Youth sports are at a crossroads. While popular in the U.S. there are concerning trends that show an overall trend towards less participation, fewer kids continuing with sports, and a corresponding increase in sedentary children.

Jody Redman, Associate Director for the Minnesota State High School League and co-founder, InsideOut Initiative

Joe Ehrmann, former Baltimore Colts player, author, and co-founder, InsideOut Initiative

Justin Kaufenberg, co-founder and CEO, Sports Engine

Carson Kipfer, co-founder and principal designer, Sports Engine

Tyrre Burks, founder and CEO, Player’s Health

“We are trying to turn a big ship, but the response has been tremendous. Everyone has wanted this. It’s been like we’ve been feeding starving people.” - Jody Redman, speaking of a program to codify personal development, character and values as the goals of youth sports

ncbi.nlm.nih.gov
aspeninstitute.org
insideoutinitiative.org
Youth sports are at a crossroad. While popular in the U.S. – 56% of all kids 6-12 participated in 2016 – there are concerning trends that show an overall trend towards less participation, fewer kids continuing with sports, and a corresponding increase in sedentary children that also correlates to health issues like obesity.

The positives in sport have long been recognized: physical activity, teamwork, sportsmanship, confidence, social interaction and of course fun. Some of the things that are factoring into the decision by families to drop sports, however, are newer phenomena:
- Sport specialization at a young age, which can lead to increased injury risk and burnout
- A focus on winning and performance over broader life lessons, which can drive away players
- Increasing injuries, sometimes related to overuse or pushing kids too hard as their bodies are developing, which in turn leads some families to reduce participation

These players, in other words, became more and more removed from the life lessons of sport. Character and responsibility took a back seat to winning. And that culture was oozing back deeper and deeper into sport, from college to high school sports.

Back in Minnesota, Jody and her team redesigned their program to encompass the entire state high school sports community, creating systematic change and creating accountability. “We needed to make space in sports culture for more than sports skills,” she said. “97 percent are done with sports after high school, and less than 1 percent ever play professionally. What are we leaving them with?”

The model is based on the principles of Awareness (recognizing the lessons sports can teach, as well the pressures placed on short term success, so the purpose can be established); Alignment (making sure all parties agree the purpose of sport is the human development of kids, and that they use the same language); Action (taking concrete steps to make sure the focus is on values and outcomes); and Accountability (making sure all parties follow through and measuring success.)

Jody and Joe, aware of each other’s work, joined forces with the support of the NFL to take the Minnesota model and bring it national through the InsideOut Initiative, which has now been rolled out in Colorado and Texas and is moving to other states in the coming years. The NFL supports the initiative in multiple ways, including using the resources of local NFL teams to spread the word.

“It’s creating a mindset where success is measured on more than the scoreboard – that’s the easy part,” said Joe. “Did you help your players develop character?”

Coaches in the program explore why they coach, how they coach, how players feel being coached by them, and how they define success. This is shared with administrators, parents and students, and all participate in helping students succeed.

“We are trying to turn a big ship, but the response has been tremendous,” Jody said. “Everyone has wanted this. It’s been like we’ve been feeding starving people.”

SPORTS ENGINE: MAKING IT EASIER TO FIND AND TRY MORE SPORTS

Kids won’t get all of those benefits from sports if they don’t play, however. And that is where another Twin Cities-based business, Sports Engine (a part of NBC Sports) is central to a new push to get kids to play more.

Sports Engine is one of the leading youth sports league management service companies in the U.S. Sports leagues signed on with Sports Engine...
use its platform to manage registrations, team sites, schedules, reporting to governing bodies and countless other tasks to enable or improve the youth sports experience.

This year, Sports Engine launched a new consumer-facing portal that acts as a front door for families looking for sports to play. It is a perfect complement to Sports Engine’s historical emphasis on leagues and teams, and allows parents to search for leagues in their area that meet their kids’ interests and schedules.

“The data has been there all along, and all of these opportunities around them,” said Carson Kipfer, co-founder of Sports Engine. “It’s a concept we’ve talked about for years, but NBC has the media muscle to promote it and get the eyeballs. It’s cool, because these local sports organizations have limited budgets. This gives them a megaphone.”

There is also a benefit to parents, who now will have one place to find and compare different programs in their area. This will encourage discovery of opportunities they didn’t even know were available.

“That whole marketplace is where we want to be — both supply and demand,” said Justin Kaufenberg, co-founder and CEO. “We took such care to architect the system so the information could be repurposed, and now it’s making it possible for families to find new ways to be active.”

PLAYER’S HEALTH: INCREASING INJURY VISIBILITY AND PROPER CARE FOR YOUTH ATHLETES
For many families, concern about injuries is another factor when choosing whether to participate in sports. Youth sports have come under scrutiny as the national conversation has intensified about concussions, overuse injuries resulting from single-sport athletes playing year-round at a high level, and legal questions about who makes decisions for kids.

Tyrre Burks, a former pro football player in the Canadian Football League, has built a solution to help answer some of those concerns and give parents, coaches and players clarity and peace of mind. The Player’s Health platform is set up for all teams in a participating league, with profiles for each player. (The system ties into Sports Engine’s registration, simplifying account creation and affordability.)

Coaches have an app on their smart-phone where they record suspected injuries, and a notification is sent to parents.

“For youth sports, the communication infrastructure about injuries is in the stone age,” said Burks. “It’s usually the coach telling mom about something that happened in the game, and there’s no follow up or record kept.”

The app can also help guide coaches on next steps, including protocols for removing a player from the field, and parents are notified. If a player has been removed, the parent holds the right to clear the child to play or not and decides on next steps, such as seeing a physician. “The control goes to the guardian, and they can control who has access to the data on the platform,” Tyrre noted.

Meanwhile, Player’s Health will be able to establish a record of what happened and the outcome, giving parents and physicians a clear picture that no injury has slipped through the cracks and their athlete hasn’t been returned to play in a dangerous situation. Collectively, this data may also help show the real rates of injury rather than allowing anecdotes and uncertainty to dominate the topic.

ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION FOR MORE AND HEALTHIER YOUTH SPORTS
What all of these initiatives have in common is making youth sports more beneficial, accessible and safer for kids. While change won’t happen overnight, these Minnesota organizations are building the infrastructure to make it happen.

“No one person can make sports a better place,” said Joe of InsideOut. “It takes intentional coaches and practitioners. But kids who play more sports can get so much benefit out of it.”

CLICK TO RETRIEVE STORY