



# The Atmosphere of American Youth Sports

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## Overview

- Children are at a critical age in sports and life
- Youth sports = largely competition driven
- Money impacts play/accessibility
- **FOCUS: APPRECIATION FOR THE GAME**



# The Goal

The goal of this presentation is to highlight - using my personal journey to contextualize common experiences and statistics - issues in the nature of youth sports in the United States. In doing so, it is hoped that presenting outside systems will promote positive reflection and change moving forward.

A person is shown from behind, in a starting crouch on a red running track. They are wearing a grey tank top and black pants. The track has white lane markings. The background shows a green field and a white fence.

Out of the gate:  
**CHILDREN ARE  
NOT AT FAULT!**

Focused on  
systematic and  
sociological issues

## Value of Youth Sport

01

### Physical Benefits

Promotes Healthy Lifestyle

02

### Instills Valuable Skills/Lessons

"My Coach Taught Me"  
Rap touching on lessons

03

### Source of Enjoyment

To many, sports is simply for fun

04

Much More!

“Team sports teach you how to get along with other people. A team is only as strong as its weakest link. Sometimes, as hard as it is to imagine, you will be that weakest link. Instead of feeling discouraged, you need to work hard”

- Chris Jordan,  
Professional Cricketer



**Only one outcome!**



To kids:  
Inspirations  
Legends  
Role-Models  
Heroes

- “She is where I’d want to be in my career”:  
Youth athletes’ role models and their  
implications for career and identity construction



# Outside Influence

Youth is a critical time in which the words, lessons, actions, etc. of others are more than impactful on perception

The perception of the world around children - and the system that creates it - becomes their reality

Knowing this is key to understanding **the world of youth sports and actions to take**





## My Experience

- Grew up in a family situation of expecting professional athletes
- Played recreational, school, and competitive sports
- Refereed soccer at numerous levels



# Firsthand Sight

- Growing up, never saw an issue with how competitive my family was - “part of the game”
- Only as an official did I see children’s games (as young as 6 years old) with screaming parents and focus on talent as opposed to fun

## OVERCOMPETITION

(many like myself have grown numb to)

Signs like these  
becoming more  
and more common  
around the country



## The Effects of Overcompetition

- Growing up, push for performance causes push away from love for sport
  - **GENERAL TREND, SHARED BY MANY ATHLETES**
- Many factors (parents living through kids, financial opportunity, etc.) play a role in pressure on children



**John Wilson**  
“That’s why they call it play”

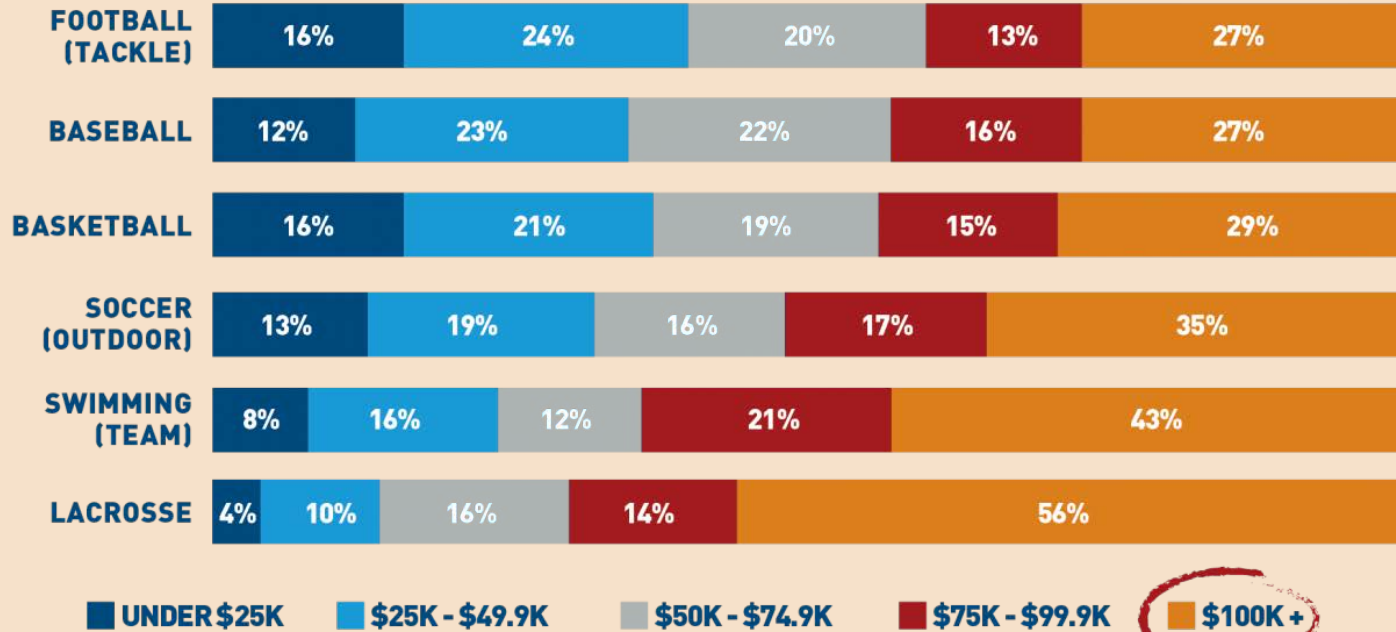
Professional athlete experience  
losing/finding the joy of the  
game



# **Cost Impacts Youth Sports**

# INCOME IMPACTS SPORT PARTICIPATION

## PERCENTAGE OF CORE PARTICIPANTS, BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME



*Families that can afford more, play more.*

- Project Play, The Aspen Institute

## Details in the Dollars

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**Accessibility**

- For many sports, average costs are well over \$1,000 a year
- Recreational options (typically free) are dying out in many areas
- Different levels of competition, but older ages typically have option that become only competitive or nonexistent
  - My experience: outside of school, forced to pay for travel soccer or not play
- Minorities, impoverished, etc. hit hardest



**All  
together**

Especially in the United States, the world of youth sports has **gotten away from its narrative** - to benefit lives through the medium of athletics

Instituting systems that emphasize love for and enjoyment of sport can resolve issues with overcompetition, accessibility and far more



# Looking Forward



- Focusing on promoting **internal motivation** has far greater impact than any outside promotion of success
  - “We believe the motivation of children in sport is much more important than that of the parent or coach,” - Inge Andersen, Norway secretary general
- As explained by John Wilson, parents should ask about whether the child has fun - not push for performance
- Deriving competition from love removes push for youth performance, **relieving financial pressure** for opportunity

## Sample System: NORWAY

- Winningest country (39 medals) at Pyeongchang Winter Olympics despite small size
- Costs low, travel teams formed in teenage years
- Talent is not scouted until late in life, when growth and passions have settled - then selected
- Purposely aligns youth sport model with children's' desire to have fun, socialize, be outside, etc.
- Formal statement “**Children’s Rights in Sport**” made and renounced (1987 and 2007) emphasized safe training environments, friendship exercises, etc.
  - Emphasizes youth in youth sports



“Joy of Sport  
for All”

# Conclusion

- The atmosphere of American youth sports has become **controlled by cost and competition**
- **Refocusing** on intrinsic motivation and love for sport is key in correcting this
- Systems with such focuses have already proven to be successful
- The future of the youth and athletics in the United States is far better rooted in personal appreciation for the game



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