



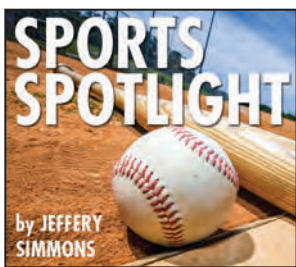
Jacob Dodd photo

On a Monday evening in late June, many of the McMinnville Civic Center fields sit empty. Participation has dwindled in the last decade, leaving many parents and coaches to wonder if baseball and fast-pitch softball will continue in the coming years.

Distrubing decline of youth baseball and softball

It's a question which seems to crop up every summer – what is going on with the youth baseball and softball leagues? The questions start the same time the ball field lights at McMinnville Civic Center begin dotting the sky, but usually die down after a week or two as people settle down.

Not this year. Dwindling participation. Spotty umpiring. Lack of direction. A growing number of travel



teams.

Pick a topic and it's probably already been brought up by coaches. They lament and often hearken back for the days

when concession stand lines were filled with dozens of people craving chicken sandwiches, every field had a game going and weekends were planned around battling for youth championships.

Nowadays, scoreboards are turned off during T-ball games, some league games are wrapped up before the sun sets and fields sit empty. There's yet to be a night this season when all seven of the fields were each in use for

games.

Maybe that's why the questions continue to pour in. The nightly visual of empty fields, contrasted against memories of nights spent at the ball-fields, make more and more wonder if youth baseball and softball are slowly dying.

A boiling point was reached June 5, when Gary Steele Karate took the field against Womack Printing in the boys 12-14 senior league. Both teams played

with seven players, the most they could manage to get to the game in the three-team league, which features just 28 players.

Both teams tried to play defense with three infielders and two outfielders in a league most closely associated in age with school teams. But is it doing them any good?

The WCMS baseball roster for 2018-19 released by coach Chad Young last month featured just two players currently playing in the McMinnville Youth Baseball and Softball leagues. The WCMS Lady Pioneer softball team, which won the Central Tennessee Conference in April, doesn't have any

returning players competing in the leagues.

Three years ago, in an exit interview with the *Southern Standard*, then athletic director Kevin Roberts shared an overall vision for what the leagues would become.

"We want to create leagues that are not just based on winning," Roberts, who was hired as the first city athletic director in January 2015, told the *Standard* in July 2015. "Our leagues needs to be based on fundamentally growing future players for our middle school and high school while having fun."

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Remember to proudly display your American flag on July 4!
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