



The
Tracksmith
Foundation



The State of Youth Track in America

The Tracksmith Foundation's findings
about track and field in the US.





The Starting Line

This report serves as a benchmark for where the state of youth track and field in America currently stands. Our goal in conducting this research is simple: to gain a better understanding of youth track and field's pain points and opportunities so that we, the Tracksmith Foundation, can better support those identified needs.

The main takeaway from our research conducted throughout the summer and fall of 2022 is that quality coaching is the biggest area of need. In this report we will discuss our findings and present ways that the Tracksmith Foundation intends to make track and field more open, more inclusive and offer higher quality coaching so that more young people can enjoy the sport, and benefit from the experience of being on a track team.



About the Tracksmith Foundation

The Tracksmith Foundation is an organization with a simple yet ambitious mission: to give more people the opportunity to participate in track and field. In 2021, the Foundation was founded following the support that Tracksmith provided in 2020 and early 2021 to save the Clemson men's track and field program. Those efforts were ultimately successful, and the team has been competitive and thriving ever since. The Foundation represents an expansion of those efforts and seeks to not only help to protect track and field opportunities but to keep the sport vibrant and growing. We believe that track and field opens doors and provides invaluable opportunities for individuals to grow as athletes, as scholars, and as members of society. Therefore, we aim to expand participation opportunities for school and university-aged youth through direct advocacy, community engagement, and growing public awareness.

Why we Conducted this Study

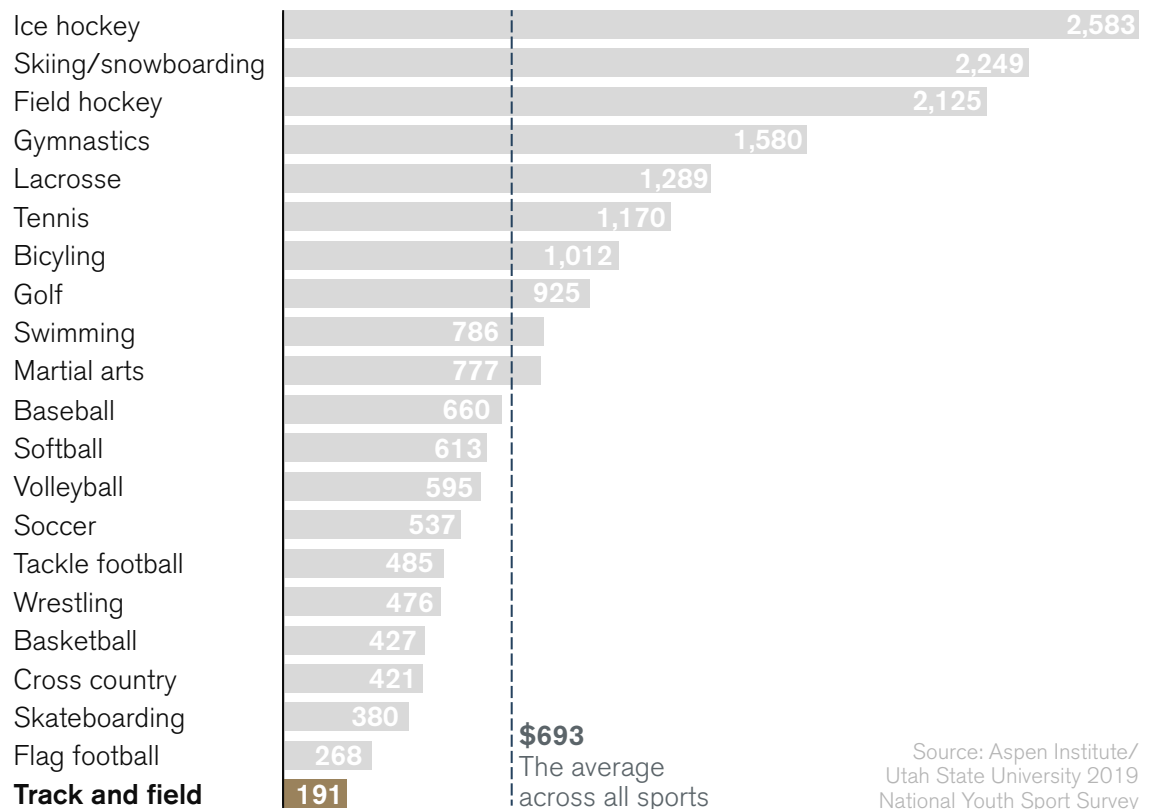
How does a new organization support something as vast as track and field in America? To answer this question, we wanted to start with a baseline understanding of the needs of the athletes. We believe that our approach to supporting the sport should be informed by a methodical process of information gathering from stakeholders who know youth track best: coaches, parents, and administrators. It's only when you know the scale of the problem – what is already great but just in need of amplification – that you can then begin to build strategies, programs, and initiatives. We also know that as a young organization, we can have the greatest impact if we start with a targeted focus and then expand our efforts as our capacity grows larger.



The Case for Youth Track and Field

At a glance, track and field is vibrant and thriving. It is the most participated-in high school sport, offers the greatest number of participation opportunities for women and girls at the collegiate and youth levels, and is one of the largest college sports in terms of overall participation. It is also the most diverse sport in the world, bringing together sprinters, throwers, jumpers, and distance runners as teammates. The sport offers more opportunities to skirt the politics and subjectivity often present in other youth sports. Athletes have more choices on what event to compete in, and coaches are expected to rely on data – rather than preferences when deciding who plays and who does not. The sport is also more meritocratic than its counterparts, providing a lower barrier along racial, socioeconomic¹, and gender lines² than other youth sports.

United States,
Average Annual
Spending on the
Sport of One Child, \$



Source: Aspen Institute/
Utah State University 2019
National Youth Sport Survey

¹ The Aspen Institute

² NFHS



Additionally, the nature of track and field allows one's results to stand for themselves, providing a tangible measuring stick that gives young athletes a clear indication of their improvement and contribution to the team. In short, track and field offers athletes the opportunity to participate, to improve, and to accomplish goals both as an individual and as a member of a team – all core values that make sports participation such an important part of young people's lives.

However, under the surface, track and field has been challenged at both the youth and collegiate levels. At the youth level, many programs do not provide quality instruction or receive the institutional backing from local high schools that other youth sports enjoy. For instance, many participants in our survey noted that their local high school track and cross-country teams often did not have priority to use the track or fields over other sports at their respective schools. At the collegiate level, there have been a rash of program cuts that have threatened the sport. The Foundation was created in part to respond to these challenges to not only ensure that opportunities to participate in the sport continue but that those opportunities, particularly at the youth level, are of the highest quality.

We have decided to focus on youth track specifically because it is where we believe we can have the greatest impact. The vibrancy of the sport relies on a strong foundation. By helping to strengthen track and field at the youth level, we are helping to build a stronger sport for the future – one that provides even greater opportunities to participate than it does currently.



How we Conducted the Research

We conducted our research via an online survey as well as a series of focus groups. The survey focused on two areas of youth track: club track and school track.

We defined club track as the youth track and field ecosystem of teams that primarily compete in the AAU and/or USATF Junior Olympics circuits. These teams are not a part of a school's athletic program. We defined school track as the youth track and field ecosystem of programs that are connected to schools. These teams compete at school-affiliated competitions as opposed to club-specific competitions. Our mentions of school track largely refer to high school track as the majority of our school track data comes from high school track coaches, parents and administrators.

Throughout this report, the term youth track will refer to both club track and school track as a collective whereas the terms club track and school track will be used to refer to the respective segments of youth track as defined above.

While there is a great deal of overlap between the club track and the school track worlds, we wanted to understand how they were similar and different. We also felt that there were likely unique challenges and needs for both halves of youth track that were important for us to delve into. Respondents had the opportunity to answer questions about both club track and school track, or they could select only to answer questions about only one of these areas. The majority of respondents, however, elected to provide answers for both club and school track.

We distributed the survey primarily via social media, garnering responses from youth coaches, parents and school administrators all over the US. A self-selected group of survey respondents opted to be a part of follow-up focus groups where we were able to gather more detailed information³.

³ 146 people participated in the survey



Main Takeaways

From this research, we were able to determine that the largest area of need for youth track and field is the need for more knowledgeable coaching, particularly for the field and technical events. However, this is a nuanced problem that requires a closer look. Many respondents noted that their programs had quality coaching in some disciplines but not others. The coexistence of all disciplines is what makes competing on a track and field team such a profound and unique experience. However, inconsistent coaching quality among the events is a distinct threat to this experience. There were also a number of other needs that were prominent in the research that will also be discussed in detail below.

The most significant other needs pertained to a lack of facilities and equipment. In regards to facilities, respondents noted that there was a need for access to facilities as well as a need to enhance the quality of already-existing facilities. In regards to equipment, respondents noted that there was a significant need to address the personal gear requirements of athletes as well as addressing the larger equipment needs of club programs and schools such as high jump mats and pole vault pits.



How we Plan to use this Research

In this report, we present our main findings, what the areas of need are, and how the needs for club track and school track are similar as well as different. At the conclusion, we will present our plan to address some of the identified needs.

1.
Gather
Information

2.
Identify
the Needs

3.
Build Programs to
Support the Needs



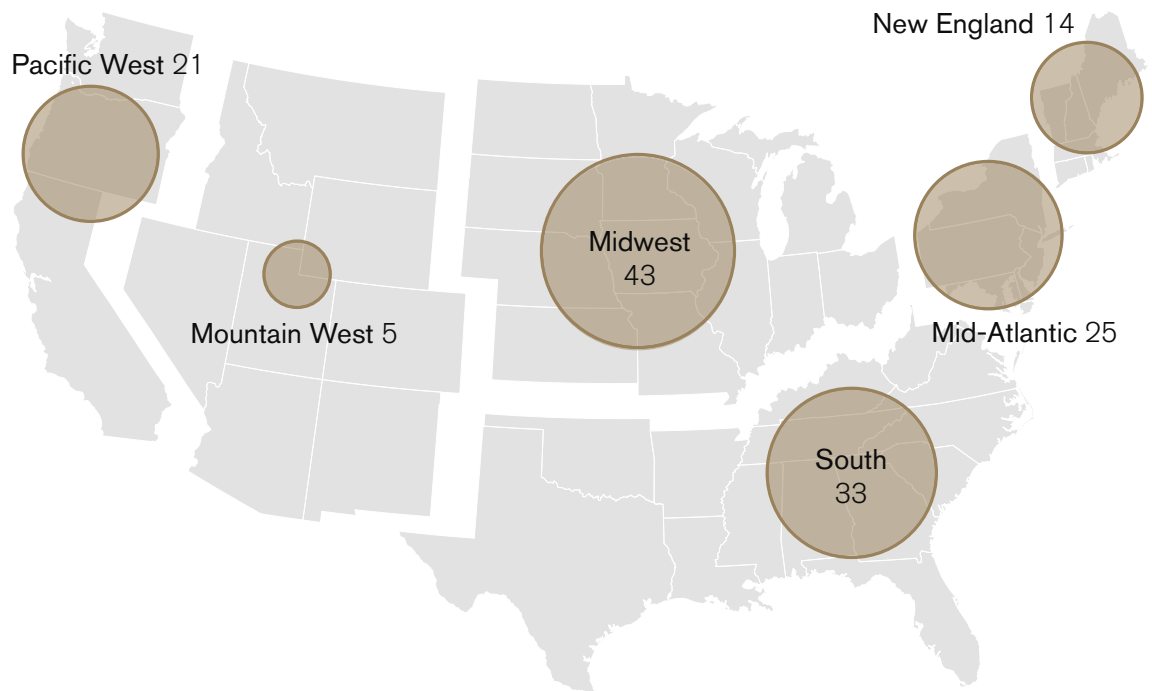
Overall Findings

The overall findings show the greatest area of need for youth track is the need for quality, knowledgeable coaching as well as a need for more coaches.

Who Responded

Our respondents represented six US regions. A majority (over 65 percent) of the respondents indicated that they lived in a suburban environment as opposed to an urban or a rural environment, suggesting that some of our findings may best reflect the experience of youth track in the suburbs.

Where our respondents live



Communities our respondents live in
146 Responses



20%
URBAN



66%
SUBURBAN



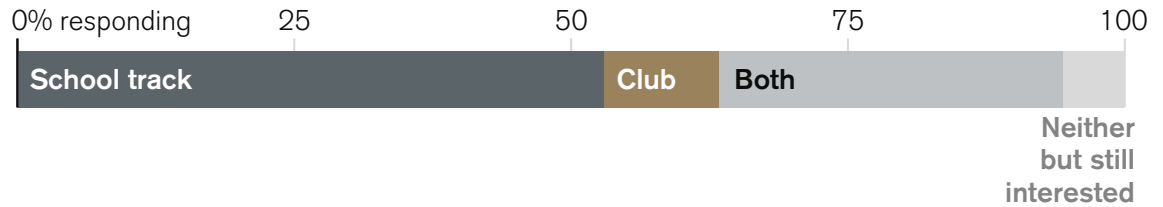
14%
RURAL



Nearly 73 percent of respondents indicated that they were school track coaches, with about 57 percent currently serving as high school coaches. Our data, in large part, reflect the experiences of coaches throughout this nation.

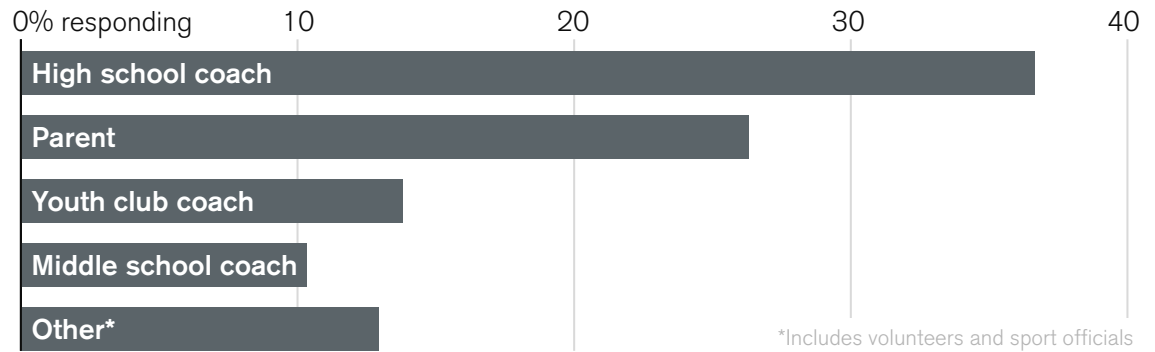
Additionally, 84 percent of the respondents indicated that they were involved in school track in some capacity.

How respondents indicated they were involved in youth track



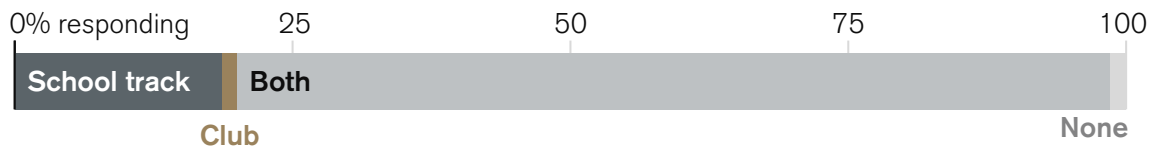
Drilling down further, coaches are the largest self-described group in our data, followed by parents. Many of the parents indicated that they were also coaches in the survey data. Overall, our data centers heavily on the experience of school track. Within the school track category, the majority of our respondents were high school track coaches with about 10% being middle school coaches.

How respondents described themselves



According to our data, 80 percent of respondents indicated that either club or school track and field programs were available in their areas, suggesting that access to programs was not a significant need for respondents.

The kind of youth programs available in respondents' areas



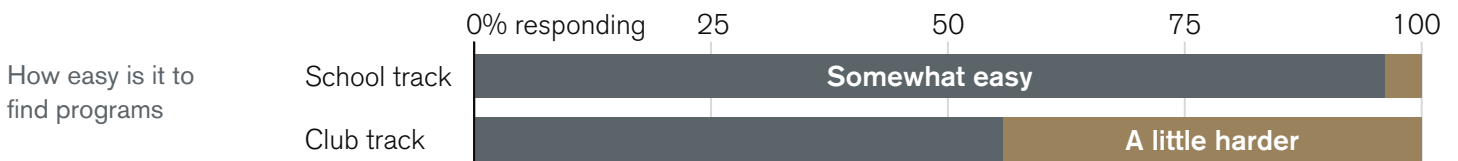


Overarching Takeaways

What the Sport Does Well

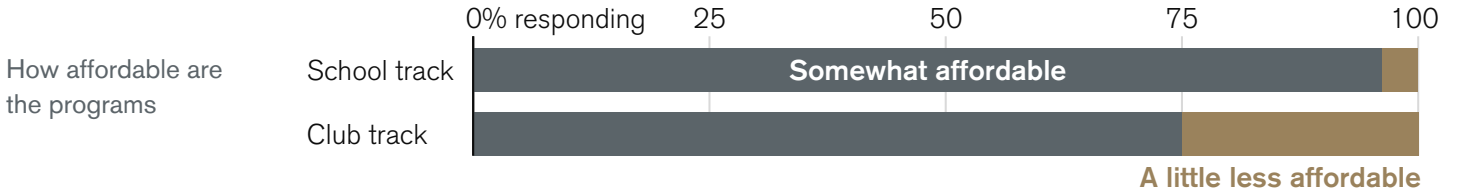
Our data show that track and field is broadly accessible, affordable, and provides essential opportunities throughout the country, in rural, suburban, and urban settings as well as communities of varying income levels.

We did not see discernible differences in the accessibility of track and field by community type, as respondents in rural, suburban, and urban settings all indicated that the sport was easy to access. Respondents noted that it is reasonably easy to find teams for both the club track and school track sides of the sport, with respondents noting that school track programs are particularly easy to find.

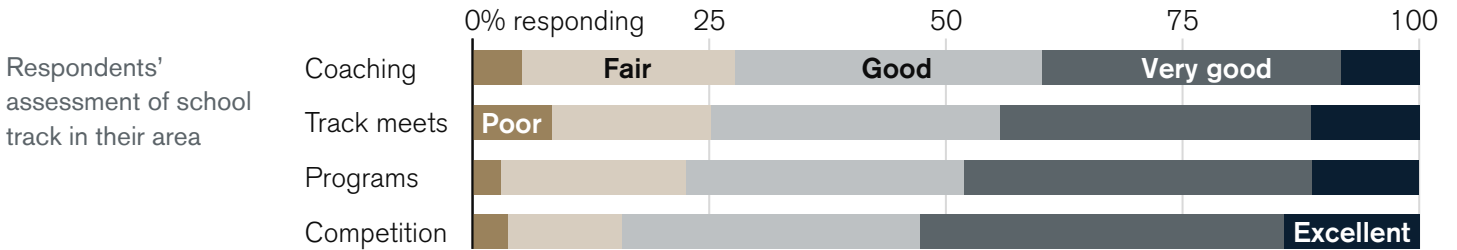
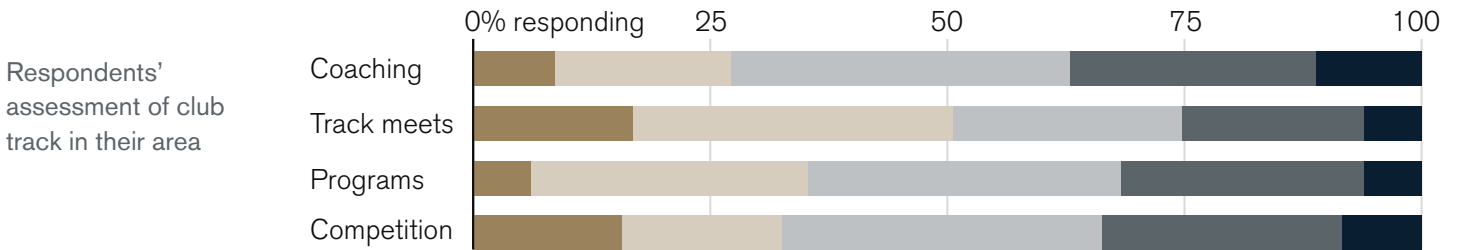


Our data did not show major differences between the respondents' perceived socioeconomic status of their communities and how accessible track and field programs were in their communities (i.e., how easy it is to find programs). More research may be needed in this area with more detailed follow-up questions as some of our qualitative data show that financial barriers are a challenge, particularly with club track as meet entry fees and meet travel costs have to be paid by families themselves whereas for school track these costs are often covered in part or in full by the schools.

With regard to affordability, respondents noted that the sport was very affordable in a general sense. Respondents noted that school track, in particular, was very affordable with over 96 percent of respondents indicating that school track was "at least somewhat affordable or better." When drilling down, however, there were specific costs associated with the sport, such as equipment and travel costs, that do present certain cost barriers.



Respondents also had fairly positive views of the overall quality of both club track and school track programs, with respondents having particularly positive assessments of school track. However, when given the opportunity to provide more detail, respondents had noticeably more nuanced views on the quality of both club track and school track programs in their communities. Therefore, while the overall view is that both club and school track are of high quality, there are specific issues pertaining to both sides of the sport that present barriers to the sport in targeted, yet significant ways.

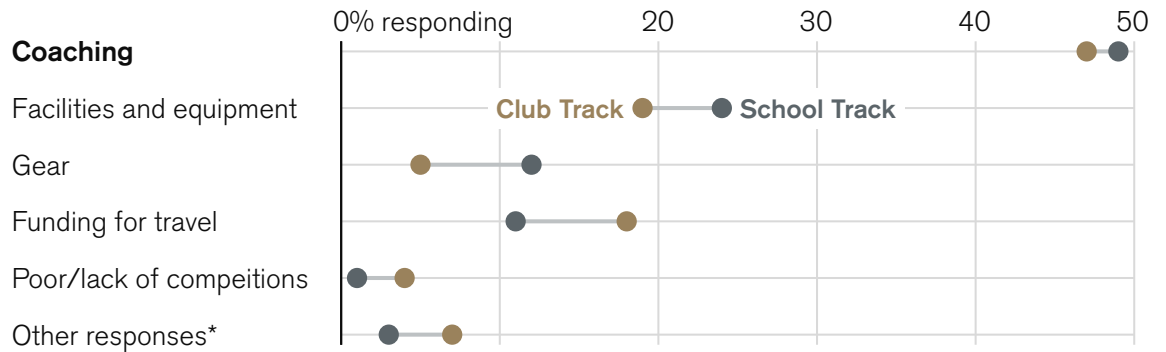




Where we See the Needs

Our data show that access to knowledgeable and quality coaching is the biggest area of need overall for youth track. This is consistent across both club and school track. Equipment, facilities needs, funding for travel, and gear (shoes and clothing) were the other areas of need that were prominent in the data.

What Respondents Said was the Area of Greatest Need.



The desire for high-quality coaching was a consistent finding throughout the data for both club and school track, with each side noting the need for not only increasing the number of coaches but also amplifying the education/knowledge of coaches. However, the qualitative data, which we discuss in detail later, provide a more granular view of specific needs for both club and school track.

Similarities and Differences Between the Needs of Club Track and School Track

Our two areas of study, club and school track, presented a number of similar needs, whereas many other needs are distinct.

In regards to the similarities, the data show that both club and school track need coaching support and additional support with facilities and equipment. The coaching needs were fairly similar across both the club and school track categories, however, the facilities and equipment needs were a bit different.



With regard to facilities support, the biggest area of need for club track surrounds obtaining access to facilities, as most club teams do not have their own dedicated facilities, oftentimes having to rely on local schools and school districts to grant them access to tracks. One parent from Kentucky noted that “teams are available, but venues (track access) are not,” stating that “most tracks are on school property, and even if they are not in use, the schools will not allow non-school teams access.” A youth coach from California similarly noted that the biggest issue was “access to a track” stating that it has become “harder and harder to find high schools open to sharing their facilities even for clubs willing to pay.”

While access to tracks certainly is an issue for school track programs as well, the biggest area of need regarding facilities observed in the data for school track pertained mainly to the quality of facilities. There were also a number of respondents who noted that while they had facilities, they were not able to use them as other school sports had priority over the space, particularly in the fall.

With regard to equipment needs, while the data for both club and school track showed a significant need for support for personal gear and shoes for athletes, school track was the only study area that had data showing there was a need for large equipment items such as high jump pits. This difference is likely due to the fact that club track programs often do not have their own facilities, thereby not giving them the ability to manage large equipment items such as jumping pits. Club track programs would, however, likely benefit from support with field event implements such as shot puts as those items do not necessarily require one to have their own facilities. These equipment needs likely contribute to what we observed in the data: that the running disciplines are much better supported than the jumps and throws.



What the Short Answer Responses Tell Us

When looking at the qualitative data the overall themes are similar, however the responses show key differences between the needs of club track and school track.

With club track, the qualitative responses paint a robust picture of needs for the sport. Respondents indicated a large need for greater access to facilities and equipment, better advertising and navigation-friendly web presence to make it easier for parents to find club track opportunities in their communities. Respondents also noted a number of challenges with the governing organizations of youth track as well as difficulty working with local school districts for facilities access.

USATF and AAU could make searchable lists of club teams more available, and better broadcast that they exist. And where they exist. And supply resources for those wanting to start or grow a club team.

—*Youth club coach from New York*

I've found that the USATF is often a barrier to getting kids interested in the sport. If we start off requiring kids to join a true club with long commitments and requiring them to become a USATF member, that can turn people away. And this prevents sports sampling. I believe it needs to start simple, with classes or easy-to-access local events and then kids can grow into USATF regional and national competitions.

—*Youth club coach and parent from New York*

With school track, the qualitative responses corroborated that the area of greatest need was for more coaches and more knowledgeable coaching. Many of the responses noted a significant need for more coaching as school track teams tend to be large and include a number of event areas. Many also noted an overall need for more knowledgeable coaching as many said that they avoided offering opportunities in the jumps, the throws, and the hurdles to their athletes due to a lack of knowledge on how to teach those events. Other challenges include requirements from some school districts for schools to only hire teachers as coaches as opposed to



outside individuals who may have valuable expertise.

Track has such a wide range of events it's hard for one or even two coaches to appropriately teach and give feedback in all events, especially when a particular event is something the coach has never practiced or competed in. Track teams also are large, and it can be hard to work with athletes equally.

—Middle school coach from Rhode Island

There are a lot of schools in my area who will have one or two coaches who are knowledgeable in track, and then the school will assign additional coaches to coach a second sport who know little or nothing about track. Most programs around here have 85 or more kids participating in track but not enough event-specific coaches to run a great program. In addition, there is a disparity in funding between the city and county schools, and this affects travel, equipment, and facilities.

—High school coach from Alabama

This creates a sub-optimal experience for youth athletes as some events, most often the field events, tend to get overlooked due to a combination of a lack of personnel to support those event groups and a lack of knowledge on how to coach those event groups. Due to limited personnel and limited resources in terms of knowledge, equipment, and financial support, many school track and field programs have to choose which event groups to focus on and which ones to give less attention. This reality means that the sport as a whole suffers.

My personal opinion is that we need more truly qualified and knowledgeable coaches, not just parents who ran or volunteer as coaches, or have a USATF level 1 certification. Also a more open relationship and collaborative environment between the schools and clubs/private coaches. These exist for football, basketball, and baseball, but are very rare and oftentimes turbulent with track.

—Youth club coach and parent from Texas



Field Events are in Need of the Most Support

The data show that field events are in need of a great deal of support for both club and youth track. Many respondents noted that the facilities and equipment needs to support the field event disciplines are simply hard to come by. Moreover, many coaches need training and mentorship in order to learn how to coach the field events, as many youth coaches do not know enough about these events to coach them from an informed place, with confidence.

Field events are a fundamental part of the sport of track and field and while it is understandable why many resource-constrained youth programs elect to just focus on that with which they are most familiar—running events—it is important that we not overlook the field events which provide a number of different opportunities to participate in the sport. There are talented shot putters, hammer throwers, high jumpers, and pole vaulters who may not be best suited to run a 100m dash or a 5k but who are amazing athletes who also deserve to have a place in our sport.

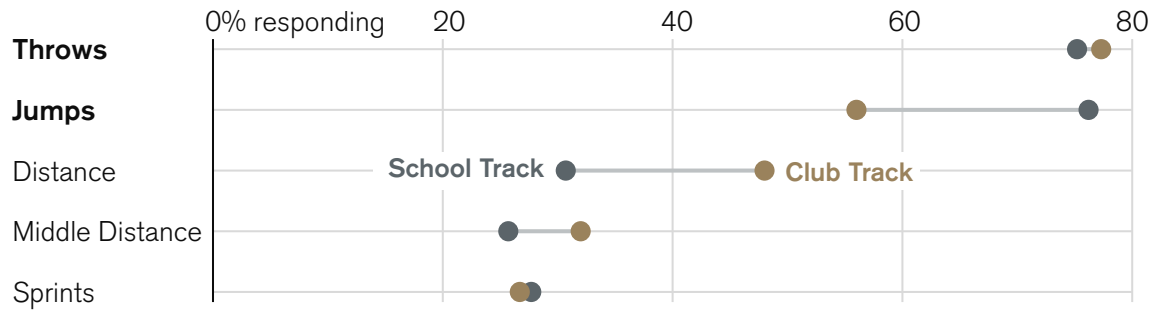
Having opportunities at the youth level is important not only for the sport/event in general but also for the younger athletes. The ability to get into the field events at a young age gives kids an opportunity to grow a passion for something new and to realize you don't have to be a runner in track and field... you can jump or throw. Field events can also open new avenues of possibilities. For me personally, I was able to grow an interest that soon became a passion of mine for the javelin. I've gotten to travel the world doing something I love to do. Without youth opportunities, I would not have had an introduction to javelin; I would have only known the running side of track and field.

—Curtis Thompson, US Olympian in the javelin and Tracksmith ASP athlete



As a track and field community, we have to do our best to ensure that young people have opportunities to participate in this great sport, whether that be on the track, on the field, or both. When the field events are overlooked, important pathways for inclusion are closed, and opportunities for young people to experience the sport and grow from it are narrowed.

Event Groups that Respondents said are in need of Further Support.





What our Focus Groups Revealed

As a follow-up to the survey, we invited a number of respondents to engage in focus groups to gain an even more nuanced understanding of what they felt were the biggest challenges facing the sport.

We limited the focus group opportunity to high school coaches as our results seemed to best reflect the experiences of high school coaches throughout this nation. The large and geographically diverse number of high school coaches who responded to our survey meant that the data we obtained from the high school coach demographic was reasonably reflective of the broader experience of what it is like to be a high school track coach in America. Given the high quality of our data from high school coaches, we felt that the high school coach cohort would provide the best granular level data from a focus group setting.

Across the three focus groups, the most common themes were the need for coaches' education, support in helping to recruit coaches, interest in a coaches collective where coaches could share ideas with one another, and support for equipment and facilities needs.

For coaches' education, many of the attendees noted that there were a number of parents or other volunteers who are interested in serving as coaches for their local high school programs but don't know much about the sport. They either never participated in track and field themselves or had not received any formalized training. The attendees noted that currently, much of the coaches' education that exist online is decentralized and a lot of materials and resources that do exist are geared towards elite level training whereas most new coaches need a way to learn the rudiments of coaching a particular event. The attendees expressed the need to help mentor and guide coaches who are new to the sport but are interested in getting involved.

Coaches' educational support was also requested for



seasoned coaches who did not know how to coach other event groups. A number of the attendees expressed that while they had a lot of experience and a high degree of confidence in some event areas, there were other event areas that they felt much less proficient with, some revealing that they have avoided coaching certain event groups altogether due to their lack of familiarity and expertise. These coaches also expressed a great deal of interest in resources or support services that would help them learn how to coach the events with which they are the least familiar. Similarly, many of the attendees noted that they needed support to help identify coaches as many programs are understaffed.

Another major theme observed from the focus groups was a desire for a coaches collective or mastermind group where coaches could call in to a regularly scheduled call to share information with one another, to learn from one another, and to support each other in their quests to be the best coaches they can for their respective communities. Some of the coaches noted that an organically organized, word-of-mouth, weekly coaches call already exists in an informal capacity. From the focus groups it appears there is considerable interest in a more formalized offering that would allow for coaches to engage with one another.

The attendees also noted that there were significant equipment and facilities needs, particularly with implements for the field events as well as mats for high jump and pole vault as well as throwing areas. These sentiments were well represented in both the quantitative and qualitative data from the survey.

Coaching is where we see the Biggest Need as well as the Biggest Opportunity

Evident in all of our data is that coaching represents the biggest area of need for youth track and field in this country. Programs spanning both club and school track are in need of more coaches. They are also in need of specific support that will help to enhance the expertise of existing coaches.



Our Decision to Focus Primarily on School Track

This project afforded us with quality data on the experience of youth track in this country at both the club and school track level. However, we felt that the overall quality of our school track data was stronger. This is likely due to the fact that a larger proportion of our respondents were connected to school versus club track. This is not to suggest that the needs for school track are greater but rather that we have a better understanding of what the particular needs are for school track as opposed to club track due to the number of respondents and thus are in a better position to address school track's needs.

Additionally, the challenges facing school track appear to be more consistent across the board whereas the challenges facing club track are more distinct and varied thereby requiring greater resources to address them. For instance, most school track programs have access to some form of a track whereas club track teams' access to a track runs the gamut from some having total access to a track while many others never have access to a track.

While our long-term intention is to serve all sides of youth track, including club track, in the immediate term, we believe that it is best for us to first focus on building out programs and support structures for school track first. This will be less resource intensive due to the relatively straightforward nature of school track's needs. Once we have more experience in providing direct support, we will be in a better position to address the more distinct and varied needs of club track which will require a number of additional programs and strategies as well as greater resources in order to meet club track's needs.



Our Plan to Support Youth Track and Field

To start, we have decided to focus on helping to address critical areas of need that we were able to observe via our research – providing coaching support and addressing gear needs.

These were some of the biggest areas of need observed in our data and are areas that our organization has the capacity to support at a high level. It is important to us that the support we provide has a tangible and meaningful impact. We feel confident that our plan will provide essential support to various communities around the country, helping to strengthen youth track in targeted, yet impactful ways. As our organization scales, we aim to expand our efforts by launching more expansive programs and initiatives in the coming years.

Coach Support Program

Addressing the need for event expertise

The Coach Support Program will be supported by Tracksmith's elite athlete program, the Amateur Support Program. The CSP will be an initiative through the Tracksmith Foundation that connects youth coaches to Tracksmith's ASP athletes for mentorship and guidance. The idea behind the CSP is to support youth coaches throughout the country by providing them with the opportunity to tap into the expertise of Tracksmith's ASP athletes, many of whom are not coaches themselves but possess a high degree of knowledge that they can in turn impart on youth coaches.

The CSP will also provide essential support for technical events by leveraging the strong field event and technical event athletes who are a part of the ASP. Past and current ASP members include US stars Kara Winger, Rudy Winkler, and Aaron Mallet. The technical event disciplines such as the jumps and throws are often undersupported at the youth level so the CSP will serve as an important role in serving that need.



Shoe Donation Program

Addressing the need for personal gear support

The shoe donation program is an initiative where the Tracksmith Foundation sources unused shoes and spikes from colleges looking to offload their inventories and provides them to high school students and school districts. This program was created based upon a preliminary analysis of the survey data which showed that equipment, and specifically, personal gear such as running shoes, represented a large area of need.

We ideated this program as a way to service a need for the sport in a way that was within our organization's capacity as well as one that would be able to be scaled in the future. Even though equipment needs span the gamut, from personal gear to high jump and pole vault mats, we felt that footwear was a need that we could confidently service.

The program was piloted in the summer of 2022, sourcing unused items from a university in New Jersey. We then distributed the shoes and spikes to a school in southern New Jersey and at a distribution event in Philly that was held in concert with the School District of Philadelphia. We will be expanding the pilot into Boston for summer 2023 and look to expand further in the future.

Our Plan to Support Club Track

The two programs listed above, the CSP and the shoe donation program, will be expanded to also support the needs of club track in the future. We also will look at ways of supporting some of the unique challenges that are prevalent in the club track sphere such as challenges connected to gaining access to local tracks, which often require obtaining permissions from schools and school districts. We also will look to help make club track opportunities easier to find, as the current resources available online are not well advertised, are difficult to navigate, and oftentimes not up to date, all making it difficult for families to be able to identify opportunities that may exist in their communities.



Our goal is to begin our efforts with school track but then expand to also support club track once we have already established a good start supporting school track via our aforementioned programs.

Additional Support Needed

While we are proud of the programs created as a result of this research, there are a number of identified needs currently outside of our current capacity to support.

Our research showed that a biggest area of need was helping programs find high-quality coaches. While our Coach Support Program was created to address this need in part, the program is designed to enhance the quality of coaches already involved with school programs. A program that would help to identify new coaches requires a resource commitment we are not currently in a position to support. As the Foundation expands in terms of reach and ability, we will look to expand our coaching support offerings, which may include helping programs find high-quality coaches.

Another area of significant need is access to facilities and large equipment items such as high jump and pole vault pits. Similar to our limitations surrounding helping programs find high-quality coaches, we are also limited in our ability to help programs create or improve existing facilities or provide them with large equipment items, which are very expensive. Our goal, as our organization scales, is to be able to also build initiatives that will help service these needs as well.



Final Takeaways

Track and field is an incredible all-around sport. It is a fantastically accessible sport along socioeconomic lines. It is also accessible in regards to general availability as many communities have youth track available in some capacity, whether that be at the club level, via schools, or both. It enjoys great racial diversity and has the greatest gender parity of any sport. It also includes great body diversity, creating opportunities for people of a range of shapes and sizes to not only compete, but excel. And at the youth level, the sport enjoys a broad reach as it is the largest sport in high school and is the cheapest sport for youth overall.

However, beneath the surface, track and field has a number of specific challenges that limit opportunity. Our goal through this research was to identify those challenges so that our organization can design ways to address them.

By committing to support the coaching and personal gear needs of youth athletes, we have taken an important step to addressing some of the major challenges that still impact the sport, despite what the sport does well in terms of accessibility.

The work is never done. But we, the Tracksmith Foundation, believe that our method-driven approach to seeking out these areas of needs have equipped us with the tools to be able to make meaningful impacts to the sport at the youth level.

The opportunity to have a quality track and field experience can be life-changing for a young person in terms of their confidence and self-image but also in terms of further academic and educational opportunity.

As a foundation we are driven by the idea that our work will support that kid whose name we will never know. We are excited to support communities all around this country in the ways that we can, and we look forward to expanding our efforts to have even greater impacts in the future.



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