Dads play important role in fostering young people’s interest in baseball

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CENTER VALLEY – Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia recently witnessed its largest crowds for a three-game series since 1994 (with 153,445 in paid attendance). And, regardless of team loyalty, the fans even got to enjoy seven extra innings of Phillies-Yankees inter-league competition. Yet, pundits and prognosticators are bemoaning the declining entertainment value of the game. Even with heroes like Cal Ripken, Jr., the demise of baseball as the national pastime has come upon us – or so they say.

What insidious forces might be responsible for this? The culprits in this social conspiracy may be many, but three things line up as probable starters: cost, time, and (in)action.

Attending a professional baseball game can put a serious dent in one’s wallet. Tickets to a major league stadium are pricey, to say the least. Add to that travel, parking and a dog ‘n a beer, and the concept of affordability takes a serious hit. These financial constraints make attendance at minor league play more appealing, not to mention the home-town entertainment that comes with a trip to a fan-friendly park in Reading, Trenton, Wilmington, or Allentown. Yet, it still does not directly cost anything to watch a game on television. Interest in baseball does not derive from, or lessen because of, the calculation of dollars and cents.

Perhaps time is a factor. Staying tuned to a season that extends from April to October requires stamina, and watching a World Series amid snowflakes seems inherently wrong. More than that, public laments about the length of the game itself are increasingly loud. Nine innings (at least) can take more than three hours. Who among us harried citizens can spare that much attention when our many works and other responsibilities require daily multi-tasking? Or course, other
forms of entertainment (movies, shows, concerts) take just as long. Leisure, in whatever form, needs time, and perhaps more than ever, we Americans need leisure.

Related to the problem of time is the apparent lack of action taking place during a baseball game. This sport does not enchant us with daring speed (like NASCAR) or brute strength (as in the NFL) or a powerful combination of the two (as in the NBA or NHL). Without these, it seems, today’s younger generation cannot get excited about or become enthralled with baseball. Yet the sport’s apparent boredom will not be overcome with gimmicks (like home run derbies) or gadgets (like ump can). Baseball is both skillful and cerebral. Its supposed delays result not from lack of action but from the demands of thinking (what pitch is coming, where to field the positions) that make the game intelligible.

But there still is a problem, and it is a cultural one. The problem is dads ... or the lack thereof. If dads do not play catch with their sons (or daughters), how will young people learn the fundamentals? If dads do not teach them the game, how will children understand its intricacies? If dads do not taken them to the park, how will children become fascinated with this legendary sport?

The generations of baseball fans that have lived (and died) with every pitch, every hit, every error, every win and loss through the decades all share a common experience – they bonded with baseball through their fathers. No money or clock or gimmick can replace this. And without this experience, the next generation of potential fans is being lost.

Decrying the loss of interaction between fathers and sons is not mere nostalgia. Consider the data gleaned from *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators 2001*. As recently as 1990, 36 percent of children lived apart from their biological fathers, up over 17 percent from 1960 and still rising. Of 71 million U.S. children, more than 30 percent do not grow up in two-parent families (and only 16 percent of single-parent households are headed by the father). And 40 percent of children in fatherless households today have not seen their dads in at least a year. Put simple, one cannot play catch or coach the team or go to a game is he is not there.

Professional baseball needs, desperately, to cultivate the loyalty of the next generation. Giveaways may be good as an incentive. But providing a family discount so that parents and children can afford to enjoy a game together would be better. Media attention may be heightened by technology. But televised games need to be scheduled so that younger fans can watch them, preferably together with their parents, without having to stay awake until or beyond midnight.

Baseball needs dads (and grandfathers and stepfathers and surrogate fathers). No one but they can communicate the treasures of the sport – its skill, its intrigue, its traditions. Only through the bond between father and son and daughter will baseball once again flourish and play its role in the health and well-being of our culture.

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