

From Elite to Everyone: Scaling Community-Based Youth Sports Globally

The Case for Focusing on the Majority of Youth

Youth sports in the US and Canada have traditionally skewed towards serving the **elite or affluent minority**, leaving a vast majority of children under-engaged. Only about **38% of American kids ages 6-12 played sports regularly in 2023**, meaning the majority are not active in any consistent sport ¹. This low participation is not due to lack of interest – in fact, **72% of youth globally say sports are important for them** ² – but rather due to barriers in the current system. High costs, intense competition, and limited access have created a youth sports culture that caters to the top 10-25% (elite travel teams or well-funded programs) while **children from low-income families participate at barely half the rate of their wealthier peers** ³. This disparity indicates a huge **untapped opportunity**: by designing sports, games, and training for the *majority* of youth (not just the elite), we can bring millions more kids into play. Importantly, focusing on broad inclusion isn't just a social good – it's a better template for global impact, because solutions that work for *all* kids domestically can be adapted to reach **1.2 billion children worldwide** facing similar challenges. Public sentiment backs this shift too: more than **4 in 5 Americans believe sports should be more accessible in underserved communities** ⁴, and a majority favor funding youth sports over pouring resources into professional or Olympic levels ⁵. In short, **rethinking youth sports to serve the many rather than the few** is both a moral imperative and a strategy to unlock massive participation at home and globally.

Successful Community-Based Sports Models in North America

Encouragingly, a number of organizations in the US and Canada are already **“doing this right”** – pioneering **community-based play** and inclusion for the majority of youth. These initiatives provide a blueprint for how to engage broad populations of kids in fun, accessible sports:

- **ESPN & Aspen Institute's Project Play (63×30 Initiative)** – A major effort to “take back youth sports” and get **63% of kids playing by 2030**, focusing on breaking down barriers to play ¹ ⁶. In 2025 ESPN launched *Take Back Sports* with a \$5 million investment, funding community leagues and coach training to prioritize **fun, multi-sport participation over elite travel play** ⁷ ⁸. This reflects a radical shift: tackling the dominance of pay-to-play travel teams and refocusing on local rec leagues where **kids of all backgrounds have a place to play** ⁹. The **Aspen Institute's Project Play** provides research and frameworks (like the *Youth Sports Bill of Rights*) to help communities design sports programs that emphasize inclusion, safety, and enjoyment for every child.
- **Stephen and Ayesha Curry's Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation** – In Oakland, California, the Currys are reinventing school and neighborhood sports to serve *all* kids. Their initiative works with the local school district to ensure **every student has access to quality play opportunities**, from refurbished playgrounds to free middle school leagues ¹⁰. This model recognizes that *schools* and *communities* can be hubs of play, especially for families who can't afford private clubs. By investing in schoolyard

facilities and equipment in under-resourced areas, they are **reinvigorating play where kids already are**, dramatically lowering the cost and logistical barriers for participation ¹⁰ .

- **Boys & Girls Clubs and Recreational Leagues** – Traditional community organizations are adapting with innovative programs. For example, Boys & Girls Clubs of America's **ALL STARS sports program** (bolstered by partners like ESPN) offers free or low-cost multi-sport leagues in many cities ¹¹ . These clubs focus on **participation and skill-building over competition**, making sports fun for beginners. Likewise, many local Parks & Recreation departments, often overlooked in the era of elite clubs, continue to provide the **majority of youth sports opportunities (nearly 60% of youth athletes play in community-based leagues vs. ~27% in travel clubs)** ¹² . Strengthening these rec programs (longer seasons, better coaching, outreach to girls and minorities) can bring in thousands of kids who otherwise sit on the sidelines.
- **Inclusive Sports Charities (USA & Canada)** – Several nonprofits specifically target underrepresented youth. In the U.S., organizations like *Up2Us Sports* and the *Women's Sports Foundation* train coaches and fund programs in low-income areas (e.g. WSF's Sports 4 Life initiative brings sports to girls of color ⁹). In Canada, the **Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities** stands out: over 20 years, Jumpstart has **helped more than 4 million Canadian kids get in the game**, breaking down financial and accessibility barriers to sport ¹³ . By providing grants for registration fees, equipment, and community facilities, Jumpstart has transformed access, even supporting children with disabilities through adaptive sports programs ¹⁴ . This shows how a broad-based, philanthropic approach can **literally change the sport landscape** of a country towards inclusion. Additionally, Canada's national *ParticipACTION* campaigns and *Sport for Life* programs promote physical literacy for all children, not just the athletically gifted, emphasizing fun, fundamental movement skills that keep kids engaged longer.

Each of these examples demonstrates **new ways to spark play among the majority**: reducing costs, meeting kids where they are (in schools or local clubs), training coaches to be mentors rather than win-at-all-cost drill sergeants, and celebrating *fun* as the core metric of success. Notably, research shows "*fun*" is the **#1 reason kids play sports and lack of fun is the #1 reason they quit** ¹⁵ . These groups are tapping into that insight to **retain kids past the age when 70% traditionally drop out by 13** ¹⁶ . The lesson is clear – if we make sports **accessible, affordable, and enjoyable** for ordinary kids, they will come *and* stay. This inclusive playbook is perfectly primed to be scaled up for youth worldwide.

A Template for Global Expansion

Focusing on broad-based youth sports at home provides a **template that resonates globally**, because the barriers and aspirations of kids in Los Angeles or Toronto aren't so different from those in Lagos or Mumbai. Around the world, most children do *not* have elite training or expensive facilities – but they *do* have the desire to play and be active. Global research by the IOC found **90% of parents worldwide want their children to play sports for health and wellbeing**, and young people themselves recognize sports' benefits ¹⁷ ¹⁸ . Yet, similar everyday barriers persist globally: less than **20% of youth worldwide meet recommended activity levels**, with many citing costs, lack of time, fear of judgment, or unsafe environments as reasons for not playing more ¹⁹ . These are strikingly similar to the issues faced by North American youth outside the top 20%. This means solutions proven in U.S./Canadian communities – if appropriately adapted – can make a difference at scale internationally.

For example, **school-based sports access** can be a game-changer in developing countries just as in Oakland. Integrating low-cost sports programs into schools or community centers ensures **girls and boys everywhere** have a chance to play without needing private clubs. (In places where girls' participation especially lags, school may be the safest and most acceptable venue for them to engage in sports, mirroring efforts in North America to close the gender gap.) Likewise, training local coaches in **positive, fun-focused coaching techniques** can elevate youth sports experiences on every continent, much as initiatives like Positive Coaching Alliance have done in the U.S. ²⁰ . Even the emphasis on **multi-sport play** – letting kids sample many activities rather than specializing early – is globally relevant: it lowers entry barriers (kids can try whatever is available) and reduces burnout. A child in rural India might not have a proper soccer league, but if there's a schoolyard or open space, they can run, jump, kick, and throw in unstructured play that builds fundamental skills.

Moreover, the **"sports for all" philosophy** championed in community programs aligns with international development efforts. Organizations such as *Right to Play* and *Laureus Sport for Good* have long leveraged play to address education, health, and peace outcomes for marginalized youth worldwide. What's new today is the surge in technology and innovation that can amplify these efforts (as discussed next). By treating the *average North American child* – who wants a fun, safe game with friends – as the archetype rather than the travel-team prodigy, we create models of sport that are inherently **inclusive and scalable**. And those models can be shared and localized across cultures. In essence, **if a concept works for the majority of kids in diverse US/Canadian communities, it likely has legs to engage kids among the 1+ billion youth globally** who have been left on the bench under the old elite-focused paradigm.

Windows of Opportunity for Global Scale

Scaling community-based play to reach *1.2 billion children worldwide* will require creativity and leveraging key opportunities on the horizon. Here are several **promising windows of opportunity** to globalize the "sports for all" approach:

- 1. Digital Platforms and Gamified Fitness:** The ubiquity of mobile technology, even in developing regions, opens new avenues to get kids moving. Innovative apps and games can turn physical activity into play that's as compelling as screen-time. For example, the augmented reality game *Pokémon GO* famously added an estimated **144 billion steps** to U.S. physical activity by incentivizing walking via gameplay ²¹ . This concept can be expanded globally with apps that encourage scavenger hunts, dance challenges, or virtual sports leagues that *blur the line between digital and physical play*. A simple smartphone app that organizes neighborhood pick-up games or tracks personal bests in jumping jacks could motivate children in communities with few formal sports. The key is using tech **not just to entertain youth, but to engage them in real-world play** – effectively turning the devices so often blamed for inactivity into tools for movement.
- 2. New Inclusive Sports and Formats:** Adapting sports themselves to be more accessible can dramatically increase uptake. We're seeing a trend toward **small-sided, low-cost, and culturally adaptable sports**. For instance, 3-on-3 basketball (now an Olympic sport) requires only a hoop and 6 players, making it easier to organize on a dirt court or playground than a full 5-on-5 game. Similarly, organizers of Modern Pentathlon are introducing **"ninja-style obstacle racing"** as a youth-friendly, exciting event, noting that it's *faster, more dynamic, and more accessible* to people of all backgrounds ²² ²³ . Around the world, sports like skateboarding, freestyle football (soccer tricks), and parkour are booming precisely because they **require minimal equipment and can be practiced informally**

in urban or village environments. Embracing these non-traditional sports (and granting them legitimacy through events and media exposure) can pull in millions of kids who might not join a conventional team. The opportunity is to **elevate “playground” sports to global prominence**, showing kids and communities that *any* game that gets you moving is valuable – you don’t need expensive gear or elite venues to be an “athlete.”

3. **Community and School Partnerships:** Much like successful North American programs, global scaling will hinge on **meeting kids where they are**. Partnerships with schools, local NGOs, and city governments can turn underutilized spaces into play zones. We have examples of “**play streets**” in U.S. cities (temporary street closures for kids to play) that could be replicated in dense cities worldwide to give urban youth safe space to run and play. Schools in particular are a universal touchpoint: incorporating daily play, recess, or sports clubs in schools can reach children en masse. International agencies and governments are starting to recognize this; for instance, UNICEF and UNESCO have called for integrating sport and play into education for holistic child development ²⁴ ²⁵ . A window of opportunity exists in aligning with global initiatives like the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3 on health, SDG 4 on quality education) which provide support for programs that get kids active. By funneling resources into **school-based sports infrastructure and teacher training** (like building simple courts or training physical education teachers in fun games), countries can make big strides in participation quickly. The global push for education equity post-pandemic can naturally include **physical literacy** as a component, ensuring we’re not just sending kids back to school, but back to play.
4. **Training Coaches and “Play Leaders” at Scale:** One of the most transferable lessons from the U.S. experience is the power of a **caring coach or mentor** in a kid’s life. Organizations can scale up models like Up2Us Sports (which trains coaches to work in underserved communities) by creating international coach mentoring programs. Imagine a Peace Corps for play: young adults trained in basic coaching and youth development could be deployed to communities around the world to spark local sports programs. There’s also an opportunity to tap into **peer mentorship** – training teens as youth sports leaders for younger kids – which not only multiplies the reach in resource-limited settings but also empowers the older youth. With online training tools and shared curricula, a global network of community coaches can be equipped with the latest techniques to make sports fun and inclusive (regardless of whether they’re coaching soccer, cricket, or a traditional game). Scaling human capacity in this way addresses a common global challenge: having *someone* to organize and encourage play. Just as the **Million Coaches Challenge** in the US (via ESPN, PCA, etc.) aims to improve coaching quality ²⁰ , a global analog could certify a million community coaches worldwide – drastically lowering the “activation energy” needed for kids to get involved.
5. **Public-Private Investment and Social Entrepreneurship:** Finally, there is a window for **significant investment and innovation** in this space. The success of Canadian Tire Jumpstart (funded by a private corporation for public good) shows that businesses can play a huge role in expanding youth sports access ¹³ . Globally, we’re seeing more corporations and entrepreneurs interested in the wellbeing of the next generation of consumers and citizens. This could translate into corporate-sponsored facilities (e.g. simple playgrounds or multi-sport courts in rural areas), equipment donation programs (like One World Play’s ultra-durable soccer balls distributed in developing nations), or tech startups focusing on youth fitness. There’s also potential in **social enterprises** – sustainable models that provide affordable sports services or products tailored for low-resource settings. For instance, low-cost sports equipment made from recycled materials, or solar-lit

community fields that allow play in areas without grid electricity, are innovations that can open up play for thousands of children. Governments, too, are recognizing the cost-benefit: improving youth physical activity now can save billions in future health costs ²⁶. This creates a policy window for funding sport-for-all programs. In short, aligning the interests of health ministries, education systems, private sector sponsors, and grassroots organizations can create a powerful engine to **finance and scale sports inclusion**. The market is enormous – the *global youth sports industry* (including equipment and software) is already valued in the tens of billions ²⁷ – and if even a fraction of that investment is directed toward the majority of kids rather than elite performers, the impact will be transformative.

In conclusion, **flipping the script to focus on the majority of youth** is not just a feel-good idea; it's a strategic pathway to energize an entire generation across the globe. The North American experiences provide proof that when sports and play are reimagined to be **accessible, fun, and community-centered**, participation soars among those who were left out. By using these lessons as a template – and seizing new technologies, innovative sports, and partnerships – we can scale up a movement of play that reaches children in every corner of the world. Instead of innovating for the privileged few, the real win-win comes from innovating for *everyone*. The playing field, quite literally, can be leveled – and in doing so, we cultivate not only the next wave of athletes, but healthier, happier, and more connected communities worldwide. ⁸

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¹ ⁶ ⁷ ⁸ ⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ¹⁵ ²⁰ ESPN Launches Take Back Sports; A Year Long Initiative to Get More Kids Playing Youth Sports and Having Fun - ESPN Press Room U.S.

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² ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ¹⁹ ²⁴ ²⁵ Over 70% of youths say playing sport is important, research reveals | sportanddev

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¹³ ¹⁴ Canadian Paralympic Committee Congratulates Jumpstart on 20 Years of Making a Difference for Canadian Kids

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²¹ Influence of Pokémon Go on Physical Activity: Study and Implications

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