

Feeling economic pinch

The downturn in the economy has affected business small and large, from your local convenience store to General Motors. Is it affecting youth sports in Maine? The short answer is that it's too soon to tell.

Some leagues are strong and report stable or increasing numbers. But others report declining numbers and leagues waiving registration fees for struggling families. "I've certainly heard that there are some families who had to choose between sports," said Karen Hawkes, director of the Maine Center for Sport and Coaching at the University of Maine.

Scott Edwards, president of District 5 Little League, says numbers are slightly up for the league overall, but for Augusta Little League, the numbers are down from 378 youths last year to a little under 350 youths this year. "The years you anticipate it's going to be up, it's down. The years you think it's going to be down, then bang!"

"I think it's too early in the recession to make an impact," said Douglas Beck, executive director of Maine Recreation and Park Association. "If we go another year, and things don't turn around, by this time next year, we'll be talking about some numbers dropping."

According to numbers provided by Little League International, there is a downward trend in participation in Little League baseball and softball in Maine. In 2005, there were 22,245 Little League baseball players in Maine on 1,483 teams. Last year, there were 21,000 players on 1,400 teams. In Little League softball in Maine, there were 6,060 players on 404 teams in 2005. Last year, there were 5,955 players on 397 teams.

"We dropped two teams this season. We had 115 kids in our league last year, and this year we have 87," Rod Stevens, President of the Skowhegan Cal Ripken Baseball league, said. "I think it's the total commitment. When our numbers were low, I called around to kids in our system and they just weren't going to play. I don't know if this is a down year or a trend."

Hawkes said she has heard of young players gravitating toward recreational-league sports. Cleveland Brown, the commissioner of Fairfield Police League softball, reports that after having 150 to 160 girls per year the last two years, there are about 200 girls in the program this season. Brown also said about 30 percent of the players in the league have not paid the full registration fee because of financial concerns. "I let them play," he said. "The financial part isn't what we're here for. Somebody says they want to play, they play."

Brad Noonan, president of Belgrade Recreation Association, said his organization offers "scholarships" to families who can't afford the cost. He said about six to eight of the 150 kids playing baseball and softball this year received scholarships. "If anybody can't afford to play, we make sure that they find a way to play," Noonan said.

Of course, it's entirely possible that some families may not ask for financial help because they're embarrassed, or they may decide they need to cut costs and cut out the fees and travel time if the economy continues to worsen. Beck thinks that if more parents can't afford to have their children play in a youth league, there will be less of a stigma about not participating in leagues, and there could be a resurgence of pick-up games.

By Matt DiFilippo, Kennebec Journal, May 18, 2009

Bad economy may be good for sandlot sports

Douglas Beck, executive director of the Maine Recreation and Park Association, told sports writer Matt DiFilippo recently that sandlot ball games have become rarities in Maine. Today, adults run regimented, structured youth programs. Adults pick the teams. Adults bring the balls and bats. Adults make the calls. In truth, there were leagues like this “back in the day,” too. Little League, Babe Ruth and American Legion baseball and softball have been around a long time. But kids organized their own games on top of that, more than they do today. “Kids in general are waiting for someone to tell them what to do, when to do it and where to do it, because they’re so programmed,” Beck said. “It’s fascinating. It’s a little disturbing, but it’s remarkable.” The trend in organized youth sports this summer, if there is one, shows that participation is down slightly. Youth-sports organizers say the current, poor economic conditions may be discouraging some families from signing up this year, due to required registration fees. In many cases, leagues accept partial payments from struggling families or make scholarships available. Some experts see a slight decrease in enrollment as potentially a good thing. Kids today can be over-scheduled by their type-A parents. Taking a season off occasionally can mean less pressure to perform, more time for kids to hack around and make their own decisions. Maybe sandlot baseball and football games will make a comeback. - *Editorial, Kennebec Journal, May 22, 2009*

Kids in sports: Multi-tasking is a good idea

Should kids focus their efforts on one sport throughout the calendar year? Or should they try ‘em all? Two high-profile coaches in Tallahassee would vote for multi-tasking - at least at the youth level. Florida State (FSU) head softball coach Lonni Alameda played both volleyball and softball at the college level. She thinks specializing in one sport might dampen the enthusiasm a kid has for the game. “Kids at a really young age going into one sport and doing only one sport get burned out, and the passion for it dies out,” Alameda said. “Then they lose the light of how exciting and fun it is to play.” FSU baseball coach Mike Martin believes playing multiple sports is important in a young athlete’s development. “You don’t want a young man concentrating on one sport until he becomes well into his teenage years,” Martin said. “There’s so many practical applications for life that you get out of playing football, basketball, baseball, and I could name others. There’s so much you derive from all sports.” FSU baseball player Tyler Holt also played soccer as a youth and then began playing football in the eighth grade. His theory for playing multiple sports is practical. “I think what helped me was playing all those different sports and getting a grasp on what I was better at and it helped me stay in shape year round,” Holt said. FSU softball player Carly Wynn still cherishes the time she spent as a two-sport athlete in high school. Wynn has simple advice for young athletes and their parents, who are debating the multi-sport question. “I would encourage kids to explore anything they love,” Wynn said. “Loving the game and being good at the game can be different. The passion and the love are more important than the skill to be good at it.” - *By Corey Clark, David Saez and Jim Lamar, Tallahassee Democrat, May 18, 2009*

Tips for reducing sports injuries

The National Center for Sports Safety estimates that more than 3.5 million children ages 14 and younger receive medical treatment for sports injuries each year. Immature bones and overuse from repeated motion account for a good portion of the injuries, the center reports. Marc Molis, an Urbandale physician specializing in sports medicine, says many of the injuries he sees are the result of little or no warm-up or conditioning before participating in a sport such as soccer or baseball. High school athletes work on conditioning with a sport, Molis says, but younger participants don’t. Not being properly prepared can lead to muscle strains and other problems, he says. Overuse injuries occur in both adults and children but may be more serious in younger athletes because they could affect bone growth. Common overuse injuries listed on the Blank Children’s Hospital Web site include knee pain, Little League elbow, swimmer’s shoulder, shin splints and lower back pain. The overuse injuries can be aggravated by inadequate warm-up, excessive activity, playing multiple sports during the same season, playing the same sport year-round or using improper technique or unsuitable equipment. Lyle Veach, vice president of the South Des Moines Little League and central region director for Iowa United States Specialty Sports Association, says baseball injuries occur because players don’t warm-up properly or they are pitching too much. Little League regulations limit the number of pitches for young players, which reduces injuries, he says. Players are also required to take breaks between pitching days, according to the Little League rules. Wearing the proper equipment also helps prevent injury. “The biggest thing is the head gear,” Molis says. Wearing a helmet in baseball, biking and roller blading is essential and added protection such as knee pads and wrist guards also can help prevent injury. - *By Patt Johnson, Des Moines Register, May 22, 2009*

Coaching: How can you survive?

The Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram Survival Guide for Coaches - What are the secrets to survival in an era where outside distractions are greater and more influential than ever? This question was addressed by five Maine senior coaches. Rick Clark, the girls' basketball coach at York High for 38 years. He also coached boys' and girls' track. Mike Bailey, the Portland High football coach since 1986. Diana Walker, the Sanford High field hockey coach for 26 years. Mike Carrier, the Bucksport softball coach for 26 years. Ron Cote, who's been involved with coaching Biddeford High athletes since 1973.

A Survival Guide For Coaches:

- A young coach needs to meet with parents at the beginning of their season and inform them of their role as parents of an athlete in your program. A handbook of the coach's set of rules and all his/her expectations - these would include games, practices, training, travel, behavior, etc. - should be given to parents so there will be no surprises when a decision has to be made during the season regarding their child. It's best to keep parents at arms length. - **Ron Cote**
- Go to clinics, ask advice from coaches you respect, read informational books, and be retrospective after games (both ones you win and ones you lose). Most importantly, do this throughout your career, not just in the beginning. - **Rick Clark**
- You have to be flexible and able to adapt to change. People don't coach the way they did in the '70s or '80s. Athletes are motivated differently now. And you've got to be flexible and aware of how kids have changed. - **Mike Bailey**
- You should have reasonable expectations. Remember these kids are high school athletes. For most of them this will be the last time they participate on an organized team; very few go on to play in college. - **Diana Walker**
- You have to be able to take criticism from all directions because it will come from all directions; from school, parents, people who don't have a clue. - **Mike Carrier**
- You should surround yourself with good people. You can't do this on your own. Whether it's the coaching staff or a support staff or family members supporting you, you need people around you to provide positive reinforcement. - **Mike Bailey**
- If you plan to have success over a period of time, you need to surround yourself with assistants at every level. Recreation programs, middle school programs, freshman programs and junior varsity programs are all part of your overall program. Be involved with them and get your team members involved as coaches and officials at the lower levels. Let them know how important they are to your program. - **Rick Clark**
- A coach needs to be a role model for the athletes he/she is coaching and should never take that responsibility lightly. - **Ron Cote**
- You've got to be consistent with your rules. I think where a lot of coaches get in trouble is when they treat one kid one way and another another way. That's the kiss of death. Whether you're consistently lenient or consistently hard-core, you've got to be consistent. - **Mike Bailey**
- You need to give yourself a break. You don't have to coach your kids 24-7. Let the kids see that you have a life outside your sport. Especially if you have a spouse/partner and/or family. - **Diana Walker**
- You can't let bad years bring you down because everyone is going to have them. - **Mike Carrier**
- (A coach) also must teach the young person how to win and how to lose but most of all, how to be an adult. They must know they will be held accountable for their behavior. - **Ron Cote**
- You need to have the support of your administration from the start. Make sure your athletic director and principal know what you are doing. If you have issues or problems with parents or other adults, make (school officials) aware as soon as possible so they can respond to those incidents with prior knowledge. - **Rick Clark**
- You have to realize coaching is a year-round commitment, whether it's running the weight room or checking grades or just knowing your athletes' personal lives. - **Mike Bailey**
- You need to have FUN! Every now and then do something with the kids that doesn't have anything to do with your sport. A community activity, car wash, cookout, ice fishing, boat trip, etc. - **Diana Walker**

Study finds youth baseball injuries down 25 percent

A new study by the Center for Injury Research and Policy of The Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital found that the number of children and adolescents treated for baseball-related injuries in hospital emergency departments decreased 25 percent from 1994 through 2006 - going from an estimated 147,000 injuries in 1994 to approximately 111,000 injuries in 2006. This is the first national study of youth baseball injuries requiring emergency treatment, and is now available online in the June electronic issue of *Pediatrics*. "Although baseball injuries have declined, the consistently high numbers of injuries requiring emergency treatment highlights the importance of increasing our prevention efforts," said study co-author Gary Smith, MD, DrPH, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital, and an associate professor of pediatrics at The Ohio State University College of Medicine. According to the study, being hit by a baseball was the most common mechanism of injury, followed by being hit with the bat. The most common types of injuries were soft tissue injuries followed by fractures and dislocations. The face and the upper extremities were the most commonly injured body regions. One possible reason for the decrease in injuries may be the greater use of protective equipment. "Safety equipment such as age-appropriate breakaway bases, helmets with properly-fitted face shields, mouth guards and reduced-impact safety baseballs have all been shown to reduce injuries," said Dr. Smith. "As more youth leagues, coaches and parents ensure the use of these types of safety equipment in both practices and games, the number of baseball-related injuries should continue to decrease. Mouth guards, in particular, should be more widely used in youth baseball. - *By Mary Ellen Peacock, Nationwide Children's Hospital, May 26, 2009*

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