

THE RIGHT TO PLAY VERSUS EARLY PROFESSIONALISATION: A CHILDREN'S RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE ON YOUTH SPORT

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This paper adopts a children's rights perspective to examine the tension between children's right to play and the growing trend of early professionalisation in youth sport. It traces the evolution of the right to play in international law and documents how intensive training regimes and early specialization can compromise children's health, education, and rest. The analysis highlights how commercialized youth sports environments often infringe upon multiple child rights and conflict with the best interests of the child. The paper proposes a child rights-based framework for youth sport governance that balances the right to play with early professionalisation in sports. The analysis situates early professionalisation within the normative framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, with particular attention to Article 31 – the right to play. This approach places youth sport into a legal accountability framework, which requires these practices to be assessed against binding child rights standards.

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1 Introduction

Youth sports exist in a very interesting space between play and work. On the one hand, every child is entitled to rest, leisure and play as fundamental rights enshrined in international law;¹ on the other hand, modern trends show children being placed in highly structured, adult-style sports programs from ever-younger ages. In elite football academies, for example, children as young as six are recruited for multiple weekly training sessions, with formal club registration by age nine.² This is often referred to as ‘premature professionalisation’ of youth sport and it raises questions about the impact on children’s welfare.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is grounded in international children’s rights law. The primary normative framework we examine is the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. As such, it views the phenomenon of early professionalisation as a rights-relevant structural practice that intersects with multiple child rights. The main focus of the study is Article 31 of the Convention, interpreted in conjunction with the best interests of the child and the interdependence of rights relating to education, health, and protection from exploitation. This approach places youth sport into a legal accountability framework – therefor requiring these practices to be assessed against binding child rights standards.

This article explores the tensions between the right to play and the early professionalisation of youth athletes from a children’s rights perspective. It examines the evolution of the right to play in international law, defines what early professionalisation entails, and analyzes how intensive, specialized sports training at a young age may infringe upon various rights of the child - including the rights to play, rest, education, health, and protection from exploitation. It also considers the interests of parents, coaches, sports federations, and sponsors, and how they sometimes conflict with the best interests of the child. Finally, the article reviews regulatory responses and offers recommendations for aligning competitive youth sport with a child-rights based approach. This study aims to provoke a rethinking of youth sports models to ensure that children’s rights are protected even as their athletic talents are developed.

¹ United Nations General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

² Read et al., 2016, pp. 2295–2302.

The right to play has been progressively recognised as a vital aspect of childhood in international legal instruments. The 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the child proclaimed that every child “*shall have full opportunity for play and recreation*”.³ In 1959 the right to play was still viewed as part of the right to education. It was not until 1989, with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), did it become cemented as an independent right of the child. Article 31 of the UNCRC explicitly guarantees the right of every child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and age-appropriate recreational activities, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. In other words, play is not a luxury or mere pastime; it is a fundamental right linked to the child’s well-being and holistic development. Under the UNCRC, State parties are obliged to respect and promote opportunities for play and recreation. However, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has observed that Article 31 is often undervalued and under-implemented. In its 2013 General Comment No. 17 on Article 31, the Committee expressed concern at the poor recognition of the right to play in many countries, noting a lack of investment in play provisions and weak protective legislation.⁴ When governments or communities do invest in children’s activities, there is a tendency to favor organized sports and structured programs, whereas equal attention is not given to creating time and space for spontaneous, child-directed play. The Committee emphasized that unstructured play is as important as organized activities, and it urged societies to foster attitudes supportive of play for its own sake. It is important to note however, that even the Committee itself tends to neglect the right to play. At the time of writing this study, 646 Concluding Observations have been published. Out of all the Concluding Observations – 646 as of 30 December 2025 – only 132 explicitly mention the right to play.⁵ This number represents just 20%. This statistic reveals a limited focus by States and even by the Committee on the right to play within the broader evaluative framework of the Committee. The relatively low percentage of observations directly addressing the right to play suggests that, although the Committee acknowledges its importance, greater emphasis and a more in-depth examination of this right may be necessary in the context of the comprehensive development and well-being of children. It is noteworthy, that since the adoption of GC 17, the mentions of play have been more frequent than before

³ Principle 7. United Nations General Assembly, Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959).

⁴ Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 17 (2013).

⁵ The author of this study has conducted a detailed qualitative and quantitative review of all of the Committee’s outputs, the numbers mentioned in the article are based on this research.

– in the first six months of 2025 from the 13 Concluding Observations five explicitly mention play. On the surface, this might suggest progress - nearly 38% compared to the historic 20% average. We do have to point out, however, that the mention is fleeting and superficial and the formulation in all five cases has been almost identical with minimal contextual adaptation or legal depth.

In the case of Slovakia, the Committee *“reiterates its previous concluding observations and recommends that the State party strengthen its efforts to guarantee the right of the child to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, including by adopting and implementing play and leisure policies with sufficient and sustainable resources.”* (CRC/C/SVK/CO/6) A nearly identical recommendation appears in the case of Ecuador, with the only addition being a culturally sensitive clause: *“appropriate to the age and the culture of the child”* (CRC/C/ECU/CO/7). Honduras received a similarly worded observation, with a specific reference to children with disabilities - a rare and welcome gesture towards inclusion (CRC/C/HND/CO/6-7). Qatar received slightly more tailored language, as the Committee recommended continued provision of *“safe, accessible and inclusive spaces for play and socialization and public transport to access such spaces,”* with particular attention to children with disabilities and those in marginalised situations (CRC/C/QAT/CO/5-6). Norway was the only State among the five to be evaluated in light of General Comment No. 17, with a recommendation to strengthen measures for the inclusion of *“children with disabilities, children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and children belonging to ethnic and religious minority groups”* in age-appropriate recreational and cultural activities (CRC/C/NOR/CO/7). In contrast, eight States - St. Kitts and Nevis, Peru, Gambia, Eritrea, Romania, Iraq, Indonesia, and Brazil - received no mention of the right to play in their respective Concluding Observations, despite evident socio-economic and structural challenges in many of these contexts that are likely to impair children's access to safe, inclusive and accessible play.

So it is clear that even post-General Comment No. 17, the Committee's engagement with Article 31 is sporadic and inadequate. The right to play is acknowledged, but it is rarely examined with the same legal precision or urgency afforded to other substantive rights such as education, protection from violence, or child participation. The absence of qualitative elaboration or child-informed indicators in these observations suggests that the Committee may still view Article 31 as non-essential, or at best as a supplementary right.

The right to play in international law is linked with other rights and principles. Article 31 must be understood holistically alongside the right to rest and leisure (also in Article 31) and the general principle of the best interests of the child (Article 3). Play is foundational for children's physical, mental, social, and emotional development. Through play, children exercise creativity, imagination, and autonomy, and they process the world around them on their own terms. The UNCRC's recognition of this right reflects a global consensus that childhood should include freedom, enjoyment, and participation in age-appropriate activities – a counterbalance to the growing pressures of formal education, work, or other demands.

Significantly, Article 31 defines play broadly. It covers not only informal play (like games with friends) but also organized recreation and sports – insofar as the activity is appropriate to the age of the child and freely chosen. The Committee's General Comment highlights that rapid changes in society, including urbanization, violence, and commercialization, are impacting children's opportunities for play. For many children, especially in disadvantaged communities, child labour, excessive homework, or intense training schedules are encroaching on the time they have to play. This context is directly relevant to youth sports: while sport can be a positive outlet and a realization of the right to play, it can also become a vehicle for denying children a real childhood if it is pursued in a manner akin to work or exploitation.

2 Early Professionalisation in Youth Sport

Early professionalisation in youth sport refers to the phenomenon of children and adolescents engaging in sports training and competition at intensities, specialisation levels, and commercial exposure traditionally reserved for adult professional athletes. Key features of early professionalisation are:

1. Early Specialisation - Children focus on a single sport from a very young age, often to the exclusion of other sports or free play. This model, historically associated with Eastern European sports schools in the 1970s–80s, has spread globally.⁶ For example, youth tennis and gymnastics programs have traditionally pushed specialization before puberty, believing it necessary to achieve elite performance. Early specialization means young athletes might train year-round

⁶ Bailey, 2015.

in one sport, sometimes starting as young as 4 or 5, rather than sampling a variety of activities.⁷

2. **Intensive Training Regimes** - The training volume and intensity for child athletes in professionalised pathways can resemble that of adults. It is not uncommon for pre-teen athletes in elite programs to train 5–6 hours per day, six days a week.⁸ Such schedules leave little time for rest, school, or unstructured play. Travel for competitions and camps further burdens the child's time. In soccer academies, as noted, even 9-year-olds might be in what is effectively a professional training routine with multiple weekly sessions and high expectations.⁹ This intensity is far beyond ordinary extracurricular play and can lead to physical and psychological strain.
3. **Commercialisation and Monetisation** - Early professionalisation often interjects commercial interests into youth sports. This can include corporate sponsorships, media coverage of child prodigies, and the operation of youth academies by professional clubs with significant financial stakes. Some talented children sign contracts or endorsements in their mid-teens, and their market value becomes a consideration.¹⁰ In extreme cases, a 'talent pipeline' develops where children are scouted and even traded across borders for financial purposes.¹¹ The global football industry clearly demonstrates this: elite clubs invest heavily in academies to groom young players in hopes of finding the next superstar, a strategy driven by the economic and reputational currency of developing talent. This financial motive can place undue pressure on children to perform and produce results.

These trends are widespread. Across various sports – from football, basketball and baseball to gymnastics, tennis, and figure skating – there is a trickling down of the professional sports model into childhood. Cultural and economic forces fuel the trend: parents see potential scholarships or careers, coaches seek competitive success, and sports federations view youth programs as talent pipelines. As a result, the traditional notion of sport as play is at risk of being overtaken by a performance-driven mindset even at youth levels.¹² A performance model has crept into youth sports, treating young athletes like professionals in training.

⁷ Jayanthi et al., 2013.

⁸ Sabato et al., 2016

⁹ Sweeney et al., 2021.

¹⁰ Epstein et al., 2024.

¹¹ Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022.

¹² Matthews et al., 2026.

Notably, the vast majority of children in such programs will not become professional athletes. The odds of making it are extremely low. In global football, for instance, out of the millions of youths who play, only about 0.04% will ever play in a professional league.¹³ Even those identified as top talents in their early teens often fail to reach elite senior status. Despite this, the early-selection and high-investment approach persists, sometimes justified by the rare cases of prodigies who do become stars. This raises ethical questions: is it justifiable to subject large numbers of children to professional-style regimens for the slim chance of success? The welfare impact on the many who do not reach the top (and even on those who do) must be carefully scrutinized.

Moreover, evidence of harm associated with early professionalisation is accumulating. Paediatric sports medicine and psychology research indicates that intensive single-sport training from too young an age can lead to increased injury rates, burnout, and mental health issues, without clear evidence that it improves ultimate sporting success.¹⁴ Injuries such as overuse damage to growing bones and joints are more common in youth who specialize early, and their athletic careers may actually be shorter on average. Burnout – the loss of motivation and extreme fatigue from chronic stress – has also been observed in young athletes facing adult-like pressure and schedules. These concerns suggest that early professionalisation carries significant risks that implicate children's rights.

3 Impacts on Children's Rights

Paradoxically, while sports are a form of play, early professionalisation can undermine the child's right to play as intended by Article 31 of the UNCRC. The right to play encompasses child-driven, enjoyable, and voluntary activities. When a child's sport becomes a highly regimented job, the element of freely chosen play often diminishes. Training sessions, drills, and competitions orchestrated by adults may crowd out the time for spontaneous play with peers or relaxation. The CRC Committee has warned that an overemphasis on structured activities at the expense of free play is detrimental.¹⁵ A child in an intensive sports academy might spend all afternoon in coached practice and the weekend at competitions, with no chance to

¹³ Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012.

¹⁴ McGuine et al., 2017.

¹⁵ Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 17, 2013.

simply mess around with friends or engage in imaginative play. This not only violates the spirit of Article 31 but also can sap the joy that drew the child to sport in the first place. In extreme cases, sport ceases to be play completely and starts resembling work. Numerous child athletes describe their daily routines as exhausting and obligatory, not something they would choose if not pursuing a bigger goal. A professionalised sport schedule can mean a child has no genuine leisure time – no lazy afternoons, no weekends off, few holidays, and constant pressure to train or compete. The loss of leisure time violates Article 31 and can also affect the child's right to rest and sleep, which are crucial for healthy development. Furthermore, when sport becomes highly outcome-oriented, the child's agency in play is reduced. True play involves children's freedom to start or stop an activity, to invent rules, and to participate on their own terms. In contrast, early professionalisation often involves adults setting strict regimens and goals (win this tournament, master that technique, impress those scouts). The child's own voice and preferences can be marginalised, which implicates their right to participate in decisions affecting them (Article 12 of UNCRC). A child rights perspective would argue that the process of sports training must still treat the activity as the child's activity – meaning the child should have a say, and it should contribute to their enjoyment and development, not just serve adult or commercial interests. When this balance is lost, the right to play is not truly being respected, even if the child is technically 'playing sports'.

Besides the right to play, another right that is often impacted regarding professional youth is the right to education. Under Article 28 of the CRC, every child has a right to education, and Article 29 emphasizes that education should develop the child's abilities and potential to their fullest. Early professionalisation can directly interfere with schooling. Children who train many hours a day inevitably lose out on school-based education. Travel to competitions can cause frequent absences. Even when alternatives like homeschooling are provided, the quality and breadth of education may suffer, especially if the focus narrows to sport performance alone. The issue is so significant that child labor laws in other fields have mechanisms to ensure education is not disrupted – for example, child actors in many jurisdictions can only work limited hours and must have on-set teachers, but similar safeguards have often not been applied in sport.¹⁶ In many countries, a teenager could train 30 hours a week for sport with no legal oversight, whereas if they were working that many hours

¹⁶ Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022.

in a shop it would violate child labor laws. This inconsistency stems from the perception of sport as inherently good or voluntary, but it leaves a loophole where a child's education can be sacrificed for athletic pursuits without clear accountability. Denying or limiting education for the sake of sport violates the principle that children's growth should be holistic. Even if a young athlete achieves sporting success, an incomplete education can curtail their future opportunities off the field. Philosophers argue that children have a right for their future options to remain as open as possible, and excessive early specialization can narrow those options by excluding normal education and social experiences.¹⁷ As sports ethicist César R. Torres notes, "*education is crucial in keeping children's future open.*"¹⁸ In practical terms, as the statistics mentioned above bear out, very few youth sports prodigies will sustain a lifelong sports career and without adequate schooling they may find themselves with limited skills to pursue other careers. This is neither in the best interests of the child (a core UNCRC principle) nor consistent with their right to develop to their fullest potential (Article 29 of UNCRC) across various dimensions.

Another right that often becomes compromised is the right to health and well-being. Children's rights include the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24 of UNCRC) and the right to safe conditions for growth. Early professionalisation can endanger both physical and mental health. Physically, intense training and competition in growing bodies can cause injuries ranging from stress fractures to chronic joint damage. The culture of elite sport often encourages playing through pain and normalizes injury as part of the game. Researchers describe a culture of risk in sports where young athletes are praised for ignoring pain and continuing to compete.¹⁹ Mental and emotional health is equally at stake. The pressure-cooker environment of professionalised sport – high expectations, competition stress, fear of failure or letting others down – can lead to anxiety and depression in children. A Human Rights Watch Report (2020) on child athletes in Japan documented widespread physical and verbal abuse by coaches – children were slapped, punched, or berated under the guise of discipline, leaving lasting psychological scars (the report's title tellingly was *"I Was Hit So Many Times I Can't Count"*, capturing the routine nature of abuse).²⁰ While Japan's context is specific, similar testimonies of

¹⁷ National Federation of State High School Associations, 2024.

¹⁸ Torres, 2015.

¹⁹ Turkeri-Bozkurt & Bulgu, 2018.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, 2020.

maltreatment have emerged from youth sports systems in the U.S., UK, Australia, and elsewhere, especially in sports like gymnastics, swimming, and tennis where authoritarian coaching historically went unchecked. This also violates the child's right to protection from violence and maltreatment (Article 19 of the UNCRC) and can cause long-term mental health issues. From a children's rights perspective, the right to health implies that sporting activities should be made as safe as possible and appropriate to the child's evolving capacities. The International Olympic Committee and various medical associations have periodically issued guidelines emphasizing that youth sports should prioritize skill development, fun, and safety over competitive success. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a resolution urging that youth sports programs consider health, integrity, and even doping prevention as critical issues.²¹ The reality, however, is that the drive for early success can overshadow these concerns on the ground. Importantly, some sports governing bodies have started to adjust rules to protect young athletes' health. For instance, minimum age rules prevent children below a certain age from competing at the most elite levels, partly to prevent health risks associated with intense training during critical growth periods. The ultimate goal should be sport for development, not sport at the cost of development.

Perhaps the most striking child rights issue in early professionalisation is the risk of children's economic and commercial exploitation. The UNCRC's Article 32 protects children from economic exploitation and from being made to perform work that is likely to be hazardous or interfere with their education, health or development. At first glance, one might not label playing sports as child labor. Children join sports presumably for enjoyment or talent, not as breadwinners. However, when the conditions of youth sport mirror those of labor – long hours, physical risk, monetization of output, and the dependence of adults' livelihoods on the child's performance – the line begins to blur. A 2022 White Paper on child athletes argued that the work of children in elite sport 'meets the criteria for child labour' as defined in ILO Conventions and the UNCRC.²² Specifically, early specialization, high-volume training, and repeated high-stakes competition at a young age often involve economic exploitation (others profiting from the child's efforts).

²¹ Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022.

²² Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022, p. 6.

Consider the situation in certain football academies globally. Top European clubs have scouting networks in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, seeking talented kids. Some families (and local intermediaries) see a chance to 'export' a child to a wealthy club's academy as a lucrative opportunity. In worst-case scenarios, this becomes a form of child trafficking for sport. Reports estimate that in West Africa alone, around 15,000 children each year may be taken abroad (often to Europe) with hopes of football success, only to be discarded if they fail to make the cut.²³ Even within one country, the commercialization of youth sport can create exploitative dynamics. Young athletes might generate revenue (through ticket sales, sponsorships, or publicity) that they do not control or benefit from. In the U.S., for example, elite youth tournaments in basketball or football can attract massive audiences and corporate sponsors, yet the minors playing see none of the money. Another layer of exploitation is the loss of autonomy and dignity. When children are seen as investments, they may be pushed beyond safe limits or pressured to compete while injured. They might be denied basic freedoms that other children have, in order to protect the investment – for instance, not being allowed to engage in any outside activities that risk injury or being kept under strict control at training camps.

In summary, early professionalisation can run afoul of children's right to be protected from exploitation in several ways: by effectively using them as economic commodities, by making them work under harmful conditions, and by exposing them to trafficking and abuse. The fact that adults' livelihoods often depend on the work of child athletes (coaches' careers, agents' commissions, sponsors' profits) creates inherent conflicts of interest.

Recognizing these sports situations as potential child labor or exploitation is uncomfortable for many – society often holds an idyllic view of sports. But a children's rights approach demands we confront these realities.

4 Regulatory Measures and Guidelines to Protect Children in Sport

Recognizing the potential impact of early professionalisation on children's rights is the first step. The next one is to implement regulatory measures to protect children in sport. These regulatory responses should allow youth to develop their talents and enjoy competition, while preventing abuses.

²³ Guilbert, 2015.

At the level of national law, the concept of children as athletes is still evolving. Few countries have comprehensive legislation specifically tailored to child athletes. However, general child protection laws, child labor laws, and education laws can and do apply. For instance, many countries have compulsory education until a certain age – this legally requires young athletes to attend school (though enforcement in practice may lag when sports commitments intervene). Child labor statutes often define limits on working hours and hazardous work for minors; theoretically, if training regimens are deemed work-like, those laws could impose limits. Indeed, some jurisdictions have started discussions about classifying intensive sports training as a form of work to bring it under protective regulation. As of now, this remains more of an academic argument than a legal reality, but it's gaining traction. For example, authorities could mandate that any sports program involving minors for, say, more than 20 hours a week must be licensed and monitored for child welfare compliance (similar to how film productions with child actors require permits and tutors).

In certain countries, sports academies are monitored by education or sports ministries to ensure standards are met. Cuba's²⁴ and some European countries' sport schools are integrated into the education system, meaning the State monitors both schooling and training.²⁵ France has regulations on youth football contracts (the 'Aspire' contracts for young players tie training with education and limit commercialization until a certain age).²⁶ In the UK, after some club scandals, the FIFA instituted rules about how far from home very young academy players can be recruited (to avoid kids moving and boarding too early) and ensures clubs provide schooling.²⁷ In the U.S., high school and college sports are governed by associations that maintain amateurism rules – a controversial topic, but one effect was to discourage outright professionalization before age 18 or before finishing college.²⁸ One significant legislative move in the U.S. was the Protecting Young Victims in Sport Act (2018), which mandated reporting of sexual abuse in Olympic sports and effectively created an independent body (the U.S. Center for SafeSport) to handle abuse cases in sport.²⁹ Despite these efforts, many advocates note that sport has

²⁴ Darnell & Huish, 2014.

²⁵ Radtke & Coalter, 2007.

²⁶ Ligue de Football Professionnel, 2024.

²⁷ Professional Football Scouts Association, 2024.

²⁸ Staurowsky, 2014.

²⁹ U.S. Congress, 2018.

lagged behind other sectors in child protection. This indicates a need for more explicit legal frameworks. One proposal is to extend the concept of a 'child performer' to sports – similar to how child actors or musicians are protected by permits and work-hour limitations. Another is to treat elite sports training centers as entities requiring child welfare licensing, subject to inspections for child-friendly conditions.

International bodies such as the United Nations and Council of Europe have also weighed in. The CRC Committee's General Comment No. 17, though not sport-specific, laid out expectations that States create environments for play and protect against over-structuring. The Committee has in some country reviews addressed issues of children in sport, especially around exploitation. The UN Special Rapporteur on Sale and Exploitation of Children in 2015 notably mentioned sports academies as a new realm of concern, referring to cases where children are treated as commodities.³⁰

The Council of Europe passed a resolution in 2018 on fighting sexual violence in sport, and earlier had a recommendation on the migration of young athletes (CM/Rec(2012)10) which urged member States to combat trafficking of young sportspeople, educate them, and regulate agents.³¹ These kinds of high-level instruments, although non-binding, do signal political will. They often result in toolkits or cooperation to address the problems (e.g., FIFA collaborated with the Council of Europe to improve how it monitors minors' transfers, as referenced by a Council report).³²

One promising practice is to both educate and empower the young athletes themselves. Some programs, for example, teach youth athletes about their rights and how to protect themselves from exploitation or abuse. This aligns with Article 12's participation rights and helps counter the imbalance of power. Finally, there needs to be a conceptual shift: treating children in sport not just as future athletes but as children first and athletes second. This is essentially a normative stance. It requires all stakeholders to undergo a bit of a mindset change – to measure success not only

³⁰ de Boer-Buquicchio, 2018.

³¹ Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)10 (2012).

³² FIFA (2021), Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players.

in medals and contracts, but also in whether the child comes out healthy, educated, and happy.

5 Towards a Child Rights-Based Approach in Youth Sport

There is an inherent tension between child welfare and early professionalisation and reconciling this with a child-rights-based approach can be challenging, but achievable. Some *de lege ferenda* recommendations follow from the analysis above. They all aim to ensure that young athletes can pursue excellence in sports, while still enjoying their childhood and fundamental rights.

1. Embedding Children's Rights into Sports Governance - Sports organizations at all levels should formally commit to upholding children's rights. This means integrating UNCRC principles (best interests of the child, right to be heard, non-discrimination, right to development, etc.) into their statutes, rules, and codes of conduct.³³ Sporting rules should be reviewed through a child rights lens, with input from child rights experts and ideally with children consulted as well.
2. Establish Independent Monitoring and Enforcement - there should be independent oversight of youth sports programs, especially elite training centers.³⁴ Governments or cross-sector bodies could create inspectorates that visit academies and high-performance programs to assess conditions – checking on education provision, training hours, health services, and detecting any signs of abuse or mistreatment. Monitoring reports should be transparent, and compliance with recommendations should be mandatory.
3. Empower Young Athletes with Voice - A rights-based approach requires listening to children. Youth athletes should have platforms to express their views and concerns regarding their training and well-being. This can be done by establishing athlete representation in youth academies or national youth teams – for instance, a youth athlete council that meets with academy management. More concretely, every sport program involving minors should have a confidential complaint mechanism accessible to the athletes (and their parents). When complaints are filed, there must be prompt and appropriate action.

³³ Williams, 2006.

³⁴ David, 2004.

4. Prioritize Education and an Open Future Plan - Ensuring that sports training does not come at the expense of education is fundamental. Academies and sports schools must be required to meet minimum education standards. Governments and sports bodies should collaborate to fund and provide qualified teachers or flexible schooling options for elite young athletes – but with accountability for outcomes. The goal should be that every child athlete attains a basic educational certification and life skills. The EU's dual career guidelines can serve as a model to adapt even at secondary school level.³⁵
5. Regulate Training and Competition Intensity by Age - Just as child labor laws limit working hours, sports authorities should set evidence-based limits on training hours, number of competitions, and travel for different age groups. These limits can be created based on pediatric science (for instance, no more than X hours per week of intense training for under-14s, mandatory off-seasons, and at least one rest day per week, etc.).
6. Reinforcing a Culture of Play and Balance - Finally, and most broadly, the sports community should be reminded that children are children, not small adults. This includes resisting the professionalisation creep where unnecessary. For younger age groups, sport should be kept fun, diversified, and child-driven. Initiatives like the “Children's Sports Bill of Rights” proposed by some organizations (which includes the right to have fun, the right to play at a level commensurate with development, the right to qualified care and treatment, etc.) can be popularized to guide parents and leagues.³⁶

These recommendations all can be summarised with one sentence - view youth sports through a child rights prism where success means producing not only champions, but well-rounded young people. This child rights-based approach in sports would benefit not just the children but sport itself – athletes who are healthier and more educated tend to have longer careers and more to contribute back to society.

³⁵ European Commission, 2012.

³⁶ Aspen Institute Project Play, 2021.

6 Conclusion

Without a doubt there has always been a tension between the right to play and early professionalisation in youth sport. On one side stands the ideal of childhood as a time for free play, joy, learning, and growth. On the other side is the reality of modern sports systems that treat children as the next generation of professional athletes, subjecting them to adult-like training and pressures at young ages. This article has examined the legal and ethical implications of that reality. It is clear that early professionalisation can infringe upon children's rights, it can undermine their rights to play and rest, truncate their education, jeopardize their health, and even expose them to exploitation and abuse. Importantly, a children's rights perspective does not imply a death knell to competitive youth sport; rather, it demands that competitive youth sport be reimaged and reorganized with the child at the center. The interests of parents, coaches, and clubs must be harmonized with the child's interests – whenever they are not, the child's interest should be given priority as a matter of both law and morality. A child's sporting journey that enriches childhood can only be achieved if we decide to enforce existing legal standards, like the UNCRC Article 31's promise of play.

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