

one of the leading researchers on the athletic lives of children. He's been brought to Washington, D.C., to deliver what is being touted as the first-ever "national report card" on youth sports.

He looks out at the crowd of a couple of dozen attendees, some of them journalists, some of them teenagers associated with the sponsoring group, and wonders how much the information he is about to deliver will sink in. He prefers to use well-known athletes to get out the message about important topics, because people listen to celebrities. He's just a Michigan State professor sitting on a panel of experts assembled by a nonprofit group called the Citizenship Through Sports Alliance (CTSA), a coalition of pro and amateur sports leagues whose stated aim is to promote character in youth sports.

Gould doesn't have a familiar face. But he has a recognizable problem.

"We are losing our child-centered focus," he says. "It's real easy to forget that sports are about producing better kids—physically, socially, developmentally."

Gould makes no mention of the USOC, which was once a member of the CTSA but had recently stopped paying the \$25,000 in annual dues. He had worked with the USOC for years as a consultant and has no interest in bashing an organization whose structural limitations he can appreciate. Still, the CTSA report card he unveils may as well be the medal count of youth sports under the guidance of the organizations the USOC oversees:

Child-centered philosophy	D
Coaching	C-
Health and safety	C+
Officiating	B-
Parental behavior/involvement	D

I grab a copy of the grade sheet and drive up the highway to Baltimore, where merely having a team to grade counts as an achievement. As Gould reminds me as I am heading out the door, youth sports in America are now largely a suburban exercise.

AGE 11

THE GREATEST CITY IN AMERICA

Baltimore, Maryland

Oriole Park at Camden Yards is, in my estimation, the best modern-era ballpark in the land. Others will disagree. Since the Baltimore Orioles took occupancy in 1992, there have been larger and far swankier facilities built around the country—full-service entertainment zones with every amenity from children's playscapes to on-site breweries to retractable roofs that weigh 22 million pounds and quite effectively separate fans from moisture and heat. That's why Camden Yards is a gem. It does not aspire to perfection; instead it strives for connection. Connection to the city from which it springs and to the history of a sport that is nothing without its history. The architects who drew up the lines not only gave ticket-buyers a JumboTron, escalators to the upper deck, and seats with ample leg room—the basic needs of the modern fan—they also gave them a glimpse of life beyond the confines of the venue and the moment. In a nod to the ballparks of the early 1900s, steel columns, beams, and trusses are used to support the structure instead of concrete. Just beyond the right field seats is Eutaw Street, a pedestrian-only promenade where fans can buy ribs and look at plaques of Orioles Hall of Famers, and just beyond that is an old, eight-story brick warehouse that was refurbished and made into team office space.

When I first visited Camden Yards a couple of years after it opened, the Orioles were regularly playing before sellout crowds, with nearly a third of all fans coming from the D.C. area. Some took the train that pulls right up to the ballpark; others drove on I-95 and parked in the many lots just off the highway. Camden Yards was a place to fall in love with, and an inspiration for more than a few pro sports owners who at the time were stuck with alien, multisport flying saucers that had touched down in the '70s and never left. Among those were the owners of the Seattle Mariners, who desperately wanted a replacement for the gray, soulless Kingdome. They saw the same thing I did in Camden Yards, a place that could be enjoyed even when the team didn't win. There was value in merely sitting there, following the arc of a well-struck ball. Here's what I wrote about that for *The Seattle Times*:

It floats up, past the redbrick B&O Warehouse, into the infinite Baltimore evening sky, white leather on black canvas. Then, on its way down, it draws a path that uses the city as a backdrop, like the set of a play that runs 81 times a year (and sometimes longer). The ball passes in front of the modern skyscrapers several blocks in the distance, then the antique Bromo-Seltzer tower with its Big Ben-like clock, finally setting down in a cushion of bluegrass in short center field, mere feet from where Babe Ruth's father ran a saloon early in the century.

Baltimore wins!

Baltimore—not just the Oriole ballclub—wins!

I wasn't oblivious to the even bigger picture; I noted that the bonds used to build the ballpark were being paid off through proceeds from a state sports-themed lottery, a regressive form of financing that relies disproportionately on the poor. Baltimore had plenty of poor people, with high murder and AIDS rates, and a failing school system.

Still, in retrospect, I wish I had gotten into my rental car and also driven a few blocks past the ballpark, beyond the Inner Harbor and into

the inner city, into the neighborhoods that aren't on the tourist maps handed out at the better hotels. I should have crossed over to Martin Luther King Boulevard, made a left on historic Pennsylvania Ave., and pursued the no less important story that was unfolding, entirely overlooked: Just as public funding for stadiums was exploding, sports and recreation resources for city children were imploding.

If I had made that trip, I might have stumbled across a boy named Carmelo Anthony, his basketball gear paid for by drug dealers.

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Anthony saw his first street death around age 11, three years after he and his mother had moved from New York City into a two-story row house in a section of West Baltimore that once was the proud heart of the city's African-American civic life but had fallen into disrepair. Globalization had exported the steel-industry jobs that previously had floated Baltimore for better than half a century and crack had joined heroin as a favorite street drug in the 1980s, so now the marble steps in front of the row homes were populated with more than one city's fair share of users and dealers, pimps and prostitutes. One day, a guy on a motorcycle came barreling around the corner chased by the cops. The bike tipped over and he slid under a car. "Got killed like that," Anthony says. "Dude wasn't even from my neighborhood."

A couple of years later, he saw a man stabbed to death. That one was worse to witness, because it took longer for the man to expire. On the other hand, all blood is the same color and dead men have the same cold look in their eyes. Anthony, now a NBA All-Star, says he never got used to the experience. "It's like your body just goes numb," he says. "You don't realize that the person's done, like he's dead completely, until you sit down and think about it." And when Anthony thought about it, the premature finality made him want a better end for himself.

But where to aim, and how to get there? He had few tools to help him carve a path out of the ghetto. His Puerto Rican father died of cancer when Anthony was 2, depriving him of a bond that as a boy he wanted more than anything else. His two brothers and one sister were

much older so they stayed back in New York. His mother, Mary, is a strong woman with deep religious beliefs, but as a \$9.85-per-hour housekeeper at the University of Baltimore she lacked the resources to expose her youngest son to much beyond the grimy sidewalks of Myrtle Avenue. Anthony did have some aptitudes: He's always had an ability to memorize words, so he was a good speller in elementary school. And basic math came easily to him. But showing up on the honor roll can be an invitation to pariah-hood, placing a target on one's back in a city where getting respect is a daily struggle. It was easier for him to play the role of class clown ... and to assume the position of statistic-in-waiting. "I was looking for a role model when I was growing up," he says. "But, you know, our role models wasn't any corporations, any owners of Fortune 500 companies. My role model was the guy up the street who was making \$500 a day without a job, doing whatever he was doing out there." The Robert C. Marshall rec center, on Pennsylvania Ave., kept him from following the same path.

Each weekday, Anthony spent the late afternoon hours playing ball at the facility two blocks from his home. Like other parents around Baltimore, Mary Anthony used the rec center to keep an eye on her kid until she got off work. There were rooms inside the windowless box of a building where kids like her son could do their homework, and play spaces inside and out in which to burn off excess energy. The rec center didn't transform Anthony into a solid student—he screwed around until his senior year when he barely acquired the minimum ACT score to accept an athletic scholarship to Syracuse—but it did offer an alternative to the action in the streets. He played all the main sports for the local teams, pitching in baseball and playing tight end in football. And of course there was basketball, in which he flashed talent from the moment he arrived in town. In one 36-35 loss, he scored 33 of his team's points. Not bad for a kid who would be asthmatic until age 13.

Soon, though, the cops took control of Marshall and a couple dozen other rec centers in the city. They were renamed Police Athletic League (PAL) sites. The familiar rec staffers were let go, replaced by uniformed officers who laid down a new rule: No one above the age of 18 could enter

the rec center. It was an attempt to flush out the adult drug dealers who sometimes played ball there. But the move backfired, as law enforcement effectively was asking kids in the neighborhood to pick sides. For children in a suburban environment where crime isn't an everyday reality, such a decision might be a no-brainer. But in places where dealers can be found on every corner, and some cops have learned to assume guilt and ask questions later, standing with the men and women in blue has its perils. "After that, drug raids went sky high in Baltimore because people wouldn't go to the PAL centers," Anthony says. "The police would be sitting in the front office of our rec center with they hats, they badges, they suits on. Like, we had rallies over there. *Rallies.*"

Yet, the cops only had assumed responsibility for the centers because city budgets for recreation were continually being slashed. The first big cuts came in 1993, just months after the Orioles moved into the \$200 million Camden Yards with a sweetheart lease. Club profits that year hit \$25 million, allowing team owner Eli Jacobs to sell the once-struggling franchise to a local attorney, Peter Angelos, for \$173 million—at the time a record price for a sports franchise, and \$100 million more than Jacobs and his partners had paid for the club four years earlier. (The franchise is now estimated to be worth more than twice what Angelos paid for it.) Meanwhile, a fiscal crunch at the state level reduced the amount of annual taxpayer support flowing back to cities. Faced with deep and immediate needs related to police, schools, and emergency services, it seemed far easier to whack away at funding for recreation and parks.

By the end of the decade, two-thirds of the city's 143 neighborhood rec centers had been shut down or, in the case of a few, taken over by the police. The cops were only able to step in because of grants flowing from President Clinton's community-policing initiative, which was successful elsewhere in reducing crime. (Not however in Baltimore, where, in key sections of the city, drug lords *were* the community leaders.) No longer comfortable using his neighborhood facility, Anthony began playing ball at the still city-controlled Mount Royal Recreation Center, about 13 blocks north of his home. It was just far enough away to discourage many kids from making the daily trek, which could be dangerous given the

intra-neighborhood rivalries. "That area where Melo grew up was so vital," says Darrell Corbett, the rec leader at Mount Royal and Anthony's youth basketball coach. "Kids used that field at Marshall all the time. Melo was there every day. It was his safe haven."

The cuts thinned out staff at the existing rec centers, making mere supervision a challenge. Activity fees rose, which always disproportionately affects those most in need of such services, the indigent. The citywide youth football league shrank in size, and baseball all but disappeared from the urban landscape. Part of the problem was that funds were lacking to maintain the fields properly. And with each demoralizing cut, the city recreation and parks department slipped further into bureaucratic dysfunction. At one point, the mayor shifted the responsibility of field maintenance to the public works department, which already was overwhelmed with the tasks of delivering clean water and picking up trash. It couldn't prioritize the repair of rusty and splintered equipment at the city's 300 play lots, 80 percent of which were deemed unsafe for children. So the next mayor handed that job back to recreation and parks—albeit without a full lawn-mowing and metal-welding staff. The department would have to make due with one maintenance worker for every 101 acres.

Oriole Park, by contrast, has a 26-person grounds crew to tend to every need of one field that gets used sparingly by grown men who have every expectation that the bluegrass will be trimmed before each game, and that the infield dirt will be raked and reraked until the chances of a bad hop are near zero.

"Funding pro sports was supposed to help the local economy, and that was supposed to get more money into the rec centers," Corbett says, leaning forward in his office chair at Mount Royal, where he still works. "Well, I guess things change. I think they ought to charge a \$1 tax on every ticket sold to those games, with the money going straight to parks and rec. I thought that was a great idea." He's referring to a proposal made by the city council back in 1999, after the Baltimore Ravens had moved into another publicly financed stadium next to Camden Yards. The state enticed the owner of the Cleveland Browns to relocate his franchise with

a 30-year lease that became the envy of the NFL: No rent, just the reimbursement of annual maintenance costs and the levying of a 10 percent ticket surcharge. The proposal to add an additional dollar to all tickets fizzled after the Ravens and O's balked at a direct subsidy to recreation.

All around the young Carmelo Anthony, then, there was decay. The outdoor court in his hood that he and his friends balled at got shut down due to neglect and complaints about noise that once was largely confined to the rec center. Midnight basketball, a national initiative that had been ridiculed by conservative Republicans after Clinton proposed federal funding for it as an anticrime tool, disappeared as a late-night option for teens. A popular inner-city, neighborhood-based basketball league also lost many teams as cheap, rec center courts became scarce; school gyms were still available but expensive (it costs \$100 an hour to open a school gym because staff needs to be brought in to secure and heat the facility at overtime rates). As for middle-school-based teams, there was nothing.

Fortunately for Anthony, he had flashed enough talent on the court to find opportunities. He wasn't much interested in playing defense, but he was smooth with the ball. He could score, which is how players in grassroots hoops get noticed. AAU clubs from across town wanted his services, as the hunt for national championships for little kids was taking hold in the mid-1990s. The neighborhood businessmen also figured he might have a future—one different than their own—so they stepped up as benefactors, filling a void that might never have existed with a better-subsidized recreational operation.

"I probably wouldn't have had to help if that was the case," says Corey Jones, one of the drug dealers who lived on the block.

I find Jones in front of Melo's former home on Myrtle Ave., which has lost a lot of life even since both of them moved out of the neighborhood. Several homes are abandoned, boarded up. There's no sign of commerce within blocks, other than the usual illicit varieties. Jones, a stocky man in his mid-30s whose street name is "Fred," tells me he's just driving through the old hood, that he hasn't dealt drugs for the better part of a decade, that he's moved on to renovating old homes. But back then, he says, he was among a group of dealers who would give Anthony rides to

practice, cash for out-of-town AAU tournaments, whatever assistance he needed to focus on basketball. "He didn't need to be in the street too much because older guys like us kept him out of it," he says.

Anthony's mother did her part, too, buying his shoes and putting food on the table. Corbett bought a \$2,700 used van to truck his players around in. But, Anthony allows, "Drug dealers funded our programs. I was like 10 when they started buying my uniforms, and it went on until I was 13 or 14." He says they never asked him for any favors in return, such as delivering product. "They just want to see you do good," he says. "They want to come support you, show you love. Then after they come show you love, they go do what they gotta do. You can't fault them for what they do. They grown men. That's a decision they made."

If there was any form of repayment that Anthony has made to his former sponsors, it lies in the fact that a national celebrity, and thus inevitable role model, has refused to condemn them for their trade.

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This posture creates a dilemma for anyone who wants people to stop killing people in Baltimore. Anthony's take emerged in the aftermath of his appearing in a local underground DVD, *Stop Snitchin'*, which discourages cooperation with the police, specifically by drug dealers who might try to avoid mandatory prison sentences by fingering other dealers. Anthony appears in a few scenes, mostly in the background. He says little, and never advocates drug dealing, much less violence. In fact, Anthony would later argue, "stop snitchin'" is the ghetto way of saying, "stop the violence." Still, thanks to his cameo the DVD went national, and since then he has rejected a request by Baltimore police to film a clip encouraging witnesses to come forward. His street cred has never been higher.

Dr. Edward Cornwell is trying to see that as an opportunity.

"Athletes and rappers, it's what it is in our society," he says. "Let me use their celebrity to get our message across."

As chief of trauma at Johns Hopkins Hospital on the east side, Cornwell is tasked with stitching up the victims of Baltimore's ongoing

drug war. Those who don't come through his emergency room doors DOA, that is. He's a busy man and doesn't have time to do anything other than fix momentary problems. Surgeons in ERs are taught to stabilize the patient, move on to the next crisis, and leave it at that. Compartmentalization is a survival tool that keeps a surgeon mentally fresh. But over the past decade he's seen enough shot up and stabbed young men, usually between the ages of 15 to 24, to step out of his comfort zone and try to confront the problem of youth violence before it reaches him professionally.

For now, that means showing groups of school kids and teachers what he's seen, in a graphic multimedia presentation called "Hype vs. Reality." He'll roll a video clip showing a gunshot chest wound of a lucky-to-be-alive gang member, dropping the jaws of little boys in cornrows. "The problem didn't start on that night when they were shot," Cornwell tells audiences. "The problem started when they were 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. That's when we form our attitudes, right? That's when we develop or accept the messages from our culture."

He wants to turn his presentation into a public-service announcement and take it national. He's been looking for an athlete who can help him do that. Eager to counter the *Stop Snitchin'* publicity, Anthony and his handlers have agreed to make the spot. The doctor is moving ahead with the effort, despite his reservations about the spokesman, because he figures he needs Melo's cache with kids. "What do I have?" he says. "White coat, black face, bloody hands. That's all I'm bringing."

A little historical perspective would serve us well here. Just over a century ago, the scourge of rampant juvenile delinquency in American cities was attacked not through the media, but, as much as anything else, through organized sports. The professionals leading the charge—the Cornwells of their day—were called "child savers."

The Progressive-era movement, in fact, saved George Herman Ruth. Though The Babe, as Ruth would later become known, now seems like a mythical figure, he was a real person who had a real boyhood—one that bears relevance to the historic role of recreational sports in both addressing urban ills and developing pro athletes.

In his early years, Ruth was a street kid. He lived with his parents near the Baltimore waterfront, above their saloon, where the action was rough and rowdy (his dad would later be killed breaking up a bar fight). He skipped school, resisted any form of discipline, and, as he would later say, didn't know right from wrong. He came to hate the cops. Labeled "incorrigible," his parents finally handed him over to the Xaverian Brothers who ran St. Mary's Industrial School for Boys, where, after a couple of brief stints, he was enrolled full-time at age 10. He was one of 800 boys at the city- and state-funded institution, among the many created around the country during that era to manage the growing number of orphans and wayward boys who threatened to disrupt the social order.

Effectively, St. Mary's was a prison, as no boy could leave campus without permission from the Brothers (akin to male Catholic nuns). But the school had its upside, too: Daily doses of recreational sports. Each afternoon for an hour or two, even in the cold of winter, the boys would head out to "the yard," a basic if perfectly functional patch of dirt and grass where several types of games were played. Baseball was the favorite sport, and every boy, no matter their skill level, was placed on a team and given instruction. It's where Ruth, who until then had had no interest in the national pastime, learned to play and love the game. There were no hovering parents, no contests against outside teams until high school age—just him and his fellow incorrigibles challenging each other and fielding the mighty fungo blasts of Brother Matthias, a 6-foot-6, 250-pound baseball aficionado whom Ruth came to call "the greatest man I've ever known." Today, the notion of developing an elite athlete largely through intramural sports seems ludicrous, but by 1914 when Ruth was signed to a minor league contract and released from St. Mary's one week after his 20th birthday, he was a finished product. For that, he credited Brother Matthias, the mentor who had taught him how to field and had insisted that he learn to play every position.

Ruth was soon the best lefthanded pitcher in baseball. Naturally strong, he applied his physical gifts and refined technique at the plate, becoming the game's first great slugger. His charisma, legendary home runs, and larger-than-life persona elevated Americans' affection for pro

sports and the otherwise regular guys in uniform. Ruth was The Bambino, the Sultan of Swat, the Maharaja of Mash, Homeric Herman, the Wali of Wallop, the Colossus of Clout—sportswriters couldn't come up with enough nicknames to capture their affection for the player who would retire in 1935 with 714 dingers. In 1936, the Baseball Hall of Fame itself was created and Ruth among the first five players inducted, marking the start of an era in which great athletes were to be recognized as immortals.

When Ruth was a boy, athletes weren't particularly revered members of society. The most outstanding of them—such as baseball's Christy Mathewson and Honus Wagner—were admired for their on-field abilities, but the true cultural heroes were more likely to come from the ranks of the military or politics, like Teddy Roosevelt. Likewise, the athletic infrastructure wasn't set up in a way that was effectively designed to identify and develop emerging talent for the pro sports leagues, as football and basketball hadn't yet taken off at that level yet and salaries in baseball were still quite modest. Instead, the emphasis was on providing broad-based recreation, as the child savers of the era strongly believed in the value of physical activity as a tool to channel potentially destructive male energies. Beyond the thousands of playgrounds Luther Gulick and his peers got built during the first two decades of the 20th century, large urban parks offered opportunities for kids to run, jump, and play catch.

Without ever intending to do so, these play spaces served as the launching pad for professional sports as a mass-entertainment phenomenon. They were so popular, Gulick wrote in 1920, that in some "it was impossible to see through the group for ten yards in any direction" because several games were going on in one space. A ball hit was a ball lost in the masses of boys.

One of the great mysteries among baseball writers is why offensive numbers in baseball jumped so dramatically in the 1920s. Steve Hirdt, a statistician with the Elias Sports Bureau, has observed that the increase was even more robust than the period beginning in 1994, which is roughly when baseball's steroid era began and home run records began to fall. Comparing the 12 years before 1920, Ruth's first year with the Yankees, to the 12 years after that, the batting average across the majors

improved from .253 to .285. The increase in runs per game was 27 percent; the increase in homers per game was 173 percent. This period has become known as the “live-ball era,” but that’s a misnomer. Tests done at the time found no difference between the ball used in the majors in the late 1910s and the one used subsequently. Hirdt suggests several alternate theories to account for the spike: new rules limiting trick pitches, more frequent use of clean balls, and batters imitating the Babe’s uppercut swing. I’ll offer one more: The players of Ruth’s era were the descendants and first beneficiaries of broad-based recreational sports for youth.

Child saved. Athlete made.

Fan made, too.

The enthusiasm for pro sports that was born during that era was so great that cities eventually began competing to attract franchises in top-tier leagues. At the front of the pack was Baltimore, whose political leaders shortly after World War II laid plans to bring major league baseball and football teams to town. The lure was a recently built, city-financed venue: Memorial Stadium, located five miles north of downtown in a neighborhood of row houses and mom-and-pop stores. In 1953, an NFL team from Dallas and a baseball team from St. Louis relocated to Baltimore and became the Colts and Orioles, respectively. Spectator sports and citizen recreation were still connected at the hip, as reflected in the fact that the city’s recreation and parks department ran Memorial Stadium. But the era of the publicly built stadium had arrived, giving club owners the power to extract subsidies for their for-profit companies. Everywhere, taxpayers would become partners in jacking up franchise values and player salaries across pro sports.

Live by the sword, die by the sword. In the spring of 1984, the Colts franchise snuck out of town in the middle of a snowy night, a line of Mayflower moving vans rumbling toward Indianapolis where a greener, artificial pasture awaited. Baltimoreans were heartbroken at the loss of the Colts, whose bond with fans was forged through legendary games (the club’s televised victory over the New York Giants in the 1958 NFL Championship came to be known as the greatest in league history) and blue-collar heroes (Johnny Unitas, John Mackey). Still, most citizens

weren’t so desperate that they wanted to keep playing the stadium black-mail game. The city had been losing jobs and was already straining to provide basic services. When the Maryland legislature proposed to build state-of-the-art facilities that could keep the O’s in town and eventually recruit another NFL club, there were signs that it would fail if it went to a public vote. But an effort to force a referendum was quashed in court, on the grounds that the funding was technically an appropriation—i.e., something the state needs to keep running—not an item subject to the will of the people.

When Oriole Park opened for business, free luxury boxes were set aside for the governor and the mayor.

The next year, there were a record 353 murders in Baltimore.

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So now B’More exports two forms of national entertainment: Pro sports on TV. And gritty dramas about a city compromised by the drug trade, like HBO’s *The Wire*. The Game and The Game.

It’s hard to blame the subject matter of the latter on that of the former. But publicly financed stadiums are supposed to deliver a real financial dividend for cities—money that can be spent to improve quality of life for its citizens. In 1996, when the O’s were playing before sellout crowds each night, an economics professor at Johns Hopkins produced a 47-page analysis concluding that Camden Yards is “most definitely not a success as a vehicle for job creation and economic development.” The report estimated that all those fans coming from out of state created 460 local jobs and lifted Baltimore home values a grand total of \$6.50. (The Ravens, who play far fewer games, hadn’t yet moved into their new stadium so the impact wasn’t fully analyzed).

A decade later, Orioles’ home attendance had fallen to 20th out of 30 MLB teams, due largely to nine consecutive losing seasons. Still, the Maryland Stadium Authority released a report insisting that Camden Yards supported nearly 2,500 jobs and \$72 million in regional wage income and that all those fans coming from out of state spun off \$7.6 million in local sales taxes. But mysterious “multiplier effects” were used

in the calculations, and the study didn't account for lost investment opportunities related to the public subsidies. Generally, experts discount the conclusions drawn in these types of stadium analyses. Either way, it's clear that not much of the alleged winnings have trickled down to the infrastructure that services youth sports.

The most famous basketball court in the city is called The Dome, located not far from Johns Hopkins Hospital. It's a covered, well-lit outdoor space where every great Baltimore baller has played, from Muggsy Bogues to Reggie Williams to Sam Cassell. The city, which is allowing Nike to reference the court on the side of one of its basketball shoes as part of an urban marketing effort, restarted Midnight Basketball there a couple of years ago. Just don't try and play there any season other than the summer. After the longtime director of the attached rec center retired a few years back, games at The Dome during other seasons became scarce. When I drove by on a warm spring day, it was locked up and caged off. The funeral parlor on the corner was open for business, though.

The most extensively used recreational space in the city is Patterson Park, across town from where Anthony grew up. It's one of those thoughtfully laid out urban parks from the 19th century that has an ice rink, pool, running trails, rec center, and half a dozen or so athletic fields. But the soccer goals are without nets and some of the baseball fields are covered with weeds. There's a distressed quality to the place that matches the chipped, fading benches which bear signs reading, perversely, "Baltimore ... The Greatest City in America" (the rah-rah slogan of the previous mayor). You can tell the recreation and parks staff is trying to shine the old jewel, maintaining the nets on the tennis courts and clearing debris. But there's only so much they can do with 365 full-time workers. In 1990, there were 1,400 employees in the department.

"If you don't fund amateur athletics, what do you expect?" Corbett says. "It's not free, and it's not cheap." Corbett is a thickly built man with a no-nonsense demeanor who commands ample respect from the kids he oversees. But he could use help. As I pulled up to his rec center, a boy a couple of years older than my son Cole was getting his brains beaten in by another kid being egged on by a dozen peers who just wanted to see

someone get hurt. The bigger kid had the smaller kid pushed backward over a chain rope above a small patch of grass in front of the rec center, and the smaller kid was just taking it—punch after punch to his gently lined, terrified face. It appeared to be a petty dispute, an early alpha-dog exercise, but the result left an impression on the pummeled boy. As word traveled down the alley that Mr. Corbett was coming and the beat-down came to an end, there was a look of deep humiliation in the kid's eyes.

If Corbett had an extra body to watch the front door, or, better yet, could organize a game to occupy those boys, all that emerging testosterone might not have been channeled into a violent episode that will surely beg retaliation.

Funding for recreation has crept up under new mayor Sheila Dixon, the aunt of Juan Dixon, a NBA player and rec center alum who lost both parents to AIDS-related diseases before he was 17. But, Corbett says, "We need more, much more." The department gets no dedicated cut of the local sales tax, as do rec departments in some other cities. And no further run has been made at an Orioles or Ravens ticket surcharge—just an inquiry by a city councilman, quickly dismissed, asking the stadium authority to forgive the city's annual \$1 million payment to the authority.

Here and there, the city's pro teams have chipped in.

A few years after Anthony left the Robert C. Marshall rec center, the Oriole organization helped bring in dirt to improve the surface of the adjacent baseball field (the renamed "Orioles/Saturn Field" has fallen into disrepair again). The club also offers a free skills clinic each spring and sponsors a baseball program for fourth and fifth graders. Its most significant commitment is as local administrator for Major League Baseball's Reviving Baseball in the Inner City initiative, providing uniforms and equipment for 20 teams of teenagers. An Oriole spokeswoman

MYTH NO. 11

Money is pouring into youth sports.

THE TRUTH

It is, but not in the communities that need it most.

THE PARENT TIP

Support efforts to build low-cost, public recreation facilities available to all children.

says the club's total contribution to city sports comes to about \$87,000 annually. She said another channel for charity is the Baltimore Orioles Foundation. But a check of that entity's tax filings from the most recent three-year period shows that little of \$443,000 in donations collected by the foundation was disbursed to organizations with ties to youth recreation. Half of the donations received, in fact, weren't disbursed to any community group; they stayed with the foundation. (More than anything, the franchise has contributed dubious role models to the community in recent years. Nineteen current and former Orioles were linked by the Mitchell Report to steroids or other banned drugs.)

The Ravens are more engaged. Four or five players have relationships with high school teams, and they provide varying degrees of support. The club itself spent \$500,000 refurbishing the best high school stadium in Baltimore it could find, replacing the rocky dirt with artificial turf and installing lights to allow night games; the NFL chipped in another \$300,000 as part of a national initiative to restore urban fields. In 2005, the Ravens outfitted city teams with \$250,000 worth of uniforms and equipment. That year, one in which the club established itself as an NFL leader in community service, the Ravens provided \$1 million in charity to local organizations related to grassroots sports or otherwise.

Still, such gifts are table scraps in the all-you-can-eat feast that is pro sports.

Consider: The Ravens dropped \$12 million in 2006 on just one player, quarterback Steve McNair. That's as much as the city of Baltimore spent on the recreational and athletic needs of the 20,000 children it could afford to service, in all sports.

"If we're to the point where the value of one player exceeds that of the general population, then we're in trouble as a society," says Portia Harris, who runs all recreation programs for the city. "People want to see star players on their teams, so that increases their market value. I can appreciate that. But what's not increasing is the investment in kids that helps them achieve in the first place." Harris, an African-American woman in her forties, speaks from personal experience. She was a rec center kid in the 1970s who learned to play tennis at a city camp and went on to earn

an athletic scholarship at the University of Maryland. "In my mind, either you pay the price now or you pay the price later," she says. "There are certain things you learn though recreation—socialization, interpersonal skills, commitment, discipline. If those things aren't taught now, when youth are impressionable, the question becomes: How do you deal with that when they become misguided adults? We've seen what happens. The penal system is exploding. They don't have enough space to keep people behind bars. A lot of that is because we didn't pay when they were younger. When I was a kid, these social programs made a difference in my life. My family was important, too, but for many, these programs are the only thing they have. If we don't give kids the opportunity to see outside of their current situation, it'll come back to hurt us."

Camden Yards sparked the largest construction boom in the history of American spectator sports. The great majority of MLB, NFL, NBA, and NHL teams have moved into new or significantly renovated homes since, or gained the approval to do so, at a cost of more than \$20 billion. Most of that tab has been picked up by the public—and it's not just cities and states that are paying. Federal taxpayers contribute as well. The Camden Yards project, for instance, used \$48 million in federal transportation funds that allowed out-of-town fans to get in and out of the stadium area more efficiently. Beyond direct grants, dozens of facilities also have been financed with the use of tax-exempt bonds, a federally supported method of borrowing money at a lower interest rate. More commonly used to build schools and other public projects, such bonds devoted to sports stadiums cost the U.S. Treasury more than \$100 million annually. "In our view, this is a very expensive public housing program for millionaires," a spokesman for Sen. Byron L. Dorgan (D-N.D.) told *The Washington Post* in 2003. Yet, efforts over the past decade to ban the practice have been rebuffed. In 2009, the New York Yankees set a new standard for exploiting federal taxpayers, building the most expensive stadium in history with the aid of \$1.3 billion in tax-free bonds.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the athletic pipeline, federal support for the recreational sports infrastructure has dried up. The primary vehicle for encouraging the creation of playing fields is the Land and Water

Conservation Fund, a legacy from the Kennedy Administration that offers matching grants to states and cities to carve out and maintain these spaces. Many of the 40,000 athletic fields created or rehabilitated through this program—including the parkland on which the new Yankee Stadium was built—were introduced long ago. Funding was whacked to a tenth of its previous level when Ronald Reagan took office, disappeared entirely in the late 1990s, restored to some degree when runner-biker George W. Bush took office, then virtually eliminated again as the Iraq war and other priorities took their toll on the budget. A month after the November 2006 elections that gave Democrats control of Congress, advocates of the program finally won a dedicated funding source—a small cut of royalty revenues from future offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico by oil companies. Thus, the nation is now wildcatting for youth sports, with the potential, a decade down the road, of a windfall. (Go Exxon!)

Baltimore has received nothing from the fund since 1980. It has benefited more from a much smaller program, the Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Act, which is designed specifically to help economically distressed cities rehabilitate their deteriorating parks and recreation facilities. Created in 1978, the same year, ironically, as the Amateur Sports Act, the initiative has provided Baltimore with \$4.6 million in matching grants, one of the last of which was used to help Anthony's rec center, before it was taken over by the police. As with the LWCF, the Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Act has received less than half of its originally authorized funding. The last check written to any city under the act was in 2003, despite the recommendation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that more parks and playgrounds get built as tools to fight growing obesity rates. The epidemic is especially pronounced among African-American youths, who on average sit in front of the TV seven hours a week more than white kids do.

Baltimore gets some state assistance for its parks and recreation facilities. It would be hard to imagine a municipality in America that needs it more. (Except perhaps Detroit, the only large American city that is more violent than Baltimore—and a city where recreation services, notably, have been slashed over the years.) Only one in nine Balti-

more children now are involved in city-run athletic programs, not a good omen in a town where beating the odds can mean just getting a high school degree. Studies have shown that kids who play sports are more likely to stay in school and less likely to commit crime as juveniles.

Much of the concern about physical inactivity has centered on minority girls. In a random, unscientific, drive-around survey of a dozen or so parks and rec centers in Baltimore, I saw no more than a handful of girls outside playing any sports in any capacity. Almost by default—weeds can't grow in gyms—Baltimore has become known as a basketball town, so surely there were some bouncing balls inside gyms that I missed. But after a while their absence was so glaring that I began looking specifically for girls with softball bats, tennis rackets ... anything.

Then it occurred to me: I'm not seeing that many boys playing ball, either. Sam Cassell, the longtime NBA guard, tells me this isn't a mirage.

"It's unbelievable," he says. "When I was growing up, every court was filled with kids playing basketball or doin' whatever. Now, on a lot of the courts, they're just not out there. I think that's why the younger generation is suffering athletic-wise."

Across the nation, no group has suffered from the obesity crisis more than black kids. You'd never know that by the looks of pro basketball and football, which have come to be dominated by African-Americans over the past three decades. Popular images of black celebrities enjoying the very, very good life might suggest a new athletic class has emerged. But pull the U.S. Department of Education statistics, as I did, and a different story emerges. In 1980, most black teenagers played sports. Back then no ethnic group had a higher participation rate. Not anymore. In fact, no other ethnic group has lost more sports participants.

In other words, enjoy the game at your favorite pro venue. Just know that the full truth cannot be glimpsed from even the best seat in the house.

...

"It's like playing the Lotto, with a one in a million chance of making it out," Corey the former drug dealer says of his old friend Melo. "He's the lucky winner."

That much is obvious on a bright afternoon in December 2006, as an extra-large SUV with tinted windows pulls up in front of a handsome brick building a few blocks south of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. An elderly black man in a coat and tie, the chauffeur, opens the right rear passenger door and out pops Carmelo Anthony, all 6-foot-8 of him. Draped in a cool blue Brand Jordan warmup suit and a matching baseball cap turned backward and pulled low over his eyebrows, he thrusts a right arm triumphantly into the chilly air, eliciting shrieks from the elementary school kids who have gathered for the grand opening of the Carmelo Anthony Youth Development Center. Two Baltimore cops part the crowd, and the Denver Nuggets star steps into a ring of cameras from the assembled media.

"This is a dream come true for you," a local TV reporter says, as if reading from script.

"This *is* a dream come true," Anthony confirms, looking out over the microphones and into the distance. "I'm doing it for Baltimore. Tryin' to bring some life back to Baltimore. We kind of lost it for a minute but, you know, ultimately this is a shot at a new beginning."

Call it a win-win. Anthony still has a little P.R. problem to solve, the lingering resentment from *Stop Snitchin'*, plus a marijuana bust and a bar fight from a couple of years before that chased off big-time corporate sponsors. News of him helping to reopen the private rec center—abandoned by the Boys and Girls Club—should improve his image and standing on Madison Avenue. Plus, he has his own Brand Jordan shoe to sell, the latest in a line that has celebrated and exploited his ties to the dead-end streets of B'More. He shot a commercial last year on the unkempt outdoor court at, of all places, the neighborhood PAL center he once abandoned. In the spot, he's presented as a black man being harassed by police, whose helicopters hover above, trailing him with a spotlight as he walks through the hood and nods at a series of little kids and hard-faced characters. His \$125 kicks became No. 1 among shoes endorsed by active (i.e. not Michael Jordan) players, out-selling that of corporate darling LeBron James.

One could argue that if Anthony was truly the inner-city angel he's trying to show himself to be, he'd endorse a cheaper shoe. That's what

Stephon Marbury of the New York Knicks did earlier in the year, lending his street-credible name to a \$15 model that began to make it okay for a kid to step outside in shoes he could afford to buy without help. From whomever. It could also be argued that Anthony's commitment to donating \$300,000 annually over the next five years to the nonprofit organization that runs the renamed Carmelo Anthony Youth Development Center is little more than pocket change to the player, who just months earlier re-upped with the Nuggets for \$80 million and, with his Brand Jordan and other deals, should make well north of \$100 million over the next five years. The money has gotten so crazy in pro sports, it's sometimes hard to fully comprehend how rich some of these guys are.

But to expect more from Anthony might not be fair. Babe Ruth codified the social contract between athletes and their public nearly a century ago. He bought a car in gratitude for Brother Matthias, and raised money for St. Mary's when a fire burned down part of the school. But the first jock to pull a bigger salary than the President of the United States—Ruth made \$80,000 in 1930—left Baltimore and hardly looked back. He lived large, indulging in the best c.a.s, clothes, clubs, and cigars that his era had to offer. He smiled a lot for the photographers, as does Anthony, and dabbled in movies, as does Anthony. Melo's first effort was a documentary, *Prison Bull*, about inmates in Louisiana playing hoops and reflecting on the circumstances that led to their incarceration. Anthony saw an early version of the doc, paid six figures to make himself executive producer, and inserted himself as the narrator and main character. He revisits the old neighborhood court in Baltimore, noting that he's from the ghetto, too. It's a touch self-aggrandizing, but the viewer does get the sense that Anthony laments the lack of safe places for kids to play.

So, thank you brother, for the much-needed love. Having laid down a couple sound bites, Anthony makes his way to the front entrance of the Carmelo Anthony Youth Development Center, where he is greeted by Elijah Cummings, who offers a conciliatory handshake. Time to mend fences. Cummings, the longtime Congressman and resident of inner-city Baltimore, had chastised Anthony for not sticking up for the police more forcefully after the *Stop Snitchin'* video hit the streets. He'd met with

him in his office and implored him to set a better example, starting with an appearance in Dr. Cornwell's anti-violence PSA. "I realized that Carmelo, while he never will admit this, still has a lot to learn," he told me at the time. "He's still a very young man. He's trying to keep one foot in the neighborhood where many young men who have not had the good fortune he has had spend large parts of their day chasing or selling death, and then you have the other foot of Carmelo in the NBA making millions of dollars. He's stretched by both worlds." In other words, he's not ready to lead. Yet people have lost such faith in institutions that Cummings, like Cornwell, respects the influence of celebrity athletes. "As one of the top five basketball players, he automatically has a much louder voice than Elijah Cummings," he conceded.

A politician knows nothing if not how to read power. So after a quick hello, the two of them move together through swinging doors, the lawmaker whose efforts to save funding for youth sports programs had gone ignored and the ballplayer who has become Baltimore's chief beneficiary of America's investment in spectator sports. They pass a pair of floor-to-ceiling wallpaper posters of Melo in repose, one of them showing him holding a many-diamonded Jumpman necklace—the kind of jewelry one could acquire only with scads of loose cash. They enter the gym, where a couple hundred kids in blue T-shirts with Melo's nug on the front wait. Kids are sitting all over the refinished court, but not on the Melo logo in the tip-off circle. The walls are papered with artistic shots of neighborhood children, interspersed with ... six more larger-than-life shots of a laughing or smiling Melo. This is what happens when a city tells a kid he's Nobody, and he turns himself into Somebody who constantly gets reminded of his new status.

The bald, jowly Cummings steps up to the microphone stand (in front of another Melo painting propped up on the floor) and composes himself. In a moment he'll present the featured guest, and he must choose his words carefully. While the success of pro athletes can be inspiring, it also can reinforce the American belief, based in Social Darwinism, that the poor deserve to be poor. That hard work, and hard work alone, is the great separator of winners and losers in sports as in society—

when, truth be told, Anthony probably isn't here today if he didn't happen to grow five inches the summer before his junior year of high school. In the past, Cummings has winced at the sight of young ballers swooning over Anthony, thinking that level of success might be theirs one day. Cummings has nothing against dreaming big, but not everyone can grow big. He wishes kids would approach the game as a means, not an end.

So Cummings, considering his options, issues a measured plea. His message is directed as much at Anthony as it is to the crowd before them. "What I hope happens here today," he says, "is our children will look at this brother here and say, 'This is a brother who grew up in our neighborhoods, and he grew up to be a great man, and he's not a great man just because he can put a basketball through a hoop. That he was great because he never forgot and he came back and gave so much of what he had so that we all could be better.' And for that, on behalf of *all* of us, and even for generations yet unborn, we thank you brother.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the No. 1 scorer in the N-B-A ... Carmelo Anthony!"

Everyone gives it up for Anthony, who takes the mike and smiles sweetly. Two days later, much of America would be calling him a thug again after he sucker punches a New York Knick, eliciting a 15-game suspension from an NBA commissioner who has grown tired of players, and particularly Anthony, acting out the code of the street. Cornwell, too, dismisses the idea of ever using Anthony as an antiviolence spokesman. But right now, at Anthony's new rec center, it's all good.

"I got my family here today. I got the whole Baltimore city," he says, waving his arms. "I probably had more doubts than anybody in the whole wide world in opening up this rec center. People said I wasn't giving back, I wasn't coming home. But how could I forget a city like this where I grew up at?"

Starting today, his local Team Melo AAU club will have a regular, and free, place to practice. Starting today, kids will get help with their homework in a well-lit reading room. Starting today, kids will fill the building with the sounds of African drums they're learning to play. Starting today, 250 kids a day will be serviced.

Now if the city could just find a way to take care of the other 160,000 in need.

...

The farther you get away from central Baltimore, the better the athletic fields. On the outskirts of town is Cardinal Gibbons High School, where a team of boys—all but one of them white—can be found taking batting practice in cherry red T-shirts that read “The House that Built Ruth.” It’s the same space where the boys of St. Mary’s Industrial School once played, before the private Catholic high school moved in and took over the place in 1963. But the field is by no means a green cathedral. The outfield tilts because of the old tunnels dating back to St. Mary’s that run between the buildings, and the infield grass is spotty, inducing bad hops.

The coach has tried to raise money for improvements. He’s found that folks are more likely to subtract than add to the diamond. Every now and then, he’ll find some stranger on his knees in the batter’s box, scooping dirt into a jar.

“You’d think a lot of people might want to pour money into Babe Ruth Field,” says Lee Schwarzenberg, the coach. “Nah. But a lot of people come here.”

Fame is a powerful thing.

Forty-five minutes up the highway in Aberdeen are the nicest youth fields in the state. Carved out of the red dirt of rural Maryland are a series of miniature major league ballparks, including a replica of Oriole Park, that were built in 2005. The facility is the home of the annual Cal Ripken World Series, where, in association with the Babe Ruth League, the retired Orioles shortstop runs one of the top international youth events. He also hosts a series of well-regarded tournaments and camps, teaching baseball “The Ripken Way”—which emphasizes simple instruction so kids can grasp the coaching, and fun so they stay engaged. Sometimes Ripken hosts teams from inner-city Baltimore, as his foundation works to bring baseball to underprivileged youth. But the Ripken complex is a business that depends on paying customers. So he’s built a park that you

just gotta see, with events you just gotta be a part of. It’s a place where a kid can ... well, I’ll let the website make the case:

Become a big leaguer at age 10: Hit a home run over the Green Monster at Fenway Park, slide into second on the Polo Grounds, or even swing for the Warehouse at Oriole Park at Camden Yards. Get your heart racing as you hear over the PA system: “At bat, Number 8 ...”

Coaches can make calls from big league dugouts and glance over at the professional scoreboards. Fans and spectators can grab a seat in the shade and cheer on the games in-between trips to the concession stands.

From the professional major-league quality fields, to the covered dugouts ... From the incredible practice facilities, to the lighted fields ... From the ponds, fountains, and trees throughout the complex, to the on-site photography, merchandise, and concessions ... You haven’t experienced youth baseball at its finest until you’ve been to a Ripken Tournament.

The Hall of Famer has serious competition in the youth baseball marketplace. That was never more evident than in August 2005 when a team of 12-year-olds from the Hawaiian island of O’ahu won the Cal Ripken World Series. People back home were excited. But it didn’t compare to the delirium that greeted another O’ahu championship team whose returning flight from the mainland a week later was met at the Honolulu airport by a six-firetruck escort, 700 delirious fans, candy leis, stretch limos, and “We are the Champions” as strummed by the Royal Hawaiian Band.

After all, no event dishes preadolescent fame quite like the Little League World Series.