

2026



STATE OF SPORTS PERFORMANCE

HOW RECRUITING, NIL, SPECIALIZATION, AND RISING
EXPECTATIONS ARE RESHAPING YOUTH ATHLETICS



RESOURCES

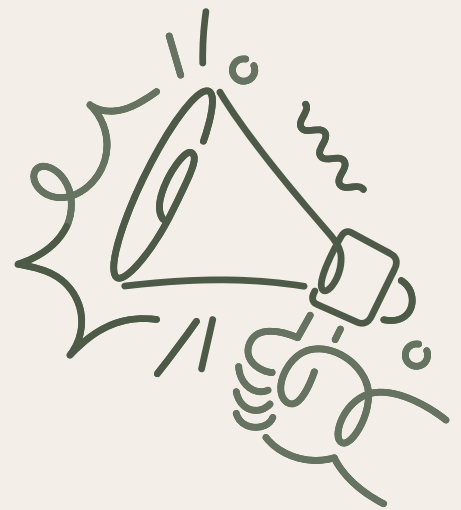


Youth sports is not simply becoming more competitive.

It is becoming more professionalized.

COMPETITIVE

PROFESSIONAL



THERE IS A BOTTLENECK

THE CENTRAL PRESSURE POINT IN YOUTH SPORTS IS THE NARROW TRANSITION BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE ATHLETICS. THAT PATHWAY IS CHANGING. YOUTH AND HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS NEED TO ADAPT.



SOURCES

WE PULLED DATA FROM OUR 500+ COACHES, NFHS, AND NATIONAL RAGS LIKE THE WALL STREET JOURNAL TO PRESENT THIS 2026 STATE OF SPORTS PERFORMANCE



COACHES FACE MOST THE NEW PRESSURE

THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT MODERN COACHING IS THAT COACHING DEMAND HAS INCREASED WHILE THE JOB HAS REMAINED BASICALLY THE SAME. IT HAS NOT.

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Overview



Recruiting, NIL, specialization, and rising expectations are reshaping youth athletics

Youth sports is not simply becoming more competitive. It is becoming more professionalized.

That distinction matters.

The pressure now surrounding youth athletics is not caused by one group behaving irrationally. It is not simply parents being too intense, coaches demanding too much, or athletes taking sports too seriously. The deeper issue is structural: the path from high school athletics to college athletics has become a visible bottleneck, and the perceived value of getting through that bottleneck has increased.

Recruiting, club sports, social media, transfer activity, private training, and NIL have changed how families interpret opportunity. Even when the odds remain long, the perceived upside now feels larger, more immediate, and more accessible. The result is a runaway expectations cycle.

This report does not argue that youth sports is better or worse than it used to be. It argues that the market has changed. The expectations placed on athletes, coaches, parents, and organizations have changed with it.

The organizations that understand this shift will be better equipped to serve athletes responsibly. The ones that ignore it will increasingly struggle to keep trust.



The Bottleneck



The Bottleneck Is Driving the Pressure. The central pressure point in youth sports is the narrow transition between high school and college athletics.

For decades, that pathway mattered. College sports offered scholarships, identity, social status, and, for a very small group, a potential path to professional competition. What has changed is the way families now perceive the value of that pathway.

NIL has made college athletics feel closer to professional athletics. Social media has made elite athletes more visible and more accessible. Recruiting content has made the development pathway feel measurable. Private training, showcase events, reclassification, and club programs have made the process feel more controllable.

The result is a cycle of escalation.

Parents are not necessarily acting irrationally when they invest more time, money, and attention into their child's athletic development. They are responding to a market that appears to reward earlier preparation, greater exposure, and more intentional planning. Athletes are not irrational for training more often when they see peers doing the same. Organizations are not irrational for expanding services when families are actively comparing programs based on development, recruiting support, and perceived opportunity.

No parent wants to be the only family that chooses patience if everyone else appears to be accelerating. No athlete wants to train less if peers are training year-round. No organization wants to offer fewer resources if competitors are promising exposure, development, recruiting help, and measurable outcomes.

The [Wall Street Journal's podcast](#) on the growing business of holding back eighth graders illustrates how far this logic can extend. The episode describes private athletic-focused middle schools and reclassification programs designed to give young athletes more time to mature before high school, with NIL and recruiting expectations pushing families to think about athletic advantage earlier than before.

The important point is not whether every family will choose that path. Most will not. The point is that these options reset expectations across the market. Once a few families pursue acceleration, other families begin to wonder whether patience has become a disadvantage.



Pro Youth Sports *

Youth Sports Is Becoming Professionalized. Professionalization does not mean every young athlete will become a professional. It means youth sports is increasingly adopting the behaviors, language, tools, and expectations of professional environments.

That shift shows up in several ways:

- more year-round specialization;
- more private coaching;
- more recruiting-focused decision-making;
- more family spending on development;
- more transfers between programs;
- more emphasis on measurable progress;
- more pressure on organizations to produce outcomes.

The Wall Street Journal's reporting on The First Academy in Orlando provides an extreme but useful case study. According to the article, one parent invested millions into a high school football program, helping fund major upgrades, new staff, travel, technology, and a roster transformation involving more than 30 transfers. The program rapidly became more competitive, then collapsed into regulatory controversy, forfeited wins, and lost playoff eligibility.

That story should not be treated as representative of every family or every school. It is not. But it reveals the direction of the incentives.

When the perceived reward grows, investment grows with it. When investment grows, expectations grow. Spreading pressure through the entire system.

Parents expect more.

Athletes internalize more.

Coaches are asked to deliver more.

Administrators are expected to explain more.

This is the professionalization of youth athletics: not merely better facilities or more advanced training, but a broader belief that every part of the athlete experience should be optimized.

Coach Pressures



The Coach Is Becoming the Pressure Absorber. The biggest misconception about modern coaching is that coaching demand has increased while the job has remained basically the same. It has not. **The job description has expanded dramatically.**

A coach is still expected to teach, motivate, build culture, and run effective practices. But that is now only the foundation. Increasingly, coaches are also expected to help athletes navigate recruiting, communicate with parents, explain development plans, define measurable outcomes, support strength and conditioning, monitor readiness, market athletes, and answer questions about where an athlete might end up.

In other words, **the modern coach is being asked to become part educator, part recruiter, part marketer, part performance analyst, part communicator, and part long-term development planner.**

The problem is the mismatch between *expectations* and *resources*.

A coach may be responsible for dozens or hundreds of athletes. The number of conversations increases. The number of data points increases. The number of parent questions increases. The demand for personalization increases. But the coach's time does not increase at the same rate.

This is one of the most important operational problems in youth sports today.

The market is asking coaches to provide a more sophisticated service, but many organizations are still supporting them with old systems: spreadsheets, group texts, manual tracking, informal memory, and after-hours communication.

That mismatch creates stress for coaches and inconsistency for families.

It also creates risk for organizations. When expectations are high but communication is unclear, families fill the gap with assumptions. Those assumptions can quickly become frustration.



Expectation Stack *

Young athletes are under more pressure than previous generations because pressure now comes from every direction at once.

Parents are investing more. **Coaches** are asking for more commitment. **Peers** are training more often. **Clubs** are competing for talent. Social media creates constant comparison. Recruiting creates earlier evaluation. NIL makes the line between amateur and professional feel thinner.

That combination creates what could be called the expectation stack. Each layer may be manageable on its own. Together, they change the athlete's daily experience.

Previous generations compared themselves mostly to teammates, opponents, and local standouts. Today's athletes compare themselves to the internet. They see professional athletes training, college athletes monetizing their brands, recruits posting offers, and peers sharing highlight clips. That visibility can motivate. It can also distort the timeline of development.

The **physical risks** are real. The [NFHS article on early sport specialization](#) summarizes research associating single-sport specialization with higher overuse-injury risk, burnout, stress, social costs, inadequate sleep, and loss of enjoyment. It also cites recommendations encouraging rest, recovery, multi-sport participation, and delaying specialization until later adolescence when possible.

The **mental risks** are equally important. When athletic identity becomes too tightly tied to future outcomes, every workout, roster decision, and performance can feel like a verdict. Development becomes harder when the athlete feels constantly evaluated.

This does not mean ambition is bad. It does not mean intense training is always harmful. It means organizations need to understand that athletes are not just training in a more competitive environment. They are developing inside a louder, faster, more public system of expectations.

Fighting for Trust



Youth sports organizations are no longer competing only on facilities, wins, or coaching credentials. They are competing for trust.

Parents are moving with their feet and with their wallets. They are choosing organizations they believe will give their athletes the best opportunity. That opportunity may mean development, exposure, coaching, playing time, recruiting guidance, safety, communication, or simply confidence that the organization has a plan.

This creates a new responsibility for athletic directors, club owners, school leaders, and administrators. **They need to define what their organization actually promises.**

Not every organization should promise scholarships. Not every program should market itself as a recruiting pipeline. Not every athlete needs the same pathway. But every organization does need a clear answer to a few basic questions:

- What does development mean here?
- How is progress measured?
- How are parents informed?
- How are coaches supported?
- What expectations are realistic?
- Where are the boundaries?

Without clear answers, parents will supply their own definitions. In a high-pressure market, that rarely helps.

The best organizations will lead with empathy in both directions. They will recognize why parents feel urgency, while also protecting coaches from impossible expectations. They will communicate honestly about long-term development instead of selling instant outcomes.

The next era of youth sports will reward organizations that can create clarity.



Our Take



The professionalization of youth sports changes how organizations operate. It should not change why youth sports exists.

At its best, **youth sports is still one of the most effective environments for developing young human beings.** It teaches athletes to set goals, work consistently toward those goals, handle setbacks, respond to feedback, compete with integrity, and contribute to something larger than themselves.

That setting is difficult to replicate. A young athlete is challenged individually, but also held accountable to a team. Progress is visible, but never automatic. Effort matters, but so do patience, humility, and resilience.

This is where technology must be handled carefully. **Technology should never replace coaches.** It should make their reach and impact greater.

The misconception about data in youth sports is that more data is automatically better. It is not. More data can create more noise, more confusion, and more administrative burden. Simple, actionable data is more valuable than endless measurement.

The purpose of data should be to help a coach answer better questions:

- What does this athlete need next?
- Who needs attention?
- Who is progressing?
- Who may be at risk?
- What should change in the next workout?

At Tully, the belief is that the future of youth sports does not require choosing between tradition and technology. The best path is a modern interpretation of tradition: preserving the human purpose of coaching while giving coaches better systems to scale their impact.

That means collecting a small number of high-value data points consistently, turning them into useful decisions, and helping coaches communicate with athletes, parents, and administrators more clearly.

The market has changed. The expectations are not going backward. The future does not belong to organizations that promise instant outcomes. It belongs to organizations that can **sustain development over years.**





What's your take?

Drop us a note and join the conversation [@tully_tracking](#)



RESOURCES

