

## *Martial Arts Little League?*

Little League baseball has been around a long time (since 1939). It may have been the first after-school activity in contemporary times. Carl Stotz, a resident of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, brought the great American sport of baseball with its emphasis of teamwork, fair play, and healthy competition to kids while helping them learn a sport and giving them a few life-lessons under the watchful eye of the adult coach, the guy next door.

Over the years Little League also brought irate parents screaming favoritism, kids who could not make the team, those who were mocked for missing a catch, and an occasional win-at-any-cost attitude that stood fair play on its head.

Martial arts for kids came to popularity roughly thirty years later. They were a different type of physical activity: not a sport and certainly not a team activity, they nevertheless fostered elements of achievement and support for the group. Martial arts were about self-defense and self-development. They kept kids' interest, giving them a goal to shoot for. The popularity and effectiveness of these rank goals eventually meant that promotions would be done more frequently and given for less accomplishment. So shorter-term goals could be created, schools started entering competitions, some competing monthly, some weekly. This would, it was argued, concentrate the kids' minds and give them a reason to train, since long-term and rather indistinct goals (such as being a better person and being healthier) did not enthuse them.

The assumption was correct. Longer term, less distinct goals do not enthuse kids naturally. Kids, like many adults, are attracted to instant gratification. That's why MacDonalD's has a chain of stores and Chez Robért does not. That's why there is instant cash, but no instant savings. That's why there are young couples with maxed-out credit cards and only a few retirees with a debt-free future ahead of them. Kids used to be taught to delay gratification or at least have a balance between fun now and fun later. It was up to adults and the social structures set up by adults to teach them this important concept for their own good. This is one reason that traditional martial arts had such promise.

In the traditional martial arts study, there is no easy row to hoe. Many kids, used to Johnny getting a blue belt in 3 weeks and his parents bragging about Johnny's earth-shattering achievement, figure it's better to be Johnny than to delay gratification. It is better to have fun and rewards now because, heck, no one knows if there'll be any goodies later on. Even the parents of the rare kid willing to take a harder road to character building and a strong work ethic, often terrified that their children might experience the stress of "failure," want to make it easier for them, asking Sensei for more frequent promotions, more incentives to stimulate the child's interest, something to light Billy boy's enthusiasm for the martial arts. Perhaps they are right, but that is because both parent and child are so ready to adjust standards so their child won't "fail," thus supposedly maintaining interest.

There is nothing wrong with a kids' program that is fun as well as educational. There is nothing wrong with incentives carefully placed along the path. However, strewing the path with incentives and rewards is like printing up a few billion extra dollars so people will feel that they have more money — pretty soon, the dollars are worth very little and it is hard to get back to a gold standard.

Martial arts can be an alternative to team sports, but not if a kid is encouraged to compete weekly and destroy the opposition so he feels good enough to continue the art that supposedly builds his confidence and self-esteem. The arts may not always do that perfectly by themselves, but too much tweaking the structure just results in less desirable alternatives and more of a Martial Arts Little League.