Sport & Entertainment Review, 2018, 4, 3-8, © 2018 West Virginia University

Envisioning Sport Programs for the Other 75%: Recapturing a Lost Generation

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Several catchy television commercials produced by the NCAA tout the thousands of college athletes who will not play professional sport. For the vast majority of college athletes, college participation will be the end of their competitive sport years, as meaningful adult sport participation in the US remains limited. The issue, however, starts much earlier. The vast majority of high school athletes will not play college sport, but will end their organized sport participation at age 18 or so. Further, the vast majority of youth sport participants will not play high school sport, or even middle school sport. In fact, statistics continue to show that by the age of 13, somewhere between 60–70% of American youth have dropped out of organized sport, with the biggest dropout rate belonging to girls. For me, and many others this drastic dropout rate is alarming. Why do so many American youth stop playing sport at such a young age?

The answers have been many. Some suggest that coaching is a problem; undertrained and overzealous coaches take the fun out of participation such that children burn out and no longer want to play. Some youth pursue other interests like music or art. Some begin working to support their families. Indeed, a myriad of reasons have been suggested and supported. One of the most compelling explanations that has built traction particularly in recent years goes beyond individual-level reasons and factors and explores the design of the US sport system itself. What about the way sport is delivered in the US creates a deluge of youth sport dropouts? How could we change the design of the youth sport delivery system sport such that we could recapture young people and provide meaningful sport participation opportunities throughout the adolescent years?

As a former youth, high school, and college sport participant, and now as a coach, parent, consultant, and scholar, I have examined this question from multiple angles, including 15 years of empirical research based largely in field and

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consultant settings. While I have examined adult sport participation as well (e.g., Lim, Warner, Dixon, Berg, Kim, & Newhouse-Bailey, 2011), I find I am most compelled by the issue of youth drop-out. If we cannot first recapture youth sport participants, there may be no need to discuss the adult delivery system. Clearly, I am not the first or even the most well-versed to discuss the issue of the US sport delivery system; but, having lived and worked in this space for nearly 40 years, I would like to offer a few insights and suggestions of ways that we could adjust the sport delivery system in the US to better serve the majority of youth, and create pathways for lifelong sport participation. This call is in parallel to the Aspen Institute's Project Play call for developing more mainstream opportunities for sport participation. To be clear, these ideas are focused not at eliminating the elite development system, which I would argue serves about the top 25% of athlete in the US, but are focused on creating a system that better serves the other 75%.

Borrowing from Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, I will call this a "youth sport for all" model, understanding that there is no singular or universal sport for all program or structure, nor will "all" participate. The term is utilized to capture a model that broadly serves youth across the country who have an interest in meaningful sport participation, but not necessarily at an elite level. These suggestions are a mix of underlying philosophy, delivery system (time, place, and people), program structure, and governance. Some are research driven, and some are ideas drawn from working with and examining existing sport programs around the country and the world.

The first suggestion toward a youth sport for all model in the US involves the delivery system (see Dixon & Bruening, 2014; Dixon, Burden, & Newhouse-Bailey, 2012 for chapter overviews). Since the early 1900's the majority of youth sport in the US has been delivered in two separate, but parallel systems: school and non-school. In the school sector, sport is delivered usually beginning in middle school (6th, 7th or 8th grade) in school-based facilities, with school subsidies, and with school personnel as coaches and administrators. In the non-school system, sport is delivered, beginning as early as age 2 or 3, in a wide range of formats. These range from municipal offerings utilizing city/town facilities, with city-paid administrators and usually volunteer (mostly parent) coaches to private paid offerings using private facilities, administrators and coaches. The coaches and administrators may be part- or full-time, and facilities range from an individual field or court to full-service academies, such as IMG (See Coakley, 2010; Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014; Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith, 2016, and Misener & Doherty, 2009 for more in-depth discussions of the US youth sport delivery system).

The benefit of school-based delivery is that most schools are built with sports in mind and provide indoor and outdoor playing fields and courts (Green & Dixon, 2012). These are usually paid for by public tax dollars, which implies that the facilities should be available to those who paid the taxes. The problem with school-based delivery systems in a youth sport for all model is that they are typically personnel-bound. That is, there are a limited number of coaches and administrators that schools can dedicate to sport, as education is their primary mission (Dixon & Bruening, 2014; Green & Dixon, 2012; Newland, Dixon, & Green, 2013). Thus, most schools offer limited participation opportunities (at most 2–3 teams per grade), and these spots only go to the most talented individuals. In very large suburban and urban schools (where there might be 3,000–4,000) students, only 24–36% of students participate (Burden & Dixon, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). While many schools have more capacity in off-seasons for facility use, they do not have more capacity for coaches, who are typically already overburdened with teaching and administrative duties.

The problem with a non-school delivery system is two-fold. City-based programs are strapped for facilities, while private offerings struggle to provide sport at an accessible cost (Dixon & Green, 2011; Green & Dixon, 2012). According to Project Play statistics, "Travel-team parents spend an average of $2,266 annually on their child's sports participation, and at the elite levels, some families spend more than $20,000 per year." This private pay for play model makes private sport inaccessible to many lower income youth, and increases participation disparities across the nation, particularly in lower socio-economic areas (Dixon & Green, 2011; Newhouse-Bailey, Dixon, & Warner, 2015; Newhouse-Bailey, Keiper, & Dixon, 2011). I'm not suggesting that we eliminate these programs; for those who can afford them they are a valuable and potentially enjoyable experience for youth and have the potential for helping advance athletes to the next level.

Thus, one way for providing youth sport for all is to provide hybrid sport programming. In line with the Aspen Institute's Recommendations for Project Play (2016), where proponents call for more "mainstream options for the moderately interested athlete," we need to create a better and more broadly implemented hybrid system. Jones et al. (2016) in their review and study of youth sport partnerships argue that inter-organizational partnerships of various forms increase the capacity of youth sport organizations to deliver sport, and to deliver sport that is more likely to meet constituent needs. Thus, school and non-school sport delivery systems need to share resources, build partnerships, and work together to provide sport that is more broadly accessible across the lifespan. What does this look like in practice? Building on my work and the work of others, here are some ideas and examples.

In Austin, TX, and Steelton, PA, flag football is provided for middle and high school girls through a private club that utilizes school fields (Dixon & Green, 2011; Green & Dixon, 2012). The coaches, referees, and logistical support is provided by and paid for under the non-school league. Athletes

pay a small fee that covers field rental, uniforms, coaching stipends, and referee costs. Athletes are recruited within the schools and represent their school in name and colors, and are subject to "no pass no play" academic eligibility rules, just like school-based athletes. Coaches and league organizers are non-school based. The schools provide space for practice and games for a significantly reduced rental fee. This system combines the advantages of low cost, school affiliation/identity, and availability of coaches; the program utilizes school fields (which are not in use during the spring), yet does not overburden school personnel. It provides a space for participation for girls who were filtered out of the school sport system.

In College Station, TX, the local parks and recreation centers partner with the elementary and middle schools to provide after-school/evening volleyball and basketball programs. This allows the city to significantly expand their programming to adolescent age groups because it gives access to additional court space, yet it does not tax the school's personnel to provide the sport programming. The city pays a reduced rental fee for the courts, which also helps the schools maintain quality facilities.

A large high school in Houston, TX, is developing a full intramural program for its students. Sports offered include volleyball, kickball, basketball, ultimate, and flag football, which are coordinated with the school sport offerings with regard to season timing and facility use. The program is financed by local companies, who provide monetary support for a sponsor stipend, and equipment (e.g., basketballs, kickballs, ping-pong tables). It is run by a teacher-sponsor, but is student-directed in all other aspects. Recruiting, coaching, refereeing, and managing are all accomplished internally by the students. Scores are kept and records are tallied and recorded on the walls outside the gym. The program, open only to those who are not on a school-based team, provides literally hundreds of participation opportunities, at virtually no cost, to both boys and girls. The students report that it enhances school spirit, gives them a sense of ownership and leadership, and provides meaningful after-school sport participation right there at the school. Administrators say that it increases student buy-in, reduces delinquency, and maximizes use of school facilities (Burden & Dixon, 2013c).

In my research and consulting work across the US and abroad I have observed partnerships between schools and churches, schools and private providers, and schools and public providers. These kinds of partnerships not only make sense, but only work when both parties are flexible and creative about space, timing, and cost. We need to continue to revise the boundaries between school and non-school sport; we need to redefine what "real" sport participation means. In doing so, we open the door for meaningful participation to many more boys and girls who are currently not being served.

A second aspect of a youth sport for all mindset in the US is an appropriately competitive atmosphere (Newhouse-Bailey, Dixon, & Warner, 2015; Warner & Dixon, 2013). That is, some sport calls for and thrives on a highly competitive atmosphere. Selecting the best and having athletes constantly compete (within and without) to be the best can cultivate excellence. We need this type of competitive atmosphere for at least some sport offerings in the US. But, this kind of atmosphere is not attractive for everyone, nor is it conducive for building broad-based participation. In fact, by its very design, it is conducive for narrowing.

In response to this type of atmosphere, a number of scholars have suggested that sport opportunities should be non-competitive, and focused on fun (see Graham, Dixon & Hazen-Swan, 2016 for a partial review). Again, this attracts a particular market segment. But, my work, particularly with mainstream adolescent girls and boys, suggests that they prefer a semi-competitive atmosphere. In essence, this means they like that scores and records are kept; this makes the games meaningful. They like that they have to try-out for the teams and they have to attend practice in order to play in games; this makes membership meaningful and helps them improve and develop skill. They do not like competing against their friends for spots on the team; they do not like getting cut if they do not progress on a particular schedule. They want to challenge themselves to become better and improve their own skill and performance, yet not necessarily compete against others (Dixon & Pace, 2007). Many of the participants we worked with suggested that they had been in the ultra-competitive system and either opted out or were forced out of that system (Dixon & Pace, 2007; Warner, Dixon & Chalip, 2012). They did not, however, enjoy playing just for fun, or in pick-up games. Instead, they wanted a way to participate in organized competition, where they could test themselves and improve their skills, without losing friendships and feeling constantly stressed.

In my study and consultation, I have observed a number of programs across the US, UK, Kenya, and Australia that provide this kind of atmosphere. For example, flag football programs in Austin, New Orleans, and Pittsburgh, as well as the emerging basketball programs we are helping to develop in Nairobi allow girls to assemble their own teams and play against other schools in weekly league competitions. They hold try-outs and communicate expectations, but the skill threshold for making the team is low, so cuts are rare. This competitive structure creates meaningful participation opportunities, but also supports (rather than strains) friendships and promotes mastery rather than ego oriented outcomes (Dixon & Green, 2011; Dixon & Pace, 2007; Green & Dixon, 2012).

In the UK, flag and kitted programs in the Coventry area have been successful at attracting girls and boys who want to play sports other than netball, soccer, or rugby. These programs fall across a range of competitive emphases; the com-

petitive emphasis being driven by the athletes themselves who self-select the level and number of tournaments they desire to play in. In Australia (and most non-US sport systems), many schools require participation in sport. In these schools, teams are created for every ability level. So, for example a school may have a soccer program that has a first 1 team all the way through a tenth team. Those teams play a matched team from the other school. Thus, the competition level on the higher-level teams tends to be more intense, and reduces in intensity as the levels progress down. Further, far and away the most prominent sport system outside the US is a club-based system where teams are provided for nearly all levels of competition, relative to the available interested pool of participants. Thus in both of these systems, rather than cutting participants, they expand meaningful competition opportunities to accommodate the greatest number of participants possible.

The main point I am emphasizing here is that in the US, we have largely viewed competition and play or fun as polar opposites. Programs, and their assumed outcomes, must fall into one category or the other. A US Youth Sport for All program would recognize and offer a range of competitive emphases, and allow participants a voice or at least a choice in the level of competition they desire (see also Aspen Institute, 2016). This goal could be accomplished by creating new programs, or by offering more of a range within existing programs. Rather than losing those participants who do not desire the highest level of competition, we recapture them at a lesser competitive level where they can achieve the outcomes they desire from meaningful sport participation.

A third element of a US Youth Sport for All program is a lower investment level (compared to varsity and elite club programs). Again, this idea aligns with the philosophy of offering more mainstream alternatives, but is implemented more at the structural level. While data on actual time expenditures by adolescents on sport participation is difficult to obtain, Project Play national surveys suggest that it is a strong concern of parents (i.e., they are worried that children and youth spend too much time in sport).

The amount of time spent on sport for highly invested athletes can be quite high. Consider the example of a varsity high school basketball player at a local school. This athlete is required to spend one hour in school 5 days a week, and two hours after school for practice 3 days per week. In addition, most Saturdays require 2–3 hours for shooting and film. Games take place twice per week, and require 3–5 hours at the gym, not including travel time. Thus, for a local high school commitment, the time required is approximately 19–24 hours per week. Time commitments can range even higher for club/select teams who may practice 3 hours/4 nights a week, and full weekend tournaments (see Newhouse-Bailey, Dixon, & Warner, 2015 for additional examples). For adolescents, then, choosing high investment sport essentially eliminates other activity choices. Teens must choose between sport and band, or sport and drama. For teens of lower socioeconomic status, they may be forced out of school athletics because they cannot both work and play sport (Burden & Dixon, 2012, 2013a; Olushola, Jones, Dixon & Green, 2013; Olushola, Green, & Dixon, 2014).

We need to create meaningful sport participation opportunities that call for a lower time investment. Programs that I have worked with, designed, and/or delivered have a found success in attracting large numbers of youth with investment levels of about 6 hours/week. In this model, athletes practice 2 times/week for 1–2 hours, then play games either 1–2 times per week, often with multiple games on one day. For example, a local middle school boys 7v7 football program practices and plays on school fields, and is coached by parent or college student volunteers. They practice 2 hours on Sunday, then play 2 games on Tuesday nights. In total, athletes dedicate about 6 hours/week to the team.

In the UK, girls play flag football on hybrid club teams. They practice 2 times/week for about 2 hours each. Then, instead of playing in a league structure, they play tournaments only, and typically play one weekend long tournament per month. Parents report that this drastically reduces their time commitment in driving their daughters to competitions. Girls report that they love the weekend tournament formats for three main reasons: 1) they are able to play multiple games in a short period of time, which quickly enhances their individual and team skill levels, 2) they spend time together, which builds their friendships, and 3) they have their non-tournament weekends open for other activities. Across stakeholders, they prefer this model to the weekly league model found in most US school-based sport.

The high school intramural program I mentioned before is based on an investment of about 2–4 hours per week. Students typically practice in the first two weeks of the season, then play games for the remainder. They usually play on Monday and Wednesday, or Tuesday and Thursday, and play 2–3 games in an afternoon. Students report high participation rates—they work or do other activities on their non-participation days, and some report that they come to watch the other teams on the days they are not playing, just because they enjoy being around sport and their friends. In sum, while some youth and their parents desire to and thrive on a model of high investment level in sport, this model is not the only one that creates meaningful participation. Any number of examples demonstrate the success of a lower investment model in drawing large numbers of mainstream participants who persist in sport because they can play sport and "still be teenagers."

Other programs are working to maximize investments by adding life-skills or mentoring components, such that the time invested in sport reaps academic and social benefits as well (e.g., Newland et al., 2013; Olushola et al., 2012; 2013). For example, the girls basketball programs in our study based in West Virginia found that mixing sport with mento-

ring and academic tutoring maximized the life benefits from both, and reduced transportation and other logistical costs in terms of time. Girls were able to accomplish multiple goals within one-time commitment. In Nairobi, we are developing this same model with the added dimension of the provision of food. Thus, in one place and time block, girls are provided sport that enhances their academics, life skills, and meets their physical and emotional needs.

A final thought and perhaps first next step is that despite strong (perhaps even voracious) cries to the contrary, it is likely time that we introduce some standardization and governance in the youth sport sector, particularly in the non-school based offerings. As a start, I think this comes in two forms.

First, we need to be open to more regulations within the Youth Sport for All or mainstream offerings. That is, if programs are going to be successful in reaching the more moderately invested participant, and they are going to demonstrate characteristics of lower investment levels and appropriate commitment levels, then the leagues or structures in which they are offered need to be structured as such. For example, a youth basketball program I work with only allows teams to select any players they want (within the age range), but they can only have 8 boys on a team, and they can only practice one hour per week and play one game per week. This creates parity in the league and prevents a default to higher competitive and/or investment levels. The league or program offering must be clear about the rules and abide by them, otherwise, the default will be another elite offering. The structures may vary, but they need to create parity and an atmosphere that will support the characteristics argued for above.

Second, we need more structured implementation of programs that work. As explained above, the US youth sport delivery system (if one can call it that) exists as a piecemeal puzzle of a variety of offerings across towns, cities, and states that has little consistency or replication. One city may have a brilliant program that was created out of a desire to serve a particular need, or from the vision of a dedicated youth sport champion. However, that program remains localized, while the next city over suffers from a lack of similar programming. We need to continue to network and share ideas through avenues along the lines of (but not limited to) Project Play, to share and more broadly implement the design, structure, and implementation of excellent Sport for All type programs across the US.

Governance of these broader programs is perhaps the most difficult part of a Youth Sport for All vision. Some would suggest that governance should be housed within USA sport—a Federal level governance system. This suggestion has some merit, yet often strikes at odds with the USA Sport Systems alternate goal of developing elite Olympic level athletes. Some would suggest that schools should subsume operation and governance of non-school sport. For the reasons outlined above, I do not think this is feasible or desirable. School systems are already overtaxed with demands, and may also have conflicting demands against elite sport. Thus, private organizations seem a desirable option. However, rather than incentivizing elite development, they need to be tasked and incentivized with broad-based participation. One example of an organization that is attempting to do this is Upward sports. Through networks of churches across the US, they promote a particular brand of sport participation that comes with training, gear, rules, and governance. While I am not advocating for this organization in particular, it is an example of how a private organization could create a Youth Sport for All program, then market it across the US and it could become broadly implemented toward a larger participation base. It seems likely that multiple organizations will emerge in this space to provide a variety of sports, and that multiple organizations will provide each sport (e.g., soccer will be provided by multiple clubs or systems). I do not envision one singular youth sport governing body or provider. But, I do think that we can learn from each other and work to support and promote sport programs that work. We can devise ways to help those programs become more broadly implemented rather than waiting and hoping for a good program to come along to each community. For example, we could strengthen something akin to the National Alliance for Youth Sport. But, instead of just becoming a member of the Alliance, there could be a directory of "certified programs" that can be replicated in other cities or town. Members of the alliance would be encouraged not only to certify their programs, but to actively promote them to other cities and towns, spreading their success at promoting Youth Sport for All.

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