7 to 8 year old age group, the cost is \$100. For the 9 to 12 year old age group the cost ranges from \$100 to \$220 depending upon the age of the player. The older players have a higher fee to cover costs for playing up to 16 additional games during the regular season of 20 games or more depending on the amount of teams in the league. This registration fee is in addition to the regular season fee of \$155. The most that families pay for players to participate in both the regular season and the Skills Program is \$375. However, Memorial Little League will reduce the registration fees for families that are unable to afford the regular price. The chart below outlines the fees for regular league play as well as Skill Program participation for the age groups the Skills Program services.

Age Group	Regular League Fee	Skills Program Fee Average (Optional)	Total for Regular League	Total for Regular League and Skills Program
7 – 8	\$135	\$100	\$135	\$235
9 – 10	\$140	\$100 – \$220	\$140	\$235 – \$360
11 – 12	\$155	\$220	\$155	\$375

The Skills Program focuses on teaching players the basic fundamentals of the game. Through the 7 to 10 weeks, players receive hands-on training on fundamentals such as catching, throwing, fielding, and hitting. Each session includes drills that specifically focus on building strong fundamentals of each skill. Sessions often follow a plan of stretching, base running, catching, fielding, and hitting, and conclude with a meeting between the coach, players, and parents. The players are given homework after each session. This homework is often at least one of the drills covered during that session, as

well as playing catch and taking dry swings. In addition to the general fundamentals, catcher and pitchers also receive specific skill work during the sessions to ensure they are learning the key fundamentals as well.

Throughout the program's season, guest coaches and speakers visit the skill sessions to teach baseball and life skills to the groups. For example, Creighton University Head Baseball Coach—Ed Servais, teaches a handful of skill sessions every year. Former Major Leaguer and ESPN college baseball analyst—Kyle Peterson, has also spoken to the players on how to maintain the balance between youth baseball and the other aspects of a child's life.

The league has a strong philosophy against year-round baseball under the age of 12. They encourage their players to play other sports throughout the year, and do not offer a fall league so that players do not feel pressured into playing baseball over another fall sport. The league has an organic partnership with the local basketball recreational league and has found that the players in their baseball league often move from sport to sport together throughout the year and keep playing together. This has attributed to the uptick in talent they have seen in recent years as the players are becoming better all-around athletes through participation in other sports. Along with better talent, this trend has also brought in new players to the league as the kids encourage their basketball teammates who do not play baseball to sign up to play in the following season.

Memorial Little League is not only invested in the development of their athletes, but of their coaches as well. Every January, the league hosts a coaching clinic for the coaches of the upcoming season. As part of the clinic, each coach receives manuals for the upcoming season inclusive of coaching techniques, baseball fundamentals, baseball specific drills and guides, and practice organization tools. The manuals, created with the help of Creighton University Head Coach Ed Servais and his staff, were designed to help educate the youth baseball coaches in Omaha and the surrounding areas. The two main manuals are the "Baseball Hilltoppers Manual" and the "Youth Hitting Manual." Each of these manuals provide tips for teaching the fundamentals of the game, as well as teaching core values such as sportsmanship and character.

Results

Enrollment of Memorial Little League as a whole has increased by over 10 percent since the Skills Program's inception in 2012. For the Skills Program specifically, there has been a 200 percent increase in enrollment and participation in the program since its inception.

Aside from the steady increase in overall enrollment and enrollment in the Skills Program, Memorial Little League has also seen an increase of player retention in the league. The rate at which players leave the league to play on select or travel teams has decreased drastically. While there are still a few players every year who may leave to play on select or travel teams, the majority of players choose to remain in the league.

Along with the increase of enrollment and retention rates, there has been a positive shift in the culture of the league. According to Jay Slagle, parents of players in the league who are not participating in the Skills Program are appreciative of the fact that the regular league plays games early in the week (J. Slagle, Personal Communication, October 7, 2015). The parents of the players who participate in the Skills Program are also appreciative of the fact that the schedules align and that their children are given so many extra opportunities to play. Generally speaking, the families involved with the Skills Program are typically more serious about baseball participation overall.

There has also been a change in the culture of sports participation as a whole in the community as Memorial Little League's stance is against year round baseball participation. By not offering a fall season, the league's players are encouraged to play other fall and winter sports. As a result, the players move from sport to sport together and form stronger friendship

bonds. The players also encourage their teammates in other sports to play baseball with them as well. Because of this, the majority of players in Memorial Little League also play soccer and basketball together in the off season.

Since the Skills Program was established, the program's board has increased to 10 members. They also have funding for new uniforms for their teams and agreements have been put in place between the league and the two local high schools, Creighton Prep and Central, that allow Skills Program participants to practice and play at both facilities.

Conclusion and Implications

The Memorial Little League Skills Program model has proven successful in Omaha, Nebraska for several different reasons. Not only does the league have community support, but with the increased engagement with the local community, they also receive aid in facility usage through the local colleges and high schools. Without the buy-in from the community, this program may not have seen the increases in enrollment that it has experienced in the last three years.

Memorial Little League's general participation has increased and they are retaining more advanced players within the league. This increase in competitiveness reverberates across the league in several ways, as Jay Slagle noted that "one of the reasons our league has grown the past few years is that we've found a way to keep the best players challenged while providing a positive environment for the not-yet-great players to learn and improve at baseball" (J. Slagle, Personal Communication, October 7, 2015).

Along with increasing and retaining players at a higher rate, the league has also noticed an improvement of the player and parent experience within the game through the addition of the Skills Program. Players who want to play a more competitive schedule but also want to play with all of their friends are getting to have both experiences through the Skills Program. This has created an environment that has improved the traditional youth league play while simultaneously affording families supplemental travel team play in a way that provides a well-balanced experience for everyone.

The two-tiered approach to participation structure of the league could be beneficial to other leagues seeing a loss of players to select or travel leagues. Other leagues across the United States can take this model and curtail it to better fit their own needs. While other areas of the United States may not have as much community buy-in or aid in facilities, they can still replicate the offering of additional programming to allow players to participate in baseball at a higher level should they choose to do so. Through challenging the more advanced players and working to further develop the less-skilled players, leagues can create a better environment to retain players and increase competition levels.

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