



State of Youth Sports Playbook

Tips, Insights, and Strategies for Youth Sports Organizers



Youth sports at its core represent an experience for young people to learn positive life skills that they will carry on with them throughout their lives. The complexities of youth sports are evident, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect people all over the world. When we consider the impact youth sports has on not only young athletes, but the community around them, we see a positive impact.

In this report, we will go over the entire youth sports landscape. We will look at the current state of play and how sports organizers are tackling the twists and turns of it all. We will dive into why kids play sports, what sports they are participating in, and key trends shaping the supply and demand of sports programs. We then will go over the current challenges and barriers in youth sports and look at the best short-term and long-term solutions, inspired by leaders in sports technology, community impact, and youth sports organizations. Finally, we will tackle best tips, practices and strategies from these leaders in the youth sports industry.

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CHAPTER 1:

What Sports Organizers Can Learn From Youth Sports Participation Numbers and Data

One of the biggest topics of conversation around youth sports is: what are kids playing these days? As a sports organizer it's essential to understand what your customers are participating in and where their interests are landing. The answer can vary depending on multiple factors, but in general we can offer insight into specific sport participation numbers and recent trends thanks to [The Aspen Institute's Project Play](#) and [Sports & Fitness Industry Association](#) (SFIA).

- Team sports participation numbers were affected at the start of the pandemic in 2020 and through 2021. It's trending upwards, but not back to pre-pandemic levels.
- 37% (children ages 6-12) participated in team sports on a regular basis in 2021.
- This is down from 38% in 2019 & 2020.
- Tom Cove, CEO of SFIA "evidence suggests sports participation continued to rebound in 2022", but expressed concern in younger kids.
- Older kids, ages 13-17 saw a slight increase in sports participation in 2021.



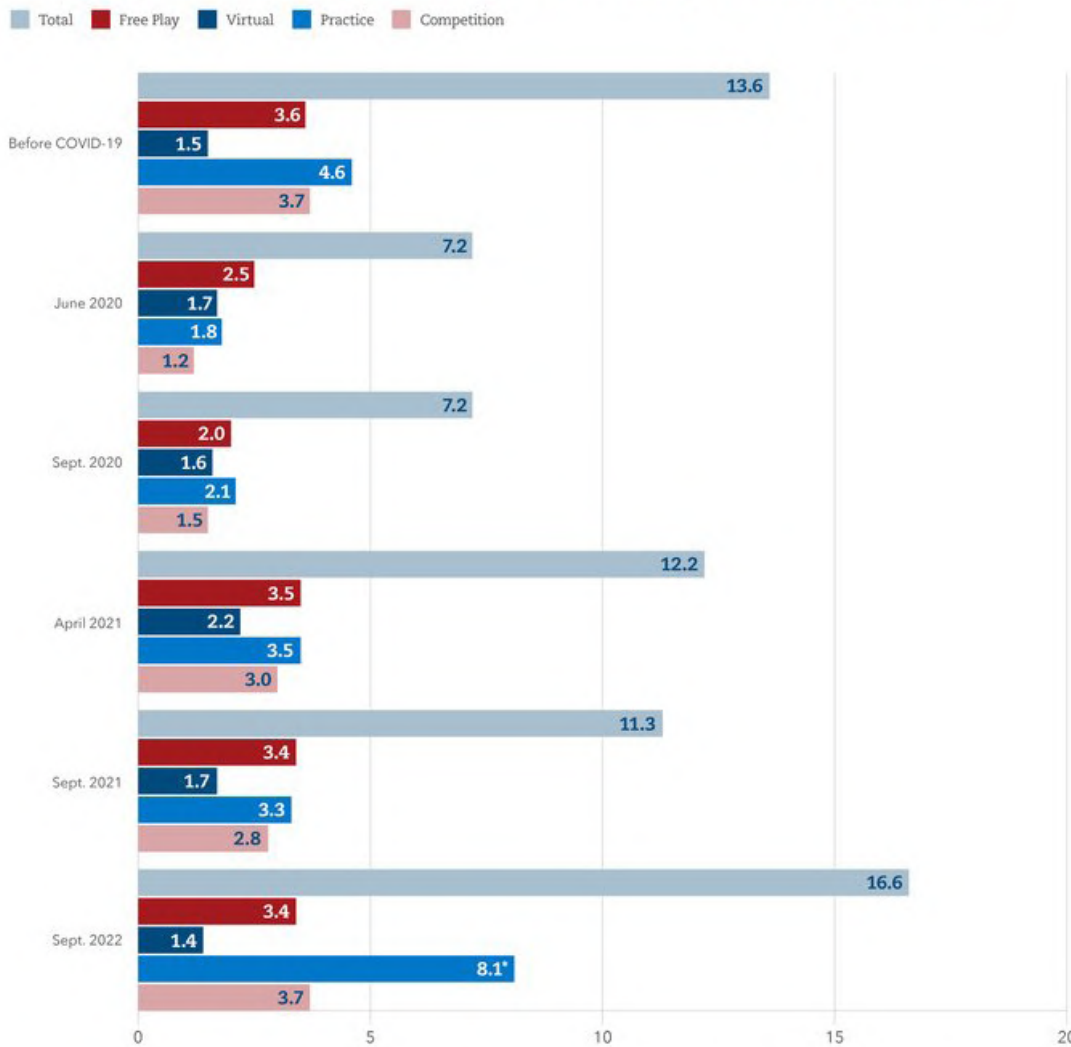
If you are a soccer club or league organizer, you're in a good spot as the sport rebounded with a 20% increase in 2021 (kids ages 6-12 years-old.) Soccer did return to pre-pandemic levels.

Baseball was also a sport that saw numbers rise, however basketball dropped. In general, these three popular sports are all significantly down compared to 2008. Experts suggest this is because of sport specialization pressures at a young age, the cost to play, and fewer recreational programs.

While participation numbers dropped, the hours of time spent playing sports is back to pre-pandemic levels.

In a parent survey that was run [in partnership](#) with The Aspen Institute, TeamSnap, Utah State University and Louisiana Tech University the findings showed the following:

Hours Spent Playing Sports per Week by Youth Ages 6-18



Source: Aspen Institute, Utah State University, Louisiana Tech University, TeamSnap youth sports parent surveys, 2021 and 2022

* September 2022 survey counted the Practice category differently than previous surveys. Practice time in 2022 was separately collected for both individual and team practices with a coach.

Now that we know that kids are playing again, let's dive into why kids play youth sports, why their parents sign them up, and as a sports organizer how you can best reach these families.

Mental, Social and Emotional Health: How it All Shapes Decisions

According to the National Youth Sports Strategy, 73% of parents believe that sports benefit their child's mental health. [Look at how.](#)

Marty Fox, who manages the Sports & Society Program's Project Play 2024 initiative of leading organizations working collectively to increase youth sports participation, shared some findings from a national survey that the Aspen Institute put together that focused on high schoolers post-pandemic.

The report provides results found during the 2020-2021 school year and was conducted by the Resonant Education staff members in collaboration with the Aspen Institute. **The survey asked students about their participation in sports as well as their perceptions about sports in high school.** Over nearly 6,000 students responded to the survey from schools all over the country, private, public and charter schools represented.

"81% of high school athletes said that they played sports to have fun," Fox said to kick-off the findings. "It was the most popular response. They also said that they played to develop skills and make friends, almost half explicitly identified that they played for their emotional well-being and mental health. Including 56% of girls identified that their mental health is one of the key reasons they participated in sports."

Why high school athletes play sports:

- To Have Fun: **81%**
- Exercise: **79%**
- To Learn and Improving Skills: **66%**
- To Play With and Make New Friends: **64%**
Competition (testing myself against others): **59%**
- To Win Games: **53%**



Now that we understand where the kids stand in terms of why they play sports, *why do parents sign their kids up?*

"1/4 of youth sports parents said that their child athletes' mental health decreased slightly or greatly since the start of the pandemic," Fox said. "22% emotional control had decreased and 30% said that their child's social well-being had decreased."

"Almost 1/2 of those parents said that their child's mental health has improved," according to the survey that spoke with parents who had children return to sports after restrictions were lifted.

One trend that the Aspen Institute has marked is that *"The more money parents have, the less interest they said their child has in sports. This may suggest that wealthier children's experiences weren't optimal even before the pandemic."*

"These findings highlight the potential role of affluence in shaping kids' opportunities, motivation, and engagement in organized sport," said Dr. Travis Dorsch, co-author of the study and founder of the Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University.

The findings suggest that mental health improves with returning to play, so as sports organizations fine tune their programming for the upcoming season, it's crucial to keep in mind the best way to provide resources that will foster a positive and healthy environment for athletes, parents, and coaches.

The [Positive Coaching Alliance](#) proactively addresses mental health and wellness in youth sports. Some of the best practices to consider when fostering a positive and healthy environment for your youth sports programs is to:

- Create a caring climate: Coaches help create an environment where all youth athletes feel they belong.
- Remind everyone that mistakes are "OK" and part of the journey.
- Have this part of the language: Control what you can control, like effort.
- Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset: The belief that young athletes can succeed through "sound effort, sound strategies, and guidance."

[Read here](#) for more information on PCA's effort to help coaches foster mental wellness in sports.

Education and Skills

When parents are signing their children up for sports programs, the thought is for the long game. The National Youth Sports Strategy found that 55% percent of parents believe that sports will benefit their children academically and improve their future careers. 80% of parents believe that sports helped their child learn about discipline and dedication, as well as how to get along with others.

It's essentially building positive habits.

The National Youth Sports Strategy found that 73% of adults who play sports participated when they were younger. What this could suggest is that the habit started when they were younger and continued throughout adulthood.

While the benefits are certainly there and kids are playing more than they were during the pandemic, there are still endless barriers that continue to make youth sports inaccessible to all.



CHAPTER 2:

What Youth Sports Organizers Can Do To Combat Barriers

The main barriers that get in the way of making youth sports accessible to all are the cost, the changing landscape, and inclusivity as a whole. While it's almost impossible to take on the task of changing the entire landscape, small tangible changes can be done within your organization to improve the state.

Cost

[In a webinar with the Aspen Institute, Positive Coaching Alliance and Sports Business Journal](#), a group of panelists talked about the current challenges in accessibility for youth athletes across the country.



TeamSnap's Director of [Community Impact](#), Lance Lee talked about access to youth sports.

"Part of my job is addressing the issue of affordability," Lee said. "When you look at the biggest barriers to sport, whether it's a sport like tennis or a sport like basketball or baseball, with the prevalence of AAU and travel, and private caches and fields, and nutritionists and college videos, the cost of just playing sports even pre pandemic has increased exponentially. So it's not just those elite level sports, it's with all sports."





You may be wondering, how do you cut the costs?

“Once the pandemic hit, an even brighter light was shown on those disparities, so we’re really trying to increase access to sport by providing scholarships, by providing grants, by partnering with organizations like PCA and Aspen Institute to make sure that kids get a chance to play.”

Parents are faced with a difficult decision: Do I pay for my child to play even when I can’t? Many families also have experienced their local programs closing down because of the pandemic.

According to a survey by Project Play, “13% of youth sports parents indicated their community-based sports provider closed due to COVID-19, and another 12% said it merged with another organization (State of Play 2021 report).” Similar trends were also apparent in travel programs too. “46% said their travel-based provider closed during COVID-19, merged with another league or club, or returned with limited capacity.”

Sports weren’t always this expensive. There was a time when kids would play freely and run home when the street lights went off. Finding a wall and bringing a ball was their way of “private skill training” and any patch of grass would do for getting some extra touches in. Now, the formalized landscape of youth sports has welcomed big costs. Equipment and uniforms are a huge cost and when you think about it, young athletes change sizes almost every year so many of the sports like hockey and lacrosse that require a lot of equipment may go to waste after a young athlete’s season.

According to [Athletic Business](#), i9 Sports, a youth sports league franchise conducted a survey which found that “in most households, travel sports cause marital battles and financial strains. Sixty-five percent of moms say their kids’ sports schedules interfere with their jobs. Twenty-four percent of moms say they resent their kids’ sports commitments.”

There are free sports programs out there, as well as scholarships and pay-what-you-can offerings, however there hasn’t been a fix-all solution that could affect the participation in youth sports sooner rather than later.

The Ever-Changing Landscape

Every day it seems that there is a new youth travel program making headlines. The youth sports landscape is always changing and after the shutdown during COVID-19 the back-to-sport mentality has taken over the country. All across North America there are new pressures in the youth sports space. The pathway for young athletes is constantly changing. One example is youth soccer in the United States. For many years the pathway was starting recreationally, moving on to travel, eventually club soccer and possibly a program like the Olympic Development Program. After that, the hope is for a dedicated youth soccer player to go on and play at a collegiate level. Now, the youth soccer landscape has several pathways; from MLS next, the academy programs, specific skill training programs, ODP and many more. For parents, the investment in youth soccer keeps increasing.

So, how does one handle a landscape that is always changing? Before investing in expensive programs it's key to check in with your child and make sure they love the game. Many young athletes face burn out and as the landscape changes, so do their interests.

One solution is to look at where the recreational programs are failing. As more travel, tryout-focused programs arise, parents shift their interest in community-based offerings. Finding ways to build strong recreational programs that hold value beyond just a stepping stone to something more expensive and greater is a starting point.





Inclusivity



Marti Reed, PCA's Director of National Partnerships & DEI Programming Manager shared her insight on the reason why girls participation numbers are less than boys.

One of her takes is that there are fewer female coaches and women like them to look up to. "There's a lack of female coaches and leaders. We need to be recruiting more people that reflect the community that they're serving," Reed said. "I think providing more access to women in coaching roles and leadership roles will definitely help us recruit more kids to participate, more young girls to participate and then also getting male allies and advocates to make sure that while these girls are participating it's a safe space for them."

Lance Lee also added that in order for any change to occur there needs to be an intentional effort and intentional thoughts to lead the way. Part of his work prior to TeamSnap was to diversify tennis and help kids in underserved communities get involved in tennis. He believes that it isn't just enough to give these kids exposure, but there needs to be a pathway to excellence. When we think about inclusivity, that means giving every child a clear pathway and chance to take sport as far as possible.

One of his solutions for this is to involve local universities, professional teams and local businesses. Those organizations have an obligation to the community to get involved and what better way than to tie all of the local resources together to help underserved communities not just gain exposure, but a pathway to the highest level achievable.

Tips, Insights, and Strategies From Leaders in Sports

Many companies and organizations are committed to making an impact in local communities around the world. We see this effort by way of increasing access to quality sports programs for young athletes. TeamSnap launched TeamSnap Impact in 2022 to do just that, break down the barriers in participation and make it possible for all to participate.

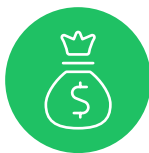
An impact program can do the following:



Make it a Policy: Formulate high-level policy, regulations, guidelines, and plans affecting youth sports. Find ways to be part of the dialogue as policymakers are answering the big questions that will shape the future of youth sports.



Follow Through with Direct Funding: One way to directly support young athletes in their communities is to make significant investments toward community programs that serve young athletes through scholarships and monetary grants to organizations.



Offer Technology Grants/Scholarships: TeamSnap Impact offers access to their world-class team management technology, so coaches can focus more time on their young athletes and less time on the administrative work of scheduling, communicating with parents and more. If your sports organization can give, find ways to target your community.

Here are some other ways a sports organizer can improve accessibility and affordability in youth sports.

Incentivizing volunteers. For many organizations, it's a challenge to pay coaches and handle all of the tasks required to operate a sports club or league. Volunteers can make the difference.

Education. "I think when you provide education for coaches that's based in social and emotional learning, coaches can understand why a young person behaves the way that they do. Coaches can make better decisions," Reed said.

Technology. You read that right, technology can also open up the doors for better access to sport.

Most of the time when we think of technology we think about it taking away from the core meaning of sports. We think of kids spending time on their iPhones, locked in on their iPads and not engaging in activities outside. Now, while these can be barriers, technology can also open up the doors for better access to sport.

Technology can help.

Here's how Maryland State Youth Soccer Association has seen a positive impact from technology grants.

"We were noticing such a dramatic impact on the game of soccer, particularly at the grassroots level and particularly in communities that might be traditionally underserved and under-resourced," Nathean MSYSA's Director of Operations told TeamSnap. "We knew that we had the power to do something about that. Some of the most critical participation barriers that exist for these kids that live in commonly, typically underserved and under-resourced communities are cost, transportation, lack of green space and lack of access to equipment. And so, we created this program, we call it, **Let's Play.**"

"Let's Play, ultimately, is a low-cost, safe character building, community based afterschool soccer program. We wanted it to be something that focused on the whole child, and not just on sports. We targeted Title II elementary schools because one of the things that became quickly identified to us was that while there are some programs that are kind of rising up in these underserved and under-resourced communities, a lot of times they're focused on middle and high school students. And there's very little for elementary school students. So, we targeted at first, through the fifth grade age group."





How it Works

“Every kid who participates in the program gets a free soccer ball. Everyone gets a free program teacher. And, honestly, the cost of such a program, as I’m sure you can imagine, is pretty high, and it’s because our critical partnerships with people like TeamSnap have allowed us to go from not just a low cost program.”

“We’re hitting all kinds of gender barriers, and probably 45% of our participants are girls, which most are tremendously excited about. 95% of our participants are kids of color, which is, which is really cool as well. So we’re exposing them to the game. Getting them excited about the game, and also teaching them lots of valuable life lessons that are really making a difference in schools.”

Special Olympics Colorado

Special Olympics Colorado provides year-round sports training and competition for more than 18,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities and unified partners. Through the support of an amazing community of coaches, volunteers, donors, sponsors and partners, Special Olympics Colorado is able to offer hundreds of annual engagements, free of charge, to individuals age 2 and up.

SPOC were looking for a way to streamline operations, and have found technology, specifically the TeamSnap for Clubs & Leagues sports management platform to be the best solution for their thousands of coaches and volunteers.

“The TeamSnap platform will help us meet the needs of our community while bringing our programs and initiatives to more individuals across Colorado,” Megan Scremin, SOCO President & CEO said.

Allowing technology to do the hard work behind the scenes is a smart and effective way to manage a sports organization. The landscape of youth sports is forever changing and as we look for ways to be more affordable, accessible and inclusive, the first step is opening the conversation up and focusing on our efforts within the community.

For any sport organizer out there, looking to better understand what’s happening in the youth sports world, we hope this resource was able to set the scene.

Our vision is to create a world where youth sports are accessible and equitable for all

We are committed to making an impact in local communities around the world by increasing access to quality sports programs for young athletes. To address the growing number of challenges facing youth as they participate in sports, TeamSnap Impact is focused on breaking down barriers to participation and making it possible for all to participate.

[Learn More About TeamSnap Impact](#)



[Learn More About TeamSnap for Clubs & Leagues](#)



Trusted by more than 19k sports organizations

