



# STATE OF PLAY 2018

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

  
THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
**PROJECT PLAY**



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TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS



## THE VISION

An America in which  
all children have the  
opportunity to be  
active through sports

## THE FRAMEWORK

Sport for All, Play for Life:  
A Playbook to Get Every  
Kid in the Game

by the Aspen Institute  
Project Play

[youthreport.projectplay.us](http://youthreport.projectplay.us)

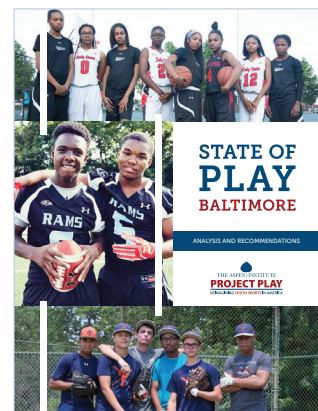
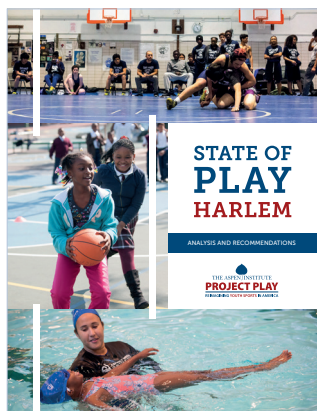
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# INTRODUCTION

Five years ago this spring, Project Play was launched. We invited more than 80 leaders from sport, health, media, philanthropy and other sectors to the Aspen Institute's campus in Aspen, Colo., to take measure of how well children were being served through sports and to consider ways to improve the state of play.

The impetus was a growing sense that youth sports had become a runaway train, untethered to the needs of many youth and communities. Obesity rates were climbing, as were the percentage of kids who were physically inactive. Earlier than ever, children were being burned out, pushed out or locked out from sports. No national plan had been developed on how to collectively address these problems.

On the eve of the meeting, Aspen got pounded with snow. Flights were cancelled. We scrambled a fleet of vans to retrieve dozens of attendees stranded at the Denver airport — six hours away on slick roads. We worried that many might just turn around and go home, rather than double down on the arguably ridiculous proposition that stakeholders could come together to reverse the above trends.

Nearly all of them came anyway, and here we are — with progress to report from the latest 2017 data and growing challenges to confront.

## Five key developments:

**More kids are physically active.** The primary — though not exclusive — focus of Project Play to date has been on children ages 6 to 12, who form the base of our sport system, with a shared vision of “an America in which all children have the opportunity to be active through sports.” One of the key downstream metrics we follow is the percentage of kids who are sedentary — those who participate in none of the 120 sport and fitness activities tracked by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), which commissions an annual survey on the subject.

The latest SFIA data, shared with the Aspen Institute, shows that 17 percent of children in that age group engaged in no physical activities in 2017. That's too high, but still a major advance. That figure has now fallen for three consecutive years, from 19.5 percent in 2014. In total, that's roughly 700,000 more kids who are now off the couch and doing something, even if it's just one day a year.

“This has been a challenge for many of us, and for a long time it was going in the wrong direction,” said Tom Cove, CEO of SFIA. “So, it's heartening and very positive that it's been turned around. Credit goes to all of those who have spent a lot of effort doing more on this. This encourages us as part of Project Play that there is success to be attained here, that it's gettable.”

**Sampling of most team sports is up.** In 2017, 56.5 percent of children played a team sport in some form at least one time during the year — more than at any point in the past six years. Over the past three years, the percentage of children falling into that category has grown in baseball, basketball, ice hockey, field hockey, wrestling, flag football, gymnastics, and swimming on a team, despite a major drop in soccer participation, according to SFIA. In the past year, volleyball and track and field have also rebounded.



## **SPORT** as defined by Project Play

All forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. Participants may be motivated by intrinsic or external rewards, and competition may be with others or themselves (personal challenge).





Now, more casual participants need to be turned into regular participants. As you can see on the charts in the Scoreboard section, only 37 percent of kids played a team sport on a regular basis — well below the 41.5 percent who did in 2011. Further, the percentage of kids who played an individual sport continued to fall, as did the percentage of kids active to a healthy level during the course of the year.

**Multisport play is making a comeback.** In 2017, children in our age group of focus played an average of 1.85 team sports. While slight, it's the first improvement in four years. Still, that number remains well below the level of 2011, when the average child played at least two sports (2.11). This represents progress in an era of early sport specialization, when families are often under pressure to focus their child on one sport before the end of grade school.

Multisport play has been a major focus of Project Play and organizations that have engaged with it. In 2015, more than 40 organizations — including each of the largest professional leagues and dozens of national governing bodies of sport — formally endorsed multisport play for children through age 12, at a minimum. Now, we're helping them identify policies, practices and resources that can foster as much.

**Most youth coaches are still winging it.** The percentage of adults trained in key competencies to engage kids remains stubbornly low, even as the value of having a trained coach has generally grown in the broader culture. The latest SFIA survey shows that less than four in 10 youth coaches say they are trained in any of the following areas: sport skills and tactics, effective motivational technique, or safety needs (CPR/basic first aid and concussion management).

Many barriers exist to training the nation's 6.5 million youth coaches, most of whom are volunteers. The churn rate is high, with most parents cycling out once their child leaves the sport or moves to a club. Parents also are pressed for time, and organizations are reluctant to ask them for more of it to get trained. Then there's the cost — even an online training course can run \$25.

**Kids from lower-income homes face increasing barriers to participation.** While inactivity rates for the overall population are down, most gains are among kids from upper-income homes who can better afford the growing fees associated with youth sports. Over the past three years in households with incomes of less than \$25,000, fewer kids are participating in sports. It's the same story with kids from homes with \$25,000 to \$49,999 in income.

Meanwhile, smartphones, tablets and video games continue to get exponentially better in providing experiences that attract kids. The percentage of kids ages 8 to 15 who report using the internet “many times a day” has grown rapidly over the past few years, to 64 percent, according to KidSay Research. What this means is the competition for a child's attention is increasingly less about, say, a soccer program keeping a child from moving into baseball, and more about providing an experience that engages children and families as expertly as technology does.

“That's especially the case with working-class families,” said Rich Luker, a consultant who has advised many sports. “Technology can be a more attractive babysitter than youth sports. It's not just a resource problem but a time problem for lower-income parents. But there's an opportunity here as well. Kids are getting tired of tech. It's not new to them anymore, like it was 10 years ago. They want to do more things offline. They're looking for someone to say, ‘Hey, do you want to play catch or shoot a basketball?’ And let it grow from there.”

In presenting the latest data and key developments in youth sports over the past year, we hope this *State of Play: 2018* report helps clarify gaps and, more importantly, identifies opportunities to drive progress.



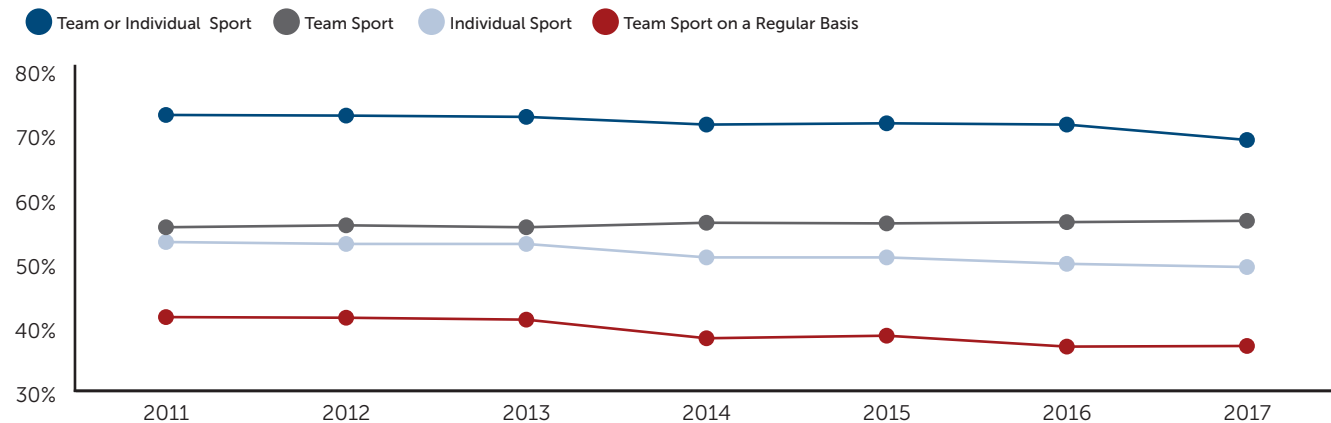
# THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE U.S.

# SCOREBOARD

Sport participation and other data below were provided to the Aspen Institute and Project Play by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, which in 2017 commissioned a survey of 30,999 individuals through Sports Marketing Surveys.

## TOTAL SPORT PARTICIPATION RATES

Percentage of children ages 6 to 12 who played at least one day during the year



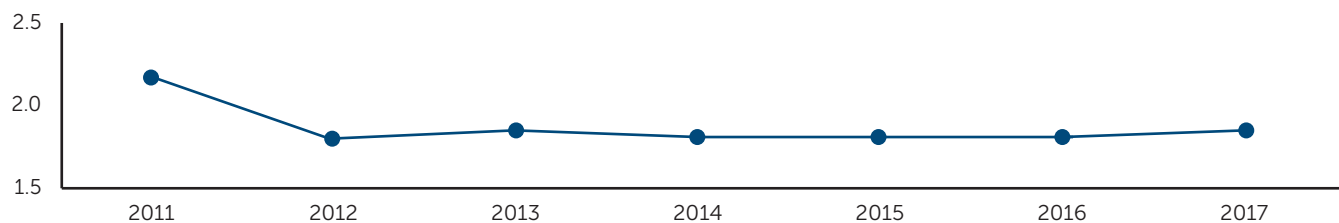
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
TEAM SPORT	55.5%	55.8%	55.5%	56.2%	56.1%	56.3%	56.5%
TEAM SPORT ON REGULAR BASIS	41.5%	41.4%	41.1%	38.2%	38.6%	36.9%	37.0%
INDIVIDUAL SPORT	53.2%	52.9%	52.9%	50.8%	50.8%	49.8%	49.3%
TEAM OR INDIVIDUAL SPORT	73.0%	72.9%	72.7%	71.5%	71.7%	71.5%	69.1%

Team sports include: baseball, basketball, cheerleading, field hockey, football (flag, touch, tackle), gymnastics, ice hockey, lacrosse, paintball, roller hockey, rugby, soccer (indoor, outdoor), softball (slow-pitch, fast-pitch), swimming on a team, track and field, ultimate frisbee, volleyball (court, grass, sand), and wrestling. Individual sports include: tennis, golf, martial arts, roller skating, skateboarding, running, and cycling (road, BMX, mountain bike).

A participant is anyone who played a sport at least one day during the year, in any form and either organized or unstructured. A “core” participant is anyone who participated on a regular basis, a number of times per year that varies by sport, as defined by SFIA. A “core” participant usually includes a level of organized play. Whether participants play on one team or multiple teams, they are only counted once.

## SPORT SAMPLING

Average number of sports played by kids ages 6 to 12



**What grade do you give stakeholders in getting kids active through sports?**

As determined by an Aspen Institute online survey of 86 respondents  
(Prior year's State of Play grade: C)

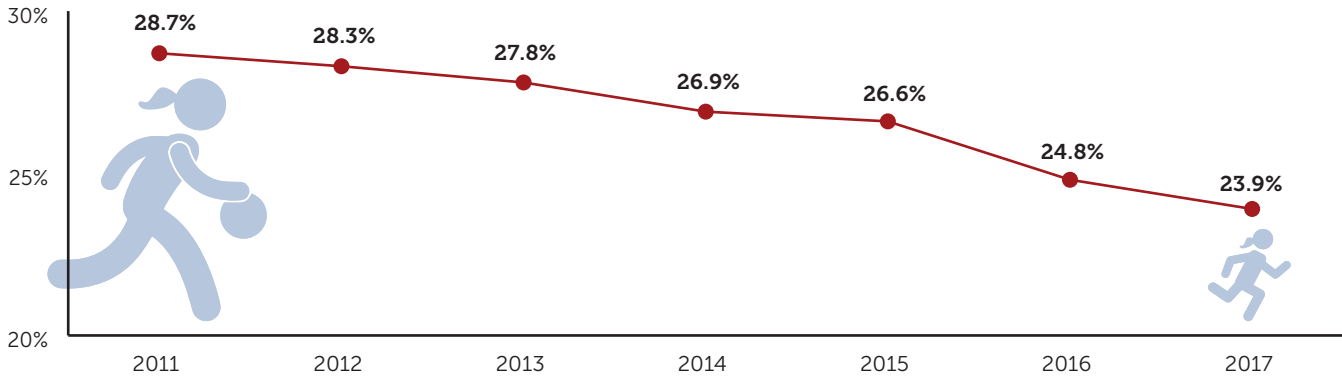


THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE U.S.

# SCOREBOARD

## ACTIVE TO A HEALTHY LEVEL

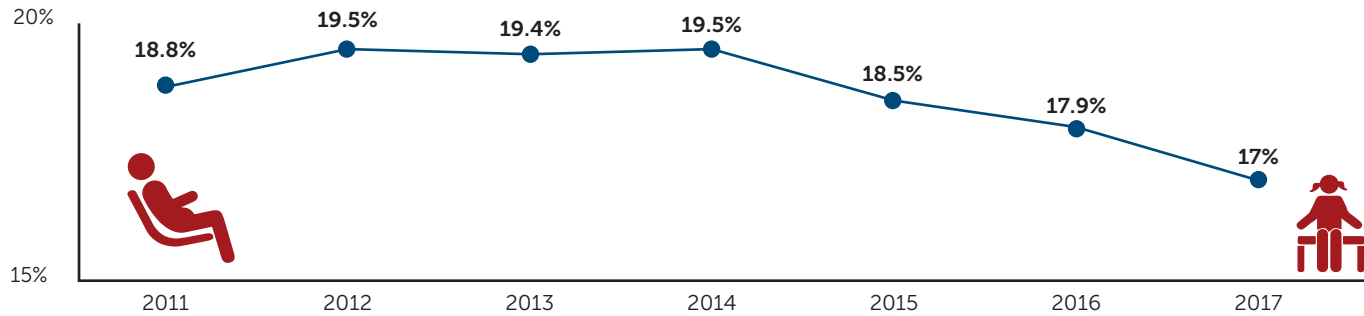
Percentage of kids who regularly participated in high-calorie-burning sports



Sports considered by SFIA to be high-calorie-burning include: bicycling (BMX, mountain, road), running/jogging, basketball, field hockey, football (tackle, touch), ice hockey, roller hockey, lacrosse, rugby, soccer (indoor, outdoor), swimming (on a team or for fitness), track and field, badminton, racquetball, squash, tennis, cross-country skiing, martial arts, wrestling, stand-up paddling, climbing (sport, traditional), trail running, triathlon, snowshoeing, boxing, dance, step and other choreographed exercise to music. The list also includes several activities more associated with teens and adults, including high impact/intensity training, cardio kickboxing, stationary cycling, rowing machine, stair-climbing machine, treadmill, aquatic exercise, bodyweight exercise, cross-training-style workouts, Pilates training, adventure racing, cardio tennis, pickleball, MMA and other combat training.

## PHYSICALLY INACTIVE CHILDREN

Percentage of kids ages 6 to 12 who engaged in no sport activity during the year



	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
AVERAGE	18.8%	19.5%	19.4%	19.5%	18.5%	17.9%	17.0%
BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME							
UNDER \$25,000	29.5%	27.9%	26.4%	28.0%	28.1%	29.9%	30.5%
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	23.8%	23.1%	23.5%	23.1%	24.3%	24.9%	25.4%
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	16.4%	16.7%	17.4%	20.2%	19.1%	20.0%	19.1%
\$75,000 TO \$99,999	13.5%	14.7%	16.1%	16.2%	16.0%	16.1%	15.2%
\$100,000+	10.1%	11.4%	12.5%	13.3%	12.2%	11.5%	10.9%

High-income households (\$100,000+) now take up a larger share of households with children than in 2011, according to Sports Marketing Surveys. The amount of children from that population segment — which is nearly three times less likely to be physically inactive as kids from low-income homes — has pushed down the overall percentage of children who are inactive, even as the rate grew within each income category.

## CORE PARTICIPATION IN SELECT SPORTS

Percentage of kids ages 6 to 12 who participated on a regular basis

	2008	2010	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017	2016-17 CHANGE	# CHILDREN IN 2017
BASEBALL	16.5%	14.1%	12.5%	12.9%	13.2%	12.7%	13.1%	▲ 3.6%	3,936,251
BASKETBALL	16.6%	15.3%	14.1%	14.7%	14.7%	14.0%	14.1%	▲ 0.9%	4,225,321
BICYCLING	27.7%	25.0%	20.7%	18.7%	17.3%	16.6%	16.0%	▼ 3.7%	4,796,374
FLAG FOOTBALL	4.5%	3.0%	2.8%	2.4%	2.6%	3.0%	3.3%	▲ 9.9%	988,260
TACKLE FOOTBALL	3.7%	3.8%	3.6%	3.3%	3.3%	3.3%	2.9%	▼ 11.8%	871,465
GYMNASTICS	2.3%	2.8%	3.5%	3.0%	2.7%	3.0%	3.1%	▲ 4.7%	932,605
ICE HOCKEY	0.5%	0.7%	0.8%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%	▲ 10.0%	368,034
LACROSSE	0.4%	0.6%	0.7%	0.9%	0.7%	0.9%	0.9%	▲ 7.9%	281,726
SOCCER (Outdoor)	10.4%	10.9%	9.2%	9.1%	8.9%	8.5%	7.7%	▼ 9.5%	2,300,704
SOFTBALL (Fast-Pitch)	1.0%	0.8%	1.5%	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	▲ 2.0%	340,863
SWIMMING (Team)	n/a	n/a	1.5%	1.6%	1.4%	1.5%	1.4%	▼ 5.7%	409,624
TENNIS	n/a	4.0%	4.0%	3.7%	3.9%	4.4%	4.1%	▼ 5.5%	1,232,902
TRACK AND FIELD	1.0%	1.2%	1.7%	1.2%	1.0%	1.0%	1.1%	▲ 9.6%	340,279
VOLLEYBALL (Court)	2.9%	2.6%	2.4%	2.8%	2.5%	2.5%	2.7%	▲ 7.2%	799,600
WRESTLING	1.1%	1.1%	0.8%	0.6%	0.7%	0.6%	0.6%	▲ 0.2%	190,094

## CHURN RATE IN YOUTH SPORTS

Children ages 6 to 12 who stopped playing a sport (churn rate) vs. children who returned or started playing

SPORT	CHURN RATE	NEWCOMERS/RETURNERS	NET
CHEERLEADING	-44.7%	61.3%	16.6%
BASEBALL	-18.4%	33.5%	15.1%
FLAG FOOTBALL	-37.8%	49.2%	11.4%
BASKETBALL	-25.0%	31.0%	6.0%
INDOOR SOCCER	-39.6%	44.4%	4.8%
VOLLEYBALL (COURT)	-50.7%	54.4%	3.7%
GYMNASTICS	-24.8%	28.0%	3.2%
TACKLE FOOTBALL	-38.9%	39.4%	0.5%
OUTDOOR SOCCER	-27.5%	19.8%	-7.7%

## TEAM SPORT PARTICIPATION BY DEMOGRAPHIC

Children ages 6 to 12 who played a team sport at least one day during the year

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
MALE	61.3%	61.7%	60.2%	59.6%	61.0%	61.1%	61.9%
FEMALE	49.4%	49.6%	48.7%	50.6%	51.3%	52.8%	52.3%
UNDER \$25,000	41.9%	46.9%	41.3%	38.3%	35.7%	34.6%	34.1%
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	47.8%	49.3%	46.6%	47.4%	48.6%	48.4%	44.6%
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	59.6%	57.3%	55.7%	52.7%	53.9%	53.7%	56.6%
\$75,000 TO \$99,999	61.5%	61.0%	61.5%	62.1%	60.5%	61.1%	64.0%
\$100,000+	66.4%	63.9%	64.2%	64.8%	68.0%	68.4%	69.0%

# THE 8 PLAYS

Key developments in the past year within the eight strategies for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children

1. ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT
2. REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY
3. ENCOURAGE SPORT SAMPLING
4. REVITALIZE IN-TOWN LEAGUES
5. THINK SMALL
6. DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT
7. TRAIN ALL COACHES
8. EMPHASIZE PREVENTION





## Challenge: Youth sport is organized by adults 1 | THE PLAY: ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT

### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*It's Rule No. 1 in business: know your customer. Video games (and the technology industry more broadly) often get blamed for our kids' sedentary habits, yet they provide much of what children want out of a sport experience, including: lots of action, freedom to experiment, competition without exclusion, social connection with friends as co-players, customization, and a measure of control over the activity — plus, no parents critiquing their every move. Simply put, the child is at the center of the video game experience, all made possible by research and feedback loops that seek input from its young customers. Now imagine if youth sport providers worked half as hard to understand the needs of kids, especially those who are left out or who opt out of sports.*

### Five developments:

**Esports entered mainstream sports even more — and the popularity of video gaming isn't subsiding.** The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) gave esports a stamp of approval in 2018 by beginning the rollout of esports competition in high schools across the nation.<sup>1</sup> NFHS entered into a partnership with online provider PlayVS to initially start in at least 15 states. After regular-season competitions, state championship games will be played before a live spectator audience and streamed on the NFHS Network. It's the first recommendation by NFHS for a new sport or activity since 2000, when it suggested schools adopt boys lacrosse.

**Soccer paid a heavy price for underestimating kids' desire to play with friends.** In an effort to develop better prospects for its national teams, the U.S. Soccer Federation two years ago began mandating that affiliated organizations down to the community level stop forming teams based on birthdates that fell within the school year. Instead, teams at every age level were reorganized based on calendar year birthdates, in which kids are less likely to play with same-grade peers. That broke up teams who have been playing together for years. Only 14.8 percent of children ages 6 to 12 played soccer in 2017, down from 17 percent in 2015.<sup>2</sup> For children ages 6 to 17, soccer had the highest churn rate in 2017 among sports evaluated by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) — meaning 19.2 percent of youth returned to soccer or started playing, but 25.2 percent of youth who used to play soccer left the game.

**NCAA changed its recruiting model in response to the desires of college athletes.** High school recruits in sports other than football and basketball can now begin taking official college visits on Sept. 1 of their junior year instead of the first day of classes of their senior year.<sup>3</sup> (Football and basketball, the highest-revenue sports, have earlier dates.) Unofficial campus visits involving athletic department officials were pushed back to the start of an athlete's junior year, deemphasizing the value of these trips at earlier ages. The NCAA described the move as a “first step toward regulating a recruiting process that can begin in middle school — and sometimes earlier,” and said the new model allows recruits more time to make “thoughtful” post-high school decisions and slow down the recruiting process. The

chase for college scholarships is a major factor in early specialization that has many children focusing on one sport by age 11 or 12.

**Given exposure, kids tried new sports.** The Aspen Institute's *State of Play: Harlem* report showed that the top three sports youth in Harlem want to try are skateboarding, fencing and ice hockey.<sup>4</sup> Why fencing? Olympian Tim Morehouse offers free after-school fencing instruction and equipment at a nearby academy to Harlem youth. In Detroit, six teenage boys won the National Urban Squash Team Championships in 2018 — a sport previously dominated by East Coast programs.<sup>5</sup> How? The Racquet Up Detroit program offers year-round squash instruction; eight years ago, a public-school student in Detroit would have struggled to find access to a squash court, let alone world-class training.

**Kids voted with their feet, pushing flag football participation past tackle.** The sports with the largest three-year participation increase were flag football (38.9 percent) and competitive cheerleading (29.8 percent).<sup>6</sup> Tackle football was down almost 2 percent. Also in 2017, flag surpassed tackle in popularity among kids ages 6 to 12 who play on a regular basis. NFL quarterback Drew Brees now has 10 flag football co-ed leagues across the country for kids from kindergarten through eighth grade. The Aspen Institute wrote a paper (as.pn/FlagFootball) concluding that children, football and communities are likely to benefit if flag is the game's standard before high school.

*“There are some fairly concerning data about the number of kids that we see churn out of youth sports at different ages. There's a (attrition) band at 8 years old, and another (at) 12 years old. A fair amount of that is associated with such a high level of competitiveness where the kids feel overwhelmed or just disenfranchised that they haven't made the top team at a relatively young age.”<sup>7</sup>*

— Justin Kaufenberg, SportsEngine CEO

## Challenge: Overstructured experiences

### 2 | THE PLAY: REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY

#### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Today, many parents are reluctant to let children ride bikes across town to play games with friends. Fear of child abductions, while extremely rare, is a psychological barrier, and crime and traffic concerns are real issues in some neighborhoods. Families are smaller, so there are often fewer siblings to play with at home. But experts recognize the need to reintroduce free play where possible, given the science. "To promote lifelong, intrinsically motivated sport participation, it is imperative to build a foundation during childhood," sports psychologist Jean Coté writes. "Inclusion of high amounts of deliberate play activities early in development provides that motivational foundation."*

#### Five developments:

**Virginia passed a new law extending recess.** Advocated for by a group of parents called More Recess for Virginians, the law allows school systems to count recess as part of the instructional day. Until now, the state only dictated how many hours of instruction were needed, and school systems had to squeeze in recess. The changes are noticeable. For example, Prince William County is going from 15 minutes to 30 minutes per day for unstructured activity.<sup>8</sup> In Loudon County, kindergarten students must be given at least 40 minutes of recess and students in first through fifth grades must receive a minimum of 30 minutes.<sup>9</sup> Loudon County recommends that recess be broken up into a morning and afternoon segment whenever possible, and its new policy prohibits students from missing recess due to academic or disciplinary issues.

**Utah legalized free-range parenting.** The state became the country's first to formally legalize allowing kids to do activities on their own without their parents being criminally charged.<sup>10</sup> The Utah law says parents won't be considered negligent by authorities, who cannot start an investigation if a parent lets their child walk outside alone, play without supervision, or allows them to wait in the car without an adult. The idea is to allow children to foster self-sufficiency based on common sense from parents, who know their children best. If the concept takes hold around the country, free play could see a revitalization. Politicians in New York and Texas are preparing to introduce similar proposals in their state.

**The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation brought skateparks to underserved communities.** The foundation teamed with the Tony Hawk Foundation to add skateparks in Western New York and Southeast Michigan as part of Built to Play, an initiative to create more opportunities for free play through new, interactive public play spaces.<sup>11</sup> The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation will invest up to \$5 million in each region (for a maximum of \$10 million) over the next several years, providing grassroots groups and nonprofits with support to create and maintain these play spaces. The need for more safe, outdoor play options for youth in both rural and low-income neighborhoods throughout Western New York and Southeast Michigan was a key finding in the Aspen Institutes' 2017 State of Play reports for those areas.

**New obesity study showed epidemic continues, underscoring need for free play opportunities.** Overweight and obesity rates increased in all age groups among children ages 2 to 19, according to a new study tracking obesity from 1999 to 2016.<sup>12</sup> The rates generally increased with age, with 41.5 percent of teens being obese by 16 to 19 years old. Of particular concern were continued racial and ethnic disparities. White and Asian children showed significantly lower rates of obesity than Hispanic and African-American children. Researchers also found a sharp increase in obesity from 2015 to 2016 compared to the previous cycle among children ages 2 to 5, especially boys. Girls 16 to 19 years old had a notable jump in overweight rates, from 36 percent in 2013-14 to 48 percent in 2015-16.

**Technology's effect on younger minds was hotly debated.** Early employees at Facebook and Google, alarmed over the ill effects of social networks and smartphones, have joined together to challenge the companies they helped build.<sup>13</sup> The Center for Humane Technology, along with Common Sense Media, plan to launch an anti-tech-addiction lobbying effort and an ad campaign at 55,000 public schools in the U.S. Two major Wall Street investors asked Apple to study the health effects of its products and to make it easier to limit children's use of iPhones and iPads. And pediatric and mental health experts called on Facebook to abandon a messaging service the company introduced for children as young as 6.

*"We need to realize that the youth sports model is being disrupted in the same sense that the newspaper industry, cable TV, books and (so many other sectors) have been. ... What we need to do is redefine the value proposition and show that (sports) is a much better experience (than digital entertainment) for kids because it provides so many benefits from the standpoint of health, social interaction, and leadership skills development."*<sup>14</sup>

— Chris Marinak, Major League Baseball executive vice president

## Challenge: Sameness and specialization

### 3 | THE PLAY: ENCOURAGE SPORT SAMPLING

#### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Most children flow into only a handful of the more than 120 sports played in the United States. And, as early as the grade school years, those identified as having the most promise get the message from coaches and others that they must specialize in one sport at the exclusion of others in order to fully develop their talents and play at a college, pro, or other elite level. It's a myth. ... Grow the menu of sport options, create better connections to vulnerable populations, and more athletes-for-life will emerge.*

#### Five developments:

##### **The Healthy Sport Index recommended companion sports.**

In October 2018, the Aspen Institute released the Healthy Sport Index ([www.HealthySportIndex.com](http://www.HealthySportIndex.com)), which combines the best available data and expert analysis to identify the relative benefits and risks of participating in the 10 most popular high school boys and girls sports. As part of the tool, the Healthy Sport Index recommends other sports youth should sample to improve their athletic skills and overall health based on their primary sport. Former pro athletes (Kobe Bryant, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Oliver Luck), national sport organizations, and leading medical experts made the recommendations. (See the recommendations on page 10.) Basketball was the most recommended sport to improve athletic skills, finishing as the No. 1 companion for seven sports: football, boys and girls lacrosse, boys and girls soccer, and boys and girls tennis.

**Boys start specializing in sports earlier than girls.** High school athletes who primarily played boys and girls soccer, baseball, softball and boys basketball started their primary sport earlier than other sports analyzed in the Healthy Sport Index, according to a survey by the Aspen Institute and analyzed by the University of Texas. Girls on average waited about two more years to start specializing in basketball than boys. Many studies show early specialization can lead to overuse injuries and burnout. Players in the above sports specialized on average around 10 years of age. The survey polled 1,290 high school athletes — mostly in North Carolina and Michigan.

**USA Swimming launched a program that helps kids play other sports.** FlexSwim, a new entry-level membership program for swimmers ages 5 to 18, targets those who want to try competitive swimming but can commit to only a few days of training a week and two meets a year. Traditional training for competitive swimmers usually means daily practice and swim meets every weekend. Said USA Swimming Chief Marketing Officer Matt Farrell: “We’re telling people it’s OK to do other sports. We know that even within our sport, not everyone is going to agree with that. But it’s a real philosophical shift, and we think it’s the best long-term view.”<sup>15</sup> Nearly half of swimmers who quit said they left to play other sports, and 40 percent said that swim team was too much of a time commitment.<sup>16</sup> FlexSwim has a lower membership fee of \$20 a swimmer (down from

\$60 for annual membership and \$150 to \$200 for club fees). USA Swimming also launched a campaign showing young swimmers participating in other sports.

##### **Elite NFL draft picks played multiple sports in high school.**

At the 2018 NFL Draft, 29 of the 32 first-round picks (91 percent) played another sport in high school.<sup>17</sup> Sixty-nine percent of the draft picks participated in track and field, 53 percent played basketball, and 13 percent played baseball. Football often produces multisport athletes. Since 2014, 87 percent of University of Alabama football recruits played multiple sports in high school, above the national average of 79 percent for the NCAA’s highest football division.<sup>18</sup> Alabama won the national championship in January 2018 against the University of Georgia, which then signed the nation’s top-rated 2018 recruiting class, featuring 25 of 26 multisport high school athletes.<sup>19</sup>

##### **Canada offered ideas for how U.S. organizations can promote sport sampling.**

Active for Life launched a Canadian campaign encouraging kids to play multiple sports, available at [playmoresports.activeforlife.com](http://playmoresports.activeforlife.com). In partnership with the Canadian Olympic Committee, the website has a video of professional hockey, baseball, basketball and soccer players explaining how playing different sports helped them as athletes. Increasingly, professional athletes are speaking out about the value they gained from playing multiple sports when they were younger.

*“Some of the changes we’ve made in the game have been challenging to the mindset of traditionalists. I’m a traditionalist in some ways, too. I don’t want everything to change. But as time evolves, and time is of the essence, we’ve had to make those changes (such as adopting short-scoring formats for youth).”<sup>20</sup>*

— Katrina Adams, U.S. Tennis Association president

## SPORT SAMPLING FOR ATHLETIC/SKILL DEVELOPMENT

For the new Healthy Sport Index, the Aspen Institute asked national sport organizations and experts to help youth athletes who are focused on one sport improve their skills through exposure to other, complementary sports. Below are their recommendations (with the name of the organization or individual offering recommendation in parentheses).

PRIMARY SPORT	TOP 5 COMPANION SPORTS
BOYS BASKETBALL (Kobe Bryant, NBA legend)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SOCCER</li> <li>2. BASEBALL</li> <li>3. TENNIS</li> <li>4. TRACK AND FIELD</li> <li>5. FOOTBALL</li> </ol>
GIRLS BASKETBALL (Kobe Bryant, NBA legend)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SOCCER</li> <li>2. VOLLEYBALL</li> <li>3. SOFTBALL</li> <li>4. TENNIS</li> <li>5. TRACK AND FIELD</li> </ol>
BASEBALL (USA Baseball)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. TENNIS</li> <li>2. LACROSSE</li> <li>3. SWIMMING</li> <li>4. BASKETBALL</li> <li>5. FOOTBALL</li> </ol>
BOYS SOCCER (US Youth Soccer)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BASKETBALL</li> <li>2. LACROSSE</li> <li>3. TENNIS</li> <li>4. TRACK AND FIELD</li> <li>5. FOOTBALL</li> </ol>
GIRLS SOCCER (US Youth Soccer)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BASKETBALL</li> <li>2. LACROSSE</li> <li>3. VOLLEYBALL</li> <li>4. TENNIS</li> <li>5. TRACK AND FIELD</li> </ol>
FOOTBALL (Oliver Luck, XFL commissioner)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BASKETBALL</li> <li>2. WRESTLING</li> <li>3. SOCCER</li> <li>4. LACROSSE</li> <li>5. TRACK AND FIELD</li> </ol>
BOYS TENNIS (U.S. Tennis Association)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BASKETBALL</li> <li>2. SOCCER</li> <li>3. TRACK AND FIELD</li> <li>4. CROSS COUNTRY</li> <li>5. LACROSSE</li> </ol>
GIRLS TENNIS (U.S. Tennis Association)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BASKETBALL</li> <li>2. SOCCER</li> <li>3. TRACK AND FIELD</li> <li>4. VOLLEYBALL</li> <li>5. CROSS COUNTRY</li> </ol>



**Healthy Sport Index**

Check out the tool at [www.HealthySportIndex.com](http://www.HealthySportIndex.com)

Challenge: Rising costs and commitment

4 | THE PLAY: REVITALIZE IN-TOWN LEAGUES

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*It's been a setting where kids of all skill levels and backgrounds play at the same local field or gym, rarely roaming beyond the town borders. But today, house leagues can be stigmatized as inferior, a casualty of tryout-based, early-forming travel teams that cater to the "best" child athletes. ... Revitalizing recreational leagues depends on improving both the quality of the offering and the quantity of available kids. Parents with means must be given a reason not to flee early for travel teams, through programming that develops their child's skills and provides opportunities for advancement, with fewer impacts on family time. Sport providers need to develop business models that bring less money out of more participants. And organizers must look in new places to grow the pool of players.*

Five developments:

**Lower birth rates impacted youth sports participation.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found the 2016 rate of 62 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44 to be the lowest ever recorded in the U.S., continuing a downward trend over the past decade. In an article on this subject, *Forbes* predicted youth sports organizations could expect declines "as the baby bust from the 2007 and 2008 recession reached athletic participation age."<sup>21</sup> The selling or closing of all Toys "R" Us stores highlighted this ongoing baby bust, *Forbes* wrote. Toys "R" Us cited declining birth rates as a threat to sales.

**Arms race over sports equipment priced out many kids.** Driven by concerns about competitive balance, USA Baseball created a more wood-like standard for aluminum baseball bats, which the majority of young players use. The change angered many parents who were shocked by the new bats' high costs (ranging from \$45 to \$350) and frustrated that the demand seemingly outstripped the supply.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, high-tech swimsuits have pitted parents who have the financial means to buy them as a competitive edge for their children against other parents who believe the focus of swimming for preteens should be on fun and skill development.<sup>23</sup> USA Swimming planned to vote in September 2018 on banning the high-tech suits for 12-and-under swimmers in most competitions. The suits, which can cost as much as \$500, are believed to increase speed by 1 to 2 percent for mature athletes.

**New study showed how few Virginia kids are served by the pay-to-play soccer model.** George Mason University researcher Tyler Richardett created a project called "Hidden Costs: Exploring Access to Youth Soccer in Virginia."<sup>24</sup> Using data from competitive youth soccer league schedules, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the clubs themselves, the project showed that children living in the southwest and southside regions of Virginia are "completely excluded" from the competitive pipeline and would require a "massive" time commitment in order to play. Economic security was an effective predictor of opportunities for inclusion. Opportunities disappeared entirely once an area of Virginia's nonwhite population exceeded 90 percent. The study also showed that the amount of required travel significantly increased as the competition level rose.

**Minor league baseball partnership showed one blueprint to revitalize community leagues.** Due to declining participation, the Oklahoma City Parks and Recreation Department made the difficult decision to cancel the 2017 youth baseball season. Baseball returned in 2018 – thanks to a partnership with the Oklahoma City Dodgers, the city's Triple-A affiliate.<sup>25</sup> Among other things, the OKC Dodgers are providing jerseys and hats for all divisions (T-ball, 6-and-under, 8-and-under, and 10-and-under) of the new OKC Dodgers Rookie League.

**Stealing money in youth sports remained all too easy and common.** When two Holbrook Little League officials were charged with misappropriating more than \$118,000 in league funds six months after the team's run to the Little League World Series, it sent shockwaves across the youth sports landscape in New Jersey.<sup>26</sup> The *Asbury Park Press* revealed even more: Authorities have charged that more than \$1.4 million was stolen from youth sports leagues over the past decade in two New Jersey counties.<sup>27</sup> Other findings showed 22 youth sports leagues have had their nonprofit status revoked by the IRS since 2010, including three currently with Little League; four in 10 leagues examined were violating state charity laws by not reporting their annual finances or conducting audits as required by the state; some leagues had not filed a nonprofit tax form with the IRS in more than 10 years; and nearly half of the leagues ran a deficit, at an average of \$21,000 per year. As costs rise for kids to play sports, financial transparency is vital for parents.

*"The idea that inactivity is related directly to household income should be a wake-up call to every one of us. That is morally unacceptable, and it's socially undesirable for the country, in terms of economic productivity and what that means for the long-term impact on health care."*<sup>28</sup>

— Tom Cove, Sports & Fitness Industry Association CEO

## Challenge: Not enough places to play 5 | THE PLAY: THINK SMALL

### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Growing access to play spaces for most children starts with the small — simple, smart moves that hold great promise. In urban areas, this may mean finding small spaces to develop quarter-sized courts for small-sided play. ... When schools agree to share their playing fields and facilities, it gives families and kids, especially those in underserved communities, more places to play in the evenings, on weekends, and during summer. ... Transportation to parks and school sites is vital, especially in predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhoods, which often have fewer nearby recreation facilities than other areas. That's significant, because people living within a mile of a park are four times more likely to use it than those who live farther away. Funding enables, but so do small gestures of other types of support. Which is another way of saying: be creative.*

### Five developments:

**School became a prominent space for physical activity because it helps academics.** A growing number of politicians and educators are taking research to heart and determining that to improve academic performance, they must do something about their students' physical fitness as well. At a charter school in Appleton, Wisc., middle-school students have "brain breaks" that include physical activity every 20 minutes, exercise bikes in the back of one science classroom to be used whenever kids feel the need, and increased P.E. and recess time. Students can also choose from two additional exercise-focused electives (dance or personal fitness) for 40 minutes every day.<sup>29</sup> In recent years, at least 14 state legislatures considered new laws that would increase the amount of P.E. or recess that schools are required to offer, or would raise the qualifications for P.E. teachers.<sup>30</sup>

**A before-school exercise program may help make students happier and healthier.** In 2009, a group of moms in Massachusetts organized a simple, before-school activity program in their local grade school, choosing early hours so as not to displace existing P.E. classes or after-school sports. The one-hour sessions consisted of running, calisthenics and group games like tag, led by parent volunteers. In 2018, researchers at Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital released findings showing that students who exercised before school three times per week had almost all improved their body mass index and fewer qualified as obese.<sup>31</sup> These students also reported feeling deeper social connections to their friends and school and greater happiness with life. The study said the benefits may depend on children participating at least three times a week.

**New York unveiled a plan to build more bridges to play spaces.** One of the key findings in the Aspen Institute's *State of Play: Harlem* report, published in April 2018, highlighted the transportation difficulties for youth sports and called for shared solutions.<sup>32</sup> In New York, the Randall's Island sports complex boasts 60 new athletic facilities, including baseball, soccer and football fields, a running track, basketball courts, a state-of-the-art tennis facility, and bike paths. But its location across the Harlem River limits frequent visits by East Har-

lem youth. In May, New York officials unveiled an ambitious plan to build bike lanes and improve walkability, which could strengthen ties between historically underserved communities in northern Manhattan and the Bronx that are divided by the Harlem River.<sup>33</sup>

**Old warehouses provided opportunity to innovate play spaces in Alabama.** In 2013, Nicole Keshock rented an old warehouse distribution center in Mobile, Ala., and turned it into a facility with five volleyball courts. Her Mobile Storm Volleyball Club shares the space with a taekwondo business. "Our facility isn't perfect," Keshock said. "The ceilings are right at the minimum. But parents love that their kids can be dropped off at 3 p.m., stay until 9 if they have to, and do homework or hang out. There's a lot of abandoned warehouses that could be used for sports."<sup>34</sup>

**Parents can now enjoy themselves at youth sports complexes.** The telltale sign of how frequently parents are taking kids to games and practices is evident in the Kansas City area, where youth sports complexes are being built so parents can stay and have a beer, get their nails done, or catch up on work at a workstation.<sup>35</sup> Elite Sports Olathe, which has 10 NCAA regulation-sized volleyball courts, is also expected to have two lounges, an arcade room, concessions, classrooms, a business center, big-screen TVs, a full-service bar, and a nail salon. "Practice is no longer a drop-off, but a lifestyle that goes well beyond the sport, and a unique experience that parents can enjoy as well," Elite Sports CEO Jason Bryson told the *Kansas City Star*.

*"Access (is the greatest challenge in youth sports). So, we find champions who can help provide access — to programs, information, equipment, whatever. ... We're going into schools that may or may not have fitness programs, and we find a champion who can give the kids access to programs."*<sup>36</sup>

— Michael Capiraso, New York Road Runners president and CEO

Challenge: Too much, too soon

## 6 | THE PLAY: DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*If a local facility is the hardware in a child's sport experience, then a developmentally appropriate program is the software. Leading sport governing bodies recognize it as the organizing framework to deliver what kids need to grow as both athletes and people. Adoption of it is seen as a tool to stem attrition, advance physical literacy, and debunk misperceptions that parents and coaches have about athletic development.*

Five developments:

**NBA announced the creation of the Jr. NBA World Championship for 14-and-under youth.**<sup>37</sup> The NBA took a major step into youth basketball with this new event, hoping it becomes what the Little League World Series is for baseball. The first tournament was played in August with a similar model as the Little League World Series — the U.S. champions played the international champions. Meanwhile, the NBA and USA Basketball recommended new playing standards for youth:<sup>38</sup> a 30-second shot clock for ages 12 to 14; an 8-foot-high basket for ages 7 to 8 and a 9-foot basket for 9 to 11; no zone defense for ages 7 to 11; no three-pointers for 7 to 11; and equal playing time for ages 7 to 8 and throughout the first three periods for 9 to 11. The new recommendations followed a different set of best-practice guidelines for development released in 2017.

**Major League Baseball rolled out modified rules for youth play.** MLB and USA Baseball developed Hit and Run Baseball, a modified form of the sport with unusual rules that run counter to the game's tradition. Medical professionals and baseball executives designed changes such as hitter limits per inning, accelerated ball and strike counts, and starting certain innings with runners on base. MLB said pilot games have shown quicker contests, more balls put in play, and reduced pitcher stress. The format "was created as a teaching tool designed to remind baseball participants that playing our game does not require a one-size-fits-all approach," MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred said.<sup>39</sup>

**U.S. Soccer Federation elected a new president after an unusually high-profile election.** Carlos Cordeiro, a former vice president of U.S. Soccer, won the presidency in a contentious campaign that saw candidates such as Kyle Martino and Hope Solo also focus their messages on youth soccer. Cordeiro's platform called for bringing more registered youth players into the system and for U.S. Soccer to focus on youth soccer "less as a business and more as a way to develop talent on the field and nurture our next generation of young adults."<sup>40</sup> Solo, a former star goalie on the women's national team, argued that soccer has become a "rich, white kid sport."<sup>41</sup> Martino said he heard from many people at the grassroots level who believe U.S. Soccer is only concerned with the national team and pro game.<sup>42</sup> After his election, Cordeiro signaled his intention to address that criticism through new youth initiatives.

**President Trump nominated new members for the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition.** Among the nominees were New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick, former New York Yankees pitcher Mariano Rivera, former NFL running back Herschel Walker, three-time beach volleyball gold medalist Misty May-Treanor, former Boston Red Sox and Yankees outfielder Johnny Damon, actor and bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno, and television personality Dr. Mehmet Oz. President Trump signed an executive order asking Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar to develop a national strategy to increase youth sports participation, including developing metrics to gauge participation and physical activity.<sup>43</sup>

**U.S. Justice Department enforces equal opportunity for youth athletes with a disability.** For five years, Ryan Huizdos played Little League baseball with the help of an easier-to-see, optic-yellow ball, since he is legally blind because of albinism. That changed in 2015 when Little League banned the ball because it wasn't approved and licensed by the league. After three years of legal maneuvering, Huizdos played in 2018 with a special waiver allowing the optic-yellow ball to be used when he's at bat, pitching or playing infield. What changed? The U.S. Attorney's Office in Detroit advised Little League that it was under investigation on accusations of violating the Americans with Disabilities Act by failing to accommodate a visually impaired boy.<sup>44</sup> The U.S. Department of Justice ordered Little League to allow visually impaired kids everywhere in the U.S. to apply for a yellow-ball waiver. Little League agreed to a new policy that allows any player with a disability to request a waiver.

*"America's approach to the development of the youth athlete is broken. As a leader in amateur sports, the NCAA is committed to supporting and promoting solutions to healthy, sustainable, long-term athlete-development strategies in youth sports."<sup>45</sup>*

— Oliver Luck, NCAA executive vice president, and Brian Hainline, NCAA chief medical officer

## Challenge: Well-meaning but untrained volunteers 7 | TRAIN ALL COACHES

### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Coaches are the delivery mechanism for quality sport programming. They determine how much exercise occurs during practice. Research aggregated by the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition shows that good coaches also lower kids' anxiety levels and lift their self-esteem. They help boys and girls enjoy the sport. They can make an athlete for life — or wreck enthusiasm for sport altogether. ... Trained coaches do best. One study found that only 5 percent of kids who played for trained coaches quit the sport the next year; the attrition rate was 26 percent otherwise.*

### Five developments:

**Women remained an untapped area to develop more youth coaches.** In 2017, only 23 percent of adults who said they had coached kids 14 and under in the past five years were female, according to data from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA). That's down from 28 percent in 2016 and the lowest on record dating to 2012. Attracting more women would help, given the challenges of finding trained coaches. Less than four in 10 youth coaches said they were trained in any of the following areas during the previous five years: sport skills and tactics, effective motivational technique, and safety needs (CPR, basic first aid, and concussion management). Forty percent of surveyed youth head coaches reported they have gone three years or more without formal training in skills and tactics in their primary sport. Research has established that kids who play for qualified coaches are far less likely to quit a sport.

**The sport with the most trained coaches was lacrosse; soccer had the fewest.** In 2017, lacrosse had the highest percentage of trained coaches in four of the six key competencies, based on the nine sports evaluated by SFIA for the Aspen Institute. Soccer was last in five of the six categories. For the third straight year, soccer ranked last among coaches who had been trained in concussion management (25 percent). Lacrosse had the highest rate of coaches trained about concussions (48 percent). Teaching coaches effective motivational techniques remained a major challenge in all sports; lacrosse and ice hockey led this category at 40 percent each. Lacrosse, flag football and volleyball coaches were the most trained in general safety and injury.

**Many sports attracted higher numbers of head coaches.** During 2017, six of the nine sports evaluated by SFIA had a higher percentage of adults coaching in their sport within the past five years than in the five years leading to 2012. Tackle football, flag football, lacrosse, ice hockey, baseball and softball enjoyed higher rates of coaching in 2017 compared to five years earlier. Ice hockey doubled its percentage of coaches in those five years. The data were much different for basketball: 36 percent of survey respondents in 2017 had coached basketball within the previous five years, down from 49 percent in 2012.

### **More states added laws that require coaches to be trained.**

Alabama passed a law requiring youth-sports coaches to take injury prevention and response training each year.<sup>46</sup> At a minimum, the Coach Safety Act calls for annual training to include emergency preparedness for traumatic injuries, concussions and head trauma, heat- and extreme-weather-related injuries, physical conditioning and training equipment usage, and heart defects and abnormalities leading to sudden cardiac death. The law applies to all paid and unpaid coaches of athletes 14 and younger and mandates that all youth sports associations that use public property provide a free training course. In Michigan, a new law requires any adults involved in youth sports to complete an online training seminar every three years, as opposed to taking it just once.<sup>47</sup> The idea is to allow for any new recommendations, protocols or research related to concussions to be updated with the most current information.

### **U.S. Soccer introduced new in-person and online youth-coaching courses.**

Courses for 4v4, 7v7, 9v9 and 11v11 soccer were rolled out.<sup>48</sup> A new D-License course, held over two weekends, also was introduced. All courses are accessible through the federation's Digital Coaching Center upon completion of the cost-free "Introduction to Grassroots Coaching" module. Spanish-language versions for these courses are being developed. The efforts should reduce barriers to obtaining coaching education in soccer.

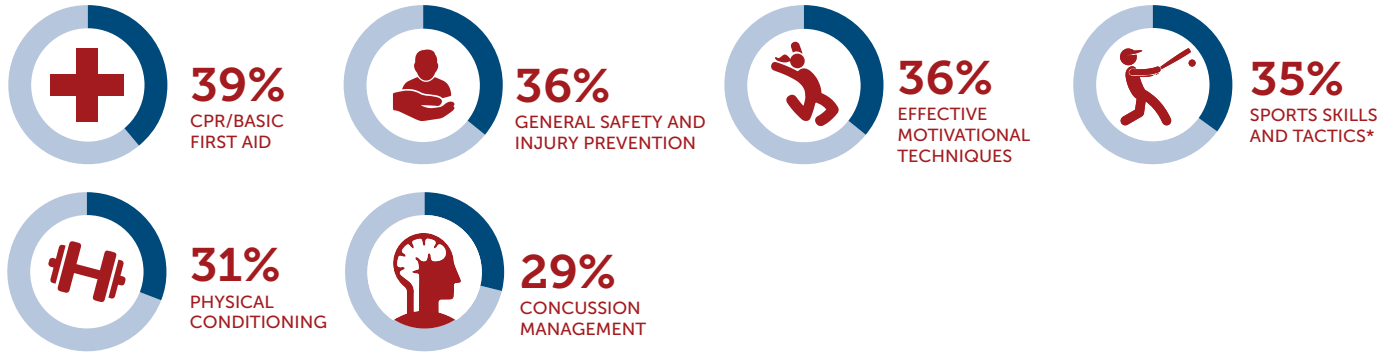
*"I think we tend to overlook the significance of (coaches) and the impact it can have on children — their emotional development, their ability to imagine, dream and hope. The idea of training coaches and understanding their significance is really important. You guys (at Project Play) get that. It's why our relationship is really a seamless one."*<sup>49</sup>

— Kobe Bryant, NBA legend



## YOUTH COACHES WITH TRAINING

Percentage of 2017 coaches who say they received specified training



\*In primary sport they coach

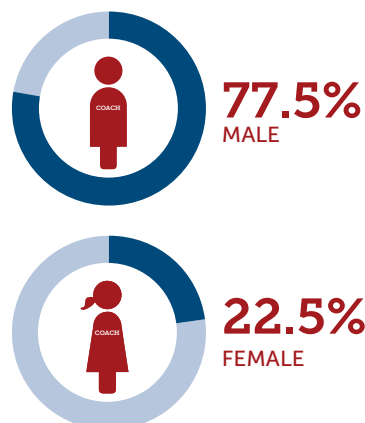
## YOUTH COACHES WITH TRAINING BY SPORT

Percentage of 2017 coaches who say they were trained in the past five years

	CPR/ BASIC FIRST AID	CONCUSSION MANAGEMENT	GENERAL SAFETY & INJURY PREVENTION	PHYSICAL CONDITIONING	SPORTS SKILLS AND TACTICS*	EFFECTIVE MOTIVATIONAL TECHNIQUES
SOCCER	48.3%	24.7%	35.5%	31.3%	31.7%	28.1%
BASKETBALL	47.0%	29.4%	37.0%	33.1%	40.5%	30.7%
VOLLEYBALL	46.1%	42.5%	52.2%	37.6%	45.1%	38.4%
TACKLE FOOTBALL	51.5%	38.8%	43.4%	44.9%	43.3%	34.6%
FLAG FOOTBALL	54.7%	42.4%	53.1%	38.8%	44.5%	28.9%
LACROSSE	45.3%	47.5%	53.3%	47.2%	46.0%	39.7%
ICE HOCKEY	47.4%	38.4%	43.5%	38.6%	50.2%	39.7%
BASEBALL	55.6%	29.5%	44.6%	41.2%	43.8%	31.5%
SOFTBALL	52.3%	36.9%	44.6%	44.0%	41.3%	38.7%
OTHER SPORTS	49.4%	16.7%	33.8%	24.6%	21.8%	17.7%

\*In primary sport they coach

## YOUTH COACHES BY GENDER AND DEMOGRAPHICS



YOUTH COACHES BY AGE	
AGE 24 AND YOUNGER	3.9%
AGES 25-34	39.0%
AGES 35-44	20.9%
AGES 45-54	21.1%
AGES 55-64	9.1%
AGES 65+	6.0%

BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME	
UNDER \$25,000	8.2%
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	12.9%
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	14.3%
\$75,000 TO \$99,999	22.9%
\$100,000+	41.7%

## Challenge: Safety concerns among parents 8 | EMPHASIZE PREVENTION

### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Among the many issues facing youth sports, injury risks trouble parents the most. The espnW/Aspen Institute Project Play survey showed that nine out of 10 parents have safety concerns — and half of those describe safety as a major concern. Both mothers and fathers said that concussions are the most worrisome and one-quarter of parents have considered keeping a child from playing because of that. Football, by far, gave parents the most cause for concern. ... Youth sport organizations should err on the side of caution — and ultimately participation — and embrace policies that eliminate or greatly reduce head contact at the 12-and-under level.*

### Five developments:

#### **U.S. Olympic Committee, USA Gymnastics changed leadership as Congress investigated child molestation scandal.**

The fallout continued in 2018 after the conviction of Larry Nassar, the former top medical doctor for USA Gymnastics who stood accused of sexual misconduct with at least 265 girls and women. More than 150 recounted their stories of abuse in court, including U.S. Olympians Simone Biles and Aly Raisman. Many survivors called for a complete cultural change in the USOC to put the interests of athletes ahead of the organization. USOC CEO Scott Blackmun resigned, citing ongoing health issues from prostate cancer.<sup>50</sup> Questions mounted of his handling of allegations against Nassar, and Blackmun was replaced by Sarah Hirshland, a former executive with the U.S. Golf Association. The entire USA Gymnastics board resigned under pressure from the USOC.<sup>51</sup> New USA Gymnastics President Kerry Perry resigned after only nine months. Congress held three hearings on the topic, and lawsuits worked their way through the courts.

#### **Congress passed a law requiring governing bodies of U.S. Olympic and Paralympic sports to promptly report child abuse to law enforcement and report sexual abuse to the U.S. Center for SafeSport.**

Supporters of the bill, sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, said a patchwork of state laws on reporting suspected sex abuse made it necessary to enact a uniform national standard. The failure to report a sexual abuse allegation could lead to up to one year in prison. Congress also appropriated \$2.5 million per year for five years for a new grant program aimed at keeping young athletes safe. The grant is expected to go to SafeSport, which in its first year of operation sanctioned more than 150 people as permanently ineligible from participation in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movements and responded to more than 500 reports and inquiries.<sup>52</sup>

**Health-incentives law moves closer to adoption.** The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Personal Health Investment Today (PHIT) Act, a bill that would provide Americans with a tax break for gym memberships, yoga classes, athletic equipment, and other qualified sports and fitness expenses.<sup>53</sup> If the bill passes the U.S. Senate, it would let individuals use up to \$1,000 (\$500 for a single filer) from their pretax health savings and flexible-spending accounts on

the cost of getting in shape. The idea is the PHIT Act will encourage Americans to stay healthy now, which will save the government and individuals money on medical expenses later. Critics of the bill question whether the PHIT Act would actually benefit the lower-income Americans — and youth — who need to move the most.<sup>54</sup>

#### **Laws banning tackle football were proposed and failed.**

Lawmakers in Illinois, New York, California and Maryland tried unsuccessfully to pass various bills in their state restricting the age of tackle football among youth. The proposed bills either got defeated immediately or went away quietly. Still, 2018 may be remembered as a crucial year for the discussion about when to start tackle. The topic entered mainstream dialogue more often. NFL legend Brett Favre said he would support legislation preventing any child under the age of 12 from playing tackle football.<sup>55</sup> Longtime NFL writer Peter King said there should be no tackle until at least middle school and maybe not even in high school, while calling on the NFL to lead on this issue.<sup>56</sup> The LA84 Foundation, one of the nation's largest grantmakers, announced it would no longer fund programs that offer tackle football below age 14.

#### **Gambling on youth sports is prevalent in south Alabama.**

One in four Mobile County youth from kindergarten through sixth grade said they have played in a game where adults bet money on the outcome.<sup>57</sup> Thirty-three percent of boys and 17 percent of girls reported adults betting on their games. More than half of all Mobile County youth who have played organized football said adults have bet on their games, with younger kids reporting the most activity.

*"We must protect, support and empower athletes, young and old, elite and beginner. Olympic and Paralympic sport in the United States must be a shining example, able to provide athletes with the benefits of participation in an environment free from abuse of any kind."*<sup>58</sup>

— Sarah Hirshland, U.S. Olympic Committee CEO



# CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

**From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:**

*Project Play offers a conceptual framework that helps stakeholders from across sectors understand how they can work together to serve the interests of children, communities, and public health. We hope the strategies and ideas contained in this playbook inspire organizations and individuals to take meaningful actions. At the same time, we recognize that so much more can get done with a commitment to Collective Impact. As the Stanford Social Innovation Review has observed, large-scale social movements — systems change — require broad cross-sector collaboration.*

Various metaphors have been used in general to describe youth sports in America. Runaway train is one. An oil tanker is another, given that more money now flows through youth sports in the U.S. — an estimated \$15 billion minimum — than through the NFL, NBA or any other league globally. But neither is exactly right. Trains and oil tankers are monolithic entities moving in a single direction. Youth sport, in the U.S. at least, is more like a busy harbor with a thousand pleasure craft and a few large ships all moving at different angles. Decisions about the shape of youth sports are still largely made at the community level, by parents, schools, volunteers and entrepreneurs.

But one of the lessons of the first five years of Project Play is that top-down leadership from the most influential national organizations matters as well. We see that in the shifts in sport participation, up and down, by leagues and sport governing bodies that have introduced new policies or grassroots initiatives. That's why at last year's Project Play Summit we launched Project Play 2020, the first time that major organizations — leagues, corporations, tech and media companies, and foundations, some of them competitors — came together to consider ways they can work together to grow access to quality sport activity for youth.

In May 2018, we announced that ESPN, Amazon, the National Hockey League and U.S. Tennis Association had joined Project Play 2020, bringing additional firepower and unique knowledge into the effort, which aims to help grow sport participation rates and related metrics with the aid of Collective Impact methodology. Backbone support is provided by the Aspen Institute, whose seminal 2015 report, *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*, is used to identify annual areas of opportunity and focus member efforts.

Members of Project Play 2020 decided to focus initially on two strategies (or “plays”) in the playbook: Train All Coaches and Encourage Sport Sampling. Within those buckets, two types of actions have been initiated: 1) shared actions, in which multiple member organizations team up to create or distribute an agreed-upon group deliverable, and 2) mutually reinforcing actions, in which member organizations on their own introduce a symbiotic tool, resource or other opportunity.

The following are a few of the efforts launched by Project Play 2020 members.

## YOUTH COACH TRAINING RESOURCE

Working with Nike and the Aspen Institute, the U.S. Olympic Committee has created and will host a simple course that aims to introduce volunteers to the basics of coaching children through age 12. The “How to Coach Kids” course will be offered for free to youth-serving organizations, as well as national governing bodies and partner organizations; its content aligns the principles of the USOC's American Development Model with those of Project Play.



The goal is not to provide a coach with everything they need to coach kids, but to create a tipping point in our culture where training is expected and sport-specific resources are easily found.

Aspen is working with community recreation groups to distribute this resource. The development of the tool has, in turn, inspired sport-specific organizations such as the U.S. Soccer Federation to consider ways to make their entry-level courses more accessible to more coaches through organizations including the YMCA of the USA.

## SPORT SAMPLING RESOURCES

Several efforts to encourage children to explore a variety of sports — and resist pressures to specialize early in one — were put in motion by Project Play 2020 members. Building on a 2015 endorsement by dozens of sport bodies and professional leagues, Aspen created a checklist for national sport organizations on policies and practices to advance sport sampling, introducing it in May at the annual conference for the Association of Chief Executives of Sports. To help grassroots providers activate, Sports Facilities Advisory | Sports Facilities Management pledged to develop new multisport events and sport-sampling programs in the facilities they advise and oversee around the country.

Sport sampling is also a key feature and call to action within the Healthy Sport Index (HealthySportIndex.com), a first-of-its-kind tool launched in October that can help parents and other stakeholders make informed decisions about engagement in youth sports. The Hospital for Special Surgery partnered with the Aspen Institute on the project, which evaluates the 10 most popular high school sports for boys and for girls based on data for physical activity, safety, and psychosocial benefits. Complementary sports are recommended for youth who have a primary sport. The American College of Sports Medicine and a task force of medical and other experts advised on the recommendations and development of the tool.

## PARENT ENGAGEMENT CAMPAIGN

Project Play 2020 members recognize the need to empower parents as agents of change, from the grassroots up. It's why Aspen partnered with Target to create the Project Play Checklists ([as.pn/checklists](https://as.pn/checklists)) — 10 questions parents can ask themselves, their child and local sport providers that will help build an athlete for life. Video companions for each checklist were introduced this year, as well as an iframe version of the checklist that allows any organization to place the questions on their website without sponsor branding. Next up is a PSA campaign that will highlight key resources for parents, with messaging supported by NBA legend and Oscar Award-winning filmmaker Kobe Bryant, who has agreed to use his platforms to elevate Project Play activities. Project Play 2020 members are helping develop the campaign and will distribute its creative assets through their platforms.

The USOC has formed a working group of leaders from national governing bodies of sports to help create parent-engagement resources that are sport-specific. NBC Sports Group has helped lay some of the groundwork for the above efforts. Its documentary series, "Play Fair," began airing in June, exploring issues relevant to sports parents; also, parent-targeted resources from Project Play have been distributed through SportsEngine.com, its online search marketplace for local sport programs.

## COMMUNITY ACTIVATIONS

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation issued more than \$40 million in grants to youth sports and recreation organizations serving Southeast Michigan and Western New York, where community foundations and local task forces, working with Aspen, identified reintroducing free play, coach training and sport sampling as priority areas of focus. More than \$10 million was given to the Tony Hawk Foundation and KaBOOM! to build innovative play spaces.





Additional investments of even larger amounts are being planned and will be announced in October 2018. In urban Detroit, the largest city in the 16 counties served by the Wilson Foundation, the National Hockey League is focusing on growing youth hockey participation as a demonstration project that could be replicated in other NHL markets. The *State of Play: Southeast Michigan* report by Aspen and the Wilson Foundation helped identify gaps and opportunities.

Now, ESPN is helping to underwrite the development of a digital, do-it-yourself Project Play Teamwork Toolkit that local leaders anywhere can use to landscape their own community’s “state of play” for children and mobilize stakeholders to action. Links to coaching and other resources mentioned above will be included. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a technical advisor to Project Play 2020, plans to work with Aspen to pilot a “community sport chief” and local health strategist model for connecting youth with local sport programs. Other efforts by Project Play 2020 members include a commitment by Nike to grow its Nike Community Ambassador Program across North America, providing coach training and support to Nike retail employees as they volunteer with local organizations in their communities to inspire and enable kids to be active.

### CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

Project Play’s framework of eight shared strategies to get and keep kids involved in sports has been used by many organizations, from the U.S. Olympic Committee to foundations, to introduce programs or shape youth strategies. The U.S. Tennis Association and PGA of America took the additional step of formally committing to align their youth development programs with those strategies in mind. Among other efforts, the USTA now will actively ask users about their involvement with other sports, reward multisport play in the participation model, and deliver content and materials to educate users on the benefits of multisport play.

Other actions by Project Play 2020 members include commissioning new research funded by Dick’s Sporting Goods to collect data to better understand the state of funding for and access to youth sports. Dick’s has provided millions of dollars in 2018 to fund youth sports teams in need as part of its \$50 million Sports Matter program, which includes a new film and other awareness-raising activities.



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Moving participation numbers at a national population level takes time and systems-level interventions. So much cannot be controlled — national and state economies, government policies and budgets, the next paradigm-shifting technology. All that any organization can do is take actions that align with the interests of kids as reflected in the framework of Project Play, with its eight shared strategies for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children.

**Many organizations already have taken action. Many more will be needed, as stakeholders aim to improve the State of Play.**

## NEXT

Let's start with the end in mind. Ten years from now, the U.S. will host the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, and two years prior our nation will have hosted the men's soccer World Cup. By then, sports betting likely will have been legalized in most of the country, generating at minimum \$5 billion a year in revenue for states — and perhaps the federal government if it gets involved — to distribute. If the trends of today continue, the sports industry could be twice the size, in revenue if not cultural influence.

Barring major missteps, it's fair to assume the top of our sports pyramid will be categorized as somewhere between robust and very robust.

The bottom? That's entirely TBD, depending on how much stakeholders commit to building healthy communities through sports, starting with quality experiences for all children regardless of zip code or ability.

A great story is there to be told. But it will take vision, leadership and systems-level adjustments in the provision of sport opportunities.

The next year will be critical in designing that future, with new chiefs setting new courses at key governing bodies (U.S. Olympic Committee, U.S. Soccer Federation), leagues such as the NBA taking more control of their youth pipelines, the introduction of sports betting in more states, and industry-aligning grassroots efforts via Project Play 2020.

Here are five questions that the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program plans to keep top of mind as we help stakeholders identify opportunities:

### Q1: What are we as a nation trying to achieve here?

There are lots of reasons Americans are drawn to sports. The desire to be entertained. To witness the limits of human physical expression. To have something to talk about with the in-law who annoys you or your neighbor on the other side of political divide. Common cause, even if it's around something as superficial as a favorite team, has value.

But what people want even more are to live in vibrant communities that foster well-being for them and their families. The most desirable communities are active communities, with ample bike paths, recreation spaces and sport activities (both organized and unstructured) for kids through seniors.

Developing more policies and partnerships that place health and inclusion — the core values of Project Play — at the center of our sport system will be essential in aligning the interests of stakeholders and addressing myriad other issues, including the health care crisis.





## Q2: Who gets defined as an athlete?

As noted elsewhere in this report, one of the key developments of the past year was the National Federation of State High School Associations embracing esports. Other traditional sport entities are investing in competitive video gaming as well, and as they chase the dollars, the public will be asked to expand the notion of an athlete to include those whose body movements are largely limited to a few fingers. The argument has been put forth: *That's a couple more fingers than are used in riflery.*

That is true, though there are hazards in adjusting our common cultural understanding of sport as activity that involves physical activity. We know that good things happen when bodies are in motion. By the week it seems, the research grows about the physiological, mental, academic, social and emotional benefits of being active and/or playing sports.

More essential, though, is expanding our scope of the athletes served by key institutions. The U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) is a critical player. In 1978, the Amateur Sports Act placed the USOC in charge of developing our sport system for athletes at all levels, including youth. Since the 1990s, and increasingly over the past decade, energies have shifted more toward the tippy-top of our sport system in an effort to turn Olympic hopefuls into Olympic stars.

That extreme focus on medals laid the groundwork for the abuses that emerged in USA Gymnastics and which have caused deep soul-searching at the USOC and the sport-specific national governing bodies it oversees. Moving forward, there may be a push to redefine Team USA as inclusive of any athlete playing on any surface anywhere; new USOC CEO Sarah Hirshland has signaled as much in early comments, though what that means practically is to be determined.

## Q3: What's the role of schools?

This year, B. David Ridpath, a professor of sport business at Ohio University, published a book, *Alternative Models of Sports Development in America*, in which he examined the model for school sports in the U.S. that has been in place for more than a century. He compared it to the model favored in Europe, in which clubs provide most of the sport development opportunities for youth and schools are focused more exclusively on academics, plus some physical education.

The influence of club sports has grown in the U.S., with some even prohibiting athletes from playing for school sports teams. It's driven, ironically, by the chase for college (school-based) athletic scholarships. As that trend marches forward, it presents a nice opportunity to reimagine the role of sports in schools. Given the body of research showing the cognitive and other benefits of physical activity, what school-based models best serve the broadest array of students? How can schools partner with community organizations to share resources? Do we need to rethink the role of the P.E. teacher, from provider of sport experiences to connector to local sport options?

School sports is a treasured American institution. But there's room for innovation, and we will encourage conversation that inspires solutions.

## Q4: What's the role of the federal government?

The United States is one of the few nations in the world without a sports ministry or similarly situated body that can guide, coordinate or facilitate sport development. Some argue this is a good thing, skeptical that the federal government, especially amid the partisan warfare of today, can get anything done that is smart or sustainable.

President Trump is diving in anyway, asking his renamed President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition to develop a national strategy on youth sports. Progress to date has been slow.



It took until September of this year to get most of the council members approved, longer than it took previous administrations. The council remains buried within the Department of Health and Human Services, with a small budget and staff. Efforts to raise money from the private sector to support Trump’s agenda are underway.

Time will tell if the marketplace responds, or if Trump can get more done by focusing on the levers that the White House controls. Federal agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention could be tasked to gather better data on sport participation so states can create their own “state of play” reports that will mobilize leaders. Grant criteria across federal agencies could be adjusted to align with youth sports needs. Proposed legislation, infrastructure bills or otherwise could be reviewed with an eye toward the impact that the language may have on community sports.

### Q5: How do we pay for it all?

This is a major question — but with a major opportunity before us. That would be legalized sports betting, which the Supreme Court opened the door to in May by ruling that the federal government could no longer prohibit states from authorizing (and taxing) such activity. New Jersey was the first mover, but no less than two dozen states are now taking steps to allow gambling on sports events. Within five years, that market could generate between \$3.1 billion and \$5.2 billion per year in annual revenue, according to one projection.

In Norway, revenue from sports betting is used to fund community sports and recreation. In 2016, \$330 million was pumped back into communities for new projects, from facilities to equipment purchases. The support has played no small part in making Norway one of the most active and healthy nations in the world, with more than its fair share of elite athletes emerging at the top of the pyramid. At the 2018 Winter Olympic Games, Norway finished atop the medal count — not bad for a nation of 5.2 million people.

Further inspiration comes from Colorado, which has used lottery revenues to fund recreation projects. There, 24 cents of every dollar spent on the lottery goes back to the state, which since 1992 has generated \$3.1 billion to build 900 miles of trails and 1,000 parks, skate parks, pools, and ballfields. The funds have improved facilities at some underfunded schools and preserved more than 700 miles of rivers. Small wonder Colorado has among the nation’s most active citizens and the state is one of the fastest growing in the nation.

In September, our Future of Sports series put the question on the table of whether U.S. states should use sports betting to fund the base of our sport system. It’s a conversation we’ll stay with as states make their plans.

**Read and watch original Project Play content at [www.ProjectPlay.us](http://www.ProjectPlay.us)**



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## FIGURES

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## POST-SUMMIT WORKSHOP SPONSORS



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The mission of the Sports & Society Program is to convene leaders, facilitate dialogue, and inspire solutions that help sports serve the public interest. The program provides a venue for thought leadership where knowledge can be deepened and breakthrough strategies explored on a range of issues.

[www.SportsAndSociety.org](http://www.SportsAndSociety.org)

## ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops, applies and shares knowledge that helps stakeholders build healthy communities through sports.

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