About two million people should read Charles Euchner's *Little League, Big Dreams*: parents of young athletes, umpires, coaches, the players themselves, league directors, and anyone else involved in youth sports. You should read it because it touches a nerve: it will make you think about the values behind youth sports, the commercialization of American society, the interplay between culture and sport, the way that baseball should be played, and the role that adults play in forming the characters of young athletes. It is part exposé, part cultural commentary, and part sports documentary. It shows us every side of youth baseball from the touching to the absurd. It is truly a comprehensive picture of a fascinating American icon: Little League baseball.

The book begins and ends at the 2005 Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where we meet some of the most important personalities, including ex-Major League outfielder Dante Bichette and his son,
Dante, Jr. The senior Bichette serves as a symbol of all that is good about and all that is wrong with Little League baseball: we meet him telling a touching story about retiring from baseball after his son hit his first Little League home run, and he exits in a discomfiting scene in which he screams at the opposing team’s players in an effort to unsettle them. These poles of behavior ranging from selflessness to underhanded animosity appear throughout the book in various guises, giving the author the opportunity to reflect on the relationship among sport, character, adolescence, adulthood, and winning.

No matter the chapter’s topic, these main themes come up repeatedly and make the book more than the story of a single Little League World Series, and more than a history of Little League. We read of young baseball players who imitate their favorite stars’ batting and pitching styles, major leaguers’ habit of pointing skyward after a hit, and their parents’ aggression and devotion to winning. The lesson is obvious: youth baseball players imitate. Because they imitate, the author suggests, we should not be surprised if the players steal signs, delight in trick plays, throw arm-damaging curveballs, stare down the opposition in unfitting childhood rage, scream at the opposition and, above all, do anything to win.

Euchner makes a strong case that adults impose the desire for victory. He describes coaches who concoct plans to take their teams to the World Series years before the event. They cull out the best players, lecture parents on the need for total devotion to the cause, drill players until they drop, mete out harsh punishments for absentmindedness, and teach their players that there is
one and only one goal: winning the Little League World Series. They hold out promises of being on television, of satisfaction for being a part of a winner, and even the hope that players will win scholarships and contracts. All these things are part of an adult vision of the world that Euchner is not sure is healthy for the kids playing the game.

The author, however, never sermonizes; he doesn’t have to because the lessons are clear enough. In telling the simple honest tale of how Little League began, how it developed, and into what it has developed, he alerts us to the now inescapable fact that youth sports mirror professional sports. Nowhere is this more evident than in club teams.

While the book is not about travel club teams (teams of all stars formed without regard for geographical boundaries), the author does a nice job discussing this phenomenon and its relationship to Little League. Little League, you realize, is big business, but its seriousness is dwarfed by club ball. Little League all star teams draw on geographical regions defined by 20,000 inhabitants; club ball teams can get players anywhere. Little League parents pay their own expenses; many club teams are sponsored by large corporations like Easton. Little League teams play 12-18 games per summer; club teams play hundreds of game year round. It is no wonder that the best Little League teams in the world can’t compare to good club teams.

When I finished reading about excessive parental involvement, the rise of club ball, the commercialization of 12-year-olds, prayers for victory, corporate sponsorship, coaches who willfully sacrifice young pitchers’ arms, professional
coaches, and myriad other aspect of youth baseball, I wondered if kids would ever be allowed to just have fun again. Appropriately, that is where the book ends—with kids having fun playing ball without regard for parents or victory.

Charles Euchner’s *Little League, Big Dreams* is a really good read. It tells a tale, it draws reasonable conclusions, it is informative, and it is a necessary reminder that the world, for all its seriousness, can still be a lot of fun if you’re kid—or an adult who might be willing to act like one.