

Responses to Questions for the Record
of
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Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
for a Hearing on “Field of Fees: Private Equity’s Role in the
Commercialization of American Youth Sports”

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Questions Submitted by Representative Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR)

1. How does the pay-to-play, profit driven youth sports model affect sports participation later in life?

Researchers who study physical activity across a lifetime have found an association between sustained youth sports participation and staying active as an adult.¹ “Youth sports participants who feel competent in their abilities, become more confident in themselves, and feel connected to their coach are likely to experience psychosocial benefits that extend beyond competition.”² They are “a means to foster a lifelong appreciation for the value of physical activity.”³ Yet American children participate in sports for, on average, less than three years, and

¹ Mariana Biagi Batista, et al., *Sports participation in childhood and adolescence and physical activity intensity in adulthood*, PLoS ONE (2024); Lise Kjønneksen et al., *Organized youth sport as a predictor of physical activity in adulthood*, 19 SCAND. J. MED. & SCI. SPORTS 646 (2009).

² Stephen M. Miller & Jason T. Siegel, *Youth sports and physical activity: The relationship between perceptions of childhood sport experience and adult exercise behavior*, 33 PSYCHOLOGY OF SPORT AND EXERCISE 85, at 90 (2017).

³ *Id.* at 91.

they quit sports altogether around 11 years old.⁴ Kids are quitting due to cost, injury, and burnout. These are each attributable to the for-profit model that dominates youth sports.

First, cost: Spending on youth sports rose by 46% between 2019 and 2024, nearly double the rate of inflation, and it continues to go up.⁵ Families spend thousands of dollars a year on enrollment, equipment, and travel, and the struggle to afford these activities is not improving. A recent report from the Play Equity Fund in California found that 60% of parents now struggle to afford youth sports, and 58% of parents said their children quit sports because of cost.⁶

Second, injury and burnout: Sports medicine researchers have found that early specialization and year-round play lead to burnout and overuse injury without a lasting performance benefit.⁷ And the 2020 Olympics Commission found that multi-sport sampling is far superior for neuromuscular control, reduced injury risk, and skill development.⁸ The majority of NFL players drafted over the last decade played multiple sports as children, and they sustained fewer injuries and enjoyed longer careers than their single-sport peers.⁹ Nearly 90% of one recent NFL first-round draft class, and roughly 95% of surveyed Division I athletes, played multiple sports as kids.¹⁰ Yet the for-profit youth sports model is financially dependent on

⁴ Jon Solomon, [Survey: Kids quit most sports by age 11](#), ASPEN INST. (Aug. 1, 2019).

⁵ Jon Solomon, [Project Play survey: Family spending on youth sports rises 46% over five years](#) (“Project Play Spending Survey”), ASPEN INST. (Mar. 3, 2025).

⁶ LA84 Foundation, [2026 California Play Equity Report](#), at 26 (May 26, 2026).

⁷ Patrick Saunders, et al., *Ulnar Collateral Ligament Injuries in Pediatric and Adolescent Throwing Athletes*, J. BONE & JOINT SURGERY REV. (2025); Comm’n on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics, [Passing the Torch: Modernizing Olympic, Paralympic, & Grassroots Sports in America](#) (“U.S. Olympic Comm’n Report”), at 55, 86 (2024); Vincent Minjares, *Analysis: Serious knee injury among teen athletes grows 26%*, ASPEN INST. (Nov. 27, 2023); Robert F. LaPrade, *AOSSM Early Sport Specialization Consensus Statement*, ORTHOP. J. SPORTS MED., at 1 (2016).

⁸ U.S. Olympic Comm’n Report, *supra* note 7, at 86.

⁹ Gnaneswar Chundi, et al., [The Association Between Early Sport Specialization and Injury and Career Outcomes Among National Football League Athletes](#), EUROPEAN J. OF SPORT SCIENCE, at 1 (2026).

¹⁰ Emily J. Luo, et al., [Early Sport Specialization in a Pediatric Population: A Rapid Review](#), CLINICS AND PRACTICE, at 2 (2025).

families committing their time and money to a single sport and traveling to tournaments throughout the year.

In short, the end goals of for-profit youth sports frustrate the goals of youth participation. And driving children out of sports earlier drives adults out of physical activity later.

a. Please elaborate on how travel, fees, and training deter or exclude low and middle-income families.

The increased travel, fees, and training associated with for-profit programs erect significant financial and logistical barriers for low- and middle-income families. The most obvious indicator is the youth sports participation gap. Despite the rise in overall participation, the gap between low-income and high-income families continues to grow. According to the Aspen Institute, it has gone from 34.9% in 2016 to 36.7% in 2023 to 38.5% in 2024.¹¹ Families spend roughly \$1,000 a year on one sport and about \$5,000 a year across club sports.¹² There are also the costs of traveling to out-of-town, and sometimes out-of-state, tournaments that frequently come with “stay-to-play” policies mandating expensive resort costs.¹³

Training costs compound this. Year-round clinics, private coaching, and showcase circuits are marketed to parents not as extras but as the minimum required to keep pace with teammates whose families pay, converting what used to be a seasonal expense into a twelve-month obligation. A family that can afford a season cannot necessarily afford these add-ons, and a child who trains only in season falls visibly behind by the next tryout.

¹¹ Jon Solomon, [*U.S. youth sports participation increased to 58% in pursuit of 63% by 2030*](#), ASPEN INST. (May 5, 2026).

¹² Project Play Spending Survey, *supra* note 5; Elizabeth Ekmekjian, Allison Snyder & Tricia Coxwell Snyder, *The Cost of AAU Youth Sports: Is Playing Sports Out of Reach?*, RESEARCH ASS’N FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (2025).

¹³ “Stay-to-play” is the policy of requiring tournament participants to stay at a preferred hotel or resort. Failure to comply with the policy can result in a penalty—either a monetary fine or disqualification—being imposed on the entire team.

The increased time commitments associated with for-profit youth sports are also highly exclusionary. Out-of-town games and tournaments, plus multiple practices during the week, present significant demands on parents, particularly hourly and low-wage workers with unpredictable schedules.¹⁴ Scholarships do not solve this problem. Committing to multi-day tournaments weeks in advance, taking time off, and travelling long distances is simply incompatible with an unpredictable work schedule. In fact, it can be a greater barrier than income itself.¹⁵

2. How does the inherent nature of travel sports -- a \$40 billion-plus industry, affect the talent pipeline in sports?

The talent pipeline in the United States is a pay-to-play model that fails to take advantage of our large population, instead narrowing the pool of potential stars to those who can navigate and afford the system. This became a focus of the public when the U.S. Men's National Team lost to Belgium in the World Cup Round of 16 this summer. The default explanation is that our best athletes play other sports. But Belgium's population is roughly equal to that of greater Los Angeles. The difference is in how children are developed. Across Europe, club academies are free to families. Norway funds local, low-cost, developmentally appropriate programs through state agencies, keeps the focus on fun and social development until age 13, and won a record 41 medals at the 2026 Winter Olympics.¹⁶ In other countries, clubs are subsidized by various levels

¹⁴ Daniel Schneider & Kristen Harknett, [*It's About Time: How Work Schedule Instability Matters for Workers, Families, and Racial Inequality*](#), THE SHIFT PROJECT, at 6–7 (Oct. 2019). A survey of 30,000 retail and food service employees found that “two-thirds have less than two weeks’ notice, and half of those get less than a week’s notice.” *Id.* at 1. They also face high rates of cancellations, last minute changes, and on-call shifts. *Id.*

¹⁵ Jamie Spinney & Hugh Millward, *Time and Money: A New Look at Poverty and the Barriers to Physical Activity in Canada*, 99 SOCIAL INDICATORS RESEARCH 341 (Nov. 2010).

¹⁶ [*World's Leading Sport Systems: Norway*](#), Aspen Inst. (last accessed Aug. 13, 2026).

of the government and professional clubs that treat it as an investment in future talent.¹⁷ Major League Soccer has begun building free academies, but by the time children are old enough to enter them, the pool has already been narrowed by who could afford to join travel teams for several years before.

The superiority of European models is also beginning to show up in basketball, a sport the United States has historically dominated, going back to the Dream Team that won gold at the 1992 Olympics.¹⁸ Today, approximately 25% of NBA players are from outside the United States, and roughly 58% of those come from Europe.¹⁹ The league's Most Valuable Player has come from outside the United States for six straight seasons, and the top pick in the draft has been foreign-born seven times since 2013.²⁰ Those European players are developed in academy systems, just like soccer.

a. Please elaborate on how the competition-killing tactics of serial acquisition and vertical integration, essentially the playbook for private equity firms, play a role in the talent pipeline and influence who can participate in/access youth sports.

Serial acquisitions, or roll-ups, are when a firm becomes large and potentially dominant by buying many smaller firms in the same business.²¹ Vertical integration is buying at different levels of the supply chain, so one company captures each layer of a transaction. Put them

¹⁷ Henry Bushnell, [U.S. soccer's 'pay-to-play' problem: The lightning-rod issue explained in a World Cup context](#), THE ATHLETIC (July 10, 2026).

¹⁸ The Dream Team roster included NBA stars Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Charles Barkley, Scottie Pippen, Karl Malone, David Robinson, Patrick Ewing, John Stockton, Clyde Drexler, and Chris Mullin plus college basketball star Christian Laettner. The U.S. men's basketball team has won gold in eight of the last ten Olympic games.

¹⁹ Joe Vardon, [Why NBA commissioner Adam Silver wants to tap into the European basketball academy pipeline](#), THE ATHLETIC (Apr. 6, 2025).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Denise Hearn et al., [The Roll-Up Economy: The Business of Consolidating Industries with Serial Acquisitions](#), AM. ECON. LIBERTIES PROJ. (Dec. 2022); Fed. Trade Comm'n & Dep't of Justice, [Request for Information for Public Comment on Corporate Consolidation Through Serial Acquisitions and Roll-Up Strategies](#), Dkt. No. FTC-2024-0028, at 1 & n.1 (2024).

together in youth sports and you get a single firm that owns the governing body, the facilities and fields, the leagues, the teams, the tournaments, the uniforms, and the tech. It no longer has to compete for families, because there is nowhere else to go, and every layer it owns takes another payment from the same parent.

This is not hypothetical. In youth baseball, Perfect Game made eight acquisitions in five years, operates in 41 states and 12 countries, and runs roughly 10,000 events a year for about two million children.²² 3STEP told a federal court that its competitive edge rests on a “vertical integration strategy” tying together clubs, tournaments, facilities, and sponsorships in sports like soccer, basketball, volleyball, and lacrosse.²³ In youth baseball and flag football, Unrivaled Sports has built a presence across 30 states by acquisition.²⁴ In hockey, Black Bear owns teams, leagues, rinks, tournaments and showcases, and its own streaming service.²⁵

For the talent pipeline, that firm becomes the gatekeeper, and it can deploy the tools that are in most monopolists’ arsenal: self-preferencing, tying, and exclusive dealing. It decides who gets access to facilities and when, which events can award championship bids, and which athletes get seen. Those are talent decisions made by someone with a financial stake at each step of the game. I saw this firsthand as co-lead counsel against cheerleading juggernaut Varsity Brands. With its executives holding a majority of the seats on the sport’s governing board,

²² Kurt Badenhause, [Perfect Game Adds 20-Plus MLB Player Investors as Business Soars](#), SPORTICO (Apr. 4, 2024).

²³ 3 Step Sports LLC v. Champion, No. 25-cv-11603, [Verified Complaint](#), at ¶25 (D. Mass. June 3, 2025).

²⁴ PR Newswire, [Unrivaled Sports Announces DICK’S Sporting Goods as New Strategic Investor in Growing and Elevating Youth Sports Experiences](#) (May 6, 2025).

²⁵ Black Bear Sports Group, [Who We Are](#) (last accessed Aug. 13, 2026).

Varsity decided who could award Worlds bids, set blackout dates and geographic restrictions to stop independent producers, and penalized teams that competed elsewhere.²⁶

Consolidation also decides who can afford to stay. Once alternatives are gone, prices are set unilaterally. Small community operators cannot survive when they are denied the only facility in town. Black Bear has acquired nine rinks in Michigan, where the Attorney General has opened an antitrust inquiry, and it evicted a nonprofit youth league from a rink it bought.²⁷ The Texas Attorney General is reportedly investigating a similar arrangement in North Texas, where the Dallas Stars control hockey.²⁸ When those operators go, the low-cost entry points go with them, and that is where nearly every child starts.

Congress can address this. Ban the practices that define the model: tying, stay-to-play, undisclosed fees and kickbacks, sale-leasebacks, and exclusivity clauses. The Let Kids Play Act does that.²⁹ Require reporting on acquisitions in this sector, and let the Department of Justice, the FTC, and state attorneys general enforce. And fund what we have already called a national priority, as the Olympics Commission recommended, with competitive grants for facilities, leagues, and coaching in under-served communities.³⁰ None of this would be unusual internationally. In Spain, sports federations are private nonprofit bodies that exercise delegated public authority under a government agency, the Consejo Superior de Deportes.³¹ Youth football

²⁶ Jones v. Varsity Brands, LLC, No. 20-cv-02892, [Plf. Opp. to Mtn. for Summary J'ment](#), Dkt. 479 at 5–6, 8, 11 (W.D. Tenn. Sept. 15, 2023); Fusion Elite All Stars v. Varsity Brands LLC, No. 20-cv-02600, [Settlement Agreement](#), Dkt. 329-2 ¶ 30 (W.D. Tenn. Mar. 24, 2023).

²⁷ Elliot Russell, [Michigan attorney general antitrust inquiry probes corporate consolidation in youth hockey](#), WCMU PUBLIC MEDIA (Apr. 29, 2026); Michael Symonds & Elliot Russell, [Black Bear Sports evicted a nonprofit youth hockey league from Wings West](#), WMUK (May 21, 2026).

²⁸ Lia Assimakopoulos, [Texas AG reportedly targeting Stars in youth hockey antitrust investigation](#), DALLAS MORNING NEWS (Nov. 6, 2025).

²⁹ Let Kids Play Act, H.R. 8788, 119th Cong. (2026).

³⁰ U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 7, at 14, 17, 122–23.

³¹ [World's Leading Sport Systems: Spain](#), Aspen Inst. (last accessed Aug. 13, 2026).

there operates inside a public-interest regulatory framework. We have no equivalent oversight body for most youth sports, which is a large part of why private equity was able to move in unchallenged. The absence of funding and oversight, and immense demand from parents, made it easy to capture.