

# Amazon Trades Charity for Ideology

Eighty-five years ago, Carl Stotz had an epiphany of sorts while he was passing a lazy summer day playing catch with his two nephews and tripped over a lilac bush while chasing a wild pitch. While nursing his wounds he had a flash of brilliance that would forever change the lives of children, families, communities, and small businesses around the world.

Decades later, he recalled to author Lance Van Auken for his book *Play Ball! The Story of Little League Baseball* what he told his nephews:

“How would you boys like to play on a baseball team? How would you like to play in uniforms, just like the major league players use? With real equipment – a fresh supply of balls and bats, with catcher’s gear. Umpires would call the games so arguments about balls and strikes, catch or no catch, fair or foul, would not interrupt play. Coaches would teach players. Someone would keep score. At the end of the year, the best teams would play for the championship of the league. What do you think of that, boys?”

In short order, Stotz enlisted help from a couple of local brothers, George and Bert Bebble, and gathered local 9- to 12-year-old boys, enough to form three teams, and came up with the name “Little League” after some encouragement from a local sports editor.

Stotz then modified the existing rules in Major League Baseball to suit the size of his young players. The only thing missing now was uniforms for the players, and that turned out to be the most difficult aspect of his vision.

Stotz was rejected a whopping 56 times before the first local business, Lycoming Dairy, said it would fork up the \$30 needed

to sponsor a team, a pledge followed by Lundy Lumber and Jumbo Pretzel. Each business had a team named after it with its name stitched on the back of the jerseys.

It was a contribution that paved the way for Little League Baseball.

Stotz uniquely understood that baseball wasn't just a game. For him, it was a way to keep young boys out of trouble and off the streets by providing them with an opportunity to play and learn. It was also a way to provide small businesses a way to be more connected to the community, where they could both contribute to its betterment as well as deepen their bond.

Since that magical summer of '38, millions of boys and girls have played Little League Baseball. There are approximately 2 million boys and girls who will play Little League worldwide this year in over 80 countries and all 50 states.

Most of those coaches are the men and women Stotz envisioned at the get-go: local parents and community members like Nick Fioravanti in western Pennsylvania who started coaching when his children were younger and is still volunteering despite both of his boys aging out of the program.

Fioravanti was busy Wednesday putting together a list of local small businesses to which he was about to reach out to support the teams in the Franklin Regional Athletic Association for the next season.

"I will be reaching out to over 100 small-business owners in Export, Delmont, and Murrysville with the hope that we get 42 of them to sponsor all of our teams," he said of the 23 baseball teams and 19 softball teams that need small-business support.

It costs \$300 for a business to sponsor a team, and the business gets its name on the back of the jerseys, no different than the Lycoming Dairy did 85 years ago – a

continuum that reflects Stotz's belief you need buy-in from the entire community to keep Little League Baseball a part of something bigger than just baseball.

"We have a couple of larger companies like the local car dealerships. However, the majority of our team sponsors have been smaller companies like landscape companies, flooring companies, insurance agencies, barber shops, hardware stores, and local mechanics and grocers. That investment pays dividends for both the kids and the businesses. The kids get uniforms and maybe we are able to fix up a field, and the businesses are able to show support for the future of our communities," he explained.

Many local athletic associations aren't as lucky as the FRAA in that they are not surrounded by a robust local small-business community that can support the teams, especially in rural and inner-city neighborhoods where retail storefronts have closed because of the economy, crime or e-commerce monopolies like Amazon.

Nine years ago when Amazon announced AmazonSmile, which contributed 0.5% of every purchase made by a participating customer to an organization of their choice, a lot of Little Leagues urged their community to name their local team as their beneficiary so that the league wouldn't collapse nor would the parents be forced to foot the bill.

Last year alone, the Baldwinsville Little League in New York encouraged its community to use AmazonSmile as a way to support the local program. So did the Chesterfield, Taylorsville, San Jose, Hillsborough, Monarch, Clark, North City, La Habra City, Cascade, Maugansville, Philadelphia and Mukilteo Little Leagues – and hundreds more. Many of them needed to find a way to fill the gap that small businesses in their area cannot fill, businesses that either are hurting or have been driven out of business by Amazon's business practices such as free shipping and deep discounts that make

competition impossible for the little guy.

Last week, the company announced that beginning Feb. 1, the centralized monopoly will no longer help support local charities, including youth athletic associations. Instead, it will donate to social justice and social responsibility initiatives that work on a larger scale, like affordable housing and other entities that align with *its* values.

Sign-ups for Little Leagues and their sponsors begin in earnest this week. It will be interesting to see what impact Amazon's decision has on youth baseball and all other types of youth programming, such as art camps that have depended on AmazonSmile to make up for essentially what Amazon in many ways took away.

If there is a moral to this, it's that centralizing power is always a terrible idea, and too often, we don't see that terrible idea until damage has been done to something important in the communities we call home.

Stotz was a moralist. He was deeply loyal to the ethos that he created around how Little League Baseball was organized: community buy-in and a strict adherence to the importance of volunteerism to make the whole thing work, from small businesses sponsoring the teams to parent coaches.

Stotz was eventually pushed out of the youth organization he founded by a New York City businessman who ran the U.S. Rubber Company. Stotz sued, accusing the organization of losing sight of its mission and purpose – the court ruled against him and broke his heart – for the next 40 years. Despite never moving out of Williamsport, he never attended another Little League game again, nor did he ever forgive the powers that pushed him out.

He did, however, never stop talking about the early days of the league to anyone who would stop by and listen to him. He died in June 1992 at the age of 82.

He wrote of his love of the game in his autobiography:

“During my years of travel around the country for Little League, I was frequently on the road at the time children were walking to country schools. Whenever I saw a boy with books, lunch box, ball glove, and wearing a baseball cap, I felt amply repaid for my efforts to help others like him get the chance to play under conditions suited to their size and ability.”

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