

Executive Summary

Introduction

Existing evidence has demonstrated that sport's benefits reach far beyond the positive health effects of physical activity. Community sport serves as a generator of social capital, creating benefits across a broad spectrum of societal goals including child and youth development, crime prevention, economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusion for all Canadians.



To realize these benefits, the sport we play must be **good sport**, intentionally driven by **positive values**.



As a result, a new picture for Canada's community sport system is emerging, highlighting the far-reaching benefits of sport across the nation. Evidence documenting these benefits, paired with further investigation on the importance of purposeful inclusion in sport, is integral to delivering the benefits of sport to all Canadians. Notably, future research in this area should focus on those who are underrepresented in sport or face barriers to participation.

To realize these benefits, the sport we play must be good sport, intentionally driven by positive values.

Values-based sport places values and principles at the heart of all policies, practices and programs in an effort to increase ethical conduct and decrease unethical behaviour. A values-based approach to sport will create good experiences for all stakeholders (e.g., athletes, participants, coaches, officials, parents, volunteers, allies, sports organizations).

True Sport is an approach to values-based sport that is founded on the core values of fairness, excellence, inclusion and fun. When the seven True Sport Principles — Go For It, Play Fair, Respect Others, Keep It Fun, Stay Healthy, Include Everyone, and Give Back — are resident in the sport experience, positive sport environments that instill character, strengthen community, and increase opportunities for excellence will result.

Research indicates that this is exactly the kind of sport that the vast majority of Canadians want, understanding intuitively that this is the sport that generates the greatest benefits. Unfortunately, sport in Canada continues to grapple with numerous issues that prevent stakeholders from realizing all that sport has to offer, most notably access and inclusion and participant safety and maltreatment. The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) undertook this research initiative to provide concrete evidence of the type of benefits that can be realized with a values-based approach to sport — to put data and examples around this intuition and aspiration.

Similar to the original report [What Sport Can Do: The True Sport Report 2008](#), this report is intended to enable communities, policy makers, and business leaders to see the tremendous potential that lies within our community sport system and to catalyze new approaches that will put this potential to work for Canadians.

Below are some research highlights from the literature review. Please refer to the full report for more.

Community Sport in Canada

- **Defining Community Sport** — “Sport” refers to an organized activity involving two or more participants engaged for the purpose of competition. It involves formal rules, requires specialized skills and strategies, and includes training or coaching. Community sport, or organized sport, is led and supported by community volunteers and institutions, and is found across the country in communities of all kinds. Community sport is not a private individual pursuit, nor is it undertaken for profit. It relies heavily on volunteers and is supported by the communities where it is held. Community sport offers inclusive participation and civic engagement, providing benefits that for-profit sport cannot.
- **Sport Participation in Canada** — More than 8 million Canadians over the age of 15 participated in sport within the year 2016, an increase from previous years. Women's increased participation in sport is responsible for contributing to this change. Similarly, more Canadians are serving as sport coaches, administrators and spectators. Greater sport participation and involvement is associated with higher income and educational levels.

Power of Sport

- **The Sport We Want** – Canadians value sport, believing it instills character in youth and strengthens communities. Sport reinforces the importance of commitment, honest effort, ethical play and hard work in the pursuit of excellence, and allows for individuals to experience achievement and satisfaction.

Improving Health and Well-Being

Good health is fundamental to an individual's well-being and their ability to realize their full human potential. It is also a crucially important economic asset. Sport helps make Canadians healthier by:

- **Increasing the Number of Active Canadians** – Adult Canadians who are active in sport average almost three hours of mostly moderate or vigorous physical activity per week and are, therefore, likely reaching recommended activity levels that have been proven to reduce mortality rates by as much as 30%.
- **Reducing the Burden of Chronic Disease** – People who are active on a regular basis significantly reduce their risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer (in particular breast and colon cancers), type 2 (adult-onset) diabetes, and bone loss and pain in later life due to osteoporosis.
- **Enhancing Mental Health** – Physical activity through sport helps to enhance self-esteem, reduce stress and anxiety, and alleviate depression. In patients with psychiatric disorders, physical exercise has been shown to diminish clinical symptoms, especially for depression. Sport also offers opportunities for positive relationships, friendship and support that foster emotional health.

- **Promoting Healthy Aging** – Physical activity through sport can help prevent chronic disease, improve balance and coordination as people age (significantly reducing their risk of falls and hospitalization), improve memory and learning, and reduce the risk of cognitive loss through Alzheimer's and small strokes. Sport also provides opportunities for social connection for older Canadians at risk of social isolation.
- **Reducing Health Care Costs** – Physical inactivity costs Canadians approximately \$10 billion in direct and indirect costs annually. Increasing physical activity by 1% alone would save \$20 billion over 20 years. These metrics are increasingly important for older Canadians as health costs associated with aging grow.

Putting Children and Youth on a Positive Life Course

Canadians value the impact of sport on children, providing positive effects for physical health, cognitive development and brain health, academic achievement, self-esteem, social and emotional functioning. Over three quarters of Canadian children participate in organized sport and over 90% of adults are confident of the character-building influence sport has on youth.

- **Structured Play, Organized Sport and Early Childhood Development** – Sport and organized physical activity have an important influence on childhood development. Preschool-aged children who participated in these activities had positive associations in the development of social skills, relationship building, engagement and psychological outcomes such as enhanced cognitive-intellectual development.
- **Building Physical Capacity and Motor Skills** – Involvement in organized sport has demonstrated improved fine motor skills in children. Providing opportunities to develop fine motor skills is important as they are not naturally acquired but are gained through experiences.

- **Keeping Children and Youth Active and Healthy** – Regular participation in physical activity during childhood and adolescence can help build and maintain bone mass, maintain a healthy body, and improve lifelong mental health.
- **Using Sport to Reduce Risky and Violent Behaviours** – Teens who participate in team sport are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviours such as substance abuse or sexually risky activities. Youth sport participation has been used to prevent crime, gang involvement and anti-social behaviours.
- **Fostering Positive Youth Development** – Children and youth sport participants have higher rates of self-esteem, self-concept and self-worth. Team sport has specific influence on promoting higher social acceptance, body satisfaction and life satisfaction.
- **Providing Adult Role Models** – Adolescents who experience positive coach relationships have enhanced social acceptance and reduced body dissatisfaction. The importance of positive coaching relationships is most significant for low-income children who significantly benefit from these relationships by achieving greater academic success and respect for their bodies.
- **Enhancing Academic Achievement** – Children and youth participation in physical activity is positively related to academic achievement, including higher grades and the ability to be more focused and concentrate.
- **Understanding the Particular Benefit of Sport for Girls** – Canadian girls experience higher rates of mood and anxiety disorders than their male counterparts, making sport participation increasingly important for this demographic. Girls' participation in sport enhances their body image and self-esteem and leads to an overall higher quality of life.
- **Impacts of Sport on Children with Disabilities** – Canadian children with disabilities are less active than their peers. Sport participation for children and youth with brain-based disabilities report improved sleep, concentration, executive function and well-being.

Building Stronger and More Inclusive Communities

Sport's benefits are not limited to individuals. Sport can also help strengthen communities by building social capital and fostering greater inclusion of equity-deserving groups. This view is widely supported by Canadians, 82% of whom believe that sport builds stronger communities. Here are some additional examples of the impact of sport on community:

- **Building Social Capital** – Community sport has the potential to help bring individuals and communities together by creating a sense of community, encouraging active citizenship, and fostering trust, reciprocity, and a sense of security among community members. Together, these elements are the social capital of every community.
- **Helping Newcomers Integrate More Quickly into Canadian Society** – Over 80% of Canada's population growth is attributed to permanent and non-permanent immigration. Sport can serve as an important tool to integrate newcomers into their local communities through socialization, local language acquisition, and shared fun.
- **Fostering Greater Inclusion of People with Disabilities** – Individuals with disabilities have reported that their involvement in sports played a role in their development of self-confidence, self-worth and identity development. Sport programming can also provide opportunities for developing social connections with peers both with and without disabilities.
- **LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Representation** – LGBTQ+ youth are less likely to participate in sport than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Research suggests that social and safety barriers may impact LGBTQ+ sport participation. Creating awareness and inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in sport is key to increasing participation and improving sport experiences as well as the lives of all Canadians.

Power of Sport

- **Renewing Indigenous Culture** – Sport offers particular benefits with regard to Indigenous communities in terms of physical and mental health benefits, building cultural pride, social cohesion, self-esteem, and transferable skills among participants and volunteers. Support for both reducing barriers to mainstream sport participation for Indigenous people, as well as financial and governmental support for Indigenous-specific sport opportunities, will contribute to increasing participation rates for Indigenous people.
- **Experiences of Racialized Peoples** – Recent interventions have begun to push back against the white colonial rhetoric that erases racialized groups from Canadian sport. Ongoing work seeks to promote sport opportunities for visible minorities who participate in sport less than the rest of the population.
- **Intersectionality** – The intersection of multiple marginalized identities can result in an amplification of barriers faced by any one identity on its own. Canadians with intersectional identities may face additional barriers to inclusion in community sport. Prioritizing research in this area is important for advancing understanding of these individuals' experiences.

Contributing to Canada's Economy

Sport plays a significant role in the economic and social life of communities, providing jobs, boosting tourism, contributing to neighbourhood economic renewal, and enhancing skills and productivity in the workplace. More specifically, sport contributes by:

- **Enhancing Tourism Through Sport Travel and Events** – Sport tourism contributes significantly to Canada's economy. In 2018, Canadian sport tourism created \$6.8 billion in total spending from both domestic and international sources.
- **Contributing to Local Development** – In addition to hosting sporting events, investment in Canadian sport infrastructure provides long-term benefits to local communities. These developments employ local community members and generate income in local economies.
- **Enhancing Workplace Skills and Productivity** – Evidence indicates that sport participation in childhood has been linked to better educational and employment outcomes later in life, particularly for women and girls. Employers are increasingly turning to sport and physical activity as a means to improve productivity in their workplaces through enhanced concentration and team communication.

Promoting Environmental Sustainability

Sport can instill appreciation of the environment and a desire to protect it, as well as provide a platform for social mobilization related to environmental sustainability. Examples of how sport at all levels can ensure it is a net contributor, rather than detractor, include:

- **Fostering Environmental Awareness and Stewardship** – Many investments in community sport are investments in green space, with users often becoming advocates for their protection, proper maintenance and expansion, just as those who pursue wilderness sports are often advocates for the protection and sustainable use of remote environments.
- **Providing a Platform for Social Mobilization** – International sport events provide powerful platforms for promoting environmental protection because of their large audiences and global reach. High-profile athletes possess this same potential. Many international sport and environment bodies are using this capacity to raise environmental awareness and to advocate for greater sustainability at the local and global levels.
- **Footprint of Community Sport** – The most significant contributor to sport's environmental footprint is travel. Initiatives to reduce this impact through carpooling or chartered transportation services all play a part in reducing the carbon footprint of community sport.

- **The Impact of Climate Change on Sport –** Climate change poses a significant threat to certain sport activities. Winter sports such as skiing and snowboarding are vulnerable to climate changes as snow conditions become less stable, while summer sports are affected by conditions including increased heat and humidity.

COVID-19 and Canadian Sport

Undoubtedly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted sport activity across Canada. During this time, Canadians' participation in sport was altered and new and unique opportunities to maintain participation through the pandemic were created. Highlights include:

- **Reduced Sport Participation During the Pandemic –** The majority of Canadian community sport activities and other recreational activities were cancelled throughout various stages of the pandemic. Nearly 90% of sport participants were impacted during this time.
- **Encouraged Activity Throughout the Pandemic –** Maintaining participation in sport during the pandemic was encouraged by mental health experts. As a result, the most common modification during the pandemic was the shift to online participation and engagement opportunities.
- **Returning to Sport –** There is a sense of optimism to “build back better” after the pandemic, ensuring that considerations for social inequalities are considered in sport moving forward.

Conclusion

The benefits of community sport invite communities and decision makers to recognize its value as a substantial public asset, and to devote attention and intentional effort to ensuring these benefits are fully realized for all Canadians.

Sport is a powerful means of promoting health, but an even more powerful means of building social capital, and perhaps the most effective system we have, outside of the family, for providing young people with positive adult role models, mentors and opportunities for positive development. Delivering on these benefits, however, requires that we build an inclusive community sport system that delivers the sport Canadians want — sport that is fun, fair, inclusive and promotes excellence.

This is not the job of sport alone. Local communities have a leading role to play, together with federal, provincial and territorial governments who can help ensure all communities have the sport infrastructure they need.

The quality and ultimate impact of community sport finally comes down to individuals — the athletes, parents, coaches, officials, administrators and volunteers whose ideas, attitudes and behaviour determine whether we will close the gap between the sport we have and the sport we want, or widen it.

By intentionally making the right choices, together we can all help ensure the sport we have is the sport we want: True Sport.