

## **The Inclusive Power of Baseball: How a Game Can Help People With Learning Disabilities Move Away From the Fringes of Society**

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*A great share of children, adolescents, and adults with a learning disability (LD) are affected by social exclusion and its harmful effects on mental health. To tackle this challenge, it is important to understand how interactions between different people emerge and develop. One of the leading factors in this context is the existence of mutual interests or hobbies. Following team sports can be seen as a string that connects large parts of society. Watching matches together (whether on-site or in a public viewing venue) can remove barriers between otherwise often disconnected members of different groups of people (such as ones with and without LDs). There are several reasons enjoying baseball games together seems to serve this purpose especially well. These events take a rather long time, with many opportunities in between to interact; they are relatively affordable; they usually take place in a comparatively harmonious atmosphere; and they portray a kind of competition that conveys important life lessons about personal accountability in a corporate context. While individuals with LDs are still young and attend school, teachers can spark an interest in baseball in them through direct leisure education or by weaving baseball examples into their regular lessons. There are good reasons to assume that such efforts contribute to preventing and combating social isolation of individuals with LDs.*

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### **LEARNING DISABILITIES AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

Children, youth, and adults with any kind of learning disability (LD) are at an increased risk of being socially marginalized (Cavioni, Grazzani, & Ornaghi, 2017; Nowicki, Brown, & Dare, 2018). Regardless of whether LD is defined as “a disorder that is characterized by at least average intelligence with

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isolated developmental delays in very specific areas ... [or] a condition that is basically identical with what is commonly known as mild mental retardation” (Grünke & Morrison Cavendish, 2016, p. 1), individuals who experience severe barriers in learning are often excluded from opportunities to participate fully in their communities (Tilly, 2019) – and that to a greater degree than many people with other types of disabilities. Being academically challenged in whatever way seems to be an especially high barrier to inclusion. The reasons are manifold. Students with LDs drop out of school more often than their nonlabeled peers. When they get older and try to get a job, they are frequently confronted with unemployment. In many cases, it is more difficult for them than for people without LDs to form healthy relationships and start a family (Culley, 2010; Isaac, Raja, & Ramanan, 2010).

One challenge that is especially hurtful is the level of peer rejection that many individuals with LDs experience (Macrae, Maguire, & Melbourne, 2003; Vaughn, McIntosh, & Spencer-Rowe, 1991). Even though numerous public and private institutions go to great lengths to find ways to better include people with LDs in many aspects of society, these endeavors can only go so far. In school, for example, teachers can apply cooperative grouping whenever possible to establish and strengthen class community. However, regardless of how well these attempts seem to work during a lesson, as soon as recess comes or school is over, students with LDs are all too often left on their own. When it comes to who gets invited to a birthday party or who gets chosen as a playmate, these children and adolescents are very frequently left out (Potter, 2014). In fact, the Department of Health (2001) in the UK has recognized loneliness as one of the most common challenges associated with having an LD. A situation in which someone’s social needs are not met over a longer period of time usually has very detrimental effects on a person’s well-being and mental health (Lafferty, McConey, & Taggart, 2014).

### **SHARED INTERESTS AS A WAY TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER**

To find ways to foster the inclusion of people with LDs beyond institutionally implemented practices, one needs to be aware of the general dynamics that come into play when social relationships are formed. Research has shown that positive interactions occur more often when the respective individuals have a lot of things in common. A large overlap of characteristics promotes empathic understanding and intimate exchange (Berke, 1994). The way social connections emerge depends on its details on factors such as gender and age. For example, during middle childhood, girls tend toward developing more supportive kinds of relationships, whereas boys tend toward developing more adversarial ones, with interactions that are aimed at achieving status (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). However, as a general rule, similarities between individuals are assumed

to be one of the (if not THE) main driving forces for the development of more or less close interpersonal connections (Berndt, 2007; Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009).

In this context, shared interests play a major role in finding common ground for social exchange. Having the same hobby results in people meeting one another and provides a basis for conversation. In a groundbreaking study on the so-called “Social Butterfly Effect,” Bryden, Funk, Geard, Bullock, and Jansen (2011) documented that we choose our friends primarily because we have shared interests and not so much because we like them the most. One of the authors, Seth Bollock, elaborated on this point in an interview: “We often form friendships with people who are similar with us in some way. This could mean having a similar profession, interest, hobby, religion or political affiliation. It showed how cliques form around common shared interests, such as being fans of the same football club” (University of Southampton, 2010, p. 1).

#### **THE POTENTIAL OF TEAM SPORTING EVENTS TO CONNECT PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE**

In his explanation, Bollock already touches on a topic that seems to have an especially strong connecting power: the interest in following team sports. In fact, on the list of the 50 most watched television broadcasts in the United States in 2019, only five were not team sports related. Uncontested number one was the Super Bowl (American football), with almost 100 million viewers. At least 23 million people watched Game 7 of the World Series (baseball; Crupi, 2020). Big events like these, but even games during a regular season, spark conversations at supermarkets, in schoolyards, and at bus stops. If a person is interested in a popular sport such as football, basketball, or hockey, he or she can frequently find starting points for conversations with a lot of people in everyday life. For individuals with LDs, this can open doors that would have otherwise remained closed. In his widely received study on soccer fans with LDs, Southby (2013) reported that sports was often the only occasion for the participants to get into contact with people without disabilities. If they wore some merchandise in public or met another person who did, starting a conversation was all of a sudden easy. Unlike in other contexts, the protagonists had the impression that their viewpoints were appreciated as they voiced their opinions about the team lineup, player transfers, or predicted scores. When they talked with someone about sports, they were able to draw upon their “subcultural capital” (knowledge about rosters, leagues, club managements, etc.) to keep the conversation going. No other topic seemed to provide an equal amount of common ground for people with and without LDs to interact on an equal level.

### FIVE REASONS BASEBALL IS ESPECIALLY FITTED TO FOSTER SOCIAL INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Considering the various most popular team sports, some seem to be more conducive than others to serve the purpose of facilitating social inclusion of individuals with LDs. In this paper, we want to make a particular case for baseball and its unique potential to connect people from all walks of life, regardless of their academic capability. It is often called “America’s game” and is said to have been a force for national unity by bringing together the North and the South in mutual love for the sport after the Civil War (Ryczeck, 2014). There has been some concern about a perceived decline in the popularity of baseball in the United States. However, the actual number of total tickets sold and local television ratings paint a rather positive picture. Baseball still outperforms any other sport in attendance and is number one in local broadcasts (Love, 2019). However, the game is not only favored in North America. Japan’s Nippon Professional Baseball League, South Korea’s Baseball Organization League, and the Cuban National Series attract millions of fans each year to their stadiums (Langs, 2019).

- (1) *Baseball games last longer than other team sporting events.* If you have the chance to watch a whole game in a ballpark or a sports bar, you will be there together with other people for a long time. It will usually last between three and four hours. However, there is no stipulated regulatory time. The longest professional baseball game ever was played in 1981 by two teams from one of the minor leagues and lasted 33 innings, at 8 hours and 25 minutes (Barry, 2012). The well-known intergroup contact theory by Allport (1954) suggests that prejudice is reduced and sympathy is increased between different group members (such as those with and without disabilities) if they have opportunities to meet under appropriate conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). They need to get together and spend time with each other to dissolve perceived group barriers and build relationships. Brenneman (2017) investigated this effect in a sports context with fans at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). His findings confirm Allport’s theory and demonstrate that positive intergroup communication increases significantly if people from different cultures and backgrounds spend extensive time together watching sporting events. A baseball game provides this time more than American football, soccer, basketball, or hockey. Except for a rare number of local niche sports (such as cricket), no other event in this context takes that long. Furthermore, the number of baseball games in a particular league exceeds that in

other sports federations by far. In Major League Baseball (MLB), each team plays 162 matches during the regular season alone (that is, not counting spring training or the postseason). Thus, being a baseball fan with an LD means that you have plenty of opportunities to get together often with all different kinds of people to form positive relationships during games.

- (2) *Baseball games allow for more socializing in between the action than other team sporting events.* Even though the gist of the intergroup contact theory appears rather basic, it is not a simple model that explains the emergence of every positive group interaction by one basic principle. Instead, research has shown that the effects vary widely from context to context (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019). One moderating variable seems to be the way time is spent with each other. In family studies, it is a well-documented phenomenon that not all types of parental time benefit child development (Hsin & Felfe, 2014). Sitting together quietly in front of a television set is not the same as engaging in a meaningful conversation. According to respective studies, children need both “quality time” and “quantity time” with their parents to develop into stable and secure personalities (Stanley, 2011). However, there needs to be ample opportunity to give attention to each other as opposed to just sitting in the same ballpark or sports bar. One aspect that makes baseball different from any other popular team sport is the fact that the amount of time that players are actually in the game is extraordinarily low. According to the well-known GeekSportsGuide (<https://geeksportsguide.com/how-long-is-a-baseball-game/>), the average duration of a real MLB match, without counting the lost time, is only about 18 minutes. That means that fans have several hours in a stadium or a pub where they do not need to focus on the diamond and still do not miss any of the game. Thus, baseball provides room for conversation like no other sport and has a lot in common with a picnic at the beach.
- (3) *Baseball games are less expensive than other team sporting events.* Attending sports games can be very expensive. Especially for individuals with LDs, this can be a serious barrier to participation. As indicated above, they are more often affected by unemployment than people without disabilities, and if they are working, they frequently hold jobs with relatively low salary grades (Culley, 2010). Referring to the aforementioned list of the 50 most watched television broadcasts, American football seems to be the most popular sport in the United States. However, going to see a match of the National

Football League costs on average about three times as much as an MLB game. Additionally, watching a National Hockey League or National Basketball Association team play is about twice as expensive as going to an MLB ballpark (Statista Research Department, 2016). Ticket prices of around 10 dollars for a regular season match during a weekday are no exception. Following the minor leagues is yet less costly (Schilling, 2018). Thus, even financially restrained people with LDs can usually afford to see a baseball game once in a while without busting their budget.

- (4) *Fan violence occurs less often during baseball games than during other team sporting events.* Coming together as a community of supporters has a lot of positive effects, but with a growing trend of violent incidents, there is also a less glamorous side to it (Wingate, 2008). However, occurrences of riots are not equally distributed over all popular team sports. In his detailed analysis to locate newspaper stories on fan violence in North America between 1985 and 2004, Lewis (2007) documented that the least excesses occurred in baseball. As Dave Peterson (personal interview, June 24, 2015), the general manager of the Worcester Bravehearts (a summer collegiate team) put it, “There are no rivalries in a league like this, such as between Manchester United and Manchester City in soccer – the fans of each team hate the other team. In baseball, there is competition, but there is hardly any hatred. We have opposing fans come in and we welcome them with open arms. This is all about the experience of being entertained.” According to Yates and Gillespie (2002), the different degrees of fan violence are correlated with the extent to which violence is present on the field, the court, or the rink, respectively. The authors asserted that “athletes’ actions have become . . . cultural notions of acceptable conduct” (Yates & Gillespie, 2002, p. 151). They stated that during the early 20th century, President Theodore Roosevelt wanted to abolish American football altogether by executive order because of its brutal nature. In hockey, the authors reported, players are even under pressure to fight. Baseball, on the other hand, is a noncontact sport with very few episodes of players attacking each other. Of course, every incident of violence on and off the diamond is one too many. However, if one had to pick a team sport for individuals with LDs that is suitable for watching together in an atmosphere where people can get into friendly conversations, baseball would be the obvious choice.
- (5) *Baseball games teach life lessons that other team sporting events do not to the same extent.* Billie Jean King, former world number-one ten-

nis player, once stated, “Sports teaches you character, it teaches you to play by the rules, it teaches you to know what it feels like to win and lose, it teaches you about life” (Steidinger, 2020, p. 1). There is little doubt that there is a lot to learn about society’s values from individual athletes or teams who play against each other: discipline, respect, resilience, and much more (Anderson & White, 2010). However, it can be argued that the lessons that baseball can teach go beyond the general principles that any team sport typifies. Joseph Paul Torre, a nine-time All-Star former MLB player, stated it in a nutshell: “Baseball is a team sport played by individuals for themselves” (McCollister, 2020, p. 199). What this means is that there are many players on a field, but it all comes down to the one-on-one battle between pitcher and batter. Although other sports are also wrapped up in statistics, in baseball, every skill is measured and analyzed. It is a game of numbers, much more than any other popular team sport. What is striking, though, is the fact that the numbers almost exclusively relate to ways that individual player performance is captured. Those in offense are rated by their batting average, their on-base percentage, and their home run ratio, and those in defense by their fielding average, their winning percentage, their opponents’ batting average, and so on. A lot of these dozens of indices need quite a bit of mathematical expertise to calculate. However, the only relevant team statistic seems to be a simple won-lost percentage. Lawson (2019) rightly pointed out that in basketball, football, and hockey, it is frequently not possible to pinpoint the blame. However, in baseball, the contribution that each player made to a failure or a triumph can be exactly quantified. Additionally, to succeed is hard. Theodore Williams, former MLB player and Hall of Famer, stated, “Baseball is the only field of endeavor where a man can succeed three times out of ten and be considered a good performer” (Dickson, 2011, p. 236). Thus, baseball teaches you more than any other popular team sport that success is hard earned and that you are accountable for your actions. All too often, people with disabilities are told that they are victims of society. It is important to send them a constant message of encouragement that motivates them to take up responsibility and use their abilities to reach their potential (Karasin, 2017). Baseball is predestined to do just that.



### **WAYS TO SPARK AN INTEREST IN BASEBALL IN YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

*Leisure education* is a term that stands for any organized instruction about how to spend one's free time in a meaningful way (Sivan, 2017). Sivan and Stebbins (2011) explained that the concept "was first acknowledged in the educational community in the US in 2018, which set the 'worthy use of leisure' as one of the seven objectives of the school" (p. 30). Helping young people to develop interests that lead them to spend their recreational time expediently is certainly best possible during compulsory schooling. Almost the whole population of children and adolescents can be reached. Besides, in elementary or secondary school, individuals are still comparatively moldable. Thus, it makes sense to provide room for some explicit or implicit leisure education during that time. There is probably never a more effective opportunity to offer youngsters guidance on which meaningful recreational experience they can pursue than while they are still school aged.

When it comes to promoting an interest in baseball through leisure education, there are certainly many options for teachers. One way is to instruct students directly in the rules of the sport, how to play it, and the teams that are located close by. Another alternative is to use corresponding examples during regular lessons. In math, teachers could demonstrate a principle such as percentage calculation by generating the on-base percentage, the winning percentage, or the slugging percentage of local baseball stars. In business, they could practice computing fictional earnings and expenses of a franchise. In computer science, they could instruct their students on how to create a Web page with information about their respective high school league. In American literature, they could pick classical baseball novels as a central theme, such as *The Art of Fielding* by Chad Harbach, *Wheat that Springeth Green* by J. F. Powers, or *The Might Have Been* by Joseph M. Schuster. In social studies, they could broach the story of how Jackie Robinson challenged the way Americans thought about race. In English, they could guide their students on how to compose a newspaper article about a game of their high school team. The options are limitless.

### **PERSPECTIVES FOR DRAWING ON BASEBALL'S FULL POTENTIAL FOR THE INCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

As mentioned earlier, baseball is often depicted as a prime factor in reconciling the North and the South after the Civil War. People who had previously resented each other got together during games and sat side by side for several hours. This gave them plenty of opportunities to talk. They shared the same passion for the sport, enjoyed their hot dog, and just wanted to get away from their everyday worries for a short moment. It is very hard to hate a group of people if you know some of them and realize that they have so much more in common



than they have disparity with you. Baseball was able to play a part in uniting the nation, and it can certainly help to build relationships between people with and without LDs. Children, adolescents, and adults “who do not meet the minimum requirements with regard to their academic progress” (Grünke & Morrison Cavendish, 2016, p. 1) all too often live their lives on the fringes of society. This must not be accepted as normal. The scientific community that is concerned with the study of LDs is obliged to find ways to improve the situation of people who are affected. Although helping them to overcome learning barriers on their way to acquiring basic reading, spelling, and math skills is certainly of vital importance, focusing exclusively on academics is not enough to set them on a path toward a fulfilling life. Humans are social creatures. They need to mingle, talk, network, and, once in a while, experience something as a group that they all enjoy. Baseball provides a platform for this and renders the possibility for individuals with LDs to feel like (and be) full-fledged members of a mainstream group.

The recommendations that can be read out of this paper concerning ways to combat social exclusion of people with LDs are certainly not to be understood as a quick fix for a very intricate and earnest problem. Being pushed to the edge of society is a multidimensional process with many dynamics that make it extremely complex (Rudert, Greifeneder, & Williams, 2019). It may even be utopic to imagine a society free from exclusion. However, the reasoning, the arguments, and the suggestions in this paper might still serve as encouragement for practitioners working with individuals with LDs to help them step out of their isolation by engaging in activities that bring them together with like-minded people (going to baseball games or watching them together on television in a public place being one possible option). For researchers, this might be an invitation to look into the topic of baseball and social inclusion more deeply and to conduct more studies in line with the aforementioned ones by Brenneman (2018) and Southby (2013). Social exclusion is a terrible disease, and anything that contributes to tackling it sensibly is to be welcomed.

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