

# What's Killing Youth Soccer in America Is Also Hurting Most Every Other Sport



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COUVA, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO - OCTOBER 10: Michael Bradley (L) and Christian Pulisic (R) of the United States men's national team react to their loss against Trinidad and Tobago during the FIFA World Cup Qualifier match between Trinidad and Tobago at the Ato Boldon Stadium on October 10, 2017 in Couva, Trinidad And Tobago. (Photo by Ashley Allen/Getty Images)

The 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup ended with France winning it but, more

importantly for my home country, the United States not in it, and even people who don't care about soccer (which is most of America) are scratching their heads about how a tiny pipsqueak country like Croatia can make it to the final while the U.S. can't even scare up enough good players to beat Panama.

The arguments over how the U.S. develops men's soccer players have raged for years, and although the extremely organized system has similarities to how America's very successful Women's World Cup teams (the U.S. is the defending champion and has never finished worse than third), it appears to be failing at all levels. Including, as The New York Times points out, getting kids to play the game in the first place. [From the Times:](#)

“ Over the past three years, the percentage of 6- to 12-year-olds playing soccer regularly has dropped nearly 14 percent, to 2.3 million players, according to a study by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, which has analyzed youth athletic trends for 40 years. The number of children who touched a soccer ball even once during the year, in organized play or otherwise, also has fallen significantly. ...

The decline has been felt everywhere: recreational leagues in longtime soccer hotbeds here; high-profile traveling teams from Maryland to California; programs targeted at Latino and immigrant populations in South Texas. High burnout rates from pushing children into travel soccer too young as well as the high costs of programs have also contributed to the lower numbers. ...

The exodus of players in youth leagues has drawn recriminations over clubs and leagues that have pushed and profited from a “pay-for-play” model that has turned off parents and kept out talent from poorer, underserved communities.

Hope Solo, goalkeeper for that defending Women's World Cup champion, recently weighed in on the money discussion, saying if she started playing today, her family [would never be able to afford](#) to give her the private training and elite-league

experience that is an unstated requirement for reaching the top levels of the sport - even at just the youth level. As the Times article points out, "Currently, American households with more than \$100,000 in annual income provide 35 percent of soccer players, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, compared with 11 percent from households earning \$25,000 or less."

No doubt, a system that encourages early specialization and requires large wads of cash is going to miss a lot of potential talent. For example, my 15-year-old son has told me wide-eyed tales of his freshman gym class, where recent arrivals from Yemen crushed everyone else in class in soccer, sometimes while playing in their socks. Maybe some of these kids will find their way onto the Oak Lawn, Ill., Richards High soccer team. But they're already freshmen in high school -- sophomores-to-be, at this point -- and I don't know that soccer has a system to discover and develop immigrant, gym-class prodigies, or any late bloomers, really. (On a related note, most of the players on France's 2018 Men's World Cup winning team are the [descendants of African immigrants](#).)

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One argument in improving the U.S. men's soccer fortunes is to encourage more of a [culture of pick-up play](#), as in other countries, and in the U.S., as in other sports, notably basketball, where America usually does pretty well. But with sports so organized at such early ages, squeezing out any who isn't dedicated, talented, physically gifted or monetarily endowed, pick-up culture in all sports is dying. (I left video games out of the equation because [I don't necessarily see them as an enemy to playing live sports](#).)

The money in youth sports isn't going toward expanding participation for all kids, [especially those who come from modest means](#). It's going toward mega-facilities where families -- it's hoped -- will [spend big bucks on their "tourna-cation"](#). The growth in youth sports is serving an ever-narrower band of families with the

means and desire to travel around the world in the name of sport, and while that isn't inherently a bad thing, it is if that isn't balanced by efforts to include kids and families who want to participate in sports, but don't have the money to support a youth sports-based tourism ecosystem.

The fast-growing sports in America are those such as lacrosse and rugby, which have zero pick-up culture in the United States but are [growing popular with wealthy white families](#). However, even sports trying to attract the well-heeled can't count on that growth forever.

As I researched this piece, I came upon a surprising sport where adherents are complaining an overly organized youth structure and a system that prices out most families: sailing. [From a site called Scuttlebutt Sailing News](#):

“ If sailing is to stop its decline it must get new sailors, ideally young ones, excited and ‘hooked’ on sailing for life, the existing training channels need to be vastly improved. In the big picture this can only come from the top down, from US Sailing, and it is not, as far as I can tell. It seems to simply not be on their radar, at least as advertised on the reverse of my US Sailing membership re-up letter indicating all the things my membership money goes to help.

When even sailing is complaining that the youth system is set up to reward money over talent, is it any shock that other American sports are struggling to attract participants -- and perform well in international competitions?