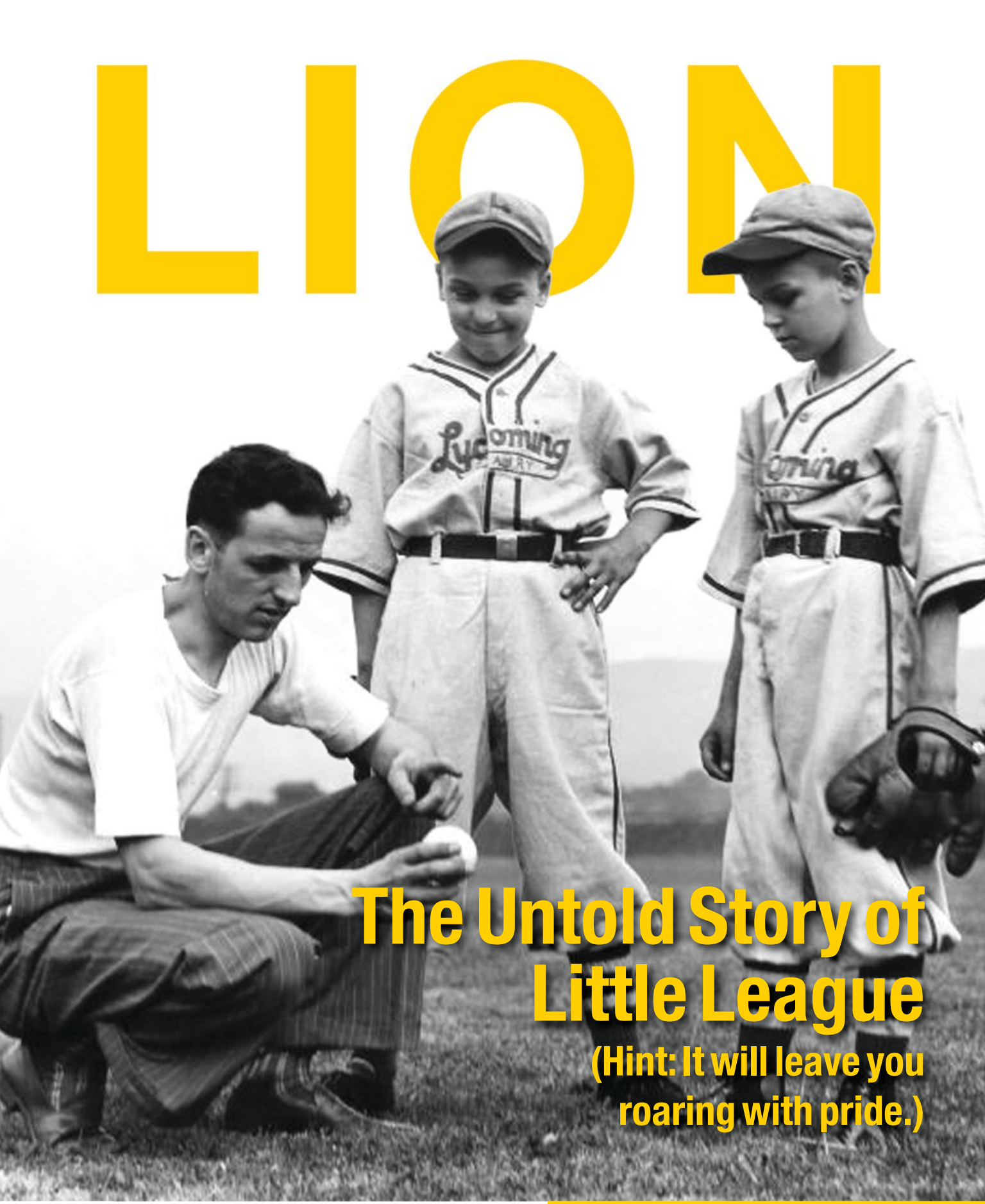
LION



The Untold Story of Little League

(Hint: It will leave you roaring with pride.)

MAY 201! lionmagazine.org

Lions Clubs International

[The Big Picture

A Grand Stand for Youth Baseball

Little League founder Carl Stotz (center with ball) visits one of the earlier teams. Stotz later became a Lion, and Lions clubs helped popularize Little League (story on page 24).

Melvin at the Bat

Maybe our founder Melvin Jones had a premonition that a Lion would establish Little League (story on page 24). Or maybe just about any picnic in 1914 included a few innings of the national pastime. The picnic at Dellwood Park in the Lockport area near Chicago was for members and family of the Business Circle in Chicago, which Jones led and became part of Lions Clubs when it began in 1917. That's Melvin in the batter's box and on the mound, women competing in a nail hammering race and Business Circle members, well, standing in an uneven circle.

Lions and Little League

The big-time support of Lions clubs helped a Lion popularize a new phenomenon called Little League.

BY JAY COPP

Dark braids flowing down her back, Mo'ne Davis fires a blazing fastball. The batter swings futilely and trots to the dugout—striking out in Little League is no reason for not hustling. The crowd of thousands at the Little League World Series in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania, roars. Within days Mo'ne will grace the cover of Sports Illustrated, shimmy with Jimmy Kimmel on late-night TV and become a national sensation.

But watching Mo'ne pitch last August was not what drew crowds to South Williamsport, nor is the prospect of fame or athletic excellence the reason parents sign up 2.6 million children each year for Little League. The world's largest organized youth sports activity, Little League has entrenched itself into the landscape of community life, as predictable in the spring and summer as grass growing and flowers budding. Boys and girls relish wearing their brand-new uniforms, thwacking the ball past fielders and clapping teammates on their backs.

Parents look forward to seeing their children test their skills in an arena larger than their backyard, and, during the lulls of a normal game, trading small talk in the stands with other parents, soon to be friends. A game is more than a game. "Little League itself represents an essence of America," intones venerable baseball broadcaster Vin Scully in a 2014 documentary on Little League.

Hustling about the Little League complex this day are Williamsport Lions George and Joe Girio, brothers and former Little League parents, managers and players. Their memories and experiences of the game stay with them. "I remember the flannel uniform, the maroon trim. Our sponsor was Mosser's Leather Company. Our wool hat with leather shrunk in the heat," recalls George, a 66-year-old who helps run his family's insurance and real estate companies. "After the game we might get together at someone's house. Have hot dogs. Made a lot of friends that way. I had lots of friendships through baseball."

Like George, Joe coached his son. "It was something we could share, something we could do as a family. He was a good player—a lot like me, not big. I remember a good game he pitched once."

The Girio brothers take two weeks off from their businesses each summer to be at the World Series. They're not spectating: they volunteer as "team uncles," making sure their assigned team knows where to go, what to do, when to get their headshots for ESPN. They even collect the players' uniforms for laundry, sometimes working until midnight.

The Girios have a combined 44 years as team uncles. Other Lions have also served in that role or volunteered as ushers or security at the World Series. The Girios and other Lion volunteers are proudly following in a tradition. Lions clubs helped support and popularize Little League since its first days in 1939.

In fact, the central role of Lions in Little League is as solid as the life-sized statue that stands outside Howard Lamade Stadium. Memorialized in marble is the founder of Little League, Lion Carl Stotz.

'Wee Wizards'

It's hard to imagine today, but after World War II Little League was mostly unknown. The idea of boys in uniforms playing on manicured diamonds with umpires, managers and a scoreboard was preposterous. Kids played sandlot baseball on scruffy fields with torn gloves and lumpy baseballs. The better diamonds, usually taken by men's leagues, were outsized for boys in any case. Baseball was the national pastime but organized baseball smacked of privilege and spare cash, a luxury for most families. "We played baseball all day," says George Girio. "It gave us something to do. People didn't have money. They didn't have computers or an iPhone. It was a struggle to get a few bucks to go to the movies."

By 1949, since begun in Williamsport a decade before, 300 Little Leagues were operating in 11 states. Americans were beginning to notice. The Saturday Evening Post, then the preeminent magazine at a time when magazines loomed much larger than television, dispatched a wide-eyed Harry Paxton to report on the new phenomenon: organized youth baseball. "Williamsport has started something pretty remarkable in the way of baseball for small boys," Paxton reported. "It is known as Little League baseball, and it is a scale model of the major league game. In the Little Leagues, teams of 8-to12-year old players compete with all the atmosphere and trappings of the big time."

The lengthy story included six color photos, one of which showed an especially small player signing his autograph for smiling minor leaguers. "It is probable that the

Carl Stotz (left) speaks at the 1965 Little League World Series. With him are a player and legendary broadcaster Mel Allen.

surface still only has been scratched, for the Little League idea seems to fascinate both boys and adult sponsors wherever it is introduced," Paxton presciently observed.

The article includes a photo of Stotz, who smiles a bit guardedly. Stotz, 39, is still slight of build. Those who knew him best—his daughters, the players on the early teams he managed, volunteers from Williamsport who helped get Little League off the ground—described him as naturally quiet but fiercely determined and at ease around boys. "Stotz is no hot-eyed zealot," wrote Paxton. "He is unassuming and amiable of manner. But the hot-eyed characters have a way of burning out. Carl Stotz has the patience and persistence to stick with his dream, day in and day out, year after year, until, little by little, it became real."

The GIs who returned from World War II had defeated Germany and Japan. Now they had to build a nation. Housing tracts sprouted. Schools and malls opened. Parents joined PTAs, volunteered at church ministries and founded Lions, Rotary and Kiwanis clubs. Baseball, a wholesome, outdoor game, was part of the new society, too. The LION Magazine noticed—and urged Lions to follow the lead of Stotz, a fellow Lion, to enable boys (and eventually girls) to grow into solid citizens by playing an organized sport.

In 1951, Bill Kehoe, the sports editor of GRIT, penned a lengthy feature story on Little League for the LION. By then Stotz had expanded his Little League to 37 states. Nearly 2,800 teams played in 650 leagues. Lions clubs sponsored 69 teams. But that figure grossly understated the importance of Lions to Little League. As Kehoe explained, many clubs contributed funds, labor and materials essential for equipment, playing fields, publicity and organization.

The LION article included action photos of the "wee wizards" in uniforms sliding into bases and dashing around the field. But the article also was intended as a call to action for Lions. Kehoe pointed out the many reasons clubs should support the "small-fry teams." The expense was relatively minor. "What does it cost? It's an unbelievably low figure—$800 for the entire four-team league." The rewards for the boys were priceless. The managers, chosen on the basis of character, "exert a great amount of influence upon the lives of youngsters whose habits and intellects are in their most formative stages. Therein lies the secret of success of the Little League as an outstanding project for a Lions club. With the proper type of men as leaders no greater achievements could be scored in the boys and girls activities field."

In an era where the ranks of teenagers swelled, as did fears of hooliganism, the LION offered further evidence of the value of organized sports. "Lions clubs and other sponsoring groups have recognized Little League as a powerful force in fighting juvenile delinquency," Kehoe wrote.

The Lilac Bush

Karen Stotz Myers, 72, Carl's younger daughter, still lives in Williamsport. Near her home is the field her father and others built. Little League was a genuinely grass-roots operation. "My family was there every night," she says. "The men put up the fence, improved the field, installed the bleachers. My mother painted the fence."

After Little League was established in Williamsport and neighboring towns, Stotz had hit the road, like Johnny Appleseed, spreading the gospel of youth baseball. He went to Lions meetings, school boards, Sunday school classes, YMCAs and other groups that gathered together fathers and their boys.

Stotz was quiet by nature but loquacious when promoting Little League.

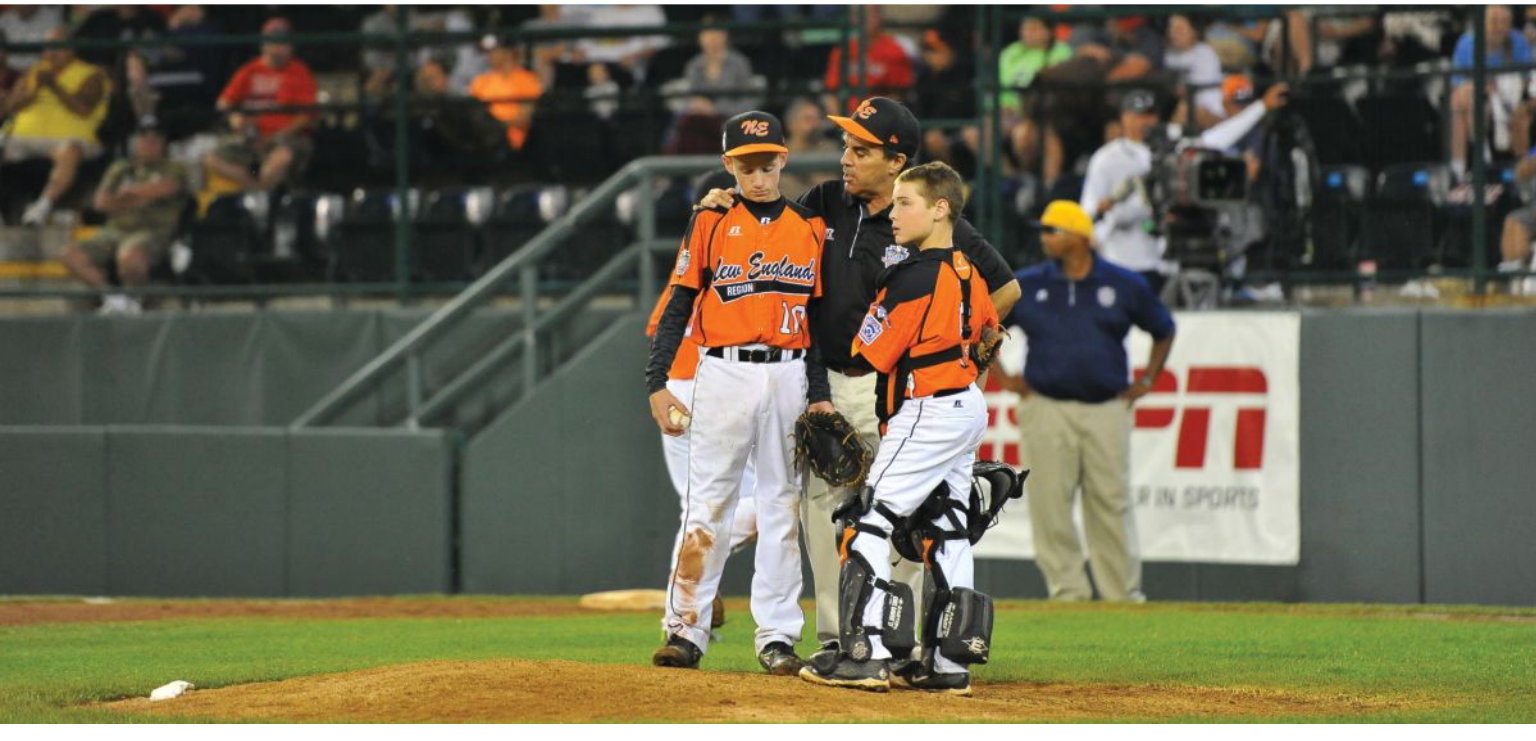
Myers was 10 or 11 when her whole family went west to California in 1952 or 1953 on a "family vacation." She recalls, "People would come within a 30-mile radius. Whether it was Lions or Rotarians, they made arrangements at a hotel or other place. There was a meeting at lunch, then in the evening, sometimes at breakfast." Her father passed out the rules and regulations, detailed the fees and told of the joy boys found in Little League. "He was on the quiet side. But when it came to Little League, he could talk," says his daughter. "He had no notes. He knew the subject. He spoke from the heart."

A clerk at Pure Oil Company when he began Little League, Stotz played baseball as a youth—but not as much as he liked. He was maybe 150 pounds at 5-8. Older, bigger boys in church leagues dominated games. It was likewise in track in high school. "He had to wait for the stars to graduate so he could run," says his daughter. Stotz knew what it was like to be outside the lines, to be willing to play but not given a chance.

A lilac bush was the inspiration for Little League. It seems like a founding myth story, a made-up tale. But it's true. One August day in 1938 Stotz tossed a baseball around with his nephews, Jimmy and Major Gehron, in the yard of his home. Stotz chased after an errant toss and scraped his ankle against the sharp stems of a lilac bush. He limped to a porch, and suddenly an idea burst into his head. He called his nephews over and, as he recounted innumerable times, proposed to them: "How would you like to play on a regular team, with uniforms, a new ball for every game and bats you could really swing?" His nephews didn't need to think about it. "Who would we play? Will people ever come to watch us? Do you think a band could ever come to play?"

Stotz never forgot the joy he had playing baseball as a boy. Here he chats with the Hampton, Virginia, team during the 1954 Little League Baseball World Series.

Australian players (above) celebrate a pivotal play. Mo'ne Davis (right) throws hard at the 2014 Little League World Series. Rhode Island Manager Dave Belisle (below) drew plaudits for his upbeat pep talks.



Stotz gathered a core group of volunteers to get the league going, and the Gehrons played on one of the first three teams, Stotz's Lycoming Dairy Farms team. He had gone to 56 businesses to seek a sponsor before the dairy assented. The idea was so unheard of—and times so hard—that it took herculean persistence by the mild-mannered clerk to get business owners to pony up.

Little League was a homegrown affair. Stotz carved the first home plate from rubber he found in his father's basement. His sister made the other bases from scratch using white canvas filled with wood shavings.

For years Little League was run on a shoestring—Stotz's shoestrings. Out of his own pocket he paid $3.67 for a catcher's mask and 12 baseballs and 82 cents for

LIONS AND LITTLE LEAGUE WERE A PERFECT MATCH: VOLUNTEERISM IS AT THE HEART OF BOTH.

postage. (Myers has saved her father's ledgers, which occasionally are displayed at the Little League Museum in Williamsport.) "My dad took home $80 a week. $40 went to Little League," she says. Stotz economized at home to pay bills. He walked to work, saving his gas coupons to run the lawn mower to cut the baseball field.

Stotz created a baseball league tailored to the age of his players. He experimented with varying lengths to first base. Using a stopwatch and wadded-up newspapers as bases, he set the length to give a fielder a decent chance to throw out a runner on a cleanly fielded play and to give the batter the opportunity to reach first safely on a slow roller.

A clean-cut man from a church-going family as well as a father who did not drink or smoke, Stotz conceived of Little League as a moral exemplar. "The umpires had to wear collars. The managers had to set an example. The boys could not act in a way not considered morally right," says his daughter.

Stotz, who had considered the ministry when younger, had found his calling. He was selfless and giving. Art Kline, who played in the Stotz's first league and later worked for Little League, recalled trying out for a team and playing the outfield with a first baseman's mitt. A man at the tryout gave him a mitt for $5, since he said he knew his dad, and told him he could pay him back 25 cents a week. The benefactor was Stotz. "Carl was probably as good with young children as anyone you could meet," says Kline in "Play Ball, the Story of Little League Baseball."

Such kindness was typical of her dad, says Myers. "He was hands-on warm. If he was with a boy, you'd see him with his hands on his shoulder," she says.

Chartered in 1923, the Williamsport Lions Club was a vital part of the town by 1938, and individual Lions presumably supported Stotz early on. No doubt understanding the value of becoming a member himself, Stotz joined the Williamsport Newberry Lions Club in 1949. He now had at his back the fastest-growing service club in the nation. He remained a Lion until at least 1957, a period of time in which Little League—and Lions Clubs—grew rapidly.

Lions and Little League were a perfect match: volunteerism is at the heart of both. Volunteers have sustained Little League through its 76 years. Today 1 million volunteers support it. The whole story of Little League—its hard-scrabble start, its reliance on volunteers, its ethos of fair play and sportsmanship, its roots in community—speak to a predominant theme. "It really is an American story," says Myers.

The Summer Sport

History matters. Today is a culmination of yesterdays. But Little League is a lived experience, a ritual repeated each spring in thousands of communities. Such as in West Windsor Township in New Jersey. A prosperous place with tree-lined streets and well-tended homes, the town of 27,000 sits near Princeton, where the train takes an hour to reach New York City.

The West Windsor Lions Club purchased the uniforms for the new Little League in town in 1956. Little League has been a town staple since then. Nearly 450 boys and girls played on 60 teams last year. Rimmed by a row of trees and attractive homes and not visible from the road, the sprawling R.J. Ward Complex is the pride of the West Windsor Little League. It's all here—three fields with lights, covered dugouts, a press box, manicured grass and large crowds on game nights.

The league has had its share of accomplished players and successful all-star teams. But it sustains itself by how it bonds parents with children and then families with other families. "My husband and I spent a lot of time at games," says Ellen Vogt, the league president whose three boys played in the league. "We'd be there with our other kids. It was a way for us to be together. It was a way for us to be close not just with our family but our community."

The Vogts moved to West Windsor from the Chicago area in 1999, so Little League was a natural port of entry into the community. "My husband and I made many friends through many nights spent together in the bleachers. A group of us still get together once a month. We call ourselves the MOB, or mothers of boys," says Vogt.

For the Vogt children, joining had been a no-brainer. "When we moved here the first thing my son said was, 'When can I sign up?'" says Vogt.

Little League gets a grip and doesn't let go. One son of Vogt's, Andrew, didn't leave Little League when he aged out. He umpired, managed the concessions and coordinated T-ball before he left for college.

In the rhythm of the life of a community, Little League flows somewhere down a middle passageway. "Playing baseball is a kind of a rite of passage," says Vogt. "One interesting thing about our league is that if you come to our field in the evening you see kids too old to play hanging around the fields when there is a game on. It's a quintessential feeling—baseball under the lights. It's a safe place. It's a good place to be."

Read the 1951 LION story on Little League.

Watch short ESPN videos on Little League featuring former U.S. President George W. Bush and major leaguers CC Sabathia and Mike Mussina and a video on the founding of Little League.

A baseball diamond remains a good place to be, and multitudes of Lions clubs continue to sponsor teams in Little League, maintain or own the fields or raise funds for equipment, scoreboards and operating expenses.

Lasting Charisma

In South Williamsport last summer, George Girio was the team uncle for the Rhode Island squad, which suffered a heartbreaking one-run loss to Chicago Jackie Robinson in being eliminated. The Rhode Island coach drew widespread praise among sports commentators for his graceful pep talk to his players afterward. "The way he talked to the kids was impressive. I was with the kids the whole week and didn't have a single problem," Girio says.

Despite the image of Little League as a sandbox for loud, aggressive parents and overbearing coaches, the reality is far different, says Girio and many other parents. He fondly recalls his own experience. "My manager was a disciplinarian. The coach was soft-spoken. It was a good combination," he says. "They taught us how to work together, how to be successful. If you lose a game, it's not the end of the world. At the same time you strive to win. And know how to accept losing."

His brother, Joe, has similarly pleasant memories. Carl Stotz, a passionate Yankee fan but consumed with his Little League duties, managed to get to one game at Yankee Stadium in his lifetime. Joe did that as a Little Leaguer. "My manager, Mike Casale, said if we won the championship he'd take us to Yankee Stadium. We did, and he chartered a bus," says Joe. But shepherding a gangly crew of 12-year-olds to New York was the least of his contributions. "He was a good manager. He never yelled. He was firm—he wanted to win. But he set a good example. He didn't criticize you if you made a mistake," he recalls.

As team uncles, the Girios are mostly worker bees, buzzing about making sure players have what they need. Every so often they are thrust near the rim of the spotlight. Last summer George coordinated a phone call from the Boston Red Sox manager to the Rhode Island team. When Joe guided a team from Louisville, the captain of a nuclear sub, a Louisville native, called to wish the team well. National security mandated that, as he let Joe know, the origin of his call was "an undisclosed location."

The Girios keep busy but every year make it a point to offer a word or two of advice. "We try to emphasize to the coach to enjoy the experience. You came here as champs. No matter what happens here, you will leave as champs," says George. Adds Joe, "The tears come right after the game. Then they go away. The kids don't dwell on it."

(From left) Joe, Art and George Girio, a Little League family as well as a Lions family, stand at the statue of Carl Stotz at the Little League complex in South Williamsport.

For the Girios, as well as many other families, Lions and Little League offer striking parallels, an intertwining of family, community and service. Their father, Art, is a longtime Lion and a past district governor who started the business they run and attended the baseball games they played and managed. Their family story follows the pattern of so many others. "My dad was a World War II vet, European theater. He had four kids and went to school on the GI bill," says George.

Now every summer for two weeks solid the Girios are together at Williamsport, not on the field or in the dugout but behind the scenes making things work. In a typical day at South Williamsport the Girios pass the statue of Stotz multiple times. Stotz died in 1992. His relationship with Little League had been strained for decades. The fallout began in the early 1950s when Little League incorporated. The U.S. Rubber Company, Little League's chief sponsor, decided Stotz needed help and appointed a board of directors with a commissioner. As board president, Stotz often clashed with the board on strategy. He believed Little League was moving away from its small-town roots, becoming too corporate. In time, there were lawsuits, counter suits, padlocked doors, court orders and a slew of negative publicity.

The dispute ended in 1956 when Stotz gave up the fight, settled his dispute with Little League out of court (without gaining money) and walked away from the organization. For years he was whitewashed, Soviet-style, from the official Little League history until, thanks mostly to his daughter, his role was properly recognized.

Droves of baseball fans in Williamsport for the World Series made a pilgrimage to Stotz's home in his later years. He welcomed them into his home and pulled out the first home plate, old scorebooks and even the remnant of the lilac bush. He never tired of telling stories of the early days of Little League. "He kept a lot of papers," says Myers. "He met a man once and then pulled out some papers. 'Look, you were the batting champ that year!'"

Stotz did not get his due while alive. Part of that was because of his own modesty. "He always used a lot of 'we's.' Those should have been 'I's,'" says his daughter. But he always treasured his ability to relate to Little Leaguers and their desire to dip their toes into the wider, more challenging world of adults. "We went to this state tourney once. Here was this shriveled old man," says his daughter. "He was surrounded by boys. He could still get their attention."