



Vital Signs

SPORT & BELONGING

VitalSigns®

Community foundations taking the pulse of
Canadian communities.



COMMUNITY
FOUNDATIONS
OF CANADA
all for community.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

**TRUE
SPORT**
FOUNDATION

WHAT IS BELONGING?

Simply put, belonging is being part of a collective we. It's about how much we believe we *fit* in a group or place – and how much that place or group welcomes or includes us. It's the result of connecting with others in rich relationships and engaging in our communities to make them better. Belonging is fundamental to our sense of happiness and well-being.

Each of us has a personal connection to the idea of belonging that is influenced by our experiences with the people, places and identities to which we feel connected. So where do we belong? What do we belong to?

A community, a workplace, a subculture – these are all things to which we may belong.

WHY BELONGING MATTERS

Our 2015 *Vital Signs* report explores the importance of belonging. From healthier and more meaningful lives; safer, more resilient and more inclusive communities; flourishing culture and identity and greater community participation; a greater sense of belonging has an extraordinary capacity to transform our lives and our communities.

Yet our research found that *38% of Canadians don't feel like they have a stake in their local community*. So we asked: How can we strengthen belonging to each other and our communities?¹

One of those ways is through sport.

In partnership with the True Sport Foundation, this *Vital Signs Report on Sport and Belonging* takes a closer look at how sport – when grounded in fairness, excellence, inclusion and fun – can strengthen belonging to each other and to our communities.

THANK YOU TO THE PEOPLE WHO
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About Vital Signs

Vital Signs is a national program led by community foundations and coordinated by Community Foundations of Canada that leverages community knowledge to measure the vitality of our communities and support action towards improving our quality of life.

About Community Foundations of Canada

Community Foundations of Canada is the national network for Canada's 191 community foundations. Together we help Canadians invest in making our communities better places to live, work and play.

About True Sport Foundation

The True Sport Foundation is a national charitable organization that is dedicated to advancing and supporting values-based and principle-driven sport in communities throughout Canada. The True Sport Foundation embraces and promotes the seven *True Sport Principles* as a means to instilling character in our children, strengthening Canadian communities and increasing our opportunities for excellence.



Sport has a unique power to attract, mobilize and inspire. By its very nature, sport is about participation. It is about inclusion and citizenship.

THE UNITED NATIONS ON
SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

WHY SPORT?

How can sport attract and include more of us to play, volunteer and cheer — and help us feel like we belong? How can sport and recreation help the 35% of Canadians who find it difficult to make new friends?²

Whether it's a knock on the door and a friend asking *Can you come out and play?*, coaching your kids' team or a friend suggesting *Let's watch the game on Saturday*, we all want to feel connected to one another and included in something greater. It's why we gather for major sporting events like the World Cup and the Olympics. It's why we retell stories of historic sport moments and simultaneously jump up when the golden goal is scored. It's why we follow the stories of our sport heroes and share pride in victory and disappointment in defeat.

Sport is woven into the very fabric of every community in Canada. While we experience the benefits of sport most immediately as individuals, it can also play a major role in strengthening communities by bringing people together, building social capital and fostering greater inclusion of excluded groups.

Why? Because sport is inherently social. It brings people together - both on the field and in the stands. In a recent survey, 87% of new citizens said that watching their children play sports or volunteering for their children's teams made them feel more connected to the community. Newcomers also reported that they often had more meaningful social interactions in the stands and on the field than at work.³

In theory, sport also offers a certain universality of experience that should make it accessible to everyone. Whether it's hockey or soccer, baseball, basketball or any other sport for that matter, a basic understanding of the rules - or a willingness to learn - should be all you need to get in the game regardless of ethnicity, language spoken or gender identity. However as the research detailed in this report shows, in practice, this isn't always the case.

To realize these benefits though, good sport must reflect our best values. Every game we play, every match we organize, every race we run - large or small - can help build a stronger Canada for the future - a Canada where everyone belongs.

DEFINITION OF SPORT

While there are many definitions for sport, for the purposes of linking sport and belonging, we use the following: *all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction, such as play, recreation, organized or competitive sport, and indigenous sports and games.*

THE UN INTER-AGENCY TASK FORCE ON
SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

IT ALL BEGINS IN THE COMMUNITY

Whether it's in the school gym, arena, pool or on the pitch, sport is an important part of our national fabric and is present in all communities. More than half of all Canadians are involved as spectators, participants, volunteers, coaches or officials in community-level sport.⁴



85%

of Canadians agree sport participation builds stronger communities.⁵

That's because in all forms — community or school-based, recreational or competitive, structured or not, for fun or for personal excellence — sport at its best:

- ✓ Unites individuals, families, neighbourhoods and communities together as players, volunteers, spectators and advocates
- ✓ Connects people across geographic, economic, ethno-cultural and other boundaries
- ✓ Provides positive role models - from coaches to elite athletes
- ✓ Teaches sports, leadership and life skills that improve self-esteem and interpersonal skills
- ✓ Connects vulnerable people and groups with networks, information, and services
- ✓ Encourages active citizenship for people of all ages, fosters trust, reciprocity, and a sense of security and belonging among community members⁶

STAT SHEET

When sport is grounded in positive values, the impact sport has on belonging is just as significant for players, volunteers, spectators and the community.



PLAYERS HAVE BETTER MENTAL HEALTH AND HIGHER LIFE SATISFACTION

71% of sport participants see themselves as being in excellent or very good mental health, compared to **59%** of non-participants.⁷ This is vitally important in establishing healthy social connections.

87% ranked themselves from 7 to 10 in their level of life satisfaction — 10% higher than non-participants (**77%**).⁸

Players say sport participation improves their skills, sense of achievement, self-esteem, sense of belonging and self-worth. Sport makes it easier to make friends and to enjoy positive social relations.



VOLUNTEERS LEARN NEW SKILLS AND MAKE NEW CONNECTIONS

65% of lifelong volunteers had their first volunteer experience through sport and recreation.⁹

In 2012, volunteerism in sport and recreation accounted for **19%** of total volunteer hours, involving **12%** of Canadians aged 15+.¹⁰

WE VOLUNTEER TO ORGANIZE, SUPERVISE OR COACH TO HELP OUR COMMUNITY, TO HELP OTHERS AND FOR THE SOCIAL INTERACTION THAT VOLUNTEERING FOR A SPORT ORGANIZATION OFFERS. MOST IMPORTANTLY, VOLUNTEERISM IS A TANGIBLE BEHAVIOUR OF PEOPLE WHO FEEL THEY CAN CONTRIBUTE AND IT CREATES ADDITIONAL CONNECTION, OPPORTUNITY AND BELONGING.¹¹



SPECTATORS FEEL PRIDE AND CONNECTION

Whether cheering on Team Canada, little league or a charity run, people are unified by wearing team clothing, supporting the same team or cause and sharing a common experience. **23%** of Canadians feel community as fans of a sports team — higher than identifying with a school or religious community.¹²

In 2010, more than **90%** of Canadians said the performance of our athletes at the Vancouver Olympics had a positive impact on Canadian pride.¹³

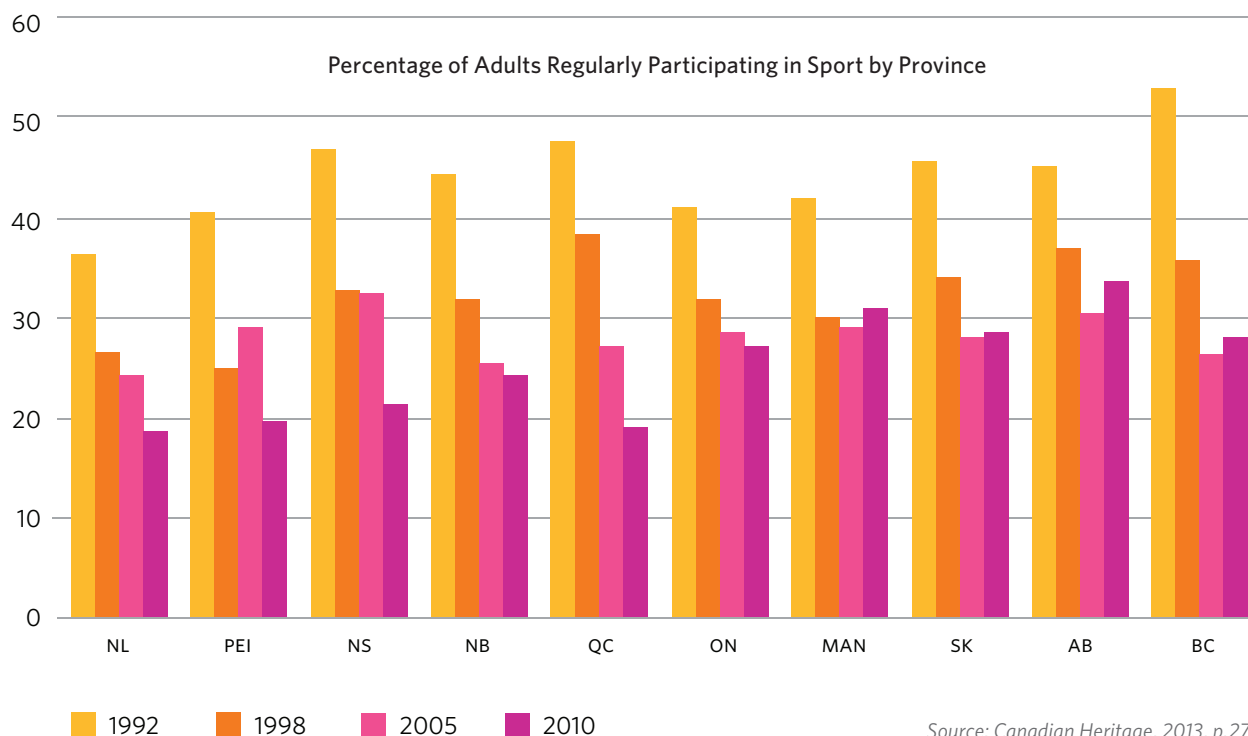
More recently, when new Canadians were asked why they participate in sport, **53%** said integrating into society was an important or very important factor in their decision. **69%** said sport helped them learn about Canadian culture during their first three years here — either through their own participation, their children's or watching major sporting events from the Olympics to the Stanley Cup.¹⁴

STATE OF PLAY

With all the benefits that sport offers in creating a sense of belonging, why is it that more and more are sitting on the sidelines? Here is what we know:

1 ACROSS CANADA, SPORT PARTICIPATION IS DECLINING

Participation rates for adults are dropping in every province:



WE OPT OUT AS WE AGE



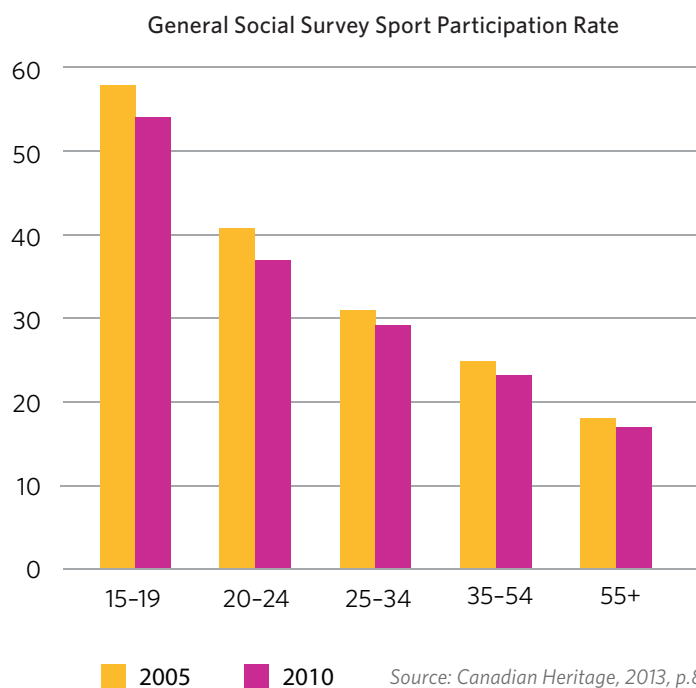
3 out of 4 children and youth ages 5-17 are active in sport,¹⁵ but participation rates peak at age 10 to 13 and then decline steadily and dramatically with age.¹⁶

7.2 million

In 2010, 7.2 million or 26% of people age 15+ participated regularly in sport – down 17% from 1992.¹⁷ That's 7 out of 10 Canadians aged 15 and older who do NOT participate in sport.



Alarmingly, the participation rate of young adults is declining faster than that of older Canadians.¹⁸ At the same time, 45% of Canadians between the ages of 18-34 say they find it difficult to make friends.¹⁹ Could sport and recreation hold the key to solve both problems?



HAVE WE LOST THE LOVE OF THE GAME?



In Canada and globally, 5- to 19-year-olds say lack of enjoyment, feeling they are not good enough to play and an increase in family and intrapersonal stress were the most common reasons for dropping out of sport.²⁰



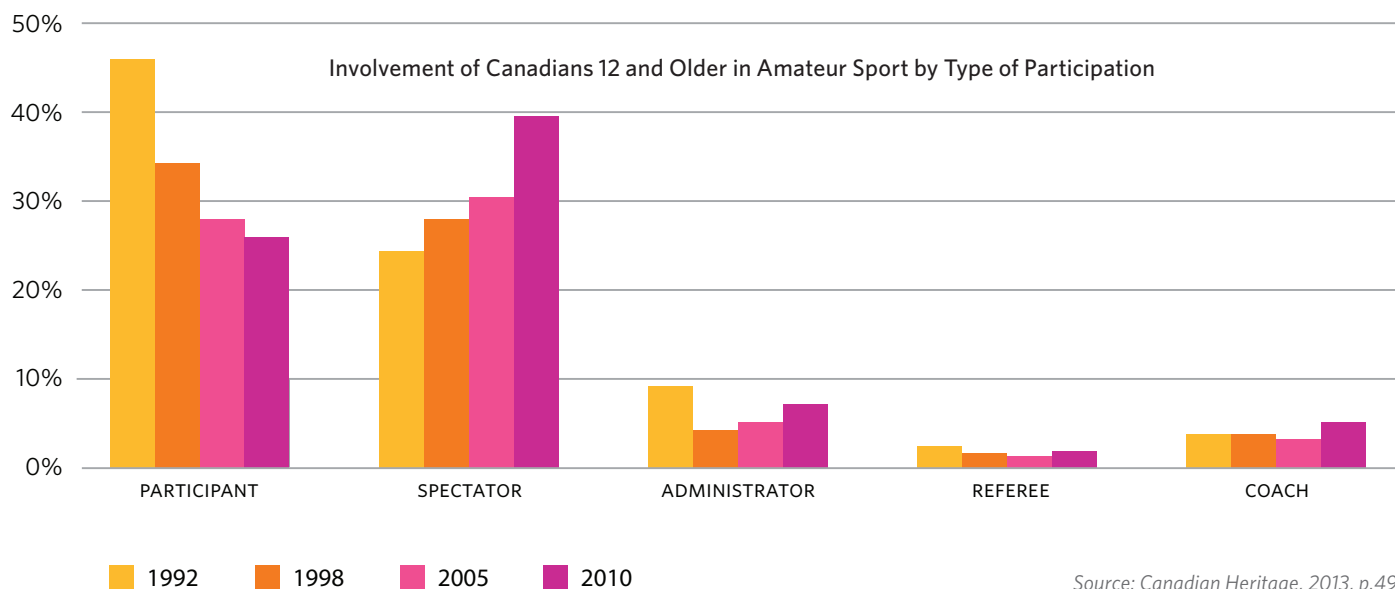
Canadians aged 15+ say lack of time (31%) and lack of interest (24%) as the top two reasons they don't participate in sport with no significant differences between reasons provided by men and women.²¹



Youth and newcomers also point to feeling vulnerable or not good enough to stay active in sport or learn new ones.

OR JUST CHOSEN THE SIDELINES?

The 2010 Canadian Community Health Survey shows almost 15 million people, representing 52% of the population ages 12 and older, were involved in leisure time physical activity – a slight increase from 2006. However, we're also seeing a big shift from player to spectator at amateur events which almost doubled from 24% to 40% in the same period.²²



Source: Canadian Heritage, 2013, p.49.

2 WE FACE A SIGNIFICANT GENDER GAP

The recently published *Women In Sport* report revealed that 65% of female sport leaders believe sport for women is better now than in their own early involvement in sport.²³ However, women across all income, education levels and ethnicities are still far less likely to participate or volunteer in sport including coaching at all levels.

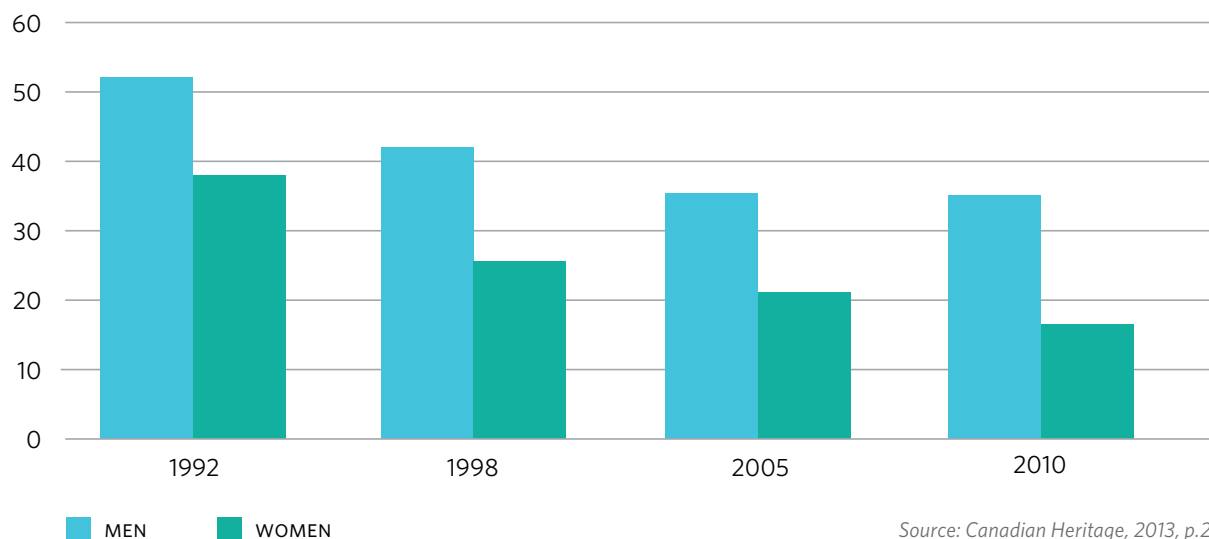


In 2010, approximately one in three men and one in six women regularly participated in sport. While the gender gap had narrowed between 1998 and 2005 it grew again to 19% in 2010.²⁴



This is critical not only for girls' and women's participation but also because when mothers participate in sports in any way their children's participation rate is much higher (71%) than that of children whose mothers do not (29%).²⁵

Adults Regularly Participating in Sport



Source: Canadian Heritage, 2013, p.27

What systemic hurdles are preventing or dissuading women and girls from participating in sport and how can we clear them?

How can we ensure that more women and girls opt in and continue to be engaged in sport throughout their lives?

3 WE NEED A GAMEPLAN

Sport has the power to create communities where everyone feels like they belong – yet research shows that some of us face more barriers to participation than others.

While participation rates are dropping across the board, teen girls, at-risk youth and seniors are more often excluded or are dropping out at higher rates than other segments of the population.

There's not a single answer or solution to get more people engaged in sport. What works for some may in fact deter others. Our **player personas** highlight the challenges that diverse groups face and outline different strategies that can help tap into the potential of sport to increase one's sense of belonging.



TEEN GIRLS

ISSUE/GAP:

Teen girls are opting out of sport and physical activity at a much faster rate than boys their age.

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- Improve their self-esteem & mental health, develop her self-identity & feel empowered
- Flourish as an athlete & learn from coaches and mentors
- Lead as a peer educator, coach or official
- Be a role model & challenge gender norms

A SUCCESS STORY

Fit Spirit ▶



AT-RISK YOUTH

ISSUE/GAP:

Youth who are considered at-risk face many challenges such as struggling with mental health issues, dropping out of school, criminal activity, or homelessness. The benefits of sport for at-risk youth are maximized if the environments are non-threatening, team focused and learning-rich.

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- Participate in positive & flexible activities that allow for their input
- Meet friends & role models in a positive environment
- Increase their self-esteem & social skills²⁶

A SUCCESS STORY

London CF ▶



ISSUE/GAP:

While overall sport participation rates are declining, both the number of seniors who are master's athletes and tournament participation is going up compared to previous years.²⁷ Among seniors who are not active, "lack of interest" is the main reason for opting out (27%) followed by age and health/injury (20%).²⁸

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- Socialize, to make friends & to make a positive contribution to the community
- Reduce isolation, combat stress & anxiety
- Open up possibilities for participation in other activities

A SUCCESS STORY

Pickle Ball ▶



ISSUE/GAP:

85% of the ~250,000 permanent residents become citizens every year, which gives Canada the highest naturalization rate in the world.²⁹ Despite their eagerness to try new sports, volunteer and have their children participate, newcomers face a number of barriers such as cost, time, lack of familiarity with the structured sports system, and lack of information on where and how to register.

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- Practice language skills, make new friends & learn more about Canadian society³⁰
- Enjoy meaningful social interactions³¹
- Benefit from fewer cultural constraints than they did in their country of origin³²

A SUCCESS STORY

Community Cup ▶



TIME OUT

How many programs encourage newcomers to conform to existing sports?

How many adapt our sport system to newcomers?

How open are Canadian-born people to trying sports and structures from other places?



ISSUE/GAP:

Around one third of 3-21 year-olds in Canada with severe developmental disabilities play team sports.³³ Substantial progress has been made to develop programs for kids ages 0-6, but far fewer options exist for children, youth and adults as they transition into work or community programs.³⁴

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- Make friends, build self-confidence, enhance their social skills & networks with peers with & without disabilities³⁵
- Build a community for athletes & caregivers³⁶
- Change negative perceptions by focusing attention on their abilities

A SUCCESS STORY

The Sandbox Project ▶



Sport and recreation is the mechanism by which people with disabilities can belong most easily. Really, they would just like to be accepted for who they are and given the same opportunities for recreation or elite level sport.

DAVID LEGG



LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES

ISSUE/GAP:

While a recent international survey shows Canadians as being the most positive about accepting LGB people, 81% reported witnessing or experiencing homophobia in sport. 70% believe youth team sports are not welcoming or safe for LGB people. 1 in 4 gay men did not play youth team sports — 45% state negative experiences in school turned them off team sport, while 34% say they feared rejection because of their sexuality.³⁷

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- Create awareness & promote inclusion
- Develop positive mental health & wellbeing
- Provide role models to decrease LGBTQ+ phobia

A SUCCESS STORY

Pride House TO ▶



CANADIANS WITH A PHYSICAL DISABILITY

ISSUE/GAP:

Information on available programs can be difficult to find³⁸ or the programs simply don't exist. For example, at post-secondary schools the majority of students with a disability can't play intramural or varsity sport. It makes it more difficult for them to meet new people and feel like they belong to the fabric and culture of a university.³⁹

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- A strong sense of community & belonging
- An opportunity for elite competition
- Role models & the opportunity to be a role model⁴⁰

A SUCCESS STORY

Soldier on Program ▶



TIME OUT

Who is portrayed in advertising for sports and recreation programs?

Are organizations marketing opportunities such as wheelchair rugby or goal ball?



FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND METIS PEOPLE

ISSUE/GAP:

Almost 6 out of 10 indigenous boys aged 12-17 participate in competitive sport, which is 14% higher than girls the same age. Sport participation drops with age to 23.5% for men and 11.2% for women.⁴¹ This is puzzling because traditionally women had a significant role in sport, which has important cultural dimensions for indigenous people.⁴²

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS PROVIDE THEM:

- Cultural & community-building aspects
- Improved high school completion rates for youth living off reserve⁴³
- Increased school attendance & achievement, lower youth crime & suicide rates⁴⁴

A SUCCESS STORY

Gen7 ▶



TIME OUT

How can we ensure low-income families — children and adults — feel like they can access, belong and contribute to sports programs?



LOW INCOME FAMILIES

ISSUE/GAP:

In 2010, 6 out of 10 children from low-income households were active in sport, compared to 8.5 out of 10 with family incomes over \$80,000.⁴⁵ For adults, there was a 33% rate of sport participation in higher income households compared to the 7% participation rate reported in homes with incomes of less than \$20,000.⁴⁶ Low income Canadians are less likely to volunteer for sport, particularly where certification or travel is required.⁴⁷

QUALITY SPORT PROGRAMS HELP THEM:

- Expand social networks
- Improve mental health & sense of connection

A SUCCESS STORY

The First Shift ►



RURAL AND REMOTE COMMUNITIES

ISSUE/GAP:

75% of Canadians living in rural areas and Atlantic Canada agree "My city/town doesn't have enough to offer for young people."⁴⁸ Since roughly 1 in 5 Canadians lived in rural areas with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants in 2011⁴⁹ — that's a problem.

SMALL TOWN SUCCESS:

Distance to facilities and availability of sport can be an issue for rural Canadians. Communities with less than 1,000 residents are more likely to report participation in sport.⁵⁰ Sustaining local sport can be vital to the viability and sustainability of smaller towns. In declining rural towns, sport may even provide the last remaining social infrastructure.⁵¹

A SUCCESS STORY

Selkirk's Sport Legacy Fund ►



TIME OUT

Are sports being tailored and 'marketed' for maximum participation?

Could we offer childcare?

More programs for families to play together?

Greater social connection?

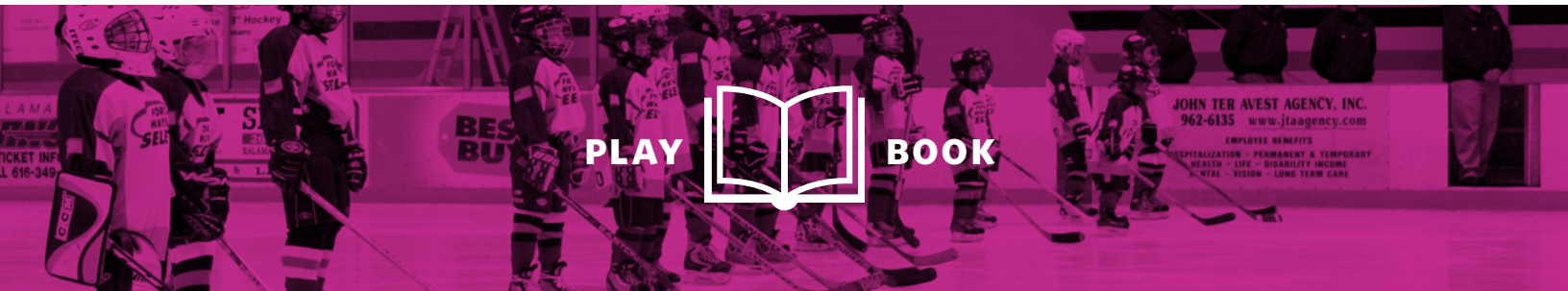
THE GAME PLAN

For athletes, parents and the community, sport is not living up to its potential. It's time to create communities where sport is more inclusive, more affordable and a lot more fun!

1 MORE INCLUSIVE

The True Sport Foundation reminds us that sport is never neutral – it has the potential to provide a positive effect just as much as a negative outcome. From administrators,

coaches, parents, officials, volunteers, fans and funders, everyone must be intentional about promoting sport's ability to foster belonging and not leave it to chance.



Here are a few strategies that sport groups and community partners can use to create more inclusive sport:

INCLUDE EVERYONE



Train coaches and administrators to understand, demonstrate and implement True Sport principles to ensure quality sport programs that exert a positive influence.



Support initiatives that ensure children and youth with disabilities are always included and integrated into regular physical education classes.⁵²



Demand schools, coaches and parents to take homophobia and bullying seriously in sporting environments.⁵³



Offer *try before you buy, learn to* camps and 101s in the form of one-time or multiple-day workshops.

SET THE STRATEGY



Actively promote fully accessible community sport and recreation systems to maintain and increase sport participation among youth, women, newcomers, people with disabilities, seniors, and people living on low-incomes.



Deliver programs to meet the objectives and needs of the participants. For example, focus on fun, social interaction, family participation, accessibility. Address other aspects such as transportation, busy schedules, childcare, etc.



Engage participants in decision-making and tailor sport activities to their needs and goals.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS



Use plain language regarding programs, basic sport information (eg: rules), available subsidies, equipment exchange or rebate programs.



Identify the most potent messages, including benefits findings, to encourage more people to take up sport, and communicate them widely to target audiences.⁵⁴ For example, highlight opportunities to have fun, to meet new people, to spend time with family, etc.



Develop tools, like the [Open Sports](#) app in the GTA as a one-stop shop to make it easier for people to find pick-up games, community organizations and programs that suit their needs and interests.



Recruit sport ambassadors from groups that usually participate less. Empower them to tell their stories, to volunteer and to help reaching out to new participants.

2 MORE AFFORDABLE

Cost is a significant barrier for many of us to reap the benefits of participating in sport. 90% of parents agree that organized sport is too expensive.

Canadian families spend an average of \$953 annually for one child to play in organized sport with families in Alberta spending the most (\$1,428 annually/child) and families in Quebec spending the least (\$886 annually/child).⁵⁵

CANADIAN
FAMILIES SPEND ON
AVERAGE

\$953

ANNUALLY/CHILD

FAMILIES IN
ALBERTA SPEND THE
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\$1,428

ANNUALLY/CHILD

FAMILIES IN
QUEBEC SPEND THE
LEAST

\$886

ANNUALLY/CHILD

PLAY



BOOK

Here are a few ways to make sport more accessible:

LOWER COSTS FOR PLAYERS & VOLUNTEERS



Make access to programs simple and dignified for low-income families (e.g., no proof of income, decrease complicated paperwork).⁵⁶ Provide snacks, transportation and equipment if required.



Partner with local groups such as [Canadian Tire Jumpstart](#) and [Kidsport](#) or work with local donors to help subsidize participation fees for those who need it in your community.

SUPPORT PAY WHAT YOU CAN & OTHER SLIDING SCALE MODELS



Consider innovative models like [MoreSports](#) or an emerging social enterprise like [Wilmington Tennis](#) for more sustainable support for ongoing participation.

ENCOURAGE CONNECTION THROUGH SPORTING EVENTS



Develop *first-time buyer* plans with substantial discounts to attend professional games.⁵⁷



Establish legacy funds after community and major sporting events like Toronto's Pan Am Games and Windsor's International Children's Games. Collectively, these funds offer an opportunity to bring together the leading sport groups and community foundations to share resources and best practices to achieve a bigger impact in the community.

True Sport Principles:

✓ Go For It

✓ Play Fair

✓ Respect Others

✓ Keep it Fun

✓ Stay Healthy

✓ Include Everyone

✓ Give Back

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3 MORE FUN

To retain our players and to bring people back to sport, we all need to feel like we belong. When the most important factors in sport drop-out rates include lack of fun, stress, too much competition and negative coach or parental behaviour it's time we all revisit the values of sport.

4/5 
4/5 BELIEVE THAT PROMOTING POSITIVE VALUES IN YOUTH SHOULD BE A PRIORITY FOR SPORT IN CANADA, BUT FEWER THAN

3/5 
3/5 BELIEVE COMMUNITY SPORT CURRENTLY REINFORCES THEM.⁵⁸

73% 

ALMOST THREE-QUARTERS (73%) OF CANADIANS SAY CHILDREN'S SPORT HAS BECOME TOO FOCUSED ON WINNING AT THE EXCLUSION OF FUN AND FAIR PLAY.⁵⁹

 **97%**

97% OF ADULTS ALSO RANK RELAXATION AND FUN AS IMPORTANT BENEFITS OF SPORT PARTICIPATION.⁶⁰



So we say, bring back the fun! Here are a few suggestions on how:

RECLAIM THE POSITIVE VALUES OF SPORT



Listen to what people value in sport participation and tailor programs to meet those needs.



Convene a municipal dialogue with sport and recreation groups, schools, and community development organizations on how to advance shared community objectives through sport.



Ensure recreational facilities: meet accessibility standards; are close to public transportation; offer a range of programs that appeal to people of diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds, genders, and ages; and have fee structures that enable participation by low-income families.⁶¹

FOCUS ON QUALITY SPORT



Keep the focus on teaching basic movement skills, creating positive environments, and having fun to develop *physical literacy*.



Educate parents, coaches, teachers, administrators, officials and participants on the principles of fair play according to the *True Sport Principles*.



Implement a *community wide approach* to improve the quality of sport or physical activity based on bringing the sectors of health, recreation, education and sport together, to develop strategies for creating welcoming environments for everyone, including newcomers and refugees.

MAKE IT SOCIAL



Pair physical activity or sport with community activities to attract women/girls, seniors, and people in smaller communities to increase participation.⁶²



Invest in renewed infrastructure, voluntary associations, community centres, arenas, swimming pools, parks, and the many other ways for people to be active and build connections.⁶³



Ensure there are opportunities to make friends and to involve family, especially for women who attach greater importance than men to family activities and making new friends as a very important benefit of sport.⁶⁴



Celebrate local sports heroes and create opportunities to meet professional and elite teams and players, both at the stadium and in the community.

IN CONCLUSION

It is hard to imagine a thriving community without sport. Its benefits to increase our sense of belonging, inclusion and opportunities to engage in our communities are numerous. For volunteers, athletes, coaches, families and fans, sport can be a place of strong connection and acceptance.



It is harder still to imagine that while sport has the power to do all of these things, many of us are still sitting on the sidelines.

Several factors influence the declining rates of participation and it is clear that there are many barriers in our way to maximizing all that sport has to offer.

So what will it take for us to harness the full and true potential of sport – to make it more accessible, more inclusive and more fun?

How will we use sport to help build communities where we all feel like we belong?

It is clear that we all have a part to play and the recommendations in this report are a great starting point for communities, funders, and citizens to start creating fundamental shifts to even the playing field for everyone.

Let's continue the conversation at [#vsbelonging](#).

[Game on.](#)

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ENDNOTES

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