

Hard ball

Demanding parents take fun out of sports

SAM MCKEWON is a senior news-editorial and political science major and the editor.

Meet Chris.

Chris is a 12-year old boy who's already signed his life away to athletic slavery this summer.

Chris could play tennis.

Or soccer.

Or hockey.

Or whatever sport he might play.

For Chris, though, it's baseball.

Chris plays 90 games a summer.

He practices every day, for sure.

Somewhere along the line, someone, probably some coach who doesn't even have kids, earmarked Chris for the meat market.

(He has the talent, does he have the drive? You got the balls, Chris? Got 'em?)

Chris wakes up. He runs. He eats. He goes to practice.

(Harder, faster, stronger.)

His parents buy the shirts. Chris has two bags, three uniforms, two gloves, two pairs of shoes, barbecue sunflower seeds, a bat for hitting, a bat for practice, his own helmet with a face guard. Chris eats fast food every weekend, lives out of a suitcase in some rundown hotel. He learns how to lose, as no team can win 60 games, can they?

Along the way, Chris adopts the philosophy of the coach, his teammates. Sports is not about love.

(You don't WANT it enough. what the hell are you doing out there? They're babies, every one of them. Apparently, you are too.)

His parents are there, living vicariously, for every game. They drag along Chris's brother, who spends every weekend playing in the bleachers with all the other kids who've been dragged along for the weekend to play in the bleachers. He cries to his mother. He wants to go. The playground. The park. The bumper cars.

Anywhere but here. Another time, she says. Watch your brother.

Chris sits the bench this game. He has nothing to do. His father stands outside the dugout, leans on the fence, with the other fathers. He glares at his son and then at the coach, one of five, four of which have their crappy sons on the field, and they're not any damn good.

(I did not pay \$3000 for my son to sit his ass on the bench.)

Chris can hear his father cussing out the coach. There'll be trouble later at the Denny's. His mother looks furious, too. She used to bring books to the game. No more. She doesn't even talk to the other mothers much.

Chris can only watch, helpless, a spectator to those who control his future.

Chris does not read much. No time for books. He did read the newspaper one day. He saw a story about a 14-year-old girl whose parents were going to sue the Women Tennis Association because they wouldn't let her daughter play professional tennis yet. The WTA backed down, the story said, and let the girl play in one tournament. The girl still isn't very happy with that, but she wasn't going to sue. She was ready.

Chris listens to music, but he doesn't play any instruments.

He doesn't see movies. He really wants to see that "Star Wars" movie and one night he was going to, but his coach called a meeting.

He doesn't play baseball for fun in the sense that it doesn't matter who wins. It always matters, coach says.

Chris does know how to detect a pick-off move. He knows to get BACK! He knows how to shift for a pull hitter. He knows how to drag bunt. He plays in the infield, so he can turn two if he has to.

Chris has never been to his

hometown museums. Not to the zoo in years. A lot of Chris' friends don't play on the team. He has no idea what they're doing right now.

They didn't have the talent.

Chris doesn't have a favorite subject in school.

He likes football, too.

After the game, Chris's mother approaches the coach first. She's pointing her finger at the coach. The father walks over. When its parents vs. coach, the other boys scatter. They go to their parents and everyone watches from behind the bleachers.

Chris is still on the bench.

Like the boy in Conrad Aiken's short story, Chris wants to shrink into his own secret, silent world, where the winds whirrs loud enough to drown out his mother, his father, his coach. But he can't go away. He can't even look away. It is his future, after all.

And Chris can't quit, no matter what. There's too much money involved, too much time. Besides, he wants to be a pro ball player. He can't think of anything else he'd like to be. Chris didn't celebrate the Fourth of July. He was in at Atlanta at a 32-team, firecracker tournament with 500 other boys. As they drove back to the hotel that night, Chris saw a few roman candles out his window.

He won't celebrate Thanksgiving, either. By then, he'll be playing basketball. No Christmas. No New Year's or St. Pat's Day. He won't be there for his brother's birthday.

(Chris is boy, interrupted.)

Chris is starting to see that sports stops for no one. Not for the country. Not for family. Not for God. And to some people, sports are more important than all those other things combined. Chris, at 13, is starting to see that nothing can stop sports, except people.

And they don't want to.

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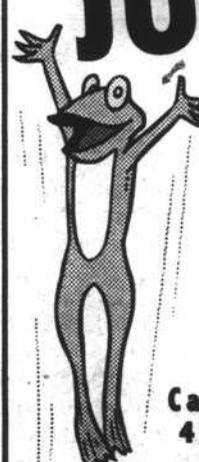
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