"Making Kids a Part of Something": An Interview With Daniel Epstein[1] on Unlocking Baseball's Potential for Inclusion of Young People With Learning Disabilities

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In this interview, a special educator and sports writer talks about the role that baseball can play in bringing young people with and without learning disabilities together. He exemplifies how a game can provide extensive opportunities for social interactions and establishes why playing baseball is more suitable for teaching social skills to struggling learners than many other hobbies and special interests. In addition, he proposes ways to make the sport more accessible for baseball players with special needs by placing them in positions where they are more involved in the game than in other things around them or by using audio cues. He also addresses exclusion tendencies in present-day baseball and discusses unfavorable developments that are occurring in the sport. In closing, he highlights the importance of role models in baseball for children and adolescents with disabilities, including the significance of athletes with special needs being more outspoken in public about their challenges.

Keywords: **Learning Disability, Children With Special Needs, Baseball, Social Inclusion**

Insights: Daniel Epstein, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. As you know, Insights is a journal dedicated to learning disabilities (LD) – your area of expertise as a special education teacher. You have worked with kids with LD for 14 years, and you are also a very active sports writer with a focus on baseball. Before we talk about opportunities for inclusion in baseball, please tell me what got you into special education in the first place and why you chose a career path of working with children with special needs.

Daniel Epstein: In a way, I have always been in special education. My brother is on the autism spectrum. He is moderately high functioning and lives on his own. He is three years younger than me, and seeing him grow up and following how different people worked with him inspired me to become a special education teacher. I feel very privileged to have always known what I wanted to do. From a very young age, I knew what had to be my career.

Insights: So you have seen how important special education can be, because you saw what a difference it made in your brother's life.

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Daniel Epstein: Absolutely. My brother would not have been able to live on his own, he would not have been able to function and behave successfully in society, he would not have been able to handle daily tasks himself without the special education that he received starting when he was 3 years old. Early intervention is very important. It makes an enormous difference for the rest of a person's entire life. My brother is living proof of that. I personally work mostly with grades 3, 4 and 5, so for the most part, my students are 8 to 11 years old. But I also have experience working with children who are very young: 3, 4, 5 years old with a moderate to severe disability. My brother was just like them when he was younger. Because he received a high-quality education, including early intervention services, he is a success story today – able to live on his own and have an independent life.

Insights: That is impressive, and reminds us of how important our job as special educators is. Thanks for sharing this. If I understand you correctly, you are working with kids with different kinds of disabilities.

Daniel Epstein: Yes, I am teaching students in resource center placement. My students are in general education classrooms but are pulled out for the resource center for literacy and math. In addition, they participate in other subjects with their general education peers such as art, gym, and music. I teach literacy, which means reading and writing. The classifications of my students vary. I have a lot of students with LD, attention deficit disorder (ADD), and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD, but I also have students with communication impairments, students who might have had emotional experiences that have created learning problems from trauma in the past, and also students who are on the autism spectrum.

Insights: We know from research that the kinds of children you just mentioned are among those most at risk of being excluded from mainstream social life. We want to combat social exclusion, and one way of doing that is through sports. You are a big baseball fan and wrote a fascinating editorial entitled "Learning disabilities and player development: Understanding obstacles to coaching."[1] *In the article, you describe a very vivid scenario with a baseball player who is sitting in a clubhouse surrounded by his teammates while the coach gives some final instructions on how to go into the upcoming game. Due to his learning disability, the player gets distracted by all sorts of things during the coach's instructions and does not understand a bit of what is going on.*

Daniel Epstein: Just to be clear – the example in that article was fictitious. I made it up to explain how people with LD typically experience the

1 https://www.beyondtheboxscore.com/2018/11/26/18110937/how-learning-disabilities-impact-player-development-mlb-milb-minors-prospects-coaching-obstacles

world, but I am quite certain that what I described happens in every clubhouse in the minor leagues and probably even in the major leagues. Unfortunately, problems like the ones that I describe are not spoken about, or they are attributed to something other than an underlying disability. As a result, the respective players are considered uncoachable.

Before we became better at diagnosing learning disabilities and at working with students with special needs, we thought that those kids were just trouble makers. But a lot is possible if we look at coaching baseball players with LD from more of a teaching perspective. I believe that there are a lot of special learners who could become great baseball players but fail to unlock their potential because their coaches do not know how to work with them and accommodate for their learning needs.

Insights: Makes sense. As a German, I did not grow up with baseball. In my home country, baseball is a marginal sport at best. But I noticed very soon after I started watching games and playing a little bit of baseball myself that it is a rather slow game. Unlike soccer or basketball, there is often quite a bit of time between the action, which gives people the chance to talk. It reminds me a little bit of a picnic. Whether you play the sport yourself or go out to a ballgame to watch it: You get into conversations easily.

Daniel Epstein: Absolutely. Baseball is a very communicative sport. It is a rich opportunity for engagement and social interaction. If kids play it themselves, it is great for them to just be in the dugout. It's a wonderful place for young people who have something in common. They are teammates, working together, interacting with each other about what is happening, just talking about the game as it unfolds in front of them instead of staring at their smartphones. And the same goes for watching baseball. At every ball game I have ever been to, you get into conversations with people around you – just talking about what has happened in the game, asking about a player who scored a home run or whatever.

For our learners with special needs, who benefit from having social interactions and who need conversations modeled for them, this is a perfect environment, very different from reading instruction, for example. In reading, we often read a book together, re-read a passage, and then discuss it. But the discussion part is difficult for the students, because it is not an organic conversation. In class, it is forced on them by me, so many students need conversation prompts. However, in baseball, there is so much room to breathe between pitches and between innings. It is a beautiful opportunity for those conversations to develop naturally. And when they are at baseball games, my students see these conversations happen around them, often between people who did not even know each other before, or between teammates in the dugout. If you think about the way in which we teach social skills, baseball provides so many opportunities for model learning.

Insights: I couldn't agree more. It is so important for kids with LD to have a chance to connect with other children.

Daniel Epstein: I think every person connects to the world in a different way. And this especially happens with children in the age group that I teach, the 8- to 11-year-old range. It is very natural for kids at that age to have one or two hobbies that they are really into. It may be baseball or anything else that interests them: video games, music, fashion … whatever it is that really gets them going at that moment – that is how they connect with their friends and how they interact with the world. In those situations, they don't need help communicating. Many of my students are able to have conversations about their special interests; for example, *Fortnite* or some other popular video game. They are having very robust and intense technical conversations. It is just that they are only able to communicate about a limited scope of topics. So we have to try and help them – bring out the skills they already have and extend them to other topics, maybe a book they're reading or whatever the case may be. And again, baseball is a great example. Whatever the child's main interest, their passion, is, that is what he is going to be able to use to interact with the world. It helps the child build bridges from the conversation island where he is very fluent to other islands and other continents of socialization and communication. That is one of the best things that we as teachers can do for our students.

Insights: No doubt. However, not all hobbies or special interests are equally suitable for serving as a connecting point.

Daniel Epstein: You're right. For example, if video games are the main thing that a particular student is interested in, that hobby doesn't necessarily have the same cross-generational appeal as baseball or sports in general. This is what makes baseball rare and valuable among topics with which to teach communication. It has been around since the Civil War, longer than any other sport that is still popular today. Students can talk about it with their peers, their parents, or their teachers. It connects generations.

Insights: Baseball has a great connecting power. But there are certain aspects of the game that make it seem less accessible for young people with LD. For example, it is full of statistics, more so than pretty much any other sport. In your editorial that we mentioned earlier, you explained how difficult it is for a lot of kids with LD to understand basic baseball statistics. Besides, baseball is unique in the sense that there are a lot of breaks between the action. That means that you might have to sit around for quite a while, but then suddenly there is a rapid shift, where you have to focus. Both aspects – the statistics and the need to instantly concentrate on a move after many minutes of dead time – make it difficult for young people with LD to participate.

Daniel Epstein: You are right, and that reminds me of the Houston Astros, a great team that was in the World Series the last two years. The way

they use data to build better players is chronicled in a book called "The MVP Machine" by Ben Lindbergh and Travis Sawchik. For example, when they trade a pitcher, they have a meeting with him where they show him all the data that they have on him. They explain things to him like: "Based on the movement of your pitches, we want you to start throwing your fastball up in the strike zone and a curveball down in the strike zone, that way the batter won't know if it's a fastball or curveball. It'll confuse the hitter, and that'll make you a more successful pitcher."

The Astros have been able to do this extremely well and have reinvigorated a lot of pitching careers as a result. Thinking about that from a special education perspective, many of our learners can't imagine anything worse than having to sit in a meeting for 45 minutes with somebody throwing a bunch of statistics and data at them. Unfortunately, anyone at the minor league level who is not able to handle that has probably not ended up in the major leagues. Data literacy is incredibly important right now in sports. In the older days, there wasn't much data involved in coaching. It was just: "Go out there and play baseball while using your natural ability." But now it's all data-driven. That's great and it's been incredibly beneficial for the sport in terms of player development and improving players, but not every player is able to process that information and make it actionable. We all learn differently. I feel like there are missed opportunities with a lot of players, and I suspect this is more at the youth or collegiate, even minor league, levels where players could be helped to become better athletes and have a longer career. These opportunities are missed because coaches might just not be teaching and communicating with struggling learners in the correct way. Thinking back to the Astros, I wonder how their approach to improving players could be adjusted to athletes with LD.

Insights: Do you have any ideas how this can be done?

Daniel Epstein: Sure. On every little league team, you have players out in right field facing away from home plate picking dandelions because it is so difficult to have nothing happening for minutes at a time. And then suddenly there's a catch. But the odds of that pitch coming to you out in right field are very slim so you might have to field the ball four or five times in the game. And if that's not likely to happen right away, it's going to be very challenging for our players with attention difficulties to stay focused. So that the kid who is picking dandelions in right field shouldn't be in right field. Instead, he should be playing a position that is more engaging, like catcher, pitcher, or first base – positions on the field where players are involved in every pitch and every play.

This is about much more than becoming better baseball players. It's about making kids a part of something and learning all of those social habits that we want to pass on to younger people. So when trying to teach students to be engaged, let's put the kids that are having trouble being engaged in a position

other than right field. Let's put them in a position where they are going to be involved a little bit more. But there are other ways, too. For example, you could use an audio cue to help kids pay attention – like a loud clap or some kind of sound signal indicating that the pitch is coming and that they need to focus.

I certainly don't have all the answers to this. As educators we look at each child individually, determine what their needs are, and then make accommodations and modifications that would benefit them. This is what we are trained to do. But baseball coaches at the little league level typically are volunteers from all walks of life and, therefore, don't have that kind of background. They are doing wonderful things for our youth, but if there is a way to incorporate best practices in education into baseball coaching, that would greatly benefit a lot of young athletes.

Insights: You presented some great ways to make baseball more inclusive for young people with LD. However, in our email conversations, you insinuated that, in fact, baseball has not become more, but actually less, inclusive in recent years. Could you elaborate on that a bit?

Daniel Epstein: Yes. I think that the sport of baseball is more aloof now than it was before. Over the last 30, 40 years, Major League Baseball and other organizations have made baseball more exclusive than inclusive in terms of participation both as players and spectators. First, in terms of cost, it can be very expensive for a family to go out to a major league game, including tickets, transportation, parking, and concessions. For that reason, baseball is often not accessible to many people, including those with LD. Beyond that, the major league is blacked out from a lot of people on TV. The games are largely on cable, which a lot of people cannot afford to subscribe to. If you don't have a cable subscription or if you can't pay for MLB.TV to watch games online, it's hard to follow baseball at all. Even local teams are blacked out, because they want you to watch it on cable.

At a different level, baseball has also become very exclusive. If you are good enough to have a career or want to play in college, you have to go to different showcases all across the country. Otherwise, you won't get scouted and you won't get noticed; you won't get a scholarship and won't get drafted. This requires travel and thousands of dollars for equipment and coaching, making it inaccessible to many families. Without the means to drive your kids all over the place or spend thousands of dollars to do so, you are out of the game.

That's the ways in which baseball is segregating itself based on financial means. But it also segregates itself because of race or gender. I wrote a series about women in baseball a little while back, examining that. But it doesn't need to be that way. All you need to play baseball is a bat and a ball. If you have gloves, that would be nice, but it's not necessary. You don't even need a baseball field. An open patch of grass would be okay. You really don't need anything else to

play. But the way the game has been built up on the developmental circuit by Major League Baseball for the sake of short-term profits will cost them in the long term by declining interest in the sport. It cuts out a lot of potential fans. They can't afford to go to the games, and it's difficult for them to play beyond the basic youth levels. In addition, they're not incentivized to play at the basic unit levels, because only middle class and above really have the opportunity to watch baseball on TV.

Many children with special needs come from poor families and are automatically left out. So we are not reaching these kids sufficiently. However, there is an organization that does it right – the Miracle Baseball League of Arizona.[2] It is mindful of children and adults with special needs, making accommodations for everybody to be able to play baseball. They're showing that it's not that hard to do it; that everyone can play baseball if an effort is made to include everyone. I wish that Major League Baseball and other organized baseball interests across the country and across the world would take lessons from them about how inclusive baseball could be.

Insights: Too bad that organizations like the Miracle Baseball League seem to be the exception. You mentioned that baseball can also be racially exclusive. Something that I have noticed over the years is that there are players of all ethnic groups on major league teams. But it is my impression that the fans in the stands are overwhelmingly white. You see all different kinds of people on the street, but not in the ballpark. Is that just a misconception on my part?

Daniel Epstein: No. You're right. And there are a lot of reasons for that. Part of it is what I just described, certain exclusionary practices. Baseball leaves out a lot of people in urban areas and inner cities, for example, where a huge percentage of America's people of color live. It also ties in with the racial history of income inequality in the U.S. For example, the unemployment rate for black Americans is always above the rate of what it is for white Americans. If you're having financial struggles, then baseball is essentially off limits to you. That disproportionately affects people of color.

You said that when you look out on the field you see players of many ethnic groups. But there is also a disparity here, between those who are American-born and those who are not. The vast majority of the players who are nonwhite come from other countries, not from the U.S. When it comes to black Americans participating in baseball, the number has been rapidly declining. I think close to 18 percent of Major League Baseball players were African American in 1980 and 1981. Now, it's below 7 percent. It's not only difficult for many young African American athletes to participate for the reasons we just talked about, but on top of that, they are not seeing any role models on the baseball

2 https://miracleleagueaz.com/

field. Today, there isn't a great black player on their favorite team that they can identify with look up to nearly as much as there used to be in the seventies and eighties. So it snowballs from there, and has a compounding effect as we continue to lead people out and exclude them.

Insights: That's worrying. But I agree: Role models are very important, especially for young people who are part of a historically marginalized group. I think that Astros outfielder George Springer has played an important part in demarginalizing individuals with speech disorders. He used to speak with a stutter and has become an advocate for people with speech challenges.

Daniel Epstein: Yes, George Springer is a great role model, a great spokesperson, and a great baseball player. I completely agree with you. What we really need to do is normalize disabilities. We need to discuss and talk about LD. It needs to be normal for people to say: I have this disability and that's okay. And role models help with this. A lot of kids that I teach in the resource room feel different from their peers. They think they are not worthwhile and able to accomplish something. That feeling easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, in reality, so many of our learners are able to accomplish so much. The whole world is in front of them, but they don't see it unless they see someone like themselves who has already gone at least part of that distance. It is so important to see someone that you can identify with and who has conquered the world. If you have a popular sports star with a disability like George Springer who is open about it, that can totally change the world for a young people. It can change their future and open up avenues for them that they would have never thought possible otherwise.

Insights: Absolutely. Dirk Nowitzky's popularity gave basketball a big boost in Germany. The fact that Donald Lutz and Max Kepler made it into Major League Baseball made the sport more popular in my home country. Those guys are cool. Kids want to be like them. None of them has a disability. However, it would not make a difference if they did. Kids would consider them as being just as cool.

Daniel Epstein: No doubt. And I'm sure there are ball players on the autism spectrum or with other special needs. But isn't yet as normalized as it should be in society. We need to reach a point where people are more comfortable talking about disabilities and other challenges. This is not only important for kids with disabilities but also for their typically developing peers. We know how peer pressure, bullying, and teasing can impact everybody, but especially students with LD. When kids see that their favorite athlete happens to have dyslexia, for example, then they understand that dyslexia is fine. You are still someone who can win a championship with your team or be someone worthy of a poster on your bedroom wall. And with that knowledge, you're less likely to tease your classmates or behave in a way that would make them feel belittled.

Insights: Right. If there is someone open about his dyslexia on your favorite

team, and you admire him, then it doesn't make sense for you to make fun of kids in your school who have the same diagnosis.

Daniel Epstein: Yes. And most kids look much more up to our athletes than to politicians, scientists, authors, etc.

Insights: Do you know of any famous ball players with LD?

Daniel Epstein: Not at the top of my head. But there are definitely Major League Baseball players with all kinds of learning problems. With 750, 800 people in Major League Baseball every season, there has to be quite a number of players with LD even though they have not publicly acknowledged it and have not taken ownership of it.

Insights: Dan, thank you so much for your time. You have given us very profound insights into the game of baseball and into what needs to happen to make it more accessible. It is such a beautiful sport, and it should be about connecting people – creating an atmosphere of people getting together, talking about the game or whatever else is on their minds. You have pointed out what needs to change and suggested great ways in which baseball can better unlock its potential to include young people with LD and other challenges.

Daniel Epstein: Thank you, Matthias. I really appreciate you reaching out to me. I enjoyed our conversation very much.

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