

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / Why Youth Sports in America Are in Decline

Hey, it's Sean Fennessy, one of the hosts of the Prestige TV podcast.

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Today's episode is about youth sports and what the decline of youth sports in America says about America.

So when I was in high school, I played tennis and I played soccer.

When it came to my soccer career, honestly, the less said about it, the better.

With tennis, I would say I achieved the status of being fine, like just above okay.

I was short, I am pretty short, 5'8", Jewish, musical theater kid, that was me.

Not exactly your prototypical athletic specimen, but I understood basic strategy in tennis and I won a lot of singles games with the JB team.

It was always a slice shot to the backhand side, get them to the net, then passing shot with the forehand or a lob over their back, their backhand side, they have to run back and do like that sort of backhand volley, that was my bread and butter.

But looking back on those high school sports days, even though I was never particularly gifted at any individual sport, I really do think that my experience playing sports in high school was a core part of my education.

Sports channeled my competitiveness, it taught me strategy, sort of underdog resilience.

I was a big warrior in high school, I had a lot of random anxieties, academics, girls, the future, and in retrospect it was really important to spend several hours every day playing a sport that funneled all that nervous anxiety back into my body, into the mechanics of a backhand volley or a forehand, it had a magical way of squeezing out future anxiety and past rumination.

And that's why I was troubled a few years ago, when I started to pick up on a worrying trend in American life, which is the steady decline in youth sports participation.

Here's a stat, in the last five years, high school sports participation has fallen for the first time on record.

The number of boys playing high school sports today is lower than any year since 2007.

There are hundreds of thousands, more students in high school than there were in 2007, but fewer boys playing sports.

The number of high school boys playing 11 on 11 football in particular has fallen for several straight years.

I think now it stands at its lowest ebb of this entire century.

Many schools can't even field the full team.

But really the decline of high school sports is part of a deeper story.

High school sports are withering on the vine because youth sports leagues, like the sports that kids play when they're eight to 13 years old, those are really in a free fall.

Travel leagues are thriving, but local rec leagues are flailing.

You name the sport, football, soccer, baseball, basketball.

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Among the most popular sports for boys and girls, the only one that seems to be growing is golf.

Just golf.

And this is happening, of course, in a decade where young people are spending less time in the physical world, spending less time with their friends.

They say they have fewer friends than they did decades ago.

They're spending less time moving around, more time hunched over a phone alone, the very opposite of a sport.

Just last week, the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called loneliness among teenagers the latest American epidemic.

So athletics seems to be just another legacy institution that's being hollowed out after church and community centers and the bowling leagues of Bob Putnam.

So what's going on here?

And why should we care?

Today's guests are Jason Gay, sports columnist for The Wall Street Journal, and Tom Ferry, the executive director of the Aspen Institute's sports and society program.

I'm Derek Thompson.

This is Plain English.

Jason Gay, welcome to the podcast.

Hey, thanks for having me.

And Tom Ferry, welcome to the podcast.

Great to be here.

Thanks, Derek.

Jason, I want to start with you because I thought your framing of this issue was really, really smart.

You start by looking at legislation in North Carolina to ban participation trophies.

Tell me a little bit about why politicians are so mad about participation trophies.

Well, participation trophies, we all know, are kind of one of those perpetual issues, right?

It comes up, you know, with some regularity.

I would probably time it to the spring and fall sports seasons, right?

And it is sort of one of those red meat topics at the culture war that never seems to go anywhere except become a place for people to take sides.

But what struck me about this particular scenario, which was three legislators in North Carolina seeking to prohibit the use of participation trophies statewide, specifically banning trophies for anything other than stellar achievement in athletics, was really some of the work that Tom and his group would, as been, have been so convincing about over the years, which is that the real problem with participation in youth sports is certainly not hardware.

But the lack thereof that participation in youth sports is on the decline, has been on the decline for some time.

And there are a myriad of very concerning factors and symptoms that will come up because of that.

And so that was the thing that I really wanted to use this piece of legislation to sort of

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call attention to, that it's just a complete misread of what the crisis is in youth sports. And before we ask Tom to nerd out on all the numbers about exactly how youth sports is declining, Jason, why does this matter?

Why should we care about the decline of youth sports in America?

Well, we should care because no cupboard should be without 14, 15 trophies, Derek.

You know.

No.

I mean, listen, the research is incredibly convincing over the years that participation in youth sports, and I mean just that, participating, being part of something, being part of a team, whether you are the backup to the backup right-feeler or the superstar of the club, has enormous impact upon children's self-esteem, upon their ability to achieve strong academic results.

You know, there are just really impressive bits of longitudinal data about positive outcomes for kids who participate in sports, and I haven't even gotten to the whole aspect of being outside and exercise and exertion and all those wonderful things.

Fresh air and sunlight, Derek, you know.

You know, we focus a lot on some of the negative things that happen in youth sports, and I'm as guilty of that as anyone, including most recently in the journal, but there are a lot of great things about it, and a lot of great coaches and a lot of great programs still.

And so participation and getting kids out there, I feel, is a really vital part of childhood.

And I'm not just being nostalgic for it.

We've had episodes on obesity.

There's been an increase in childhood obesity.

We've had episodes on youth anxiety, and the argument that I am very persuaded by that is not just about the fact that teens spend seven hours a day on their phones, five hours a day on social media.

It's that the day is only 24 hours long, so those five hours spent on their phones participating in social life through a screen are five hours not participating in being outside, being around people.

And I'm very persuaded by the evidence that that trade-off of the physical world to the digital world is not good for teen mental health.

Tom, let's bring you in here.

Put some numbers on this story.

How dramatic is the decline in youth sports in America?

Well, we don't exactly know, Derek, because there was really no data collected before 2008 that we can do apples to apples on.

And in fact, the federal government didn't start collecting data on this until 2016-2017.

But based upon the industry data, we know that in 2008, about 45% of kids were playing team sports on a regular basis.

Then the economic recession hit, and it took a huge bite, and nobody even paid any attention to this.

It just fell off.

Municipal park budgets were cut, programming went away, the travel team environment ramped

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up, things became privatized, and it fell down to about 37%, 38% of kids ages six to 12 played sports in 2014 or so.

Now, since then, it's kind of leveled off a bit.

I think a lot of people, look, that's when Project Play, which is our signature initiative, got started, and a lot of the organization, professional leagues, the Nikes, the under-armors of the world, they all started digging into this access to sport issue, the coaching issue.

People kind of woke up to it all, and things have leveled off.

But the pandemic really took a huge bite.

I mean, the latest data from the federal government shows that only 50.7% of kids ages six to 17 played sports.

It took a lesson on a sports lesson or some sort in 2021, so in the middle of the pandemic.

So filter that, as you may, it's pandemic data, but it's still down from about, according to the federal government, about 56, 57% pre-pandemic.

We'll see where we net out, but generally, the trends are flat to not good.

It's interesting because if you look at youth sports as an industry, it looks like it's booming.

Youth sports is, what, a \$20 billion industry in this country, and by many accounts, it continues to grow as a dollar amount.

But then if you follow the kids, it's a very different story.

And you've been really instrumental in helping me understand that the reason why, as an economy, it's growing, but as participation is declining, is that this is really a tale of two Americas, isn't it?

There's rich kids sports, and there's everyone else.

Tell me a little bit more about that.

Yeah, it's more than \$20 billion, too.

It's, I mean, by our research, parents alone spend north of \$30 billion a year.

And that does not include the public spend.

So that's not what municipalities are spending.

That's not what schools are investing.

That is not private equity is getting into the space.

I mean, but even at \$30 billion, it is far larger than the NFL or the Premier League or any entity out there.

It is a huge industry.

The thing is, that money is being rung out of a smaller and smaller group of parents who will do just about anything for their kids.

If some club says, we need five grand, seven grand for your kid to play volleyball, if parents have it or can find it, they'll pay it.

That doesn't mean that the state of youth sports is healthy just because the amount of money flowing through it is greater.

It's just more of like a have-and-have-nots environment.

I was just going to interject for a second, Derek, that I alone have spent \$20 billion on youth sports between my two children, between basketball, soccer, and especially lacrosse.

It has been quite an expenditure.

Yeah, right.

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You've already accounted for two thirds of this entire industry.

And thank you, by the way, for offering your subsidization of youth sports in America.

You really are doing what you can.

Tom, one more question to you before I go to Jason again.

The last time we spoke, you had this really stunning statistic for me where you said that teen participation in youth sports among families with incomes of \$25,000 or under, so this is families in poverty, is about 24%.

For families with an income over \$100,000, it's more like 40%.

Maybe update those numbers for me if they change dramatically, because it really tells the story of youth sports being something where rich kids are participating twice as much as poor kids by this definition.

That is still the case.

And during the pandemic, that was the case too.

So there was a drop-off in participation, but it was commensurate.

So all kids were playing less, but it's still double the rate.

That's what we have now, Derek.

We just have a country where if you have money, you have access to a sport experience.

And I just find that to be sad and self-destructive as a society.

Right. So kids sports has seen this explosion of travel team culture where rich kids or the rich parents of children are spending \$3,000 or in Jason's case \$20 billion to get their kids on super teams from two counties or three states away.

And as a result, it saps the local rec leagues of some of their talents, certainly of some of their kids.

And as a result, those local rec leagues can sort of die on the vine.

Jason, one cost of these pay-to-play leagues is that it seems to channel the worst instincts of the parents who participate in them.

And you've written about this, the fact that around the country,

we are losing umpires in Little League Baseball because parents are acting so crazy.

It's kind of like, it seems to me, they're saying if we spend \$3,000 on baseball, we want to essentially get like a four seasons product.

And if the umpire misses one ball or one strike, we're going to go ape shit on them.

Tell me a little bit about how you found this culture of pay-to-play sports is kind of berserking parents in this country.

Well, candidly, this is another area where Tom and his colleague, John Solomon, have been all over for a number of years, but just the attrition of officials within youth sports and school sports too, referees, umpires, you know, officials of all kinds.

Yeah, this is definitely correlated to the ratcheted up intensity that exists in sports.

I mean, you know, listen, it's hard to go a week, it seems, without seeing some sort of viral headline about an umpire versus parent confrontation.

In fact, the catalyst for writing about this in the journal is the fact that there was a league in New Jersey, which just announced that any parent or any spectator who crossed the line somehow with umpires would be in fact forced to become an umpire themselves for a period of three games.

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And if they completed those three games as a volunteer umpire, they would be allowed to go back into the stands.

Now, that is a very creative turn.

I don't know about the practical application of it, but it does speak to the absurd lengths that leagues now have to go to keep the thing running because they are in shortages.

And I just want to go back for one quick second about, so a more holistic aspect of this, which is for the sports themselves, if we're talking about finding the best in the world, which is the kind of thing that parents like to talk about when they're dreaming of travel teams and college scholarships and this kind of stuff.

If you're just the king of soccer or the queen of baseball or you're trying to figure out how to get the best players in the world, the key to this is retention, retention, retention and expanding the field of players as much as possible.

And what we are doing is the complete opposite, which is we are creating structures which keep people away from the sport, which do not find late bloomers, which cause people to basically drop out of things before they even have a chance to develop as athletes, as bodies, as brains, as coordinated human beings.

We're just removing this possibility from and it just, it can't help but hurt sports if you're limiting it to a select kind of thing.

I mean, it's kind of the airplane analogy.

We are kind of creating the economy, the premium economy, the business and the first class sections of youth sports.

And if you're only really focusing on those upper class seats, you're not getting the best. No question about it.

Tom, you and I have talked about why this is happening.

And I want to be clear that I think the motivations here are very complex, but I want to put one statistic on your radar.

In the 1990s, Division I and Division II colleges annually distributed less than \$300 million in student-athlete scholarships.

Today, they distribute more than \$3 billion.

So athletic scholarships have gone up by 10x in 30 years.

Among other things, I have to think that the explosion of financial rewards for student-athlete seems to be driving some parents' anxious decision to invest deeply in sports for their kids.

Yes?

Well, the irony is, people talk about how youth sports is so competitive these days.

But I look at it from the lens of an economist and I think it's actually an anti-competitive environment.

Meaning if you're structurally pushing aside kids starting in first and second and third grade because they don't have the money or they're late bloomers or they don't even have the right birth date, you're denying a whole chunk of the population competition opportunities, all the stuff you can learn, resilience and teamwork and all the things we generally prize. So it's an anti-competitive environment.

It's an unfair anti-competitive environment. If they're like anti-trust laws for youth sports, someone would step in and say, yeah, this needs to be fixed.

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I would just add on top of that, I've heard from travel coaches and moments of candor that, and Tom, you've probably heard similar things, that not every kid on a travel team is necessarily travel worthy, but you still have to fill out these rosters.

In effect, what you're having are many parents subsidizing the travel experiences of that one or two or three kids who might be capable of going on to a higher level of play, when in fact really what you're doing is just pumping the economic engine of it all.

I'm really glad that you guys settled on this point because I do think that someone might think, well, this is just how America is. We allow inequality to bloom in the hope that we get some extraordinary talent out of that scrum for merit. But you're making a subtler point, which is that pure, unvarnished meritocracy can double back and screw itself. We've learned from the wonderful book *Range* by my friend David Epstein, that sometimes specialization in sports can lead to burnout, or it can sometimes lead kids to not have the kind of fulsome training that they need in order to be excellent in the long run. If you have a system that says parents are trying to find kids from an early age, trying to get their kids from an early age to specialize, to focus on a single sport obsessively, that that's going to increase the odds of injury and burnout. It's going to increase the odds of overwork, and it might ironically not lead to the kind of extraordinary outcomes that those parents and maybe even those young kids are hoping for. It's not this clear sense of, oh, we're just separating the wheat from the chaff, and this is the system that necessarily gets the best athletes. It might, in fact, be creating a backlash. Tom, a question that's been rummaging around in my mind is, as you guys have talked about the numbers, is where does this \$30 billion go exactly? If you were going to see some kind of breakdown, like an itemized breakdown of where the \$30 to \$40 billion spent on youth sports goes, is it travel budgets versus equipment and jerseys? What's a good way to think about where that \$40 billion is going?

Yeah, we've done the research with Utah State, and a lot of it goes to travel. It's hotels, it's flights, it's getting your whole family to the second grade AAU national basketball championships or whatever travel tournament there is that weekend. Yeah, that's the funny thing, youth sports doesn't need to be expensive. It can be local, it can be quality. If you want to play quality competition, you don't need to fly three states away, just play a team that's a year older than your kids. This is an eminently solvable problem, but parents just keep getting suckered into this idea that if my kid's going to advance, then they need to be on the elite team when they're in second and third grade, and we have to fork over all this cash. That is the rationale for certain parents who see some talent in their kid when they're in grade school. There's enough of them who think, wow, college is really expensive, so my kid has a chance to get a scholarship or preferential admission to select a college, which is a whole other thing and drives the upper middle class even more. They invest. That's where they start writing those checks, and they only become hip to the fact that very few kids actually get those dollars when their son or daughter is maybe in 11th grade, like, oh, okay, that's \$2,000 from the baseball team.

The return on this is extremely low, but I think it's also competitive parenting. If your kid is a good athlete, I mean, you're a good parent. I think there's a whole lot in the mix. Parents also, I mean, I will say this about the travel team environment. You spend time in the car with your kid, and you have conversations with them. It's hard to get teenage boys to talk. Well, you can do that if you have to take a six-hour drive to Pennsylvania from Connecticut. There

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are benefits, and they're often around a type of kid that seems like they're going somewhere. They're organized. They're going to be society's winners. So there's lots of reasons why. And then these other parents become like your social group. So there's not one reason, but the environment clearly changed, Derek, when the amount of chum that was thrown in the water through NCAA scholarships ramped up. And by the way, it's about \$3.6 billion now. It's above \$3 billion. So I think that matters. Jason, I saw you nodding a lot as Tom was talking. And he, I think really, in a sophisticated way, put a lot of different motivations on the table. On the one hand, it seems just like a matter of inevitability that higher-income parents are going to pay more for the extracurricular activities of their kids. Like, they love their kids. They want to spend money on their kids. That seems sort of inevitable. He also put on the table the fact that, you know, it can sometimes be hard to drag your kids away from their iPhones and their iPads and their screens.

And if being on a travel team means driving six hours in the car with your son or daughter, well, you know, maybe that's quality time that you begin to really enjoy. It becomes a ritual for you. And then on the more nauseous side or the more notorious side, you have this fact that maybe a lot of parents are either incredibly desperate for their kids to get that money from colleges or that they feel pressured because the parents around them have this pressure or this value of making their kid into a star athlete. So there's a lot of complex motivations here.

Which of them do you see in your life and in your reporting on this subject?

Well, I see them in, you know, I think all those are factors, for sure. But I also think there's a very primal motivation here, which is that parents are told. And I'm saying this now as a parent who is experiencing this with my own children who shockingly show some proficiency for youth sports, which I never did. But these programs prey upon an anxiety that to somehow not put your kid into these arenas by that these club sports, travel sports, travel teams, travel tournaments, they will be left behind athletically that a whole class of kids their age will move on down the road with this super team, you know, this group of athletes who will, you know, play and get to know each other and become this incredible Barcelona-like, you know, academy of talent and your kid will be stuck back in the, you know, hayfields. And it's not true, first of all, you know, talk to any college coach. If there's great talent, they will find that great talent. It's very seldom hidden away from them. But secondly, it sort of is a way a lots of things are sold to parents these days. The type of food you give your child, the type of scholastic education you give your child, what kind of clothes they walk out the door, what kind of sneakers they wear, it's status signaling, which kids aren't asking for, you know, and I talked to a parent, I won't blow this person up, but I talked to a parent recently who said that they solve the travel sports conundrum by telling a child who had made a travel team, he had not made a travel team. Now, I do not endorse this. I do not support this. I'm all in favor of full transparency with one's children. However, he said it immediately took what was a very stressful thing in this child's life and just took all the caffeination and anxiety out of his life. And he went back to kind of being a much happier child than he was when he was in this kind of torrent of travel. And there's something to be said for that. And just another side point here is that, you know, my life writing about sports, I get the opportunity oftentimes to talk to college coaches about whatever their team is doing or athlete on their team. But I try to take a little bit of time at the end of each of these interviews to have a conversation about these very issues,

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because they're so prevalent about what are they looking for in, you know, young athletes, what do they want to see in terms of specialization or not specialization. And everything that you said at the top about specialization, the orthopedic reasons not to do it, or they're just burnout reasons not to do it. I thought it was fascinating to talk to a top tier lacrosse coach recently, you said that the reason I like kids who play multiple sports is by the time they get to my campus, they still might like playing lacrosse. If I get somebody who's playing lacrosse 12 months out of the year, by the time they get to me, they might be 18 years old, but they're 40 in terms of lacrosse years. They've been playing a really long time and they see it too often that that kid reaches that quote unquote summit of that spot on a team. Forget about the scholarship part of it, but just a spot on that team and they get in there and the last thing they want to do Derek is play lacrosse. I find that really, really interesting. I think that college coaches actually should be a little bit more vocal and upfront about this because they do speak out of their mouths, both sides of their mouths a little bit because they're down there of course at the showcases watching travel teams play and all that and they are recruiting from those travel showcases. But I wish and I think they should be more upfront about the fact that they are looking for a more centered, you know, polymathic type of student athlete than people are being told they should cultivate. Tom, I want to talk a little bit about possible solutions. I know that you've written about Norway's really original and I think quite innovative approach to youth sports. Tell us a little bit about what Norway's up to. Yeah, so Norway kicks everybody's butts in the winter Olympics, right? A nation the size of 5 million people. So basically Minnesota, okay? And in the 28 Olympics they had like 39 medals. We had like 28. They were number one. We were number four. We had a lot more ice. We had a lot more snow. We had a lot more people, but they just completely outperformed people. So I covered that for, I was podcasting for the, for NBC Sports at the time. And so I spent some time with a Norwegian journalist and like I had access to these people. I'm like, how are you guys doing this? And I got so fascinated. I went over to Norway. I talked to the lead architect of their system and the bottom line is Norway wasn't always good. They actually had a terrible Olympics in, I forget which one, it was late 80s, early 90s. And they went back and said, listen, we got to redesign our entire sports system. And the first thing they did was put in place a children's bill of rights in sports. They said, listen, we need to get it. If we want to get it right at the top, we've got to get it right at the bottom. We have a limited population. We need to use it wisely. So we're going to recognize what the rights are of children, the human rights are of children. And that is to play. That is to access to play. That's to your friends as social, emotional development. That's physical literacy. That's love of game. That's the whole goal of that system. And then they began to put policies behind it, like no national championships before the age of 14, no regional championships before the age of 12. And to us, that sounds like really anti competitive. Well, guess what? I mean, athletes like Erling Haaland, who is the best soccer player in the world, is a total killer, just broke the record for Premier League goals last night, he came out of that system. So did the best female soccer player in the world a couple of years ago. So did the best beach volleyball team in the world, beach volleyball from the Fjords. So the point is that they get it right. They understand what's age appropriate and developmentally appropriate. And then once a kid gets into the teenage years, that's when they put them with the great sports scientists and the great

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coaches. And if you have the motivation and the well rounded athleticism, then they turn you into something special. So I think it's interesting and people say, well, that's Norway. There's socialist stuff. Like, yeah, they got oil too. And they got money. And children are children everywhere. They're the same thing. Athletic development is the same thing, just because we're American doesn't mean we can't pull best practices from other countries. And it's not just Norway. You also told me and tell me if this is still true, that Norwegian teams in youth sports, if they post their scores online, they can face expulsion from the Norwegian Confederation of Sports. Is that is that still true? Yeah. Yeah. So I mean, kids naturally keep score, of course, right? But you know, but yeah, you're not allowed to post them on the internet or otherwise. And the goal is like, the point is not winning the game at six or seven. The point is development. So it's a way to send a message to the to the adults, to the parents, to the coaches that keep things in perspective. They also talk about going back to your original question to Jason about participation trophies. They say, according to the Bill of Rights and Sports, that if you give a trophy to any child before the age of 12, everyone needs to get a trophy, right? So you would think that like that would be from an American perspective, that is a recipe for creating a bunch of losers who don't know how to compete in society. But the results of the back end in the winter sports and the summer sports is guess what, they're doing just fine. Jason, do you think anything like this could possibly succeed in America? Sure. I mean, I mean, take on, not like, succeed if it did take on. I think what has reached a crisis point that there are great many very committed and altruistic people who are trying to figure this out. And I should emphasize that the vast, vast, vast majority of people who work in and around youth sports are in it for the right reasons. And it really is a case where the most toxic episodes are the small group of people. But, you know, there are ideas like, for example, with regard to the idea of traveling club sports, you know, sucking away talent from recreational sports, you're seeing towns now put into place policies that a child who plays for a recreation or a travel or club team must also participate in the recreational league. You know, you sort of do a two for you kind of take down the commitment for both and you make them play both. And what you find, and I've seen this in action, what you find is that a travel kid, you know, gets the experience of playing on a travel team. That's kind of cool. You're playing on tournaments under the lights and that kind of stuff. But you also get something from playing with teammates who are behind you because you suddenly go from just being another person on the roster to the best person on the roster and possibly a teacher and kind of a role model for kids your age. And there's an enormous amount that a child can learn from that experience. I mean, think about all of us who have come through workplaces where we were the lowest person. And then all of a sudden, you know, found ourselves in, you know, leadership positions where that's a totally different ask. And I think to give that experience to a child is incredibly healthy. Healthy. I also think, and this is sort of the miracle of it all, is that you almost can take it totally back, Derek, and let the children guide you. And I know that sounds like I'm about to start singing a song, but the kids have it right. The kids have it right. You watch children, you know, eight, nine, 10 years old after a game. And yeah, maybe one might throw a bat or throw a glove. But the majority of them win or lose, they are back to being kids within 90 seconds of the final play. And they have the right attitude about it. They are in it mostly for the fun.

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You know, they want to get better, hopefully, but they're there to see their pals and participate and do something cool. That's not Minecraft for once, right? And I really do feel that this is an enormous amount of adult energy. And that if all of us just kind of take a deep breath and watch kids play sports, now, you may have heard about these things, they call them silent Saturdays. Now that I've taken fashion at a lot of youth leagues where they strictly either prohibit parents from being in the gym or if parents are on the sidelines, they are ziplipped and they're not supposed to be yelling anything. The games go on great. The kids in fact report that they enjoy them just as much if not more. So I actually do feel that the regulator upon this is our children. Tom, leave us with a happy and optimistic story. Is there a youth sports league where you have seen changes and reforms that even if they don't move us all the way to the Norwegian model, suggest that there might be a better equilibrium that we can find here?

Yes, absolutely. So USA hockey or hockey you had had a real problem around 2009 or so. They saw all

these kids who were signed up at four, five, six and they were dropping up by nine. The concussion crisis was coming along. Parents were starting to get concerned. So USA hockey, the national governing body for hockey in this country with the NHL support, put in place something called the American development model, which is a description as to what's age appropriate like. Here's what needs to happen between zero and five and six and 10 and 11 and 15, et cetera, et cetera. Practice the game ratios, multi sport play, what coaches should emphasize, et cetera, et cetera. They began to message this to parents, to coaches. They also changed their competition structure. They got rid of

the 12 and under Pee Wee national championships and they banned body checking at the Pee Wee level

in practice and sorry in games, allowed it in practices. And they began to see the participation numbers turn back up again, which is a kind of an amazing thing given there's a limited amount of ice out there. It's not like soccer where you just put kids on a field, right? So the ADM is American development model is a wonderful thing. And so then the US Olympic committee around 2013 or 14 started to ask other NGBs to create their own ADMs and about 25 or 30 of them did. And so they're in place. The trouble Derek and the opportunity is that right now they're just educational tools. You can sit there, you can pay attention or you cannot pay attention to them. Hockey has more control over its pipeline than other sports do like basketball, which doesn't really have any control, USA basketball doesn't have any control over the AU. But could we create an environment where all of the NGBs were incentivized to embed American developmental ADM practices throughout its affiliates, right? If the US Olympic committee is distributing \$110 million a year to the NGBs for high performance criteria, like, are you getting people on the podium? Well, can we raise \$110 million, put it in a pile and say, okay, who is doing youth development the best and give every NGB and ADM score by a third party? We'll let Jason do that. I think it's all about changing the incentive structures. I mean, life is carrot and stick still human behavior, right?

We have a misaligned system right now and I've been in the space for 10 years trying to solve the problem and 20 years trying to study it. And I can tell you, they're an enormous amount of good people. I have only found really good people in this space and they want to do the right thing, but they're not incentivized. It's not structured in a way for them to do what they know is right. So I think there's a really good conversation and we're going to try and lead it over the next

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year about sport governance in this country. The amateur sports act and I'm not going to walk, I'm not going to geek on you here, but there's some real conversations to be had about how to set this thing up in a way that creates better outcomes. I mean, Derek, this is kind of strange to sit here and now go on a rant praising the NFL, but I have to because my son has recently been playing NFL play touch football and this is a league where it's young kids, they get there, it's flag football, but it's a little more sophisticated. They learn the plays that are a little bit more, what you do in your backyard, but more importantly, you get real NFL gear. If you're on the Seahawks, you get Seahawks gear from the Bengals, you get Bengals gear and on and on. It's pretty cool for a kid is coming up. And I was trepidatious about it at first. I was like, wow, am I putting my kid on a path to playing helmet football and tackles and collisions and concussions and what is that going to mean? But after a few weeks, it occurred to me that really what this is is customer development. Derek, this is developing future NFL consumers, people to watch it on TV because all of a sudden my son knows everything there is about the leagues, the divisions, what the franchises are, what the plays are, the rules of the game. They are much more sophisticated television consumer than they were before they began NFL play. And there's something ingenious about it. And whether or not the intention is pure, it is a less heightened anxious type of youth sports environment for that reason, I believe because of the fact that the stakes are low. There's not some sort of professional touch football pipeline as of yet. And so I think everything is ratcheted down a notch. And I think that's actually quite a bit healthier. Tom Ferry, Jason Gay, thank you guys so much. Thank you, Derek. Plain English was hosted and reported by me, Derek Thompson, and produced by Devon Manzi. We'll see you back here every Tuesday for a brand new episode. Have a great week. you