



ARE WE FAILING OUR KIDS IN SPORT?

The hidden harm of talent bias - and how to fix it.

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now ON

Why do so many young people walk away from sport? The answer often lies in how we treat them – unknowingly favouring the talented few, leaving others feeling undervalued and disconnected. Imagine if sport were a safe space where every child felt seen, supported and inspired.

Sport, when done well, offers immense benefits to individuals and communities. It enhances physical and mental wellbeing, strengthens social bonds, and can greatly improve life satisfaction. It's known that for every \$1 invested in community sport, \$7 is returned in direct economic benefits, including healthcare savings and educational gains. ([Australian Sports Commission](#)).

Knowing the profound benefits of sport to individuals, communities, and society, we surely must recognise that access is not a privilege. [The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) affirms that *every child has the right to engage in play and recreational activities*, recognising these as essential to their development and wellbeing. Sport *should* be one of the most powerful and accessible vehicles for fulfilling this right.

Yet despite the value we place on it, up to 70% of Australian teens drop out of organised sport by their mid-teens. According to the [AusPlay survey](#), only 17% of children and 22% of adults meet recommended physical activity levels. These numbers reveal a critical issue: our current sports systems are not delivering on their promise to all participants.

Where are we going wrong?

Let's revisit the qualifier in my opening statement: "Sport, when done well offers immense benefits..." We must not be complacent in assuming that sport is inherently 'good'. One Australian [survey](#) found that 82% of children reported experiencing some form of violence (psychological, physical and/or sexual) in community sport.

Beneath more overt behaviours such as bullying, harassment and discrimination- too commonly reported across all settings, ages and stages - lies a deeply engrained, competitive culture. Australians *love* to win. This obsession has subtly fostered behaviours that- deliberately or not - cause many participants to experience shame, intimidation and a profound sense of inadequacy.

Feelings that can push them away from sport long before they have the words and ability to express them. The normalisation of these behaviours adds to the reluctance to disclose these experiences until years later ([Journal of Pediatrics](#)).

So how do we uncover these unspoken feelings and trace their causes before children are lost to sport? The answer surely cannot rely on traditional reporting and complaints systems alone. We must look beyond the surface, proactively tuning into the real experiences of our youth.

Talent bias hides in the participant experience

[From Now On – Sport for Impact](#) facilitates active listening to both engaged and disengaged participants. With eyes, ears and hearts open, we help sports organisations and clubs pay close attention to their participants' experiences in sport. This approach allows us to uncover patterns, identify unspoken challenges and ensure the participant experience is at the heart of every component of sport design and delivery.

Through active listening - including surveys, focus groups and consultations- we've identified behaviours so prevalent they've come to be seen as "just a part of sport". But when we truly examine their effects, particularly as they compound over months and across seasons, we see they carry real weight and lasting consequences.

At the core, these behaviours are forms of preferential treatment. That is the practice of giving certain participants - typically those perceived as more talented or physically adept - greater opportunities, attention and resources, often at the psychological cost of those left out.

Academia confirms this: children who perceive favouritism in sports environments, whether through team selection, special privileges, or extra resources for top players, often suffer from diminished self-worth and a loss of enjoyment in sport. They start to equate their self-worth with their ability, which can lead to dropping out altogether. ([Brandon University](#))

Acts of Preferential Treatment - And Their Alternatives

Our work in active listening has helped identify several forms of preferential treatment that appear to be closely associated with these indicators of withdrawal. By tuning in to their impacts on children, we can spark greater awareness and encourage a renewed commitment to keeping all children engaged in sports – not just the talented few.

Here are some examples to look out for, alongside some alternatives we can consider.

1 The Drill *When Winning Leaves Others Behind*

Training drills are often structured so that the winner stays in play while the loser rotates to the back of the line. This setup grants more development time to some, while others are left waiting, getting bored and disengaging while watching their peers thrive. Over time, they may internalise that they are less capable, leading to a decline in self-confidence and enjoyment of sport.

Alternative: Structure drills so that all participants rotate evenly, ensuring equal playing time. This inclusive approach helps every child build skills and remain engaged, fostering a more supportive learning environment.



2 The Bench *Missing the Action; Missing the Growth*

When equal game time gives way to favouring stronger athletes, children on the bench receive a clear signal about their value to the team. Not only does additional bench time breed boredom, it can damage the ego and erode a child's feeling of connection to the team. Furthermore, when 'benching' players is used as a consequence for mistakes or underperformance, children may start associating participation with an opportunity to fail rather than to grow and have fun. This can increase feelings of inadequacy, stifle development and make sport less enjoyable.

Alternative: Implement equal game time policies for all participants- especially in youth leagues- affirming that everyone's contributions matter. Carefully consider the consequences and objectives of the game/league before allowing unequal game time to be introduced.



3 The Academy

Picking Talent Too Early

Some teams split children based on perceived talent as early as eight, despite evidence that elite talent cannot be reliably predicted at such a young age. Friendships are divided up in an environment where 'playing with friends' is a primary motivator. Chosen participants receive more intensive coaching and resources- while risking early burnout. For players not selected, this division can be demoralising. They often endure frequent and heavy defeats from the 'Academy' teams and eventually turn their backs on a culture that clearly favours performance above participation. **Brandon University**

Alternative: Encourage mixed-ability training groups that provide development opportunities for all children, regardless of skill level. This inclusive approach fosters a sense of belonging and growth, supporting longer-term engagement. Ultimately, the talent pool naturally widens as children are nurtured to play through all stages of their development until they reach an age and stage where talent identification actually becomes feasible.



4 The Race

Ranking Over Development

Events like school athletics and swimming carnivals rank children based on speed or strength. This implicitly categorises children based on their genetic ability and stage of physical development alongside the opportunities they've been afforded to develop skills. All things outside of most children's control. Children quickly internalise their 'place' in the lineup, which is often perceived as a fixed status rather than a development opportunity. For those not amongst the winning few, feelings of inadequacy may fester, especially when they see their peers receive public accolades. Additional development opportunities, such as representative pathways, further widen the gap.

Often, these carnivals are amongst our children's first touchpoints with organised sport, setting the tone of their future relationship with it.

Alternative: Emphasise effort, personal improvement and team games above individual rankings to encourage all children to feel capable and valued.



5 The Try-Outs

Rejection at First Sight

Many children's first exposure to a sport involves high-stakes tryouts. Children who don't perform well during these initial assessments may be cut or placed in lower-level groups. This early rejection can sow the seeds of self-doubt before they've even had a chance to explore their abilities or develop basic skills.

Alternative: Run introductory sessions to build skills and confidence, helping children feel comfortable before they compete. Coaches can then evaluate potential over time.



6 The Awards

When Talent Wins, Others Lose

Whilst youth sports are improving at recognising equitably in the earlier years, it's not long before awards start flowing more strongly in favour of the 'talented' players. This tendency to celebrate and reward only the highest performers sends an implicit message about the importance of sporting prowess in our society, framing the contributions of others as less meaningful. For children consistently missing out, this further erodes self-belief and means many players don't receive vital recognition and support that's so strongly correlated with their ongoing engagement with sport.

Alternative: If awards are to be used, ensure the celebration of a wide range of attributes—not just athletic prowess, but effort, improvement, teamwork, and respectful play. This approach reinforces that sport is not only about excelling in performance but also about growth, resilience, and camaraderie. More children have a chance of recognition.



A Culture of Care - Ensuring No Harm In Sport

Whilst we consider this crucial matter of retention in organised sport, we must ensure that sport – above all else – does no harm. Whether victims of overt bullying, subtle favouritism or systemic inequities, children subjected to these experiences are not just missing out on the benefits of participation due to their departure from sport, but leave feeling belittled or ostracised during their formative years. We must redefine sport as accessible for all, not as a domain reserved for the talented few. Children aren't born to meet society's obsession with sporting prowess. They just want to play.

By listening closely to participants, we can challenge bias and create a sporting culture where everyone can thrive. Redefining what it means to win in sport would help not only our talent pool grow but also build stronger communities and improve the health and wellbeing of all involved. Sport, at every level, stands to be profoundly enriched through this reimagining of youth sports.

Where does your organisation sit?

Talent bias is rarely the result of deliberate exclusion. It emerges from the systems, structures and everyday decisions that determine whose experience matters, where resources flow and what sport defines as success. Changing those systems starts by listening differently. When we understand how participants actually experience sport – including those who leave, disengage or never feel they belong - we can identify where seemingly normal practices are working against retention, inclusion and long-term participation.

The [Participant-Led Systems](#) article expands on the broader framework behind this thinking, exploring how sport can shift its resources, accountabilities, capabilities and strategies around the people it exists to serve.

If you'd like to explore what a more participant-led approach could look like in your organisation, get in touch at anna@fromnowon.com.au to book a free 30-minute diagnostic conversation.

About the Author

Anna Walker is Founder and Director of From Now On, a sport participation consultancy working at the intersection of participation, inclusion, data and impact. With more than 25 years' experience across National Sporting Organisations, government agencies and community sport systems in Australia and internationally, Anna brings a rare combination of system-level thinking, deep respect for the realities of clubs and volunteers, and an ability to translate lived experience into executive and board-ready insight.

Anna's career has spanned strategy development, program design and policy advice across more than 40 sports in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands and England. This perspective - shaped by frontline conversations with participation leaders and firsthand observation of how early decisions in sport systems shape who feels welcome and who quietly opts out - informs her current work helping sport organisations design systems that value participation as much as performance, retention as much as recruitment, and experience as much as access.

She established From Now On to address a challenge she witnessed repeatedly across different contexts: sport systems designed for outcomes they were never structured to deliver. The Participant-Led Systems framework emerged from this work - combining international evidence, organisational theory and practical partnerships with organisations and leaders to test how systems change translates into sustained participation growth.



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