Youth Sports in America

How They Have Changed and Why it Matters

By

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Preface

I have fond memories of playing youth sports as a child in the 1970s and early 1980s. I am a professionally trained sociologist who has published research on the benefits of parents being involved with their adolescent children, and the benefits of adolescents being engaged in school-based activities (including school sports). This research has been cited thousands of times. Given my own childhood experiences, and what I thought I knew about the benefits of youth sports, it was a given that I would encourage my children to play sports. I actively pursued sporting opportunities for all four of my children (who are now young adults). They began playing youth sports in our local community; three of them ultimately played on travel/select teams outside of our local community; two went on to play Club Ice Hockey at the collegiate level.

Near the end of my time as a youth sports parent, I had an "aha" moment when I realized my children's youth sports experiences were not the same as the ones I had as a child. I overheard a parent who was new to the team that year state that she was glad we were playing "this team" because her son played with them last year, they "had a lot of friends" on that team, and that since they had "stepped up" a level, she was hoping her son played well so that his former team would see how good he really was. It was as if I were struck by lightning as I recalled having nearly identical conversations years earlier regarding my oldest son.

With my oldest son, we chased higher levels of play, increasingly further outside of our local community, every year over a five-year

period of time. He ultimately landed with a team on which he played for several years; it was run by a for-profit organization, using a selective try-out model, with paid coaches, and all the various frills and add-ons you would expect for such a team (i.e. a *select* team, elaborated in Chapter 2). When I came across parents from former teams with whom we had only played one season, I found myself having *facial recognition*; I recognized many parents' faces, and may have recalled their first names, but knew little else about them. I wondered whether this mother shared my experiences.

With this in mind, I approached the mom (with whom I had frequent interactions during the first part of the season) and inquired whether I could ask her a couple of questions about her son's former team. She happily agreed. I asked whether she could tell me the names of the parents on the other team? She could name quite a few of them. I then asked her whether she could (1) name their partner(s) (if there was one), (2) tell me if there were other siblings in the family, and (3) whether she had ever been to their house (or them to hers) for something not hockey-related. She responded rather defensively and said that my questions were unrealistic, as their children played hockey together for "only a single season" and it was "too short of a timeframe to know those families that well."

This mom had facial recognition similar to what I had developed for the parents on former teams, and based on her defensive response, I speculate she was somewhat embarrassed having just stated she had a lot of friends on the team. While she knew what the other parents looked like, and knew some of their first names, she had not established any meaningful relationships nor had any

sustained interactions with them. Maybe she was right, and my questions were asking too much? After all, she only interacted with those parents four days a week, for 1-3 hours at a time, over five months. What could I have been thinking?

My youth sports experiences as a child were all in my local community and helped form strong social bonds between children and parents; my three children playing travel/select ice hockey did so at three different rinks in three different communities (although there was a local ice rink less than five minutes from our home). At that moment, it became clear to me how fundamentally different my experiences with youth sports were from my children's. My family's experiences did not match the research literature either, which often contends youth sports build strong social bonds for the children, parents, and community.

In this book, we explore the changes in how youth sports are organized and delivered in America and how that impacts communities, families, parents, and children. What were once offered by a combination of local and community-based non-profit organizations with volunteer coaches (i.e. local youth sports) have been replaced by regionalized, for-profit travel and select teams. Parents are now more frequently taking their children outside of the local community, often paying more direct costs to for-profit organizations with paid coaches, and spending more time in their car commuting to a "second job" - their children's youth sports activities. Our research question is - "Does what we know about the effects of youth sport still hold true when they are taking place much further from the local community, requiring more time and money, at higher levels of competition, using selective try-out models, with paid coaches, and being run by for-profit organizations?"

This is an especially timely topic as the United States Attorney General recently released an *Advisory on the Mental Health & Well-Being of Parents* (2024). Some of the driving factors related to the mental health crisis for parents are time constraints, money constraints, the feeling that they need to meet unusually high community or cultural standards of what it means to be a good parent, and a lack of community support. One area in which these might be especially problematic for today's parents is their children's involvement in privatized youth travel sports.

Most chapters present three different perspectives. In the first section, I provide an academic overview of the research literature on youth sports as it relates to a given topic. In the second section, I provide an auto-ethnographic account as a father of four children who played a combination of local and travel sports and explore how our experiences fit within the established literature and the theoretical musings in this book. In the third section, my oldest son addresses his experiences having played on several local, travel, and select sport teams and later returning to play high school hockey. He and I are sometimes at odds about the value and impact of his involvement in travel sports; his perspective provides an important contrast.

The modern youth sports landscape carries new potential benefits *and* risks that we highlight along the way. We do *not* want to discourage parents from pursuing youth sports, as we are both sports evangelists at heart. Our hope is that the issues we explore, and our experiences, prove valuable for those parents considering sporting experiences for their children outside of their local community and/or with a private organization.

Chapter 1
Old-School Youth Sports

Parents historically turned toward youth sports as an inexpensive way to invest time and money in their children and embed themselves in the local community. More than three-quarters of parents believe playing sports helps their children's mental or physical health, helps their children learn discipline and dedication, and teaches them how to work with others.[1] More than half of parents believe playing sports helps their children academically.[2] These beliefs partly stem from widespread messaging. Pediatricians tell parents about how good it is for their children to be physically active and healthy, psychologists tell them about all the important leadership and cognitive skills their children will develop, and various family specialists tell them how important it is to develop socialization skills and have their children make age-appropriate friends through sport. This is further reinforced in American schools; be they public, private or parochial, schools require some form of physical education classes and have for many years. The message many parents receive is clear: children should play.

Many parents also have positive memories of playing youth sports as children and adolescents. They remember talking sports with their parents, team parties, pick-up games, coaches, celebrations, friendships, car-pooling, and the after-game snacks and interactions. And if they played school sports, they likely

remember school announcements of upcoming games, results being announced (both good and bad) each morning, being let out of classes early for bus rides to away games, fundraising (oh, those chocolate bars and donuts), and being given money to buy dinner on the bus ride home. This is likely a pretty standard vision of organized youth sports for many adults who grew up in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in American society.

Numerous scientific studies widely back these beliefs. Youth who play sports have more positive health outcomes,[3] increased self-esteem,[4] and lower levels of anxiety and depression.[5] Youth who play sports show lower levels of stress,[6] and have higher self-esteem and greater self-confidence.[7] Youth who play sports also show positive character and leadership development,[8] an increased ability to work in teams,[9] and exhibit higher levels of responsibility.[10] These youth also have reduced levels of deviance and delinquency,[11] lower levels of substance use,[12] improved school performance,[13] and a lower likelihood of dropping out of high school.[14] The structure of youth sports also helps with friendship formation.[15] One comprehensive review concludes that playing youth sports may be associated with increased cognitive and non-cognitive skills, improved overall health, improved mental health, increased earnings, and higher levels of educational attainment.[16]

Playing youth sports is associated with higher levels of social capital,[17] which can be broadly defined as "the resources embedded in social relations that actors can use to garner benefits and improve their life chances."[18] Youth sports make children and adolescents active builders not only of their own social capital, but as contributors to their parents' stock of social capital.[19] Youth who

participate in sports also have increased levels of civic involvement in adulthood.[20]

Children report playing sports for a variety of reasons. Many children say they play sports because they are fun and exciting and view sports as opportunities to challenge oneself, build skills, and increase their sense of self-worth.[21] Adolescents play sports in part because they receive encouragement and support from parents or friends to do so,[22] and because they have a desire to interact with the activity leaders and their age mates.[23] Based on these studies, participating in youth sports is good for you, generally fun, and exciting.

Much of the research on individual outcomes fits into Coakley's framework about the role of youth sports for children and adolescents.[24] Coakley contends that youth sports improve personal character development or help reform at-risk populations by having one of three effects (or a combination thereof). First, there is the *fertilizer effect*; involvement tills into the children's personal experiences the various positive attributes of playing sports. Examples of this include physical development, positive health outcomes, increased self-esteem, character development, and teamwork. Second, there is the *car wash effect*; involvement cleanses character and washes away possible personal defects. Examples of this include surrounding youth with mainstream values, teaching them self-control and conformity to rules, and exposing them to positive adult role models. Third, there is the *guardian angel effect*; involvement guides young people in success-oriented or civic-oriented directions. Examples of this include creating and acquiring physical, social and cultural capital, inspiring achievement, and the forming of social networks.

There are a host of positive benefits of playing youth sports at the local or community level. Youth playing organized sports benefit from greater access to adult role models.[25] Studying a local little league baseball organization, Brown finds parents exchange various types of social capital: ride-sharing kids to practices, information about local resources such as doctors and community resources, and information about teachers.[26] Children also have sleep-overs with teammates, allowing them to build stronger relationships amongst themselves and with other adult figures.[27]

The overwhelming positive picture that parents are presented with regarding organized youth sports has recently been challenged. Some scholars question whether these positive claims might be exaggerated or misleading for a variety of reasons, including not being able to control for selectivity into the sport itself.[28] Research also links participating in youth sports to negative outcomes such as an increased risk of physical injury and burnout.[29] Other research questions whether youth sports, especially those in school, contribute to the stratification of unequal opportunities, status, and advantage.[30] Playing on youth sports teams is also linked to hazing and bullying,[31] and in some cases is associated with children developing eating disorders.[32]

Despite emerging literature questioning the positive effects of youth sports, and documenting some of its adverse effects, there persists a near consensus among many parents that youth should be encouraged to play organized sports. This mantra is so ingrained in the American psyche that one scholar refers to many advocates as *sports evangelists*.[33] These parents press for sports involvement, often trying to recruit other parents into the sporting

activities, either unaware of the potential negative consequences or choosing to ignore them.

My previous research focused in part on how parent involvement with their children, and student involvement in school activities (including sports), affect student outcomes.[34] Confident in the near universal benefits of youth sports, and my own personal experiences, I set about raising four children of my own and enrolled all of my children in sports. But somehow as a sociologist, and then as a parent, key structural and cultural changes in the organization and delivery of American youth sports escaped me. Somewhere between my childhood experiences, and those of my children, the way we (as Americans) think about youth sports, the way in which youth sports are offered, and the way in which we engage with them fundamentally changed.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, spanning my own childhood experiences and the time in which I was publishing on parent involvement and youth sport, local youth sports were organized in what can be thought of as a traditional or classic framework. In densely populated areas, or areas with high levels of sport saturation (i.e. a lot of children play a particular sport), there were two variations. The first variation was the Local Practice with Home and Home games (LPHH), a common variation in urban and suburban neighborhoods. This was often the case for the youngest children when there were high levels of participation in sports such as little league baseball or softball. Young children would begin a sport at their local park and would play against other age-appropriate teams from their own community, either after school or on weekends. As the children aged, and fewer children

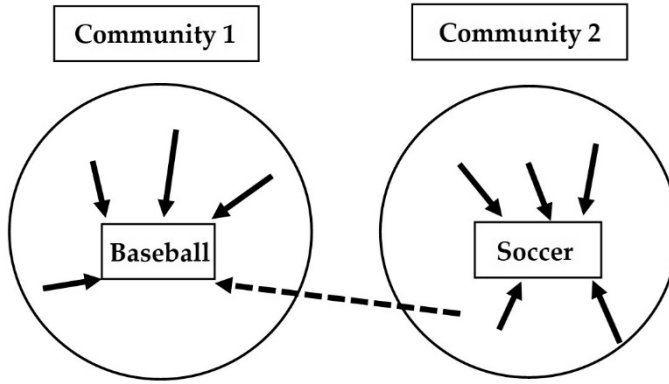
participated in a given sport, the model transitions to some variation of Home and Away games (LPHA).

These leagues were frequently run by non-profit organizations, had volunteer or parent coaches, and would have an assessment to place *all* children on a team. Nobody was cut; this youth sport format was *inclusive* by design and if there were a lot of children in a particular age group, they simply formed more teams. Many of these organizations even required that every child play a certain minimum amount of time in every game. These models we refer to as *local* models moving forward.

Growing up in America, you realize that each town or community seems to have a favorite sport. It may be that you lived in a soccer community, or one where the primary youth sport was baseball, softball, basketball, or football. These sports may have been based in your local community, or if you lived in a rural environment the youth sport may have been regionalized. While most parents might have chosen the locally popular sport (i.e. a *local* youth sports family), in rare cases parent(s) might have chosen to transport their child to another community to play a different sport than what was offered locally (i.e. a *commuter* youth sports family). Within the local organizational framework, there were two different family types; the dominant family form of youth sports involvement was the *local* family, but there were some *commuter* families as well. Parents might have chosen to become a commuter family because they lived in a sparsely populated or rural community, the sport used a specialized facility not available in their local community, or they chose a sport that was not offered locally.

Figure 1-1 reflects how the majority of youth in urban and suburban neighborhoods in America traditionally played for a local organization in their own community. There are two communities depicted, one offering soccer and one baseball. The arrows indicate individual children playing in a particular league; in this example, one child plays on a baseball team in a neighboring community (represented by a dashed line).

Figure 1-1: Traditional Youth Sports Models (Densely Populated and/or Sport Saturated Areas)



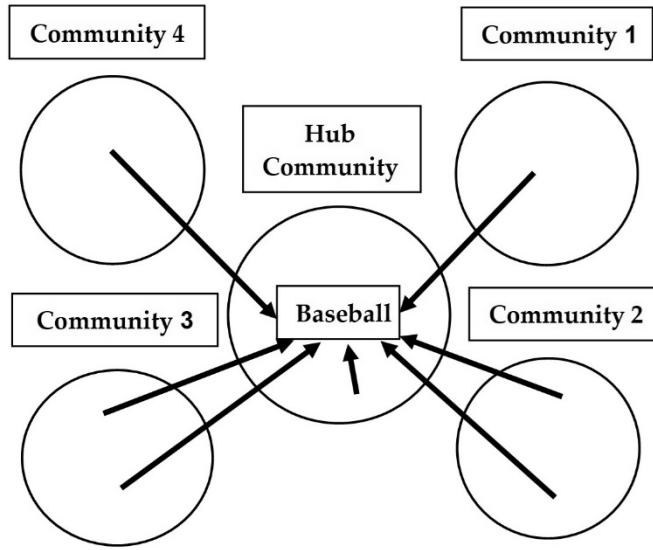
The second traditional format of youth sports is referred to as a *regional* model. In this model, the majority of parents would take their child out of their local community to participate in youth sports. This was a common model in rural America where there was less population density, and thus there were fewer children of similar ages. For example, a little league baseball team might have been based in one town but drew players from surrounding towns. These arrangements in rural areas were still community-building as often times the children also attended regionalized schools together. While these families were outside of their own individual

communities, they were still engaged in the broader community as the local residents defined it. Within the regional framework, there were also two different family types, but the commuter family was by and large the predominant one.

This format may have also occurred in densely populated areas if families pursued less popular sports or where sports required a specialized facility. Examples of these sports include swimming, diving, ice hockey, or more culturally or class-oriented sports such as cricket or horseback riding. In this model, one town might have served as the magnet or hub; it would not be unusual in rural areas for this centralized community to also have hosted the regional middle school or high school.

For the limited number of families that lived in the town hosting the youth sport, they were local participants, but there were a far larger number of commuter families by necessity. In some cases, if there are great distances, parents might have the near equivalent of a second job driving their child ever farther away from home for practices and games. It would not have been unusual for there to be a small supplement or charge for out-of-town players since many times the facility may have been paid for with local tax dollars. Figure 1-2 depicts this model.

Figure 1-2: Traditional Regional Model
(Non-Densely Populated and/or Sport Non-Saturated Areas)



Some families in these outlying communities were fortunate enough to have shorter rides, and others may have had multiple children from their community engaged in the sport so some ride-sharing was possible (e.g. communities 2 and 3). For other children and families, such as the family in community 4, they faced a lengthy drive with no additional support from other community members.

These commuter models all share four traits in common: (1) they take a greater time commitment given the distance, (2) they cost more financially, even if run by a local non-profit with volunteer coaches and low tuition, due to the cost of gasoline and possible surcharges, (3) they weaken social ties in the local community for those families who are commuters, and (4) in larger families they

place greater strain on the family unit. These potential costs/risks persist even if the youth sports are run by non-profit organizations, are staffed by volunteer coaches, have an inclusive assessment model, and maintain manageable costs.

These two arrangements were the most common for many decades in American youth sports. Youth sports were locally based, sponsored by a local community organization or church, and participating in them helped build a strong sense of unity and community among the parents and children. In some cases, they built this sense of community more broadly as many times residents, even those without children, would show up at the park to watch softball, baseball, soccer, or football games. Youth sports were central to the social fabric or social life of the community.

Youth Sports, Not School Sports

There is one issue we should address before going any further: youth sports and school sports are very different. A large portion of previous research in the United States specifically addresses *school* sports involvement.[35] This makes sense, to some degree, given that it is far easier to collect data on youth in school settings. By past research focusing heavily on school sports, including some of the research indicated above, scholars and policy makers have confounded *youth* sport involvement and *school* sport involvement.

An example of the confounding of youth sports and school sports is in how many scholars and policy makers interpret my previous scholarship.[36] That research showed that participating in *school activities*, including sports, led to higher achievement and a lower likelihood of dropping out of high school. The greatest benefit was

associated with playing school sports, although involvement in other school-based activities such as art, music, band or school clubs were also beneficial for students. This research has been collectively cited over 1,500 times (scholar.google.com), sometimes by people touting the benefits of playing youth sports who do not distinguish that school sports are different than other youth sports.

School-based sports differ from other youth sports in several key respects. Local youth sports start at an earlier age, encompass a wider audience of children, and are less selective than school sports. Local youth sports are historically inclusive; school sports often select those students who already are in better physical shape or who possess better physical abilities. By the time youth are introduced to organized school sports, they are already adolescents and teenagers. While parents drive children to local youth sports practices, and often network with other parents during practice, most adolescents and teenagers playing school sports do so before or after school at the school itself. In many cases they may ride the activities or late bus home; this bus ride fosters bonding between the children, as opposed to between a parent and child when the parent is the primary driver. Parents may not have the same sustained interaction with other parents that might be present at local youth sports practices.

These major differences between youth and school sports cast doubt on whether some of the positive effects from previous research on school sports can be applied to non-school youth sports, and vice versa. In this book, we are addressing non-school youth sports. Our analysis and recommendations do not, in many ways, apply to school sports.

Father's Account

I grew up in what someone once described as a small town in a very big city. It was a suburb of Miami, but it was on the outer ring; the Miami greater metropolitan area is quite large geographically. There was only one road into and out of my neighborhood for many years, but it was not a gated community; we were a traditional, working class neighborhood. Parents were employed in blue-collar or pink-collar occupations, such as carpenters, mechanics, secretaries, truck drivers, sales persons, and receptionists. Parents of similarly-aged children by and large knew one another, they coached local sports teams, led the brownie/girl scout and cub/boy scout troops, visited each other's homes, hosted holiday parties, attended church together, and volunteered in the school PTA. We were a close-knit community and many activities ran through the local park. Kids walked or rode their bikes everywhere.

When I became a sociologist, I learned that our neighborhood would best be characterized as having strong ties, with high levels of social capital (something I discuss later). Despite various ups and downs, I know of very few kids from my neighborhood who would have traded their experiences. In fact, many who grew up in my neighborhood struggled as adults to find such a community in which to raise their own families.

I vividly remember details about playing local youth sports in my neighborhood. Our coaches were parents, we knew all the kids on the team, and we mostly attended the same local elementary school. We celebrated birthdays together, we had sleepovers, and we would car-pool to away games. Parents would often socialize

with each other and kids would meet up at the local park to play pick-up games of various sorts. In our community, sports were very much central to who we were.

Teams had local sponsors, some better than others, who helped offset the cost of playing sports. This often meant they provided the uniforms for free, in exchange for putting their company names or logos on them. Sponsors also offered various perks to the kids and their parents on those teams. If PAKS (a local convenience store) sponsored you, you might get free Slurpees after your game if you won. If Tony's Place (a local Italian restaurant) sponsored you, you might get the occasional free pizza party during the season. Local sponsors included the grocery store, the ceramic studio, the dance studio, the hardware store, a parent's local business, and even one of the churches. People were invested in our community on many levels.

Little league baseball, for example, was a clearly defined Local Practice, Home game model (LPHH) where we played other teams from our own community. Teams would play each other at our local field and alternate which team was home or away. As we got older, and fewer kids played the sport, it advanced to the LPHA model where we would host teams from other communities as the home team, and travel to games in other nearby communities as the away team. This was very similar to how other sports, such as soccer, were handled. Due to lower sport saturation, youth football at all ages always travelled for away games as we could not host multiple teams in the same age category. Every child made a team; there were no selective models where children were cut/released or excluded from being able to play.

I am sure there was a fee to play, but am unsure of the cost as my parents have long since passed away. It could not have been that much because my family was definitely what I would call working poor. We lived in a working to middle-class neighborhood, but my family hung onto the bottom edge. Having the electricity or the telephone turned off, or eviction notices left on the door, was somewhat of a pattern at my house. In this regard I am not alone, as this is a fairly typical pattern when your parents struggle with addiction. That my parents could afford the sports activities, despite our precarious financial circumstances, means it had to be cost effective or affordable. I do know on occasion a family would have the fee waived, something that I have never heard of for one of today's travel teams. For all I know, my family might have been one for whom the fee was waived.

Nearly every community had their own youth sports teams. There was no widely available private coaching, no scholarship chase, no prohibitive tuition, and no charge to watch the local community game. The only charge to watch a game I can recall was for high school football games.

There were no doubt superstars among us; some children/adolescents/teens were clearly better athletes than others. Inevitably, these kids would become the varsity athletes at the middle school or high school, which might have been the first time a selective tryout model was used. One key defining trait of that era was that the overwhelming majority of kids played local sports. In all my years living there, I can count the total number of kids who left our community to play for another community on one hand. While we served as the hub for some children who came from communities that did not have their own teams, the vast

majority of the kids on these local youth teams lived in the neighborhood and attended the same elementary school.

For-profit youth sport organizations were rare. I have two anecdotal pieces of evidence to support this claim. First, children from the Country Club of Miami would come to my working-class neighborhood to play youth sports; they were commuter youth sports families based on the schema provided earlier. Second, while playing youth soccer and football, I vividly recall playing against another local non-profit organization where children of the Miami Dolphins' football players or coaches played. I was from a working-class community, but when I played against that community's local team, I played against the "Shula Boys". On occasion, we would see the Miami Dolphins' Head Coach (Don Shula) on the sideline watching his sons play. If there were such a thing as widely available for-profit youth sports programs fielding select teams, the kids from the Country Club or the Shula Boys surely would have been in one of those programs.

In some respects, I have both the benefit and detriment of my generation (age) and educational training. I benefitted from playing youth sports before they became a multi-billion dollar a year industry. My community offered every major team sport one could imagine; I played baseball, soccer, and football every year of my youth. My community also offered youth basketball, softball, and cheerleading. My elementary school offered other sports, such as karate and wrestling, as part of the after-school program. The local park was overrun every night of the week with parents and children alike, and the lights at the local field would light up for night games routinely (i.e. baseball, softball, soccer, and football). Sport was so integral to my community that children would play

football in the streets, 2-man or 3-man baseball at the park, pick-up basketball at the elementary school, and have impromptu soccer scrimmages when the weather was nice. We were a sports-crazed community.

In nearly every case, our coaches were our parents. Sometimes there was a volunteer coach, often a young person in their twenties who had a passion for the sport. I do not recall a single paid coach. I do not recall a single time someone had to pay to watch the games. I do not recall a single person being turned away because they could not afford the sport or activity. My age thus brings with it a certain benefit because I can recall times when all of the positives were present in youth sport. I sound like an old man talking about "the good old days"; I do not believe my children had such experiences.

Son's Account

My dad's description of his positive experience with youth sports mirrors my own *local* experiences playing recreational sports to some degree: lively fields and parks with games and spectators, volunteer coaches, pickup games, after game snacks, community, and financial assistance when needed. For example, the soccer "town" team I played on growing up was officially made of players from three towns, the same three towns that made up the regional high school. Despite pulling from three towns, we often struggled with numbers, in part because of how many kids played on travel teams. Attendance at practice was optional and often skipped; some kids basically only came to games. You did not need to have a good work ethic or a positive attitude; I vividly remember kids often complaining or being lazy. We only ever ran a few laps

around the field, and only some of the time. Everyone's favorite thing to do in practice was to scrimmage and while it could get competitive at times, by and large these types of teams were highly recreational. There were no sons of professional players, and none of these kids went on to play at the collegiate or professional levels. For this soccer team, only a few of us even played junior varsity in high school. The majority of the kids who eventually played varsity soccer in high school played on travel teams, not on the local town team.

If you wanted to really be competitive, you would play for a travel team (whatever verbiage the sport or area has for it: club, elite, AAA, select, etc.). This is when your parents would pay more for you to play on a (usually much) better team, with better coaching, and higher competition. These teams were not for everyone though. A lot of kids played on the town team because they either had no desire to play at a higher level, or their parents were not willing or able to make the commitment (time or money). The local town team was very inexpensive, and the travel was very minimal.

You might think kids would jump up and down between the recreational and competitive teams, but this was hardly ever the case. I never met some of the kids my age who played soccer, who lived in one of these three towns, until high school because they played exclusively for the competitive (travel) team. The pattern I saw was that you either played on the competitive team until high school, then switched to the school team, or you stopped playing that sport altogether. I cannot remember a single kid who played on a competitive team then came back to the local recreational town team.

The two ways this type of transfer could happen are (i) by personal choice opting for lower competition, being overwhelmed, or burnt out or (ii) by being forced to switch by getting injured or being cut. I think it would take a very mature young child to say, "well I still like playing this sport, I tried playing more competitively, but I prefer to play less competitively." Admitting to being overwhelmed or burnt out is unlikely as well; it is tantamount to saying, "I tried to play competitively and failed." It is ingrained in American culture that we need to achieve the highest we possibly can; doing anything less is considered failure. For young children this can manifest into not wanting to let your parents down, while older children may worry about what their peers think.

There is a difference between having the ability to own these statements as an individual and having to confront another social group (i.e. your peers) about them. You would always be the kid who "was not good enough" or "thinks he is better than he is." I hate to say it, but having been on both sides of this situation with several sports for many years, the best path towards switching teams downwards as a kid is by injury - it provides a built-in excuse. It is not your fault you were cut, you were injured. A blameless excuse for the kid, and the recreation team would be happy to have you.

If I compared all this self-doubt and anxiety that complicates the decision for what sports team to play on when I was a child to now, when I am an adult, the difference is night and day. I do not care if I play on a lower-division soccer team as an adult, I know it is not a failure on my part or that I am not good enough. It is not embarrassing; I do not worry about what my old social group would think of me coming back. I am mature enough to admit the

higher division was not for me. In my experience, many parents are unable to set aside their pride and make the same thoughtful decisions when it comes to their children. Parents are worried, if not petrified, to face their old friends if their child fails after they have tried to move to a better league. They perceive their child's failures as a reflection of their parenting ability, and thus of themselves. Maybe they did not provide enough resources for their kid to succeed, or maybe they did not push them hard enough, or maybe they just wasted a lot of money on higher programs when it did not bring any added benefit to their child.

I enjoyed my time playing on the local town soccer team. I got to see my friends a few times a week and play soccer until the sun set. I know this is why cut grass is one of my favorite smells. The nostalgic utopia my dad talks about still exists in some places, just without much degree of competition. Youth sports today are largely split between competitive travel teams and local recreational teams. The description my dad gave matches the recreation teams, but fails to match the competitive travel teams for several reasons explained in the next chapter. But if you are looking for this old-school ideation of sports, the local non-profit town team is where you will find it.

Chapter 2
The Modern Landscape

Somewhere between my playing youth sports as a child, and when my children played youth sports, things changed. The local models depicted in the last chapter have slowly been replaced by private, for-profit models. These for-profit organizations often refer to themselves as offering *elite* or *club* experiences.; these labels are not appropriate for several reasons. In many cases, these players are not elite; it is not uncommon to hear anecdotal stories of so-called elite players not making their high school varsity squads. The word *club* indicates a small, personalized, or boutique arrangement, which these for-profit organizations are not. Given these concerns, and the tryout or selective model used by many of these organizations, we refer to them as *select* youth sports teams or organizations.

In this chapter, we discuss three major structural and cultural changes that have led to a decrease in local, non-profit youth sports involvement. These trends include (i) the growth in the number of private, for-profit youth sports organizations, (ii) the increased willingness of parents to spend more time and money on their children's sporting activities, and (iii) the introduction of the internet and the smartphone.

The Privatization of Youth Sports

One of the greatest changes in the past twenty years in youth sports has been their privatization and the proliferation of for-profit

models.[37] It is unclear whether private organizations initially drove up the cost of youth sports or whether they saw an opening and created a marketplace. Three conditions helped foster the privatization movement.

Unlike in past generations, today's parents are expected to be ever-present in their children's lives and are expected to give everything to their children at all costs. This includes enormous financial sacrifices in order to prove they are ***morally worthy*** parents.[38] As discussed below, this may mean taking out a second mortgage, delaying saving for retirement, deferring job promotion opportunities, or failing to save for their children's college education.

The second contributing factor to the growth of private youth sports teams is the sheer number of children playing youth sports (i.e. market size). According to the National Council on Youth Sports, there are approximately 60 million children registered to play youth sports in the United States.[39] While there was a significant drop-off during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of children playing organized team sports has recovered.[40]

Closely tied to the volume of youth athletes is the amount of money to be made through privatization. The last two decades has seen a meteoric growth in the amount of money dedicated to youth sports. Based on parent survey data, families in the United States collectively spend an estimated $30 - $40 BILLION annually on their children's sporting activities;[41] it is estimated to be a $69 BILLION industry by 2030.[42] An estimated $1 BILLION was spent on constructing or renovating youth sports facilities in the United States in 2025.[43] As far as spectator events, visitor spending at