AMERICAN ECONOMIC LIBERTIES PROJECT

Written Testimony of
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Before the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce
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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Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to return to this Subcommittee. My name is Katherine Van Dyck. I am a Senior Fellow at the American Economic Liberties Project and the University of California Berkeley Law School's Civil Justice Research Initiative and a former Attorney-Advisor in the Federal Trade Commission's Office of Policy Planning. For two decades, I was a litigator representing consumers, small businesses, and workers against powerful corporate interests, including as co-lead counsel in an antitrust lawsuit against Varsity Brands, challenging its monopolization of competitive cheerleading that extracted millions from gyms and families across the country.

In December, I appeared before this Subcommittee to describe how private equity has captured much of the youth sports industry, raising costs for families and erasing opportunities for our children. I am grateful to be here again, and for the attention you are giving to how the commercialization of youth sports is harming children, their families, and communities across the United States. Profit-driven investment firms, usually private equity, are swallowing up the youth sports industry through serial acquisitions and vertical integration. And once they capture a market, they maximize profits through extraction. For families, that means rising enrollment fees, customized uniforms and expensive equipment, endless travel to tournaments at diamond-plated facilities, expensive hotels forced on them by stay-to-play policies, and gate fees to watch their own children play. And for the child who is not a star, the casual rec league is disappearing. Specialization, travel leagues, and year-round play previously reserved for elite high school athletes are becoming the only pathway to play. And these expensive pathways mean families are going into debt, while the participation gap between lower- and higher-income children grows wider.

This hearing asks how to correct course. As a country, the United States has declared its stake in youth sports again and again. Presidents from Dwight Eisenhower to Donald Trump have issued executive orders related to physical fitness and youth sports.[1] Title IX and its ensuing regulations declared that girls deserve equal opportunities to participate in athletics.[2] The Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act (the "Amateur Sports Act") created the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (the "USOPC").[3] It was designed to be "a single, unified system to promote broad participation, facilitate sports development, and identify top talent to represent the nation in competitions abroad" and eliminate "rival efforts at fundraising and overlapping systems of financial management … in favor of a more centralized structure for raising and allocating funds to support movement sports."[4] The USOPC is tasked not only with fielding Olympic teams, but also with promoting physical fitness and broad public participation in amateur athletics, including youth sports.[5]

However, our federal government has never funded these mandates. So the key question becomes whether the private youth sports enterprises we have grown to rely on are built to serve our national interests, our families, and our communities. Or instead, whether they are built to extract from them. That distinction matters, because the primary motive of these firms is profit—not fun, child development, or community building. And that motive is fundamentally at odds with what we want youth sports to achieve. If the consolidation and predation it breeds go unaddressed, the problems this Subcommittee has already identified will only deepen.

The solutions are right in front of us. Congress can—as the Let Kids Play Act sponsored by Representatives Chris Deluzio (D-PA-17), Pramila Jayapal (D-WA-07), Pat Ryan (D-NY-18), and Angie Craig (D-MN-02) and Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) proposes—ban the practices that are used to consolidate youth sports, prey on vulnerable families, and drain their bank accounts.[6] It can hold private equity firms accountable when their businesses collapse and leave communities in shambles. And it can finally provide the public funding that youth sports desperately need to achieve our national goals and give our children affordable opportunities to have fun, grow, and learn the valuable lessons that youth sports provide.

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[1] *E.g.* Exec. Order No. 14,327, *President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition, and the Reestablishment of the Presidential Fitness Test*, 90 Fed. Reg. 37,993 (Aug. 6, 2025); Exec. Order No. 13,545, *President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition*, 75 Fed. Reg. 37,283 (June 22, 2010); Exec. Order No. 13,265, *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports*, 67 Fed. Reg. 39,841 (June 6, 2002); Exec. Order No. 12,345, *Physical Fitness and Sports*, 47 Fed. Reg. 5,189 (Feb. 2, 1982); Exec. Order No. 10,673, *Fitness of American Youth*, 21 Fed. Reg. 5,341 (July 16, 1956).

[2] 20 U.S.C. § 1681, et seq.; 34 C.F.R. § 106.41; U.S. Dep't of Educ., *Supporting Equal Opportunity in School Athletic Programs* (Feb. 2023).

[3] 36 U.S.C. § 220503; 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 14 (2024). *Passing the Torch* is the final report of the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics (the "2020 Olympics Commission"), an independent body established by Congress to study United States participation in the Olympic and Paralympic Games. *Id*. at 7; Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act of 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-189, § 11 (Oct. 30, 2020).

[4] U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 3, at 27.

[5] *Id*. at 14.

[6] Press Release, *Deluzio, Murphy Introduce Bill to Kick Private Equity Out of Kids' Sports and Stop the Ripoffs* (May 13, 2026).

I. How the Extraction Model Works

The private equity playbook has been summarized as "acquiring a company, loading it with debt, cutting costs to pay that debt, extracting cash along the way, and selling it in five years."[7] The playbook also includes the competition-killing tactics of serial acquisition and vertical integration.[8] Private equity firms might also sell or transfer the portfolio company's real estate holdings to the investment firm or a different portfolio company and lease them back at profit. The sleight of hand in either scenario allows investment firms to recoup, or "exit," their investments without eating into the firm's revenues.[9] The end result is a debt-ridden portfolio company, a captive customer base, laid off workers, wealthier investors, and communities bearing the costs.

This consolidation and extraction business model in youth sports targets our children and creates serious risk. Varsity Brands, which private equity firm KKR bought for $4.75 billion in 2024,[10] monopolized All Star cheerleading through ownership of the cheer events, the camps, the uniforms, and control of the governing body that wrote the sport's rules.[11] By controlling each layer of cheerleading, it did not have to compete for customers. Instead, Varsity built a "flywheel" that trapped families inside and locked newcomers out. Varsity's flywheel was no different than the one built by Live Nation, which captured event promotion, concert venues, artist management, and ticketing to monopolize the live event industry.[12] It allowed Varsity to control as much as 90% of competitive cheerleading, driving up costs for parents, degrading experiences for kids, and acquiring or pushing out competitors.[13] Worst of all, it allowed a sexual

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[7] Gretchen Morgenson and Joshua Rosner, *These Are The Plunderers*, at 26 (2023). Private equity firms typically acquire target companies through leveraged buyouts, where the purchase is financed with borrowed money using the acquired company's assets as collateral. Once the acquisition is complete, the private equity firm will use its controlling stake to extract wealth from its new "portfolio company." In addition to the billions in fees that private equity firms charge their investors, they charge portfolio companies with monitoring and transaction fees, often with little transparency. Then, to pay the investors who provided capital for the acquisition, the firm will take on additional debt against the portfolio company to pay dividends, a practice known as "dividend recapitalization."

[8] Denise Hearn, et al., *The Roll-Up Economy: The Business of Consolidating Industries with Serial Acquisitions*, Am. Econ. Liberties Proj. (Dec. 2022). Serial acquisitions, also called "roll-ups," "buy-and-build," and "platform add-ons," are "corporate consolidation strategies that occur when a company becomes larger—and potentially dominant—by buying several smaller firms in the same or related business sectors or industries." Press Release, *FTC and DOJ Seek Info on Serial Acquisitions, Roll-Up Strategies Across U.S. Economy*, FED. TRADE COMM'N (May 23, 2024); Fed. Trade Comm'n and 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). Vertical integration involves the acquisition of companies at different levels of the supply chain, such as a retailer and manufacturer, or in ancillary markets, such as a health care practice and a pharmacy.

[9] A systematic review of 55 studies in 8 countries found these practices directly linked to higher costs for patients and payers at health care companies acquired by private equity. Emily Harris, *Private Equity Ownership in Health Care Linked to Higher Costs, Worse Quality*, J. AM. MED. ASS'N (Aug. 2, 2023).

[10] Press Release, *KKR Completes Acquisition of Varsity Brands from Bain Capital and Charlesbank* (June 26, 2024).

[11] Varsity relinquished board control of the U.S. All Star Federation as a condition of its 2023 settlement. Fusion Elite All Stars v. Varsity Brands, LLC, No. 20-cv-2600, *Settlement Agreement*, Dkt. 329-2 ¶30 (W.D. Tenn. Mar. 24, 2023).

[12] New York v. Live Nation Entertainment, Inc., No. 24-cv-3973, *Verdict Form*, Dkt. 1417 (Apr. 15, 2026).

[13] Fusion Elite All Stars v. Varsity Brands, LLC, No. 20-cv-2600, *Consol. Am. Compl.*, Dkt. 56 (Oct. 2, 2020).

abuse crisis[14] to fester in a sport that lacks any federal governing body and falls outside the jurisdiction of SafeSport.[15]

Black Bear Sports Group is following a similar model of consolidation to capture the rising popularity of ice hockey. In Michigan, the organization has acquired nine ice rinks, and the state's Attorney General has opened a formal antitrust inquiry into its alleged consolidation of youth ice hockey facilities and programs.[16] Because Black Bear owns the rinks, the leagues, and the tournaments, families and small clubs often have nowhere else to skate. Black Bear claims it is saving ice hockey by taking on the expensive role of ice rink operator. Keeping ice rinks alive in communities that can no longer support them is important. But increased costs and exclusion do not have to be part of that effort.[17]

The flywheel drives self-preferencing, tying, and exclusive dealing, the monopolist's favorite tools for blocking new entrants and innovators. A single entity in youth sports—with simultaneous control of governing bodies, venues, leagues, teams, and tournaments—can foreclose competition from smaller recreational leagues and teams by denying access to their facilities, prohibiting teams and athletes from participating in games outside their leagues or certain geographic areas, conditioning tournament bids on participation in other league-owned events and camps, and tying discounted enrollment fees to exclusive apparel and equipment deals. This is what is transforming youth sports into a luxury experience that only the wealthiest families can afford. And it falls well short of the goals our nation has set for our children.

II. The Truth Behind Private Funding

Proponents of private investment say youth sports cannot survive without private money, that scholarships are available, that travel teams are popular, and that privately funded enterprises are the best avenue for developing the athletes of tomorrow. These arguments gloss over an array of problems that flow from an overreliance on private money in the first instance.

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[14] *E.g.* Daniel Libit, *Varsity Hit With New Cheerleader Sex-Abuse Suit After Litigation Lull*, SPORTICO (Oct. 9, 2025); Kathryn Casteel, *Settlement reached in federal lawsuit alleging sex abuse at Rockstar Cheer*, YAHOO! (Apr. 15, 2024); Victoria Hansen, *Ex-students file 12 sex abuse lawsuits against 6 cheerleading gyms in 7 states*, NPR (Jan. 24, 2023); Marisa Kwiatkowski & Tricia L. Nadolny, *Cheerleading Has a List of People Banned from the Sport. It Was Missing 74 Convicted Sex Offenders*, USA TODAY (Sept. 18, 2020).

[15] *See* U.S. Center for SafeSport, *FAQs*, last visited Nov. 25, 2025 (SafeSport only applies to individuals affiliated with NGBs). SafeSport was created by the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017, passed in response to the horrific sex abuse scandal at USA Gymnastics. Pub. L. No. 115-126, 132 Stat. 318 (2018) (codified as amended at 36 U.S.C. §§ 220541–220543). The U.S. Center for SafeSport falls under the USOPC and governs conduct of adults working in youth sports. It provides a mechanism for reporting and investigating allegations of abuse, but its jurisdiction is limited to youth leagues that are affiliated with their respective NGBs, an affiliation that is entirely optional.

[16] Elliot Russell, *Michigan attorney general antitrust inquiry probes corporate consolidation in youth hockey*, WCMU PUBLIC MEDIA (Apr. 29, 2026).

[17] Michael Symonds & Elliot Russell, *Black Bear Sports evicted a nonprofit youth hockey league from Wings West*, WMUK (May 21, 2026); Jaclyn Skurie & Roberto Ferdman, *This Company Is Building a Hockey Empire. Many Say It's Ruining Youth Sports*, WALL STREET JOURNAL (May 4, 2026).

A. The Public-Private Conflict

The argument that youth sports should be privately funded is an old one. Pop Warner football, Little League baseball, and other programs going back decades are private ventures. When the Ted Stevens Act was passed in 1978, it gave the USOPC two unfunded mandates—to support and organize our Olympic sports and to develop and support amateur athletics, including youth sports.[18] From their inception, those mandates have been funded entirely by private dollars, largely through the USOPC's broadcasting contract with Comcast/NBC Universal.[19] The USOPC has chosen to put nearly all of those funds toward our Olympians, "investing less than 1% of its resources in youth and grassroots development."[20] This leaves the national governing bodies ("NGBs") overseeing youth sports—like USA Hockey and US Soccer—left to fend for themselves in funding the programs they are trying to build.[21]

The unfunded USOPC mandates also leave youth sports programs under the NGBs reliant on other sources, like state and local governments and private organizations. When state and local funding collapsed under the strain of the 2008 financial crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government offered no safety net.[22] This depletion of public funds, diverse local businesses ripe for consolidation, and inelastic demand from parents desperate to create opportunities for their kids to play and earn scholarships combined to create perfect conditions for predatory and anticompetitive investments. And once those companies invested—whether it was a private equity firm, a venture capital fund, or some other group of investors—their main goal was to maximize the financial return on those assets, whether they owned them outright or were managing a public program or facility.

The academic literature says private involvement in public projects requires significant guardrails: competition for contracts must be robust, the public must specify and measure the results it wants in advance, the private partner must be replaced if it underperforms, and the deal must be transparent.[23] The same literature says this rarely works and is more theoretical than practical.[24] Private youth sports operations are no different. They "will treat the performance standards set by government as a constraint and will use any discretionary room that is left to

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[18] U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 3, at 14.

[19] U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Comm., *About the USOPC* (last visited June 25, 2026); Jason Clinkscales, *Olympics, Comcast Sign Four-Year, $3 Billion U.S. Rights Extension*, SPORTICO (Mar. 13, 2025).

[20] U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 3, at 11.

[21] The NGBs are certified and overseen by the USOPC. U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 3, at 27. The NGBs set standards for youth sports around official rules, ethics, and safety; educate coaches; develop grassroots youth sports programs; and train Olympians in their sports. *Id*. at 54–55.

[22] Nicholas Pitas, et al., The Great Recession's Profound Impact on Parks and Recreation, Parks & Rec. Magazine (Feb. 2018); Jon Solomon, *Survey: 31% of Parks Departments Already Cut 2020-21 Budgets*, ASPEN INST. (May 5, 2020). By September 2021, families reported that 13% of their youth sports organizations had closed entirely due to COVID-19, 12% had merged with another organization, and 19% had returned but could only offer limited programming. Travis E. Dorsch & Jordan A. Blazo, *Findings from Phase IV of the COVID-19 National Parenting Survey*, ASPEN INST. (Sept. 2021).

[23] Pamela Bloomfield, *The Challenging Business of Long-Term Public–Private Partnerships: Reflections on Local Experience*, 66 PUB. ADMIN. REV. 400, 409 (2006).

[24] *Id*. at 407, 409–10.

them in the contractual arrangements to maximize their financial returns."[25] Their investments' returns are designed to flow outward to shareholders instead of being reinvested in facilities, scholarships, and lower fees.

The ice hockey situation in North Texas offers a good example. Public authorities partnered with the Dallas Stars organization to operate community ice rinks.[26] The result is an alleged monopoly over youth hockey across the region, accompanied by claims that the operator is not honoring its commitments to community access, instead using its power to dramatically increase prices, restrict ice time, and bend teams to the organization's will. It is reportedly the subject of an investigation by the Texas Attorney General.[27] This is the heart of the problems created by reliance on private money in youth sports. Even the most well-intentioned deals, with guardrails in place, can collapse. Investors will bypass the guardrails, and the government's ability to enforce them, to increase their returns. Money and resources will be extracted from the community. Kids will lose opportunities to play.

B. Why Families Are Locked Out

The clearest casualty of commercialized youth sports is access. The Aspen Institute has already identified an enormous participation gap. Only 23% of children from low-income families play sports, compared with 44% of children from families earning over $100,000.[28] The commercialized model widens that gap through multiple barriers to entry.

The first barrier is cost. Spending on youth sports rose by 46% between 2019 and 2024, nearly double the rate of inflation,[29] and it continues to go up. Families spend thousands of dollars a year on enrollment, equipment, and travel,[30] and the struggle to afford these activities is not improving. A recent report from the Play Equity Fund in California finds that 60% of parents now struggle to afford youth sports, and 58% of parents said their children quit sports because of cost.[31] So while overall participation is rising, those gains are concentrated in the highest-income households.[32] The gap between poorer and wealthier households is widening.[33]

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[25] *Id*. at 407.

[26] Kenny Jacoby, *'They control everything': How the Dallas Stars monopolized Texas youth hockey*, USA TODAY (Aug. 1, 2025).

[27] Lia Assimakopoulos, *Texas AG reportedly targeting Stars in youth hockey antitrust investigation*, Dallas Morning News (Nov. 6, 2025).

[28] *Youth Sports Facts: Participation Rates*, ASPEN INST. (2024).

[29] Jon Solomon, *Project Play survey: Family spending on youth sports rises 46% over five years* ("Project Play Spending Survey"), ASPEN INST. (Mar. 3, 2025); Bureau of Lab. Stat., U.S. Dep't of Lab., *CPI Inflation Calculator* (showing 25.26% cumulative inflation from Jan. 2019 to Sept. 2024) (last visited Dec. 11, 2025).

[30] Project Play Spending Survey, *supra* note 29.

[31] LA84 Foundation, *2026 California Play Equity Report* ("Cal. Play Equity Report"), at 26 (May 26, 2026).

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

[33] The participation gap between poorer and wealthier households has risen from 34.9% in 2016 to 36.7% in 2023 to 38.5% in 2024. *Id*.

The second barrier is time. The travel team model takes a Saturday game on a local field and turns it into a three-day tournament several states away. The obstacles to attending these events can be insurmountable. A family that can scrape together a registration fee or get a scholarship may not have a flexible work schedule and a reliable car every weekend. Children are shut out not only by money, but by time and distance. Hourly- and low-wage workers increasingly face unpredictable schedules, leading researchers to conclude that this temporal precarity may matter even more than low pay, and that parents cannot reliably coordinate care around fluctuating hours.[34] A model that requires committing to multi-day tournaments weeks in advance, taking time off, and travelling long distances is simply incompatible with those schedules. In fact, it can be a greater barrier than income itself.[35]

The third barrier is geography: where a child lives and what the community can afford. Access to fields, rinks, and maintained facilities correlates directly to family income and local wealth, with a persistent rural-suburban divide and a gap between what private and public schools offer.[36] The availability of funding for school sports and local clubs is, according to the 2020 Olympics Commission, "the single greatest determiner of young Americans' ability to access [youth] sports in their communities."[37] Local governments have incentives to develop programs and facilities in those under-served communities. Cambridge, Massachusetts offers 20 soccer fields a day at no cost, and San Francisco oversees hundreds of fields, recreation centers, and other public spaces.[38] A private investor, on the other hand, is looking for the neighborhood with the most cash to spend. When a private tournament operator and private equity backed sponsorship agency recently announced a partnership, their press release said this part out loud, touting tournaments with "an incredible concentration of highly engaged, affluent families."[39] Again, the public goals of affordability and access clash with the private goal of profit.

The lesson here is that youth sports run by private investors and driven by profit limit accessibility based on how much money a family has, the time and flexibility they can devote to their child's team, and where they live. No amount of scholarships will break down all of these barriers. Only public investment can ensure every American kid gets to play.

C. What Parents Are Promised

The commercial youth sports model justifies itself by claiming they offer what families want. But what families are sold is, in large part, a false promise. This is a consumer protection

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[34] 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*.

[35] 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).

[36] *See* Cal. Play Equity Report, *supra* note 31, at 30 (discussing poor local access and lack of transportation as barriers to sports participation).

[37] U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 3, at 22.

[38] Project Play, *Improving Youth Sports: Role of Cities and Counties*, ASPEN INST., at 2 (2025).

[39] A screenshot of this statement is available on X.com, but the press release has since been revised to delete it. @CapitolKVD, X.com (June 15, 2026), https://x.com/CapitolKVD/status/2066575006394458293.

problem on top of the competition issues discussed above. Operators tell parents that paying now means college recruiters will see their kids play, which will increase opportunities to earn an athletic scholarship (and maybe even NIL money). The marketing is explicit—3STEP Sports promises "national brand recognition within the college recruiting landscape," Black Bear promises "college exposure," and Perfect Game tells parents to "build your baseball resume at the venue America's top scouts and coaches turn to."[40]

These promises work. Eighty-three percent of parents believe their children have the talent to earn an athletic scholarship, and nearly half are confident it will happen.[41] In reality, only about 2% of high school athletes receive an athletic scholarship, most covering just a fraction of tuition.[42] And what makes the promise so powerful is the soaring cost of college itself. As higher education becomes increasingly out of reach, so go the fees an operator can charge a family chasing it. When the promises aren't delivered, families are squeezed at both ends, paying the youth sports machine for a shot at a prize they are unlikely to win and then taking on student loans anyway.

D. How Profit Motive Harms Kids

The extraction model is not only expensive. It is bad for our children's development. The youth sports-private equity machine makes its money from year-round, single-sport specialization and endless tournaments, which is precisely the model that medical evidence warns against. Athletes who specialize before puberty face sharply higher rates of burnout and overuse injury without any lasting performance advantage,[43] and the harms are now epidemic. Serious knee injuries among teen athletes are up 26%, and the Tommy John surgeries once reserved for professional pitchers are common among adolescents.[44]

The evidence points the other way on what actually develops athletes. 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.[45] Nearly 90% of one recent NFL first-round draft class, and roughly 95% of surveyed Division I athletes, played multiple sports as kids.[46] Elite athletes themselves, including tennis champion Roger Federer,

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[40] Press Release, *3STEP Sports Expands M&D Lacrosse into Minnesota*, 3STEP SPORTS (June 19, 2025); Black Bear Sports Group, *Junior Hockey Franchises* (last visited Dec. 12, 2025); Perfect Game, *PG Showcase* (last visited Dec. 12, 2025).

[41] New York Life, *Parents Face Growing Financial Strain Pursuing Youth Sports for Their Children* (Apr. 22, 2025).

[42] Nat'l Collegiate Athletic Ass'n, *Scholarships* (last visited Dec. 12, 2025).

[43] U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 3, at 55, 86; *see also* Robert F. LaPrade, *AOSSM Early Sport Specialization Consensus Statement*, ORTHOP. J. SPORTS MED., at 1 (2016).

[44] Dionne Koller, *More Than Play*, at 26–29 (2025); Vincent Minjares, *Analysis: Serious knee injury among teen athletes grows 26%*, ASPEN INST. (Nov. 27, 2023); Patrick Saunders, et al., *Ulnar Collateral Ligament Injuries in Pediatric and Adolescent Throwing Athletes*, J. BONE & JOINT SURGERY REV. (2025).

[45] 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).

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

credit multi-sport experiences with their success and advocate for it today.[47] Former NFL star J.J. Watt recently underscored this, stating on X that "[a]nyone who discourages your child from playing multiple sports does not have your child's best interests in mind"[48] and "[y]ear round single sport specialization benefits the adults who can make money off of it at the expense of the child's development."[49] In short, multi-sport sampling is best for kids. Year-round specialization is best for the bottom line. It is a direct conflict between profit and our children's development, health, and safety.

III. The Path Forward

This is not a fight about whether private business belongs in youth sports. It is a fight about monopoly, extraction, and predation. Opposing those things is not a partisan position but a pro-competition and pro-family one. The same principles that distrust concentrated power and defend free and open markets are precisely the principles being violated when a single firm corners a town's rinks and fields and charges families whatever it likes. Protecting children from extraction should be among the easiest bipartisan efforts in this Congress. To that end, the recommendations below are aimed at stopping extractive conduct, investing in our children and putting public money back into the facilities and programs families need.

A. Ban the Extractive Practices

Congress should prohibit the specific practices that define the extraction model: tying participation to the purchase of an operator's other products and platforms, stay-to-play schemes that force families to stay at designated hotels and book through preferred travel vendors, undisclosed junk fees and kickbacks, sale-leasebacks, and exclusivity clauses that lock teams out of competing leagues. The recently introduced Let Kids Play Act targets these sorts of extractive practices directly, by designating the private equity funds that implement them as "vulture investors" and requiring them to divest from youth sports.[50]

These prohibitions should, as laid out in the Let Kids Play Act, be backed by both public and private antitrust enforcement. The Department of Justice, the Federal Trade Commission, and state attorneys general should scrutinize consolidation in youth sports with vigor. Mergers and acquisitions in youth sports should face heightened scrutiny and mandatory reporting requirements. Exclusive dealing, tying, vertical integration, serial acquisitions, and the capture of nominally independent governing bodies should be challenged using the full strength of the Sherman Act, the Clayton Act, and the FTC Act. Vertical integration that creates conflicts of interest should be banned. Finally, private equity firms should be held accountable, through joint and several liability, when they load their portfolio companies with debt or their lax management harms families and communities.

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[47] Luigi Gatto, *I can't imagine my children becoming tennis professionals*, TENNIS WORLD (Mar. 14, 2019).

[48] @JJWatt, X.com (Jan. 7, 2026), *https://x.com/JJWatt/status/2008934446704246862*.

[49] @JJWatt, X.com (Jan. 7, 2026), *https://x.com/JJWatt/status/2008981899973423609*.

[50] Let Kids Play Act, H.R. 8788, 119th Cong. (2026).

On the consumer protection side, youth sports organizations should be required to provide transparent, itemized pricing for all services; disclose all fees upfront; and prohibit mandatory purchases of ancillary services as conditions of participation. Finally, companies should be barred from receiving kickbacks from hotels, streaming services, or other vendors whose services they require families to use. These arrangements drive the stay-to-play policies and other mandatory purchases that are forced on families, and they have no legitimate place in youth sports.

Breaking up these chokepoints and schemes will help bring local, affordable, community-based operators back into the game.

B. Reinvest in Public Goods

Above all, Congress should stop relying on private dollars alone and use public investment to make youth sports the public good we've already recognized it to be. It need not invent a plan. The 2020 Olympics Commission already recommended one: separate elite training from grassroots sports and stand up a funded Office of Sports and Fitness within the Department of Health and Human Services to make competitive grants to states, localities, and community nonprofits that will build facilities, launch leagues, and invest in coaching and training in under-served communities.[51] Then condition that funding on real standards for safety, coaching, and youth development. Pairing that with making certain youth-sports costs like enrollment fees and mandatory equipment purchases tax-deductible for families tackles affordability head on. And investing public money into public facilities and K-12 programs keeps these programs in the community. Put public money into programs that build Olympic and women's sports, instead of letting private investors take it away.

IV. Conclusion

Youth sports, at their best, unify communities. They are a place where people can come together and experience joy. Parents who might agree on little else share a sideline, and children learn to belong and to work toward something larger than themselves, in a fun and safe space. Sadly, this is vanishing from middle class American life and becoming a luxury good, further eroding community bonds. But as we celebrate our nation's founding and America's vibrancy this week, let's remember that it is possible in this great democracy to change course. This Subcommittee and the entire Congress should pass legislation to ban consolidation and extraction in youth sports, give families and communities real opportunities to thrive, put children first, and create an environment in which American sports are once again about joy and our children's well being.

Thank you.

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[51] U.S. Olympic Comm'n Report, *supra* note 3, at 14, 17, 122–23.