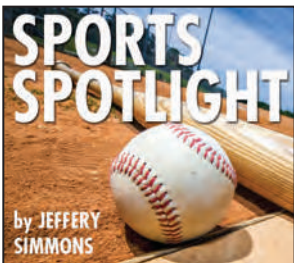


Teams flocking to travel ball for competition

As the McMinnville Youth Baseball and Softball leagues slowly wither away, one reason tends to be a trendy topic. Travel ball is cited over and over as a reason why less kids participate in local leagues, deciding instead to take their full teams and compete in week-end tournaments and Midstate leagues.

Travel ball is booming. According to a *TIME* article published in August 2017, youth sports has become a \$15 billion business – encompassing everything from tournament fees to private



lessons. Some teams charge player fees, others solicit sponsorship to pay entry fees – some that can run up to \$500 for a weekend.

Compared to a \$50-60 player fee charged by MYBS – an oft-criticized amount



Photos provided
AJ Whitman was a standout for Supreme Building, helping his team to a boys 6-8 championship. On the weekends, Whitman shows off his talents for the Renegades, which features players from Dickson and Murfreesboro.

for a youth league – travel ball seems to be an exorbitant cost. Yet many local players are exclusively playing travel ball now.

WCMS softball coach Joe Damon works with a travel team during the summer. Along with making long trips on the weekend, Damon has his team playing in a league in Manchester.

His reasoning is simple – he sees the benefit of travel ball.

“I attribute a lot of the success of our school team last year to travel ball,” said Damon, who led the Lady Pioneers to a CTC championship in his first season at the helm. “These girls have played a lot of ball.”

“Last year, we played in the league anyway. We really needed to be using a bigger ball [the girls 10-12 league uses an 11-inch ball, where 12U and school softball uses 12-inch ball]. We tried to play here first. We’d rather play here.”

Rob Cope, another local coach who takes a team to Manchester, chooses to travel for a similar reason. He doesn’t think the city league is interested in implementing the changes needed to improve local players.

“The last year when we played, the coaches didn’t want to sit any players so they voted to play all players,” said Cope, who also mentioned the size of the ball and the differences in pitching distances. “There were six girls in the outfield. What is that teaching them?”

“Manchester allows our teams to compete in the 14U league. McMinnville needs a league for girls older than



Nick Hollis has been leading the Her-icanes to championships for several years. The 14U Her-icanes recently won a tournament in Myrtle Beach. Members of the team are, front row, from left, Aleya Esparza, Shelby Roberts, Madison Hollis, Justus Turner and Brylee Sayer. Back row, coach Hollis, Karah Hood, Rhealee Johnson, Kassidy Davis, Terralyn Rice, Taylor Swan and coach Dave Davis.

ages 10-12. For our girls to get better and more competitive, a travel team is needed.”

The city leagues have seen a mass exodus of teams in the last decade – dropping from 47 teams in 2008 to 22 teams in 2018 in leagues for boys and girls ages 7 and older.

Cope believes the city isn’t offering a product that fits with the needs of today’s players.

“I don’t think the numbers are down because of travel ball. It is because the league refuses to meet the girls needs,” said Cope.

Parks and Recreations athletic director Terry Beard acknowledged local coaches

had made suggestions to get the league conformed to the standard distances and ball sizes traditionally used in softball.

Safety and participation stood out to him as reasons why the league plays at 35 feet for girls ages 10-12.

“We have 10-year-old girls out there that are small kids. Our concern is for those girls first moving up to that league is can they handle it?” said Beard. “We’re not opposed to making the changes.”

Beard added that a fall league will be offered to girls ages 13-14 and he is hoping teams will come back and give the Civic Center a chance. Participation in the

fall league could prompt change for next year, city officials confirmed.

Nick Hollis runs one of the most successful softball travel teams in the area. Hollis has been the leader for the Her-icanes for the better part of the decade and has also served as an assistant WCMS softball coach over the years.

His daughters, Erin and Madison, were both standouts for WCMS, the Her-icanes and on their city league teams. He believes the city league has its merits, while also realizing travel ball serves a great purpose as well.

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