

## **Jericho Scott Has a Cold**

*Jericho Scott was the 9-year-old who briefly became a media sensation when his youth baseball league banned him for being "too good." One year later, Craig Fehrman tracks him down and finds that everyone got his story wrong.*

NEW HAVEN, Conn.— Dom Aitro Field sits in the middle of a dense, hilly neighborhood, right behind a battered K-4 school where the “Free” in the “Drug Free Zone” sign has been spray-painted over. Still, when the weather’s just right, the sunlight and the thick trees circling the field create a shadow that splits the diamond in half, from home to second to center field. The dugouts’ peeling aluminum roofs and the wet laundry hanging 15 feet from the bleachers seem to disappear. Dom Aitro Field becomes the perfect place for baseball.

On Saturday, Aug. 1, the weather’s just right, and Mark Gambardella’s New Haven All-Stars are playing in the PONY Baseball North Zone Tournament. It’s a four-team, double-elimination affair, with the winner going to the Mustang (10 and under) World Series. And, in the bottom of the fourth inning of the tournament’s first game, Jericho Scott nods at his catcher, takes a deep breath, and winds up.

You remember Jericho, right? Last year, he became a national sensation—the 9-year-old banned by his baseball league for being “too good.” He also became, in what is always a competitive category, the worst-covered sports story of the year.

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The *New Haven Register* inaugurated the Jericho Scott era on August 22, 2008, with [its story](#) on the controversy surrounding the Liga Juvenil de Baseball de New Haven, an independent inner-city youth baseball league. The LJB had told Wilfred Vidro, Jericho’s coach, to stop pitching him because he threw too hard and presented “a danger to other kids in the league.” When, two games later, Vidro sent Jericho back to the mound, the LJB ruled it a forfeit.

Jericho didn’t go viral until a few days later, when the blogosphere’s [major players](#) latched on to [a Register follow-up](#) about Jericho’s parents protesting the LJB decision. Old media and new media, both followed the same pattern: praising Jericho, mocking the LJB, and lamenting the everyone-gets-a-trophy contagion.

But there was always more to this story. At the forfeited game, the parents and players of Jericho’s team allegedly chanted “losers” and caused enough commotion that the LJB had to escort the other team off the field. Several people said they heard Jericho’s mother curse and threaten league officials. The LJB claims she said: [“This will be the last year. Once the lawyer is done they’re gonna eat shit and there ain’t gonna be a league next year.”](#)

It's important to keep those words in mind as you learn about the history of the LJB. Formed four years ago, the league and its volunteer staff give about 100 inner-city boys and girls ages 8 to 10—some fresh from T-ball, others who've never even played sports—the chance to learn, exercise, and have fun. Look at what Jericho wore in all those outrage-mongering pictures: sweatpants, mismatched shoes, an adorably oversized hat—this is not the uniform of cutthroat baseball. Or consider the LJB's response to the scandal: While the league ended up disbanding Jericho's team, they offered to refund players' \$50 registration fee, to put them on different teams, to keep Jericho as a non-pitching player, even to help him find a more competitive league. Most of these details came from Peter Noble, who emerged as the LJB's reluctant spokesman. While reporting this story, I became quite familiar with Noble's voicemail message, which, first in Spanish, then in English, offers daily updates for the after-school tennis program he also runs. Noble seems like a pretty stand-up guy, even if he never returned my calls.

All this to say that, when LJB officials acted to prevent Jericho from pitching, they acted intelligently and responsibly. They did exactly what a developmental league with a wide range of talent should do—ensure everyone gets a chance not to win, but to improve. Still, the media sided with Jericho, letting his camp get away with statements like: “[It spoil\[s\] their summer and their childhood](#)”; “[He's trying to hold the weight of the world on his shoulders](#)”; and “[I'd rather have him in the midst of this controversy on the field than dealing drugs on a street corner](#).” Even worse, the media uncritically aired the Scotts' ever-evolving reasons for refusing the LJB's attempts at compromise—the Scotts wanted Jericho to remain with his friends; they wanted this particularly close-knit team to stay together; they wanted (this is my favorite) Jericho “[to stay grounded](#)”; or, in what became their final answer, they wanted to stand up to a full-blown conspiracy centering on the league's second-place team, which was sponsored by the LJB president's own barber shop. (The kernel of truth: the LJB president was renting a chair in said barber shop while his own beauty shop was rebuilt after a fire.)

This one-sided coverage was bad enough. But the media also overlooked crucial information. Last week, I talked to Gambardella, a local legend who's coached PONY baseball for the past 30 years—and Jericho for the past five. “The only reason Jericho went to that other league,” Gambardella says, “was, well, I gotta take a vacation sometime.”

So, while Gambardella took two weeks off, Jericho and a friend joined LJB's season-in-progress, signing with a team that was already 4-0. Over the next five days, Jericho pitched 13 innings in three games, and his new team improved to 8-0. The LJB was never Jericho's primary gig—that was the PONY league and Gambardella's All-Star team. But the *Register*'s viral hit mentions “[another league](#)” only in passing, and [the AP story](#) that ran on ESPN.com's front page doesn't mention it at all.

Neither did Jericho's parents, of course, since it undermines pretty much everything they've put on the record. Instead, with the entire media as their mouthpiece, the Scotts played the role of aggrieved parents and captured the national imagination. When CBS's Early Show did [a short feature](#) on Jericho, it made no attempt to explore the league's side of the story. When the Scotts told the *New York Daily News* that “[five of the \[LJB team's\] victories were no-hitters that Jericho hurled](#),” the paper fit it into its glowing profile—even though, again, Jericho pitched in only three LJB games.

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At some point in last year's uproar, I decided to track Jericho down. I didn't want to interview him (and I never did), figuring he'd probably had enough of fame. But I did want to watch him pitch.

So, this summer, I started with my best lead—the Scotts' lawyer. John R. Williams's reply to my email read, in full, "They decided to move on and not pursue the matter." After cold-calling a dozen local coaches and administrators, I got to Gambardella. He invited me to his team's big PONY tournament. I asked him when Jericho would pitch. "Well, he'll be pitching," Gambardella said. "But as for when, that's a feel thing, you know?"

Which brings us back to Jericho on the mound. Despite the stakes, it's a youth baseball game like any other—camping chairs, distracted siblings, maybe 100 spectators in all, with a slight majority for New Haven's opponents. From a woman who kindly shares her bug spray, I learn they came from Chesterfield, Va., an eight-hour drive. (They go by "CBC" for reasons I'm never able to determine.) It's a more suburban crowd than New Haven's, a sea of khaki shorts, and they like to grumble. "This is a horrible field," says one parent. "How did they get to host this? I mean, *really*."

Clearly, we're in for a bit of a culture war, in addition to our regularly scheduled programming. CBC's kids boast name-brand equipment bags, Space Age batting helmets, and, back home, as another parent proudly informs me, a baseball complex recently remodeled at a cost of \$500,000. New Haven's team, in contrast, is a tough bunch of inner-city Italian-, Hispanic-, and African-American kids—and they're representing a city whose Little League [barely found enough sponsors](#) to survive. They have . . . well, they have an impressive array of chants.

Playing as the road team, New Haven leads off with a walk, then a two-run homer. (Gambardella, coaching third and crossing his arms, says only "Let him cross" to the gaggle of players at home plate.) By the end of the first, New Haven's up 5-0, and their ace, a lanky white kid, looks not just unhittable, but untippable. The CBC coach is frothing—literally, I'm afraid—at his players.

By the bottom of fourth, it's 20-0, and Gambardella replaces his ace with Jericho. Now, I'm no Keith Law, but I can play one online. One of the more telling sins journalists committed while covering Jericho was wildly overestimating his talents. The Early Show clocked him at 47 MPH, but that's actually in line with [his age group's averages](#). (And, again, let's contextualize the hype: in his recent memoir *Beyond Belief*, Josh Hamilton remembers throwing 70 MPH at about the same age.) Jericho does have a smooth, compact delivery and a nice pickoff move, but, more than anything else, he seems really polished. He's a fun-sized Orel Hershisier.

When he takes the mound, Jericho, or "J," as his teammates call him, receives no special recognition. He strikes out the first CBC hitter on three straight, but then gives up a home run to left—CBC's first run of the game—a double to right, a loud out to center, a double to left, and another fly out. Jericho's final line is one inning, three hits, two runs, one K, but, thanks to the 10-run rule, the game's over. New Haven has its first win.

In their next game, New Haven plays another Connecticut team, Stratford. (In their first game, Stratford beat the tournament's fourth team, Vesta, which hails from outside Pittsburgh.) Stratford's starter throws harder than anyone else here. New Haven counters with a finesse lefty, and Stratford strikes first—a few walks, back-to-back doubles, a squeeze, and suddenly they've got six sloppy runs. New Haven chips away, but, in the top of the fourth, when Stratford switches pitchers, they're still down 6-3.

Up to the plate steps Jericho Scott. As in the first game, he's hitting ninth and manning second. If Jericho is one of New Haven's five best players, it's for his defense. Later in this game, he'll make the Web Gem of the Weekend, a beautiful, bare-handed grab-and-throw. With the bat, Jericho's best skill is a preternatural eye at the plate. Against CBC, he walked and struck out looking (it was a terrible call), and here, against Stratford, he carefully works the count.

We're all a little shocked, then, when Jericho just smokes one to center. Stratford's outfielder tracks it, but it's gone—and to the deepest part of the park. Jericho basically skips around the bases; his mom whips out her cell and stays on it for the rest of the inning. New Haven never looks back, winning 13-6.

CBC's brain trust sticks around to watch the game, though the parents and players head back to the hotel. As New Haven starts sing-singing through another chant, the CBC coach shakes his head. "That is such an obnoxious team."

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Whatever else they said, no one from CBC (or the other teams) mentioned Jericho's past. It seems unlikely that this was out of respect. Instead, even youth baseball junkies forgot one of 2008's noisiest stories.

While that story began online, it quickly crossed over to talk radio, then TV, with the Scotts receiving overtures from Letterman, Leno, Ellen, even Dr. Phil. But Jericho's biggest impact came in the sports columns and blogs. Journalists from as far afield as the *Lewiston [Idaho] Morning-Tribune* and the *Grand Rapids [Michigan] Press* weighed in. They worried about Jericho and his poor parents, raised a fist against Big Brother, [linked the LJB to the subprime crisis](#). "Sort of makes you glad Michael Phelps didn't splash the water at the local swimming pool too hard when he was a kid, scaring the other kids," wrote one wordsmith. "Next, let's yell at him for being too good at math," opined another. (Bloggers arguably outdid their print brethren. See this post, lovingly titled "[The Tale of Jericho Scott: Trophies For All! Let's Turn Our Kids Into Sissies! Why Not Socialism, Too?](#)")

Well into the fall—and well after the LJB season had ended—the Scotts kept their legal cause alive. They organized fundraisers, washing cars and selling memorabilia autographed by Jericho. Jericho began lending his celebrity to other (actual) causes, attending a walk to fight sickle-cell anemia. This led to probably the low-point in the whole mess, when Gary Smart, who serves on the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America's national board of directors, told the *Register* that "[Jericho's case is similar, in that he, too, is being set aside.](#)"

But the media had moved on. Leno et al. probably lost interest after seeing that Early Show segment; it's hard to turn a cute kid who can't quite make eye contact into compelling TV. But the LJB held a press conference that, according to [several accounts](#), was well attended. Even the *Register's* reporting improved—notably in [a Dave Solomon column](#), which briefly quoted Gambardella.

Here, then, were important updates, fresh angles, genuine news. But if the media brought Jericho's story to life, they also left it for dead. (See the stalagmite-looking [Google Trends graph](#).) Why? Perhaps the media felt trapped by their own righteous reactions. Perhaps they just needed to move on to the next big thing. Or perhaps it was never a story so much as a platform, with Jericho serving as a 58-pound human soap box.

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On Sunday, Aug. 2, New Haven plays CBC again—and with a win, they're off to Texas and the PONY World Series. At this point, I'm not sure how much of a prize that is. The tournament was supposed to start on Friday, but got rained out. Now, whoever wins will have to turn around and board a 6 a.m. flight out of LaGuardia on Tuesday.

CBC starts an Asian-American kid who goes by "Dice." I've heard whispers about him all weekend and reserve a page in my notebook to tally gyroballs. New Haven goes back to their Game One starter, but, this time, he struggles with a new ump and a noticeably smaller strike zone. CBC's fans, who apparently spent Saturday night cooking up some chants of their own, explode. "Give me a C"—"C!!"—and so on, ending with "What does that sound [?] like?"—"CBC!" In their dugout, the coach prowls. "Let's give 'em some of their own medicine."

It starts raining in the bottom of the first, and it starts thundering in the bottom of the third. In the top of the fifth, and down 11-0, New Haven starts a mini-rally when Jericho steals home. (Throughout the tournament, New Haven runs the bases like the '82 Cardinals.) But as Jericho pops up, lightning flashes across the sky, and the umps push the game to tomorrow.

Later that afternoon, the sun comes out, and I check back at the field. It's empty, except for four CBC parents. Three are on their hands and knees in the mud, bailing water with styrofoam cups; the fourth is taking pictures to document the now-playable field. If New Haven's fans seem like a more combustible mix — they include not only Jericho's parents, but also Vidro, his old LJB coach and new team's rowdiest fan — it's the CBC contingent who, this weekend, at least, comes off as arrogant, entitled, paranoid, and downright mean. The beauty of it is that, as in Jericho's original scandal, everyone can claim to be "about the kids." "We just want them to play tomorrow," is how one of the muddy CBC parents puts it to me. "We don't want it to come down to a coin flip."

It doesn't. On Monday, Aug. 3, the weather returns to just right, and CBC quickly finishes yesterday's business, winning 14-4. One final game will decide who heads to Texas in twelve hours. CBC turns to a short kid who throws a 12-6 changeup, if that's possible, and it's devastating. He easily strikes out Jericho, who leads off in this game, and retires New Haven in

order. In the bottom of the first, CBC's hitters score five runs off the finesse lefty. Their fans are delirious.

New Haven fights back, tying it 7-7 in the top of the third. But that's as close as they get. In the bottom of the fourth, and now down 14-7, Jericho comes in to pitch. It's a tough spot—two on and CBC's third baseman-slash-manchild at the plate—and Jericho struggles. A sharp single to right, a walk, a double to right-center, and it's over. CBC wins on the 10-run rule, 17-7. As New Haven's fans graciously applaud, CBC's coach careens on to the field, slapping kids on the head and screaming, "That's it! That's it, right?" No fewer than fifteen parents rush down from the stands, armed with digital cameras and camcorders. The kids seem . . . relieved.

Jericho Scott pushes back his hat, keeps his composure, looks at Gambardella, then at his parents. Mostly, he just seems surprised at how quickly it ended.