



**“Benched: The Crisis in American Youth Sports and Its Cost to Our Future”**

Testimony Before the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and  
Secondary Education

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John O’Sullivan, Founder of Changing the Game Project

Chair Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the committee today on the crisis in American youth sports and the devastating effect on the health and well-being of our children and our nation. My name is John O’Sullivan, and I’ve spent five decades involved in sports, first as a high school, collegiate, and professional soccer player, followed by three decades as a coach on every level from five-year-olds through NCAA Division One soccer. In 2012, I founded [Changing The Game Project](#), and our mission is to give sports back to our kids and put a little more “play” in “play ball.” I also come before you today as the father of two teenagers who recently completed their own youth sports journeys.

Through my work with Changing the Game Project, I travel extensively providing coach education, parent education, and leadership development for youth athletes and teams. I have worked with over a dozen US Olympic sports governing bodies including USA Swimming, US Soccer, US Ski and Snowboard, US Lacrosse, USA Field Hockey and others. Internationally I have consulted with organizations across the globe including Ireland Rugby, National Rugby League of Australia, the International Ice Hockey Federation, FIS and more. I have worked with hundreds of schools and sports clubs both domestically and internationally, and sit on the National Advisory Board for the Positive Coaching Alliance. For the past 9 years I have hosted the “Way of Champions Podcast,” one of the top rated sports coaching podcasts in the world with over three million downloads and over 450 episodes.

In my travels, and through interviews with hundreds of top athletes, coaches, authors, sport psychologists and beyond, I witness firsthand the crisis engulfing our young athletes and their families due to a far different youth sports experience than I had growing up in New York. As a child I participated in multiple sports, from soccer to basketball to wrestling and baseball. I only



specialized in soccer later in high school, and was able to play NCAA Division 1 soccer at Fordham University. I felt no pressure to pick only one sport early on, nor did my family have to pay exorbitant fees or face extensive travel costs for me to participate at a high level of youth sports. I rarely left the tri-state area, and certainly did not need to take airplanes to play youth sports matches. In other words, I had a very different experience than kids today.

### **The Race to Nowhere in Modern Youth Sports**

Modern youth sports is a microcosm of our children's overscheduled, professionalized childhood. The term "play date" was first noted in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006, indicating a much more organized and less organic approach to children's play. As more families had two income earners, more parents began planning and scheduling activities for their children instead of sending them out into the neighborhood to find their friends and organize an activity. Once this less organic form of play became more common, parents started planning the activities, and eventually hiring coaches and other facilitators to run these activities,

Today, if you go to almost any sports park, you will not see children engaged in free play, only organized, adult driven sports practices. And sadly, these sports are more often organized around the needs, values and priorities of the adults running them rather than the children participating. The business of youth sports, which is estimated to reach \$70 billion by 2030, too often no longer meets the needs of the child in sports. It is a race to nowhere that leads to burned out, injured children who walk away from an active lifestyle, and often never return, even in adulthood. Is it any wonder that studies have shown that 3/4 of children drop out of organized sports usually by middle school?

### **Our Children Are Overscheduled, Overworked, and Undervalued**

The modern youth sport participant is facing injury, burnout and dropout at far higher rates than in the past. [Early specialization](#) has led to an injury epidemic, with surgeries that only used to be seen in collegiate and adult athletes seen in an increasingly younger population. [Over 3.5 million children under age 14 are treated for sports-related injuries every year](#), and youth sports now ranks as the [second leading cause of emergency room visits among youth](#)., [ACL tears have increased 26 percent over the past 15 years](#) for high school aged athletes, while serious shoulder and elbow injuries among youth baseball and softball players [have increased five-fold](#) in the last two decades.



Sports clubs are pushing tryouts and cuts to younger and younger ages, [which is in direct opposition to the science around talent identification and development](#).

This early selection becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby those chosen early on get better coaching facilities and more attention. Yet study after study has shown that early selection favors children whose birthdates are within the first quarter of the year (January-March) often to the tune of 60-70% of selections. Studies also reveal that the late bloomers and younger athletes often become the highest performers. Sadly youth sports clubs feel the need to have tryouts, make cuts, form all-star teams at 5-7 years old, and play on adult size fields and sheets of ice not because it is in the best interest of the kids, but because it's what the adults want, and if they do not provide it, someone else will.

### **Parents Are Stressed, Frustrated and Overcome by F.O.M.O.**

In my travels I meet very few parents who like the current system, but they feel helpless to change it lest they be labeled a troublemaker or their child misses out. The current system has created financial burdens and excessive time commitments for families, many of whom feel pressured to put their very young children into specialized private training and extra camps and clinics. Others can no longer afford youth sports fees, or go into debt to keep their children in sports. I hear many stories about families who cannot save money for college and instead invest it in youth sports, based upon the fleeting chance their child might get a sports scholarship (which data shows happens to 3-5 percent of high school athletes, and most scholarships are only partial.) Others have plenty of money to pay for college, but put their kids in sports to get preferential college admission treatment to the most exclusive schools. The overwhelming FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) felt by many parents leads them to make decisions that are not backed by science or in the best interest of their children.

To make matters worse, a recent influx of private equity money into youth sports businesses, with investors purchasing clubs and facilities, has led to our children becoming commodities. As a [recent Fox News story demonstrated](#), sports teams have become vehicles to extract a profit for investors, rather than a means to put money into coach education, player development, and other factors that increase enjoyment and player retention. This new reality is adding to the stress, fear, and pressure on parents to keep up with the Joneses and many families and their children can no longer keep up.

### **Coaches are Burned Out and Under Attack**

We rely on volunteer coaches to help run the majority of our youth sports programs in the US, yet coach training and retention is not adequate. Many



coaches also do not feel supported by their clubs, schools and organizations, and are under attack by misinformed, entitled parents. These are coaches who give their time and energy, often with little or no compensation, in order for kids to be able to play.

Even lightly compensated high school coaches, and heavily compensated college coaches, are walking away, and tell me it's no longer worth it. "Why would I put my reputation, and my family's financial wellbeing, at risk when one angry parent can make a false complaint, and I have no recourse?" they ask. Our SafeSport system is being weaponized against coaches, with no ability for them to fight back against false allegations. We cannot afford to lose our best and brightest coaches because they no longer enjoy coaching, nor can we ask them to risk reputation and financial security simply to coach youth sports.

### **What Does the Future Hold?**

As you will hear today, participation in sports has many incredible, lifelong benefits. [Children who participate in sports through adolescence](#) are 1/10<sup>th</sup> as likely to suffer from obesity, do better in school, and are less likely to do drugs, smoke or get pregnant. They are more likely to go to college, and have better health outcomes throughout their lives. Perhaps most importantly, as active adults they are less likely to suffer poor health outcomes and they tend to raise healthier, active children. Poor sports experiences today lead to intergenerational issues and raise healthcare costs for our entire nation.

The good news is we can make a difference. When children enjoy their experience, and when organizations keep it affordable, children keep playing. Here is one idea.

The reverend Billy Graham once said "a coach will impact more people in a year than the average person does in a lifetime," and organizations that invest heavily in coach and parent education and creating a child centered environment are making headway. They have higher player retention, greater membership satisfaction, and have sidelines and stands that are more likely to model proper fan behavior and not referee abuse, screaming matches, and even physical violence. Coaches have the single greatest impact on retention and athlete experience, yet we do not have enough qualified, trained coaches.

[As initiatives such as the Million Coaches Challenge have shown](#), coaches trained in interpersonal skills as well as sport specific skills have far greater coaching effectiveness than untrained coaches. They tend to retain athletes at a much higher rate, and provide a far better experience. Yet while nearly all



coaches today are required to do safety training (first aid, concussion, SafeSport), not many are required to do any sport specific or interpersonal skills training. We keep asking busy moms and dads to coach, but perhaps we are overlooking an incredible resource that our government has already spent tens of millions of dollars on?

**The incredible men and women in our armed forces are extensively trained and have tremendous experience in physical fitness, discipline, strategic planning, and leadership skills, all critical sport coaching skills.** When these men and women leave the service, many of them return to the workforce, yet miss the greater purpose they had serving their country. Why not train them on their way out of the service and connect them to youth sports organization in their communities? Why not repurpose their training, while giving them greater purpose once they return home?

[I have worked with a wonderful nonprofit called Soldiers to Sidelines](#), an organization that is desperately trying to retrain these men and women and give them additional sport specific and interpersonal skills so they can make a difference in the lives of our young athletes. They have certified thousands of coaches, and impacted hundreds of thousands of athletes already, yet we could do so much more and put all the incredible training and expense to a greater use with a concerted effort to steer our well trained retiring soldiers into coaching.

In conclusion, we have a crisis on our hands when it comes to childhood health and wellbeing, and creating a better youth sports environment is one of the solutions to this crisis. The current system is set up to prioritize the needs, values and goals of the adults, instead of the children. Change only happens when the pain of our current situation outweighs the fear and difficulty of doing something different. Our children are in pain, and we must be their voice.

I sign off every podcast with the following thought: “Your influence is never neutral. Every time you step into a room, you leave a positive or negative impact, and the more aware of your influence you are, the more powerful it is. Use it for good and make a positive difference this week.”

That is the power of influence, and I don’t think I’ve ever been in a room with the potential influence that the members of this committee have to bring attention to the sad state of youth sports and help all of us make positive change. I hope that all of us today are aware of the influence that we have to give sports back to our kids so that today’s generation can enjoy the same positive sports experience that I did so many years ago. Thank you, and I look forward to working with the committee in the future to help change the game.