

American Legion used to own summer baseball. It has lost a quarter of its teams in 10 years.

By [Jacob Bogage](#) July 26

For years, there has been just one option for high school baseball players looking to play in a decent summer league. They suited up for their local American Legion post, which played 40-some games in two months under the June and July sun.

Posts divvy up the local high schools to draw the best players and even accept returning college freshmen younger than 19. They pitch high schoolers on high-quality, team-oriented local baseball.

But “travel” or “showcase” baseball teams have steadily chewed away at the grasp the American Legion, the nation’s oldest veterans’ organization, held on summer ball. The Legion has lost 25 percent of its teams nationwide over the last 10 seasons, with some states losing close to 80 percent.

The Legion once boasted era-defining baseball players as alumni: Mickey Mantle, Johnny Bench, Ted Williams, Catfish Hunter, Jim Palmer, Brooks Robinson. Legionnaires still revere an era of pure, hometown baseball.

Those “travel” or “showcase” teams, though, offer more face time before college and pro scouts, better competition and a more individual-focused game, where players can spend more time working on personal skills than sacrifice bunting, organizers say.

Teams are often run by high school coaches as a de facto offseason training program or by for-profit baseball trainers. They play weekend tournaments instead of regular schedule. Roster spots on some teams can cost thousands of dollars.

“I’ve been trying to get recruited, so I think showcase ball is the way for me to go, so I could get more looks from colleges,” Oakton rising senior second baseman Eric Lingeback said. He plays for showcase team MVP Elite, where nearly a dozen Northern Virginia high school coaches are position instructors.

Lingeback considered playing American Legion baseball. His local Legion coach tried to recruit him to play there in addition to MVP Elite, but Lingeback didn’t have enough time for both, he said.

MVP Elite plays in tournaments on the weekends usually hosted by colleges, where scouts, even a few of them, will watch every game. The team rarely practices, he said, leaving time during the week to rest up for those tournaments and attend skills camps hosted by college coaches.

“If I was committed or I wasn’t going to play college ball, I think I’d play Legion,” Lingeback said. “You get to play with guys you played with in high school. There’s a lot less pressure because you don’t have to perform in front of scouts. You can just enjoy yourself.”

Given the choice of summer baseball leagues, younger players are increasingly spurning the Legion, statistics show, leaving the organization struggling to envision a sustainable future.

States like Florida, California, New Jersey and Oklahoma have lost nearly 80 percent of their teams since 2008, according to participation data.

New Jersey had 336 teams in 2008. This season, it had 51. Puerto Rico’s program shut down completely in 2012.

Legion officials at both the national and state levels are struggling to diagnose the problems causing America’s oldest veterans’ organization to shed ballclubs. Many blame the showcase teams, long derided as “selfish” by Legionnaires for their style of play.

Confronted with such steep declines, that war of words has escalated — “I think a lot of people are paying a lot of money for things that aren’t going to happen,” said Michael Buss, the Legion’s deputy director for youth programs and head of the baseball league — but has yet to blot out the issues causing the Legion’s decline.

It coincides with deep cuts to the Legion’s national membership. The American Legion lost nearly 1,000 posts nationally between 2000 and 2014. Membership dipped 11 percent to 2.4 million members.

And the American military veteran population continues to age and shrink. There were 22.7 million veterans worldwide in 2013. The Department of Veterans Affairs predicts there will be 14 million veterans by 2020.

Younger elite high school players, freshmen and sophomores, are the key age range to support any baseball league. The Legion, officials say, is losing the battle for their participation because players get a better sales pitch elsewhere.

“Back in the mid-2000s,” Sherwood Coach Sean Davis said, “if you played Legion as a freshman, you were an absolute stud. Now most of my freshmen could play Legion.”

And that’s telling, because Davis was a longtime assistant for Damascus Post 171. His father was the longtime manager of the Post’s team. Sherwood consistently funneled players to American Legion baseball, even displayed signs on its home field for Post 171’s county championships.

Now Davis coaches a local showcase team, Elite Baseball, based out of Columbia.

“I think it’s a time for kids to work on themselves,” said Davis, adding that players can refine individual aspects of their game. And the quality of play is right up there with what Legion baseball was in its heyday, Davis said.

In other words, for the first time in a long time, there’s a viable option other than the Legion for summer baseball, and it has cast the future of the American Legion’s famed summer league into question.

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