

Contact: Jessica Bukowski

jbukowsk@usc.edu

Leveling the Playing Field: Expanding Access to Youth Sports Through Sustainability

By Lauren Hobart, CEO, DICK'S Sporting Goods

Even if you can't tell the difference between an alley-oop and a layup, you probably know who LeBron James is.

Despite being widely regarded as one of the greatest basketball players of all time, during his MVP acceptance speech after winning the 2013 NBA Finals, James said, "I am not even supposed to be here." It is remarkable that, while James faced housing instability growing up, he still found a way to access the resources needed, the coaching, equipment, transportation and more, to become the star he is today.

Now, one must wonder: how many James-level superstar athletes have we missed out on because they lacked access to comfortable basketball shoes, a proper-fitting baseball glove, or a high-quality tennis racket?

At the same time, how much perfectly adequate sports equipment goes to waste when it is no longer needed, contributing to an unsustainable cycle of waste?

The burden of sports costs is not only falling on young athletes, but also on the broader environment all young athletes share: the Earth. Repurposing sporting equipment must be prioritized to give opportunities to young athletes and to support the well-being of the world they live in.

Youth Sports Equipment Burdens Families With Expenses:

About 27.3 million children in the U.S. play sports. Most sports, especially at a competitive level, require specialized clothing, shoes, and equipment, causing families to [spend an average of \\$1,000](#) on a child's main sport. As many families struggle to make ends meet for their children's essential needs, spending over \$200 on a baseball bat is no easy purchase.

It is no surprise that income-based access to youth sports is widening. In 2024, participation among children from high-income families exceeded that of low-income households by 20%, with [low-income kids playing roughly half as much as those from wealthier families](#). As youth sports costs rise and families cut back on nonessential spending, the future of young athletes is at urgent risk due to economic barriers to entry.

Wasted Athletic Gear Creates a Costly, Unsustainable Cycle:

If there's one constant among children, it is that they are always growing—out of their sports uniforms and sometimes out of their interests. While much of this no-longer-needed athletic gear and equipment is perfectly usable, about [85% of clothing ends up in landfills](#). At the same time, families in need are buying brand-new athletic clothing and equipment. With current consumption trends, textile manufacturing-related [greenhouse gas emissions are on track to increase by 60% by 2030](#).

Bridging the Gap Between Unused Gear and Families in Need Via The Circular Economy:

The circular economy is an economic model focused on reducing waste through repurposing. Buying high-quality items allows them to last longer, and once they are no longer needed, they can be recycled, reused, or refurbished. This reduces the environmental damage and greenhouse gas emissions associated with production, while also allowing gently used products to be purchased at discounted prices.

DICK'S Sporting Goods saw an opportunity to utilize the circular economy through its [partnership with SidelineSwap](#), a company that has enabled over one million athletes to trade and resell used gear. Not only is this partnership setting an example for sustainability in the sports industry, but it is also reducing costs for families with young athletes. Since U.S. households are sitting on approximately \$20 billion of unused sports gear, this partnership allows athletes to earn a gift card for their used items while enabling those items to be resold at a great value, breaking down barriers to entry.

This partnership aligns with the mission of the [DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation](#), which aims to inspire and enable youth sports participation through programs and accessibility grants. Because no young athlete should have to settle for low-quality equipment or be excluded from playing entirely due to cost.

It is imperative that we prioritize opportunities for young athletes, as sports have the power to transform even a young boy living in poverty in Akron, Ohio, into an NBA MVP. Our youth deserve the opportunity to chase their dreams, and to have the resources they need to pursue them.

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Strategy Note:

One reason I chose to highlight the DICK'S partnership with SidelineSwap is the limited awareness of this initiative and how closely it aligns with DICK'S Sporting Goods' values of championing young athletes. Additionally, as consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability in their purchases, this partnership presents an opportunity to connect those two ideas. I gave the CEO a conversational tone throughout to reflect DICK'S approachability as a brand, engaging readers through a friendly voice, the recognizable story of LeBron James and an appeal to those who care about equity and youth.