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## ***An American Legion Dilemma: The Issue of Race in Junior Baseball***

From the late eighteenth century to the end of World War II, Organized Baseball excluded African-American players. This situation thus reflected prevailing social attitudes in the United States. The effects of racism and segregation also influenced youth baseball, including the American Legion's nationwide program for teenagers. Begun in 1926 as a means to teach citizenship values to young men, American Legion Junior Baseball rapidly gained in popularity across the nation. Regarding race, unlike Organized Baseball, the Legion did not have a national policy on barring African-Americans from Junior Baseball. However, Legionnaires south of the Mason-Dixon line did follow the Southern custom forbidding blacks and whites from playing against each other. When in 1934 an integrated team from the North advanced to play in a Legion tournament held in North Carolina, a controversy ensued, The Legion's national leadership deferred to the Southerners on this issue and, as a result, gave a tacit endorsement to Jim Crow regulations. Furthermore, the organization did little to prevent the occurrence of similar incidents in the future. When racial controversies did occur in the following decades, Junior Baseball leaders continued to uphold local Southern customs.

Based on letters, newspaper clippings, and committee meeting minutes in the archival collections of the American Legion headquarters in Indianapolis, this paper seeks

to provide an analysis of the racial incidents in Junior Baseball. In so doing, this work will explore the attitudes of the participants in these controversies. This includes the integrated teams, the coaches, the Southerners who hosted the tournaments, and Legionnaires who were confronted with these incidents. This paper also endeavors to explain why the Legion took the position of deferring to segregation and inequality when they had the stated goal of promoting democracy with their youth baseball program.

As part of the discussion, this work will also describe how the policy followed by the Legionnaires had a larger societal impact. Specifically, Junior Baseball both reflected and perpetuated the unequal status quo in American sports regarding race. For example, the influence of the established attitudes in this country, prior to World War II, is a major reason why Legion leaders chose to avoid promoting the potentially divisive social agenda of allowing blacks to participate on an equal footing. The Legion, however, could have altered this situation since it did have opportunities to advance the cause of civil rights with its youth program. Instead, the organization's policies with Junior Baseball served to reinforce the traditional norms of discrimination in sports. In this respect, the experience of Legion Baseball demonstrates how a youth sports program can both reflect and promote prevailing societal values.