

Pomona College

**Effect of Playing Youth Club Sports on Playing a Sport in College**

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Economics Thesis  
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## Introduction

Traditionally and certainly over the past fifty years, most youth sports were recreational, free, and coached by volunteers. Then, competition began to rise and fueled the growth of various forms of club teams for youth sports. These club teams can, and often do, cost participants several thousand dollars a year. Indeed, the youth sports industry in the United States has grown to almost \$15 billion annually.<sup>1</sup> Encouraging the financial expenditures, club sports may bring potential payoffs for youth athletes, such as college admissions, college scholarships, and professional contracts. As a college athlete who has played in club sports since childhood and used my club as a path to college sports, I understand the lengths to which families will go to participate in a "good" club. Here I will explore the benefits and shortfalls of youth club sports, the effectiveness of youth club sports compared to other avenues (such as high school sports or a college scholarship fund) on a person's chance to play in college, and how the club-to-college sports pipeline may impact the economic divide between socioeconomic classes. I hypothesize that playing a club sport will increase a person's chance of playing a sport in college, but that additional factors such as playing a high school sport, GPA, or socioeconomic status will play a more significant role.

## Literature Review

Previous research on the topic of youth club sports spans a few adjacent topics but fails to directly address the effect of participating in youth club sports on playing a sport in college. In the following pages, I will summarize the existing research pertinent to my study, covering (a) youth club sports participation and its trends, (b) existing barriers to sports participation, (c) the

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<sup>1</sup> "The National Youth Sports Strategy." *The National Youth Sports Strategy*. (2019). Retrieved February 1, 2022, from [https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/National\\_Youth\\_Sports\\_Strategy.pdf](https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/National_Youth_Sports_Strategy.pdf)

increasing attention to specialization within youth club sports, and (d) the potential pipeline from youth club sport participation to college sport participation.

### **Youth Club Sport Participation**

Useful to understanding the breadth of youth club sports participation are research studies such as the Aspen Play Projects and the National Youth Sports Strategy. The Aspen Play Projects, conducted by the Aspen Institute, detail the amount of youth club sports participation annually (as shown in Figure 3 below), how that participation has changed year to year, and the level of participation across age groups and across all forms of sports. For example, the 2020 State of Play in the Aspen Play Projects shows that youth sports participation increased in 2019 for youth aged 13-17 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The ability to see the year-to-year trends across sports is useful in determining which sports, and whether they are team or individual sports, garner more participation across time. More significant is the overall trend, which indicates that sports participation in general continues to increase, particularly pre-pandemic, including participation in youth club sports.<sup>3</sup> The Aspen Play Projects also show levels of sports participation across different genders and age groups, and provides intriguing analyses: “participation increased for both males and females in the older age group, but the gap widened.”<sup>4</sup> Males played sports more regularly than females did by 6.4 percentage points at ages 6-12 (39.1% for males and 32.7% for females: see Figure 1 below) and by 8.7 percentage points at ages 13-17” (43.5% for males and 34.8% for females: see Figure 2 below). This data shows that gender plays a role in sports participation and an increasingly larger one at higher ages, particularly high school ages.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Figure 1

### Core Sport Participation by Demographic

Percentage of children ages 6-12 who played a sport on a regular basis

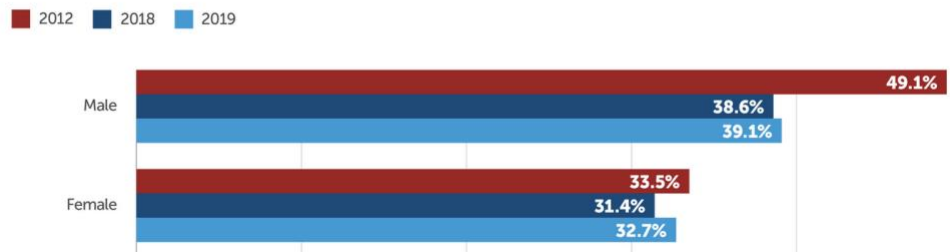
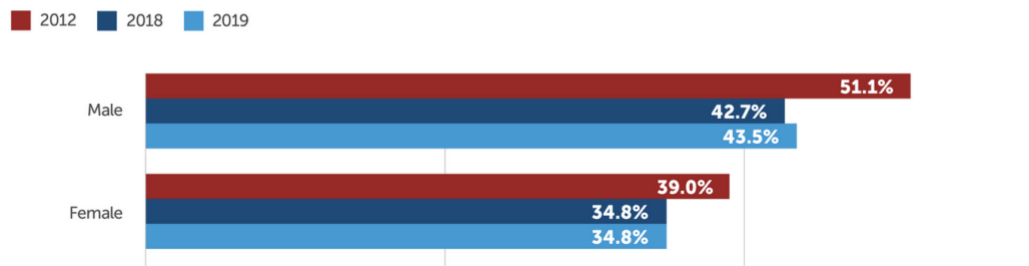


Figure 2

### Core Sport Participation by Demographic

Children ages 13-17 who played a sport on a regular basis



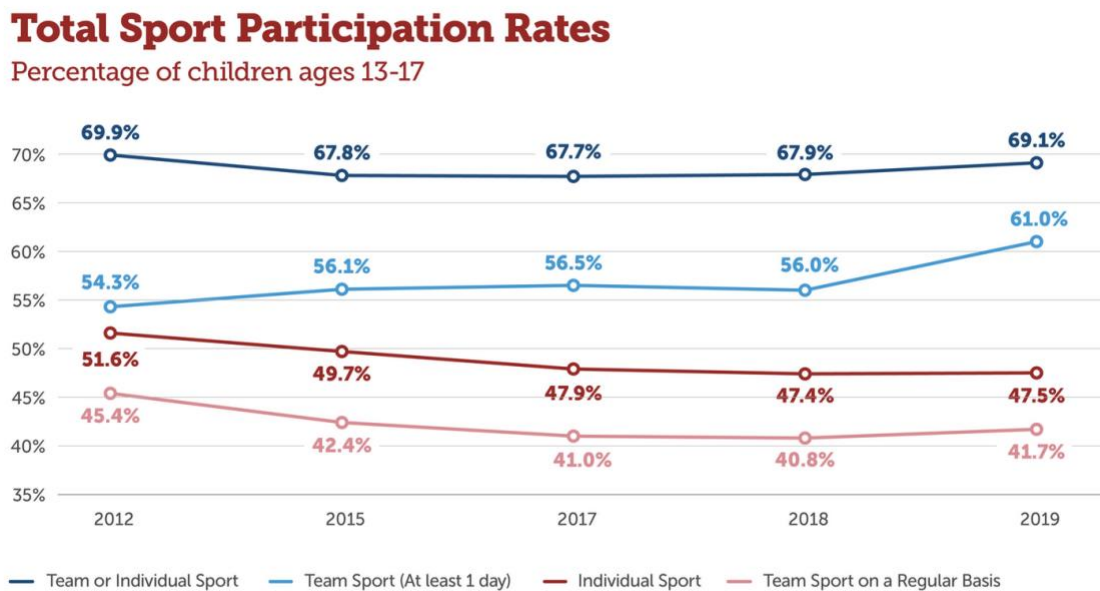
The National Youth Sports Strategy, with research conducted by the Office of the United States Assistant Secretary for Health, also provides useful details for establishing the spread of youth sports, the financial commitment that it entails, and for whom such participation is available. The National Youth Sports Strategy shares, for example, that “58 percent of youth ages 6 to 17 participated in sports in 2017, and the numbers are lower for girls, racial and ethnic minorities, youth from households of low socioeconomic status, and youth with a disability.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

These factors, which are significant at the youth level, become even more determinant as children and adolescents look to take their sports participation to the next level.

Figure 3



Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2019

The National Youth Sports Strategy also explains that the youth sports industry has grown to an estimated fifteen billion-dollar industry, and that “close to 60 percent of parents reported spending between \$250 and \$2,500 on sports programming each year.”<sup>6</sup> These statistics show the financial commitment that youth sports can entail and also offer insights into who is able to spend such money. This financial aspect of youth sports spurs my interest in studying whether such expenditures are worthwhile and whether the money and time spent on youth sports will likely impact participation in a college sport. The Aspen Play Projects and the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

National Youth Sports Strategy, while providing relevant and meaningful background information, do not answer these questions.

### **Barriers to Club Sports Participation**

Another paper on youth sports participation, Seefeldt and Ewing (1997), documents the number of children and adolescents participating in sports and examines gender differences, barriers to participation, and benefits of sports participation. Particularly interesting here are their noted barriers to participation – including “restrictions on team membership, the organizational structure of sports in the United States, lack of competent volunteer coaches, and overzealous promoters.”<sup>7</sup> These barriers are prevalent in youth club sports and could impact the number of club sports participants, and which ones, are able to continue to play their sport at the collegiate level.

As a further study notes, one barrier to youth club sports participation in particular becomes prevalent as we examine the increasing expenses of youth club sports: socioeconomic status. Shifrer et. al. (2015) question whether collegiate athlete advantages apply equally to female athletes, racial minority athletes, and athletes from lower socioeconomic statuses. Shifrer et. al. find that high school sports participation is positively associated with college enrollment across races, genders, and time periods.<sup>8</sup> However, because this report’s authors primarily examine high school sports participation rather than club sports participation, their evaluation of socioeconomic status is meaningful but less pronounced than in the context of club sports, and thus, my analysis. Shifrer et. al.’s study is useful in its methodology and consideration of factors

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<sup>7</sup> Seefeldt, V. D., & Ewing, M. E. (1997, August 31). “Youth sports in America: An overview.” *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest*. Retrieved February 6, 2022, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED413324>

<sup>8</sup> Shifrer, D., Pearson, J., Muller, C., & Wilkinson, L. (2015). “College-Going Benefits of High School Sports Participation: Race and Gender Differences over Three Decades.” *Youth & society*, 47(3), 295–318. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12461656>

that may affect athletes' college admissions, but the key difference between our studies is that Shifrer et. al. examined high school sport participation while I am examining youth club sport participation. I expect the club nature of participation will lead to a higher impact of socioeconomic status on college sports participation, because most youth club sports are not only pay-to-play, but also are extremely expensive and time consuming, providing opportunities that exist for limited socioeconomic groups.

### **Sports Specialization**

Existing literature also has begun more recently to examine youth sports specialization – choosing and committing to one or two sports at an increasingly younger age, in hopes of developing an expertise. Brooks, Post, and Trigsted (2018) investigate whether there is an association between youth sport specialization and the hope of receiving a college scholarship, and find that some eventual expectation of playing in college or receiving a scholarship does exist.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Post, Rosenthal, and Ruah (2019) explicate the extent to which parents, especially, encourage such sport specialization with the expectation that it will lead to their children playing in college.<sup>10</sup> Post et al.'s paper is particularly useful in detailing not only the expectations that parents have when urging young athletes' specialization, but also in detailing the financial investment that parents and families make in those specialized youth sports in pursuing their objectives, i.e. college admissions and/or scholarship. Post et. al. also note that a household's median income significantly affects how much money can be spent on a child's

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<sup>9</sup> Brooks, M. Alison, Eric G. Post, Stephanie M. Trigsted, Daniel A. Schaefer, Daniel M. Wichman, Andrew M. Watson, Timothy A. McGuine, and David R. Bell. "Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs of Youth Club Athletes Toward Sport Specialization and Sport Participation." *Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine*, (May 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2325967118769836>.

<sup>10</sup> Post, Eric G., Michael D. Rosenthal, and Mitchell J. Rauh. 2019. "Attitudes and Beliefs towards Sport Specialization, College Scholarships, and Financial Investment among High School Baseball Parents" *Sports* 7, no. 12: 247. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sports7120247>

sport participation, and identifies that, as of 2019, parents reported spending on average \$1500 in the past year on their child's sport participation.<sup>11</sup> This data and insight are extremely intriguing, and while I do not have data regarding the amount of money a family spends on youth sport participation, I intend to consider, and control this, for by including socioeconomic status in my models.

### **The Club-to-Collegiate Sport Pipeline**

Parents are willing to spend substantial amounts of money on their children's participation in youth club sports because they believe that it will pay out significantly in the future. Post, Rosenthal, Root, and Rauh (2021) builds upon the Brooks, Post, and Trigsted (2018) paper by further examining the beliefs of players and, especially, parents about sports specialization and the likelihood of receiving college scholarships. According to Post et. al. (2021), previous research into youth sport parents reveals that parents believe early sport specialization is beneficial for improving sport ability, but that parents also tend to overestimate their child's chances of receiving a college scholarship.<sup>12</sup> They also discover that high-income parents spend significantly more money than middle-income and low-income parents on youth specialized club sports.<sup>13</sup>

To procure an understanding of the chances of playing a sport in college, "Varsity Odds 2020," conducted by ScholarshipStats.com (with data from the *NCAA October 2019 Trends* report) and other athletic associations, details useful statistics for college athlete

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<sup>11</sup> Post, Eric G., Michael D. Rosenthal, and Mitchell J. Rauh. (2019). "Attitudes and Beliefs towards Sport Specialization, College Scholarships, and Financial Investment among High School Baseball Parents" *Sports* 7, no. 12: 247. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sports7120247>

<sup>12</sup> Post, E. G., Rosenthal, M. D., Root, H. J., & Rauh, M. J. (2021). "Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs of Parents of Youth Basketball Players Regarding Sport Specialization and College Scholarship Availability." *Orthopaedic journal of sports medicine*, 9(8), 23259671211024594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23259671211024594>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



recruitment and scholarships. For example, just over 7% of high school athletes go on to play a varsity sport in college and less than 2% of high school athletes go on to play at NCAA Division I schools.<sup>14</sup> These figures are useful in gaining an estimate of the chances of playing a college sport. Furthermore, in comparing my results to these figures, I will be able to determine if club sports lead to a significantly better chance of playing in college, and consequently draw conclusions about whether or not club sports, in comparison to high school sports, are a worthwhile investment.

Particularly helpful in tracking the pipeline from high school sports to college sports is Tompsett and Knoester (2021)'s paper, which details aspects of high school sports, as well as additional factors such as socioeconomic status, that affect college athletic recruitment. Tompsett and Knoester use the same Education Longitudinal Study data set that I utilize, and follow a similar intention for discovering factors that affect playing a sport in college.<sup>15</sup> The authors find evidence that the process of becoming a college athlete is shaped by a variety of factors including race, class, and gender, playing a high school sport, and socioeconomic status, and note that "sport participation characteristics," i.e. participation, contribute to the odds of becoming a college athlete.<sup>16</sup> I will build upon this research by isolating participation in youth club sports, which Tompsett and Knoester do not include in their research. Although the Tompsett and Knoester paper discusses only high school sports and does not address club sports,

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<sup>14</sup> "Odds of a High School Athlete Making a College Team." *Scholarship Stats.com* | Play your Sport in College! (2020, October 8). Retrieved February 6, 2022, from <https://scholarshipstats.com/varsityodds>

<sup>15</sup> Tompsett, J., & Knoester, C. (2021, August 27). "The Making of a College Athlete: High School Experiences, Socioeconomic Advantages, and the Likelihood of Playing College Sports." *Human Kinetics*. Retrieved February 6, 2022, from [https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/ssj/aop/article-10.1123-ssj.2020-0142/article-10.1123-ssj.2020-0142.xml?utm\\_source=TrendMD&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=Sociology\\_of\\_Sport\\_Journal\\_TrendMD\\_0#r61](https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/ssj/aop/article-10.1123-ssj.2020-0142/article-10.1123-ssj.2020-0142.xml?utm_source=TrendMD&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Sociology_of_Sport_Journal_TrendMD_0#r61).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

its data and analysis are insightful and applicable to my study on club sports and the associated factors that may affect playing college sports.

Each of the examined works offers valuable insight to the different stages of sports participation, but none fully address the effect of youth club sports participation on playing a sport in college. I aim to address this gap in the research with my study.

### Data and Methods

I use data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS) and the follow-up 2012 report, which was collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). I use this data set rather than more recent data because ELS contains variables for both participation in a youth club sport and a college sport, and the 2002-2012 cohort contains complete data. With this data set I use the variables for “participation in a youth club sport” (“CLUBSPORT”) as my independent variable and “participation in a college sport” (“COLLEGESPORT”) as my dependent variable.

My dependent variable is a measure of the “payoff” of participating in youth club sports. The benefits, or payoff, could include college admissions, scholarships, or participation in professional sports; I use participation as a college athlete to encompass athletes who gain admission (with or without a scholarship) to a college to play their sport. (The college sport participation on which I focus here is varsity, and not club, participation. College varsity sports are college sanctioned and sponsored in contrast with college club sports, which lack the same degree of school support and often lack the same level of athletic experience, participation, and skill.) Because the path directly from youth club sports to professional athletics is rarer and

limited to fewer sports, I am narrowing my study to the effect of participating in a youth club sport on playing in college.

To look at the next level, research on college recruitment and what kinds of athletes play sports in college becomes useful. Various books and papers have been written on the recruitment of college athletes. JL Shulman and WG Bowen's *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values*<sup>17</sup> and DS Eitzen's *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*<sup>18</sup> both detail how factors such as race, class, and gender, all of which I will include in my model, relate to an uneven playing field in the trajectory toward playing a college sport, and look into how college athletic recruitment affects admissions.

My independent variable in my study is participation in youth club sports. I will also include various controls, all of which are student and school characteristics that correlate both with participating in youth sports and with college admissions. These controls include participation in high school sports (I can measure this because the ELS data set distinguishes between in- and out-of-school sports, which accounts for the high school versus club sport difference); socioeconomic status (SES); gender; race; family structure; native language; high school GPA; and SAT score. Both my independent variable ("CLUBSPORT" in the Stata output) and my dependent variable ("COLLEGESPORT" in the Stata output) were collected in the data set survey as an answer on a scale of how frequently respondents participated in club or college sports on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (every day). Since I only needed whether or not respondents did participate in a club or college sport, I converted these to binary variables. I used 0 to denote that the respondent did not participate in either a club or college sport, respectively

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<sup>17</sup> Shulman JL, Bowen WG. *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Eitzen DS. *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*. Lanham, MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc; 2009.

(3, 4, and 5 on the original scale, which means the respondents participated “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never”), and 1 to denote that the respondent did participate in either a club or college sport, respectively (1 and 2 on the original scale, which means the respondents participated “every day” or “three or more times a week”). My variables (also shown in Table 1 below) are defined as follows: COLLEGESPORT: 1 = the respondent participated in a college sport, 0 = the respondent did not participate in a college sport; CLUBSPORT: 1 = the respondent participated in a club sport, 0 = the respondent did not participate in a club sport. BYSEX is the sex of the respondent in the base year of the survey; BYRACE is the race of the respondent in the base year of the survey; BYSTLANG is whether or not English is the native language of the respondent in the base year of the survey; BYFCOMP is the family composition of the respondent in the base year of the survey; BYSES1QU and BYSES2QU are the quartile codings of the socioeconomic status of the respondent in the base year of the survey; and HSSPORT is whether or not the respondent participated in a high school sport.

The variables used in my regression model are described in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1

VARIABLES	(1) N	(2) mean	(3) sd	(4) min	(5) max	Variable Label
BYSEX	13,221	1.507753	.4999588	1	2	Sex-composite
BYRACE	13,221	5.57386	1.906179	1	7	Student's race/ethnicity-composite
BYSTLANG	13,221	.8366236	.3697228	0	1	Whether English is student's native language-composite
BYFCOMP	13,221	2.2018	1.861132	1	9	Family composition
BYSES1QU	13,221	2.636866	1.125606	1	4	Quartile coding of socioeconomic status
BYSES2QU	13,221	2.636412	1.124787	1	4	Quartile coding of socioeconomic status

HSSPORT	13,221	1.566145	.7610709	1	3	Participated in interscholastic sports
CLUBSPORT	13,221	.3418047	.4743324	0	1	Participated in non-school sports
COLLEGESPORT	13,221	.1085394	.3110723	0	1	Participate in varsity or intercollegiate sports

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As I perused my data set, I came to a few important realizations. First, I had planned to control for gender within my regression, but my data set did not contain a “gender” variable. I replaced this with “sex,” which was included in the variable set. Additionally, I originally intended to control for both GPA and SAT score in my regression, because both of these variables would ostensibly affect a person’s chances of obtaining college admission, and thus affect whether the person could play a sport in college. While my data set included these variables, they are restricted from public use, so I was not able to access those data points in the set, and could not include them in my regression. As a result, “SAT Score” and “High School GPA,” which I originally intended to include as variables, are not included in my final regression model. Finally, the data set did not include any kind of variable or indicator for the amount of money that an athlete or family spends on youth club sport participation. I hypothesize that this information would significantly affect the outcome of whether or not a person plays a sport in college. That is, I hypothesize that someone from a higher socioeconomic status would be more likely to play a college sport because of the high costs of college tuition and the expenses associated with sport participation, but I do not currently have a sufficient way to measure or obtain data for the actual amount of money invested per participant in club sports. While I include socioeconomic status as a variable in an effort to control for this factor, it would be

useful to be able to see the actual expenditures on club sports from those who participate. These changes will likely affect the results of the regression.

The final regression model results can be seen in Table 2 below.

### Results

My regression model predicts COLLEGESPORT as a function of CLUBSPORT and BYSEX, BYRACE, BYSTLANG, BYFCOMP, BYSES1QU, BYSES2QU, and HSSPORT. My regression output and results are described in Table 2 below.

Table 2

VARIABLES	(1) COLLEGESPORT	p-values
CLUBSPORT	0.0519 (0.00556)	0.000
BYSEX	-0.00957 (0.00524)	0.068
BYRACE	-0.00352 (0.00153)	0.021
BYSTLANG	0.00662 (0.00782)	0.397
BYFCOMP	-0.000159 (0.00143)	0.912
BYSES1QU	0.00861 (0.00643)	0.181
BYSES2QU	0.0117 (0.00641)	0.068
HSSPORT	0.111 (0.00350)	0.000
Constant	-0.107 (0.0143)	0.000
Observations	13,221	
R-squared	0.100	

Standard errors in parentheses

The regression coefficients, as shown in Table 2 above, are as follows: the coefficient for my independent variable, CLUBSPORT, is equal to 0.0519, which means that when a person played a club sport, their likelihood of playing in college increases by 5.19 percent. (I arrive at this conclusion because when using binary variables, the model shows the probability that the dependent variable equals one ( $Y=1$ ); for a binary variable,  $E(Y) = \Pr(Y=1)$ .) Other than HSSPORT and BYRACE, all of the other explanatory variables in my model were less effective on COLLEGESPORT. For example, if a person's sex was female, their likelihood of playing a sport in college was decreased by only 0.96 percent, and if English was their first language their likelihood of playing a sport in college was increased by only 0.66 percent. Participation in a high school sport, however, had the largest effect on playing a sport in college: participation in a high school sport increased the likelihood of playing in college by 11.06 percent. It is logical for participation in club and high school sports to have the largest impacts on playing a sport in college. Furthermore, participation in a high school sport may have a greater impact than participation in a club sport on playing a sport in college (in my study) because many sports do not involve club level participation. For example, almost every high school in the country has a football team, but club football is far less common – thus most people who play football in college probably played football on their high school team but not on a club team. While other sports, such as swimming and soccer, rely heavily on club sport participation for college recruiting, the number of high school sports that do not have a corresponding club sport likely outweighs the opposite.

I examine the p-value and the 95% confidence interval to test for statistical significance. These values show that the explanatory variables that are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) are

CLUBSPORT, HSSPORT, and BYRACE. Thus I can extrapolate that (a) whether a person played a sport in college is largely driven by whether that person played a club sport, whether they played a high school sport, and their race, and (b) the other factors do not significantly determine whether or not a person played a sport in college. Both participation in a club sport and participation in a high school sport were in line with my hypothesis of the factors that would most significantly affect playing a sport in college, but I also expected socioeconomic status to play a larger role. I did not hypothesize that race would be statistically significant, but this outcome certainly requires further examination and study.

The R-squared value, or the proportion of variation in the dependent variable accounted for by the explanatory variables in the model, is equal to 0.1003. This tells that the explanatory variables, as a set, account for about 10.03% of the variation in COLLEGESPORT. This indicates that my independent variable does not explain much in the variation of my dependent variable, and other factors may affect whether or not a person plays a sport in college. The value of the R-squared likely would have been higher had I been able to include "SAT Score," "High School GPA," the quality or exclusivity of the club, the type of sport, and/or the amount of money spent on youth club sports. The adjusted R-squared value, which shows the percentage of variance in the model that is explained by the inputs, reflecting the number of explanatory variables and the sample size, is equal to 0.0998; because this adjusted R-squared is relatively low, many of the explanatory variables in my model likely affect to some extent my dependent variable, but it is also likely that there are additional factors that will affect whether or not someone plays a sport in college (likely the factors identified above, such as SAT Score," "High School GPA," the quality or exclusivity of the club, the type of sport, or the amount of money spent on youth club sports in my model).



## Conclusion

The youth sports industry in the U.S., grown to almost \$15 billion, brings along with it high financial expenditures and potential payoffs for youth athletes, such as college admissions and scholarships. In my paper, I explore the benefits and shortfalls of youth club sports and the effect of playing a youth club sport on a person's chance of playing a sport in college. I find that when a person played a club sport, their likelihood of playing a sport in college increases by 5.19 percent. I believe this result stems from the benefits that club sports offer to youth athletes. First, club sports can often offer better coaching and a higher level of play than community or school sports, because most club sports require some kind of fee or a pay-to-play structure; this set up allows the clubs to hire better coaches and to compete with other clubs at high skill and competition levels. Second, youth and high school-aged athletes often participate in club sports in addition to their participation in high school sports; this extra time and practice likely improves the athlete's skill level in their sport, which leads to better recruitment prospects. Finally, clubs (especially exclusive ones or those which compete at very high levels) may offer their athletes specialized connections to college coaches or college sports opportunities, leading to better recruiting opportunities and giving club athletes a better chance of playing their sport in college.

The 5.19 percent increase in likelihood of playing a sport in college if a person plays a club sport is a statistically significant figure. I also conclude that there are a variety of additional factors, such as sex, race, English as a native language, family composition, socioeconomic status, and participation in a high school sport, that I included in my model that may impact whether a person plays a sport in college.

My study contains room for improvement. I was unable to include certain factors in my model, such as SAT Score, high school GPA, and the amount of money spent on youth club sports. I believe these variables would likely play a significant role on whether or not a person who plays youth club sports will also play a sport in college. The next step to take in this study would be to find a way to include these variables; such further study would be valuable and may offer youth athletes (and their parents) additional insight into whether or not youth club sport participation is worth the time and money invested.

Since families do spend substantial money on youth clubs sports, thus contributing to the growth of youth sports into a \$15 billion industry annually, my study is important because it shows a positive correlation between participation in youth club sports and participation in college sports. Athletes and their families can use the information from my study to determine if their time and financial expenditures in youth club sports are worth the 5.19% increased likelihood of playing a sport in college.

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