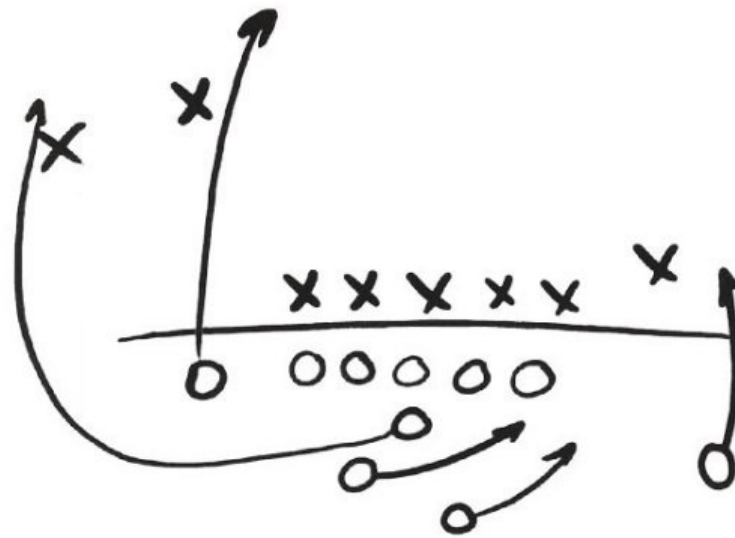


THE Best & Worst



OF YOUTH SPORTS

KRISTEN SWANN

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I'm Kristen, a senior at the State University of New York at Fredonia. I'm studying journalism and sport management. I come from a very athletic family. Sports have always been a passion of mine and have shaped my life in many ways. My nephew, Nolan, was born in June of 2015. While he's still very young, it is absolutely inevitable that he will be playing sports as soon as he is able to run. Watching him grow up has been one of the most amazing experiences. This project was inspired by the borderline obsession I have with wondering which sports he will choose and what he's going to be like as an athlete. Wanting to be involved as much as possible, I decided to figure out the best options for him. Throughout my childhood, playing sports was my entire life and I loved every second of it. I can only hope to help Nolan have the same.

Get in the Game

One thing that is true for every place in the world is that sports are a fundamental part of life. They provide an outlet from stress and give people something to share with each other. Even children find benefits from playing competitive sports.

For many, playing organized youth sports is an essential part of growing up in America. Here, sending an eight-year-old out onto the soccer field to compete against the neighbor's kid for bragging rights is completely acceptable.

Parents love the sense of pride they get from watching their kid follow in their athletic footsteps. While you may be inclined to immediately sign your child up for whatever sport you excelled at or most love to watch, there are many factors to consider first.

In the United States, about 30 million children and teens participate in some form of organized sport.

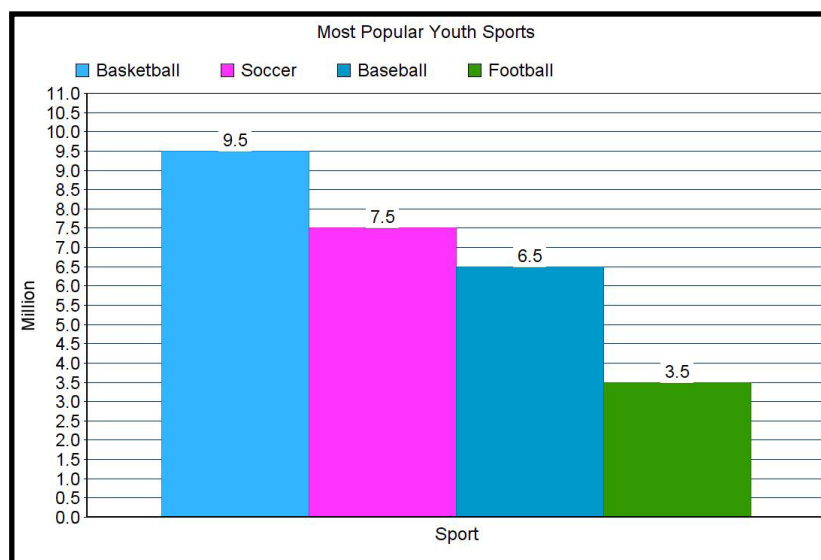
According to a study by the journal *Frontier in Human Neuroscience* in August 2014, kids who did more aerobic exercise had more compact white matter in the brain, which is linked to better cognitive function. Benefits to playing sports are not only physical.

Technology and information have advanced at a rapid rate. As a result, we know more now than we ever have before. Studies have shed light on injuries and other potential risks or benefits that weren't before known.



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The current trends in youth sports reflect the findings of these studies and suggest that parents should be making more informed decisions about the sports their children play.



The most popular youth sport in 2017 is basketball, with 9.5 million youth participants.

The top five sports by number of children involved are shown in the chart.

The popularity of each sport does not directly reflect the overall popularity amongst the entire United States Population. Football is obviously the most

popular sport in America. However, there are reasons why each one is in its respective place in the youth sports rankings. A great amount of consideration is needed to figure them out.

Basketball

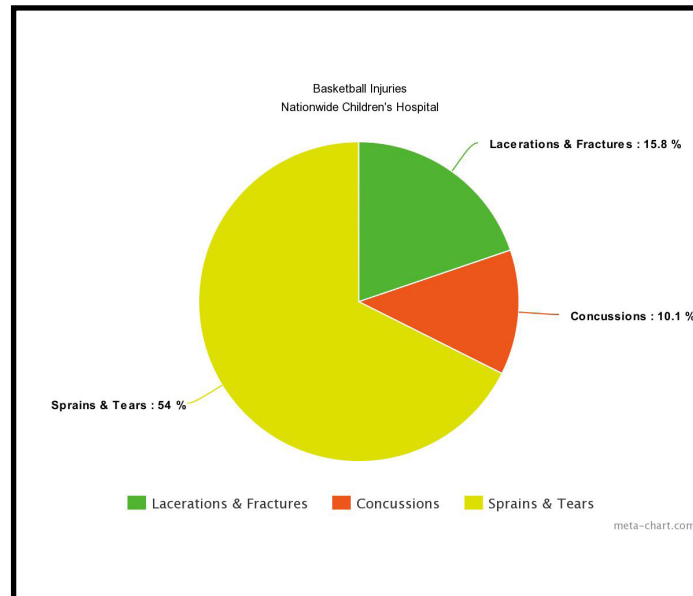
Basketball is the most popular youth sport in America, with about 9.5 million participants.

This may seem surprising, due to the small number of players on a basketball team. One of the reasons for its popularity is how easy it is to play. All that is needed is a ball and a hoop at a park or a school gym.

As a result, the annual cost for a child to play basketball can be relatively cheap. On average around \$200 is spent by American families on just the equipment needed. However, this price can increase by miles if the child wants to play for a club team. AAU basketball can cost thousands of dollars between membership fees, weekend tournaments and travel costs.

Playing AAU basketball can cost upwards of \$4000 for one child. While AAU has been criticized by many important figures in

the basketball community for being a greedy money machine, parents must keep this in mind when their child begins playing. Get ready for some long, expensive weekends, if they go far.



Another surprising factor for youth basketball is the amount of injuries. Many consider basketball to be a non-contact sport, however, in a six-year span between 2005-2011, 2.5 million injuries occurred to high school basketball players.

According to a study done by Nationwide Children's Hospital, 15.8% of injuries were lacerations and fractures,

10.1% were concussions and 54% were sprains and tears.

Even in a sport where most contact is against the rules, injuries still happen and they can affect a child's participation.

Pros	Cons
<input type="checkbox"/> Relatively Cheap	<input type="checkbox"/> Smaller teams could mean less playing time
<input type="checkbox"/> Builds teamwork skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Can be very expensive
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop concentration and discipline	<input type="checkbox"/> Height hinderance at higher levels

Football

There is no word more American than football. Sure, it is used for different game in other countries, but in America, football means drinking beer on your couch and watching large men slam into each other for a couple hours a week.

The only problem is, this doesn't sound like a safe game for kids, or anyone for that matter.

Youth football in America is in a more controversial place than ever. Due to recent discoveries about the harm that injuries can cause later in life, many parents are opting for a safer alternative for their children.

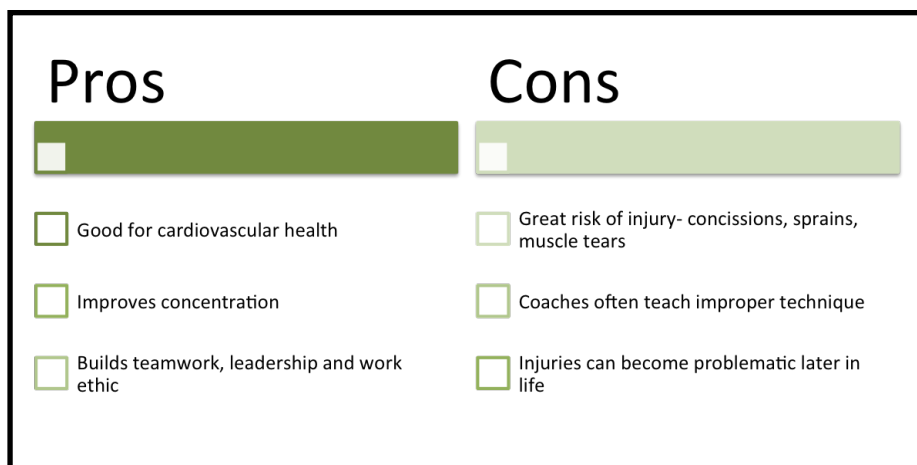
The injury rate for children playing football ages 7-11 in the United States is up to 30.4% according to the Orthopedic Journal of Sports Medicine, which is higher than most youth sports. Inadequate coaching at the developmental level only makes these numbers worse.

Larry Meadors is the Program Director at Burnsville Youth Development in Minnesota and has been coaching youth sports for over 50 years. Meadors says that injuries in high contact sports, such as football, are often a result of learning improper technique at a young age.

"There's often too much emphasis placed on competition, with little attention on developing proper athleticism," says Meadors.

Another factor to consider about football is the cost. On average, families spend up to \$558 annually on equipment alone. It is especially costly when kids are

Despite a steady four-year drop, youth tackle football participants are up by a fraction of a percent in the last year. However, overall participation up to age 17 is declining.



The CEO of the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, Tom Cove, believes this is mostly due to sport specialization at a young age. Another attribute to this trend could be parental

hesitancy due to former NFL players speaking out about their decisions to keep their own kids from playing football.

Think about all of the hard work and effort that goes into parenting. From the time that a child is born, no decision gets made without great thought. From buying the expensive diapers, to making sure they're eating the healthiest food, much care is taken when raising them.

A parent who cares that much about the welfare of their child would have to be crazy to send them onto a field to get run over by other kids on purpose, right? But, Americans love their football. And everyone thinks his or her kid is going to be the next Tom Brady. The truth is, they're not. But, there's some good news about the safety and future of youth football.

Beginning in the fall of 2017, some new rule changes will be tested at select youth football programs. The new rules will include: (continued on p. 8)

Soccer



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Soccer is one of the fastest growing sports in America. Every four years, more and more Americans tune in and watch the World Cup. This trend reflects the popularity at the youth level as well.

Youth soccer participation has increased by 89% since 1990, according to NBC News. Seven and a half million kids play at some level. Although the United States is far behind the rest of the world when it comes to the popularity of soccer, it is growing here, and many parents are keeping this in mind.

The injury rate in soccer is higher than many contact sports. The injury rate has also skyrocketed by 111% since 1990. While this is partially due to more kids playing, the level of physicality has jumped too.

There's not too much to worry about at a younger age. Studies have shown that children ages 12-17 are three times more likely to be injured and the most common injuries are sprains.

So, until age 12, soccer is pretty safe.

Soccer is known for being played in the streets of poor neighborhoods, with anything that resembles a ball, around the globe. Some of the best players in the world came from these places. However, in America, soccer is a very different game.

Pros	Cons
<input type="checkbox"/> Develops aerobic endurance	<input type="checkbox"/> Can be expensive as interest grows
<input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork, socializing	<input type="checkbox"/> Injuries becoming more common
<input type="checkbox"/> Easy to start out/ getting more popular	<input type="checkbox"/> Very time consuming

Basic equipment can run up to \$200 alone. Private coaching, registration fees for club teams, tournaments, travel and uniforms can cost a family upwards of \$11,000 a year. High-level youth soccer in America has become a sport for the few elite who can

afford it.

While, there are some cheaper alternatives, if you are the type of parent who wants to make sure your child gets all of the opportunities possible, be prepared with your checkbook when signing them up for youth soccer.

Baseball

Baseball is one of the oldest and most loved sports. In recent years, the Great American Pastime has taken a drop at the youth level. Since 2007 the sport has lost over one million youth participants, according to Sports and Fitness Industry Association data. Experts say that kids are losing interest due to the slow pace of the game and the difficulties involved with playing pickup games.

Other issues that kids have with baseball are the complicated rules, which make learning at a young age challenging. Also, sport specialization has led to a decline in popularity of baseball as well as other sports.

Still many adults view baseball as one of their favorite childhood memories.

“One of my favorite things about playing baseball as a kid was the competitive atmosphere. I really enjoyed being able to compete against my friends,” said Jacob Kindberg, who played baseball growing up and now at Robert Morris University.

“On the other side, one of the worst parts of baseball as a kid was playing the outfield when I was young. When you are little, not many kids hit the ball into the outfield so the games can be really boring out there,” said Kindberg.

The Little League World Series brings attention to youth baseball.

The tournament is broadcasted on ESPN in August every year. Despite the popularity of the event, kids are just not as interested in baseball as they used to be.



Courtesy of Creative Commons

Little league is one of the safest sports to play, since there is very little contact between opposing players. Impact by the ball causes more than half of all acute injuries. Arm injuries for pitchers are very common as well. Other injuries occur to the shoulders and hands.

Like all sports, club baseball teams can be pricey.

Basic cleats, a glove and other elective equipment will cost on average \$230. These are repeating costs though, as children likely grow enough to need new equipment every year.

Little League is almost everywhere in America and is cheap to play.

Pros	Cons
<input type="checkbox"/> Relatively Safe	<input type="checkbox"/> Slow game/ boring
<input type="checkbox"/> Basic leagues are cheap	<input type="checkbox"/> Complicated rules
<input type="checkbox"/> Easy start-up leagues, like tee-ball	<input type="checkbox"/> Losing Popularity



My youth soccer team, age 12.

With all of the options out there for youth sports, it can be hard to decide which one is right for a child.

Basketball is the most popular for a reason. Kids get great exercise, which can be beneficial to them in many ways, not just physical. They'll also learn about teamwork and have a small risk of serious injury.

Choosing a sport is definitely not that black and white, though.

Often, the best decision is to let them choose.

They might need a little help, so have them try many different sports until they find one they like. If they're starting off young, they're probably not

much better at one over the others and through the years they have a better chance of showing major improvements in a sport they actually chose and enjoy playing.

Try your best to remain unbiased. Sure, it would be great to see your kid go out and break your scoring record from high school, but if that's not where their passion is, you're wasting their time and making them unhappy.

Too many kids have horrible experiences with youth sports and it's a parent's job to make sure they are playing for the right reasons. Remember, they're just kids. Don't take it too seriously. Youth sports should be a fun way for kids to socialize and be active, while learning important life skills along the way to become better people.

Continued from page 5

- Smaller playing field- decreased to 40 yards.
- Fewer players- 7 per team.
- Players must rotate positions.
- Players of equal size are matched up.
- Coaches are allowed on the field to organize players.

The actions taken to make the game safer are enough for new mother, Kelly Brucato to let her son play in the future.

“With all of the special types of helmets and equipment as well as recent attention put towards concussions and spinal cord protection, I think it's a lot safer now for kids to play contact sports and its ever been,” said Brucato of Belfast, NY.

After the testing period, the rules could be implemented throughout the country. It may go without saying that any changes to make the game safer for children are a positive.