

Fostering A Positive, Safe and Brave Culture for Youth in Sport

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Table of Contents

Fostering A Positive, Safe and Brave Culture for Youth in Sport	1
Project Contributors.....	2
Introduction	5
Background	6
Research Goals and Questions.....	10
Methodology.....	10
Key Insights & Opportunities for Change	14
Argonaut Rowing Club.....	15
Ausome Ottawa	20
Toronto Football Club (TFC) Academy.....	25
University of Toronto BIPOC Varsity Association (BVA).....	29
Discussion	32
(Re)defining What Safe Sport Means to Youth.....	32
Operationalizing Positive, Safe and Brave Spaces for Youth in Sport	33
The “How” of Change.....	34
Co-Creation, From Insight to Action.....	35
What is Next?.....	36
References	37

Introduction

The research project, “Fostering A Positive, Safe and Brave Culture for Youth in Sport,” explores youth and organizational provider perspectives on how sports in Ontario can foster positive and inclusive environments for youth through intersectional understandings of race, gender, (dis)ability, income and geography and within youth sports environments. The project also produced actionable change tactics and recommendations, co-created with youth, and designed to overcome barriers to quality sport participation and foster optimal, safe sport cultures that allow youth to develop and thrive.

The research builds on the existing needs emerging from three annual Change the Game youth population surveys administered in collaboration with the research partner, MLSE LaunchPad, a community-based Sport for Development (SFD) organization that has, since opening in 2017, reached over 50,000 youth who face barriers to positive development. Survey insights highlighted the potential for youth-led SFD approaches to address youth sport culture issues and challenges associated with inclusion and safety for girls and young women, racialized youth including Black youth, Indigenous youth, and other racialized youth, children and youth with disabilities (CYD), and youth from low-income households.

Following a mixed-methods analysis of the 2023 Change the Game survey, the team engaged youth alongside four external providers of different types and levels of sport within a qualitative, participatory-based study, to explore challenges and co-create practical recommendations and practice changes within the operations of the participating organizations. The qualitative analysis followed an inductive approach to identify significant themes from transcribed data obtained through interviews and focus groups with youth and stakeholders from the four sport provider organizations. This analysis aimed to develop actionable recommendations and intervention strategies directly informed by both the youth needs and experiences, as well as the operational contexts of providers.

Stakeholders shared perspectives, challenges, and ideas, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of what an ideal safe sport environment means to them, and what might be the next practical steps toward realizing these goals within their operational context.

Background

MLSE LaunchPad and other providers of youth sport programs and initiatives require increased research capacity to develop policies, practices, and programs that are more inclusive and effective in advancing equity and developing positive cultures. For example, recent studies have found that racism and discrimination remain prevalent in the youth sport, community sport and SFD sectors and that an anti-racist approach is required for the youth sport, community sport and SFD sectors to achieve equity and inclusion (Long and Spracklen, 2010; Darnell, 2012; Joseph, 2017). Prior to this project, the partners had collaborated (since 2020) on an annual survey-based research program that has generated learnings consistent with the previous findings (see Norman et al., 2023-in press).

The qualitative, participatory action study reported in this document was intended to build upon these Change the Game research collaborations, and a partnership between MLSE LaunchPad and the University of Toronto, and was directly informed by the key insights and themes emerging from multiple years of survey data. MLSE LaunchPad's research team initiated the Change The Game research project based on a need for data to inform post-COVID-19 plans for 'rebuilding' the youth sport sector, and a desire to create evidence-based, return-to-play plans that would reflect the current and emergent needs and experiences of youth and families in Ontario. Over 25,000 youth and parents/guardians have engaged with Change the Game surveys since 2021 on themes of access, engagement, equity, culture and safety in sport, and from a representatively diverse sample across the intersections of age, race, gender, ability, geography and household income.

The 2021 Change the Game survey, for example, which drew on more than 7000 youth responses, found that more than 1 in 3 Black youth, 1 in 4 Indigenous youth, and 1 in 5 BIPOC youth have directly experienced racism or discrimination in sport. The 2022 follow-up Change the Game survey of more than 8000 youth, published in MLSE's Change the Culture, Change the Game report (available at <https://www.mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research>), found that 82% reported not having anyone they feel they can talk to about experiences with racism or discrimination in sport. The study further confirmed representation and inclusion to be necessary, with girls and young women, Black and other BIPOC-identifying youth, and CYD all stating that they want "coaches who look like me," "peers and teammates that accept who I am," and to be part of "organizations that respect my culture." (Change the Game, 2021; Change the Game, 2022). These experiences are connected to broader systemic barriers in Canadian society, in which white, middle-class, and non-disabled people are considered normative and enjoy a stronger claim to Canadian identity and public resources. Set following the administration of the third Change the Game youth population survey, the project reported here was intentionally designed to extend the results of the Change the Game surveys into a participatory process that could identify potential reforms concerning youth sport culture, and produce results practical enough for participating sport organizations within Canada to be able to pilot and act upon, aligning reforms with the specific needs as identified by youth.

The study further sought to fill specific gaps in the sociological literature on sport and Sport for Development, first, by shifting the focus of research away from a narrow focus on the benefits and outcomes of sport and toward a more critically informed assessment of how to rebuild and reform sport programming and environments, informed by EDI and the concept of intersectionality. To date, Sport for Development research has mainly focused on monitoring and evaluation (Coalter, 2010, 2013), as well as assessing whether or how such programs are effective in meeting their stated development goals. This study, by contrast, was aligned with growing calls to help re-design sport programs, opportunities,

and cultures further ‘upstream,’ make suggestions for how youth sport can be more inclusive, and respond to calls for research that analyzes the organization of sport itself in the context of inclusion, prosocial cultures and developmental outcomes (Darnell, 2012; Spaaij et al, 2014). In this way, it was meant to build on studies with a somewhat limited focus on measuring the impact of Sport For Development programs once they are completed.

The report embraced the ambivalence of sport and SFD from the sociological literature. Sport can be a powerful social formation with significant psycho-social benefits, particularly for youth (see Eime et al., 2013). Sports can also be important for the realization of inclusive social participation, as spelled out in the current Canadian Sport Policy (Canadian Sport Policy, 2012), but also become a strong force of social exclusion and marginalization. For example, while sport can support self-determination or inclusion, sport has also been found to reinforce male dominance and to be a site of racism, racial discrimination and the normativity of Whiteness (Darnell, 2007). Sport also often remains exclusionary along lines of social class (Collins, 2014) and ability (Silva and Howe, 2012). Against this backdrop, and the insights of the Change the Game surveys, a goal of this research was to support underserved youth in Canada in becoming more directly involved in the design and implementation of sport policy development, and practical recommendations because of how they have been excluded and marginalized in the organization and provision of sport programs, and the direct impacts of such exclusion on them. Thus the project aimed to build on the Change the Game surveys by centering the qualitative experiences of youth facing barriers and organizations, producing new knowledge and programming considerations to address specific priority needs and issues defined by youth.

The main theoretical underpinning of the study was interpretive sociology, which posits that the primary currency or data of the social world are the interpretations that human actors make about and in response to the structures and contexts in which they find themselves (Donnelly and Atkinson, 2015). Interpretive sociology relies on the notion of the double hermeneutic, in which actors make

‘interpretations about interpretations’ in a non-ending process of meaning-making and remaking. Interpretive sociology has a long history in the sociology of sport. It has illuminated how sport is understood amongst and by particular social actors, particularly given barriers to access and participation. Interpretive sociology has also shown and even insisted that sport holds different social meanings for different people based on their social location. For this study, interpretive sociology challenged the notion of sport as a universal language, an idea used in the popular rhetoric and justification of Sport for Development. Instead, meanings and understandings of sport are regularly interpreted by participants, which this research aimed to capture.

The study was also informed by a decolonizing approach to Sport for Development (Darnell and Hayhurst, 2011). Recognizing that SFD can be susceptible to colonizing practices where notions of sport are imposed on marginalized populations, scholars have called for a decolonizing approach that challenges social hierarchies through research. In this way, the goal of social science research is not only to understand the current sociological landscape but to produce results that can challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and class hierarchies.

Interpretive sociology and decolonization are particularly compatible with participatory research methods, which were the guiding methodological principle for this study (see Spaaij et al., 2017). Whereas in traditional, positivist approaches to social science research, the researcher controls the study and conducts research upon participants, in participatory methods, the research participants are active peers who contribute to the co-construction of knowledge. The ethos of this approach is that knowledge is co-created in ways that can genuinely and effectively produce recommendations and reforms meaningful to those whom it will impact the most.

Research Goals and Questions

As stated, the overarching goal of the project was to build upon and further develop insights from the ongoing research partnership between the University of Toronto and MLSE LaunchPad and to develop youth-led policies and recommendations for improving sport cultures and practices. It was designed to respond to the results of three years of Change the Game survey data, which demonstrated a clear prioritization and focus on inclusion, positive youth development, life skills coaching competencies, and mental wellness as key factors enabling youth' sustainability and quality of sport engagement. Participatory and action-oriented methods were employed to co-create new knowledge to inform policies, methods, and strategies for developing trust-based cultures and positive environments that recognize the intersectional diversity of youth in a cross-section of sport environments.

The research project qualitatively engaged an intersectionally diverse cross-section of youth and organizations from multiple types and levels of sport in a participatory process to identify potential reforms concerning youth sport culture in pursuit of what an ideal safe sport environment means to them. In doing so, the methodology set out to answer the following research questions:

1. Given identified barriers to participation and inequitable access to a quality culture for youth, what changes do youth participants want to see regarding their opportunities and experiences in sport?
2. To what extent could principles of Sport for Development be integrated into mainstream sport organizations to respond to the barriers and opportunities identified by youth, in positive ways?

Methodology

This research design was certified by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board (protocol 44871), and employed an intersectional and interdisciplinary mixed-methods approach over three

phases of work, with interpretative sociology and decolonization serving as theoretical underpinnings for the participatory research activities implemented. The three phases of this project qualitatively investigated how youth access sport, the quality of the culture and extent to which specific barriers impact the environments they experience, and then applied this knowledge to derive recommendations about how to improve programs and experiences for youth engaged with the sport organizations involved.

Phase One: From Survey Insight to Qualitative Planning

Phase One, which occurred between June 2023 and October 2023, leveraged data and insights from the third Change the Game population survey to inform the recruitment of participating youth and organizations and the development of qualitative tools to be implemented in phase two, including focus group and semi-structured interview guides with youth and key stakeholders from sport organizations.

Analyses performed on the Change the Game survey data included mixed methods analyses to create the foundation for designing the qualitative analysis component of the project. Descriptive and correlation statistical analysis examined the sporting experience in various youth sports organizations at different levels, including competitive, recreational, grassroots, and sport for development, and how access, barriers and quality of experiences were distributed according to intersectional factors of identity. Responses to open-ended survey questions of priority interest to phase two, including “What does an ideal safe sports environment mean to you?” were coded and consolidated into themes to inform the planning and development of focus groups and semi-structured interview discussion guides. Subsequent qualitative discussions to follow with organizations from different types and levels of sport were initially centered by a consistent conceptualization of what the idea of safe sport means to youth in Ontario, and what an ideal environment entails to support that definition, as identified by youth.

In preparation for phase two, four additional research partner organizations were engaged, in addition to MLSE LaunchPad, to further diversity the types and levels of sports and youth engaged in

said sports as part of the participatory action methodologies to follow. Recruitment involved an information package distributed by MLSE LaunchPad through sport networks, online social media platforms, and individualized information sessions or conversations with interested organizations to answer questions, clarify expectations, and review the ethics, scope and boundaries of the research commitment. Four organizations were confirmed as partners (in addition to MLSE LaunchPad): including Ausome Ottawa, Toronto Football Club (TFC) Youth Academy, Argos Rowing Club, and the BIPOC Varsity Association at the University of Toronto. In preparation for phase two, a pilot focus group discussion was administered with youth aged 19-29 from the MLSE LaunchPad community to solicit initial feedback on key study themes, enable members of the research team to pilot the draft discussion guide, and generate ideas to inform the development of final discussion guides for implementation with the four external sport provider partners.

Phase Two: Participatory-Action

Phase Two, occurring between October 2023 and March 2024, featured a series of participatory focus group and semi-structured interview discussions, co-planned and co-facilitated by youth, and including both young athletes and key stakeholders of each of the participating organization. An honorarium of \$50 was provided to each focus group participant or interview discussion participant.

An initial series of discussions were facilitated with 33 research participants between October and December 2023. For each organization, this involved:

- Ausome Ottawa: One focus group discussion involving eight youth and parents/guardians of youth, volunteers and front-line staff.
- Argonaut Rowing Club: Two focus group discussions, one involving six junior rowing athletes; and one involving seven organizational stakeholders including coaches, administrators, parents and Board Directors.

- TFC Academy: Focus group discussions with seven youth and two separate semi-structured interviews with a coach and a member of the management team.
- BVA: Semi-structured interviews with 3 BIPOC student-athletes at the University of Toronto, including one member of the BVA executive.

Discussion transcripts were coded, themed and analyzed between December 2023 and January 2024, and individualized summaries of insights and prospective areas of recommendation were prepared specific to each of the four participating organizations. Summaries specific to each partner were provided to each of the partner organizations for review and consideration, followed by an additional facilitated conversation that occurred between February and March 2024 with the representative leads for each of the four sport partners engaged. This was to discuss the needs and ideas emerging from youth participants, and determine the priority areas of focus for implementing an organizational action, intervention or reform to address a key issue or opportunity identified by youth.

Phase Three: Knowledge Mobilization

An insight-to-action approach to knowledge mobilization was employed across all project phases, and remains ongoing beyond the scope of the funded project period. Across phases one and two, this included translating relevant youth population survey insights into the development of qualitative discussion tools and mobilizing qualitative participatory-action insights with youth into the evidence-informed actions to be introduced and piloted by a diverse cross-section of sport organizations.

In January 2024, a Change the Game “Playbook” style industry report and publicly accessible data dashboard was released featuring a series of recommended plays for how to organize youth sport in ways that respond to systemic discrimination and increase positive internal cultures and perceptions of inclusion for youth. This was informed by both survey insights and the preliminary insights with qualitative research partners and youth. Reinforced by a robust earned media, social media and sport

stakeholder engagement strategy, promoted by the University of Toronto Centre for Sport Policy Studies and MLSE LaunchPad, the playbook was launched at a large youth sport symposium hosted by the research team, including a featured panel segment for the qualitative sport partners to reflect and share key issues, learnings and opportunities for improving sport access, culture and safety. The learning event attracted more than 200 youth sport stakeholders from across Canada.

Subsequent knowledge mobilization initiatives arising from the study remain ongoing and will carry forward beyond the scope of the granting period. These will include, at minimum, one scholarly publication, one industry publication, ongoing policy advocacy, and the continued amplification and reinforcement of critical learnings to advance wider uptake and practice relevancy across the sector.

Key Insights & Opportunities for Change

The discussion guide and approach intended for each qualitative activity provided a platform for open, honest dialogue for sharing individualized perspectives, challenges, and ideas, contributing to a richer, more comprehensive understanding of safety in sports. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and views on what safety meant in their respective sports disciplines, spaces and environments. This collaborative approach allowed for the emergence of a consensus operational understanding of what a "safe sport" environment means to them specifically, which underscored the importance of physical, emotional, and psychological safety alongside accessibility and inclusivity.

Emerging from these insights, a common language for describing what a safe sport environment entailed within and across organizations was established alongside a set of tailored areas of recommendation for each organization to consider. Specific areas of recommendation were analyzed alongside organizations to determine their relative priority, and in consideration of the diversity of capacities, resources and constraints specific to each organization's operations.

Conceptualizing an Ideal Safe Sport Environment for Youth

When asked what the ideal safe sport environment means to them, youth participating in the 2013 Change the Game survey called for a system that (re)defines safe sport, sport culture and associated reforms based on the diversity of youth perspectives in sport. For participants of the study, this meant zero tolerance for bullying or discrimination and a physically and psychologically safe and accessible environment where peers and coaches support youth to feel comfortable as themselves, have fun, and be there for each other in sport and life. The following sections examine and extend these survey findings qualitatively, in relation to each of the research partners.

Argonaut Rowing Club

A focus group with seven junior rowing athletes, plus a follow-up discussion with adult stakeholders of the organization, including coaches, board directors, parents and administrators, were facilitated to explore the concept of an ideal safe sport experience through the lens of junior athletes at the Argonaut Rowing Club (ARC), and ideas for how ARC can provide the most welcoming and inclusive community environment possible to encourage young athletes to stay active in the sport for life.

Implementing A Safe Sport Environment and Brave, Positive Culture for Youth

The concept of an ideal safe sport environment resonated with the focus group participants, who provided context about how ARC promotes a safe, positive, and brave sports environment for their youth. At ARC, the organization is actively working to implement a multi-year strategy to engage diverse youth and provide a welcoming environment in rowing that reflects the diversity of its wider geographic community and is consistent with this conceptualization. A culture of safety is further reinforced at critical moments when individuals are motivated to push outside of their comfort zones on the water

and in the offseason while actively receiving support from both peers and coaches in reinforcing a “we’re with you, and here to help you” mindset, regardless of outcome. In practical terms, rowing has also been defined by multiple junior athletes and adult stakeholders as both a late-adoption sport and the ultimate team sport, where safety and athlete-centered support are intertwined and defined by five keys to success for supporting junior athletes:

- The promotion of a community-based culture by all levels of the organization, where club members, new and returning, are encouraged to get to know one another, receive support regardless of whether they are recreational or competitive rowers, and take “ownership” of the club by learning about its member-developed code of conduct and living its values of taking care of its space, its boats and each other.
- Access to welcoming and physically safe spaces and activities to promote a try-it-and-growth-by-learning mindset, where coaches and leaders actively support athletes in learning from experiences and moments when they do not win. The leaders promote a balance between acknowledging that sport is a competition while intentionally reinforcing the club itself as a community where respect for each other is mandatory.
- Promotion of individual strengths to facilitate development and improvement at the pace of each rower and youth, reinforced by leadership role modelling and setting an example of support toward each other, starting from the top of the organization.
- Implementing the belief that rowing is the “ultimate team sport” that requires a strong understanding of who one is sharing a boat with and where coaches, leaders and teammates take the time to learn about each other and their boundaries to inform strategy, language, communication needs and development preferences. The leaders emphasize the importance of having respect for each other and their competitors.

- Leaning into its opportunity as a late-adoption sport that can welcome and support young athletes who may have left or been pushed out of other sports for safety or other reasons.

Opportunities for Change

The effectiveness of ARC at inclusively engaging and retaining youth across both recreation and competitive pathways requires consistency, individualized learning about each athlete as a person, and continued advocacy and opportunity-creation for youth to be exposed to and try its sport.

- **Thrive:** Whether through a combination of group discussions, surveys or informal moments, ARC is encouraged to learn about the life histories of its new athletes in sports outside of rowing to inform activities and approaches that help enable them to thrive in rowing. Stories and examples were shared from multiple athletes who discovered rowing later and are now benefiting positively from the community at ARC after having left other sports where they had experienced harmful, toxic or abusive cultures and relationships, including with coaches. While junior athletes passionately expressed how positive their experiences at ARC have been by comparison and how much the community culture at the Club has impacted them personally, several also expressed hesitancy in asking for help or raising personal challenges with coaches. When asked to reflect on something they would like to change, multiple athletes discussed their own comfort levels with asking coaches and leaders for help. They wondered aloud about whether they could be comfortable disclosing personal challenges with a coach when they do occur. While ARC coaches are held in high esteem and perceived to be of a high quality by study participants, it has taken some athletes time to re-establish trust in the positive potential of the role of a coach in their holistic development and it did not occur to participants until the focus group that they could be a helpful resource in a difficult moment.

Regarding next steps, in-season vs off-season engagement strategies are in development. ARC will develop a series of tactics to address the priority items emerging from the Thrive feedback emerging from discussions with junior athletes. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **In-season vs. off-season opportunities and approaches:** This includes healthy language and interpersonal on-boat vs. off-boat dynamics, with an intentional focus on developing coach and athlete relationships during key learning moments.
- **Coaching fit:** The club is currently working on building its team for next season, planning to incorporate research findings into its coach hiring, recruitment and development plans. In doing so, a recruitment objective will be the engagement of passionate coaches who prioritize trust with athletes in service of a more vibrant culture where athletes, coaches, other stakeholders and members feel comfortable approaching each other if they need support and subsequently receive support from each other while working toward both individual and team success.
- **DEI Committee:** The club is currently working on establishing a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee to further develop and refine strategies to promote trust between athletes and coaches, informed by the intersectional diversity of its athletes and members.

Secondary Themes

The following three points are opportunities to elevate the reach and quality of safe rowing experiences and environments for young athletes, emerging from discussions with both junior athletes and organizational stakeholders:

- **Welcome:** Review Club practices and approaches to intentionally ensure that a friendly and welcoming environment and experiences are afforded to all junior athletes. As relatively new athletes to both the club and the sport, study participants described how meaningful it was for

them to have older and veteran rowers take the time to introduce themselves individually, be available for questions, and share constructive feedback in quieter moments during both in and off-season. The off-season time can also provide opportunities for athletes and coaches to build trust and relationships. Spending intentional time together can improve athletes' and coaches' comfort with and appreciation for one another. In reflecting on what helped them feel like they were part of a wider community, seasoned members (whom they saw as role models) taking the time organically at informal moments such as these stood out as being particularly meaningful, with multiple participants also expressing a desire or recommendation for all junior athletes to feel similarly welcomed early into their time at the club. While the examples raised indicate the presence of a pro-social culture at ARC as experienced by study participants, the Club is now considering how its new member welcome processes and approaches can more intentionally impact all junior athletes similarly.

- **Promote:** Junior athletes and stakeholders can encourage Club leaders to continue efforts to implement its strategy to diversify membership, promote the club as part of the fabric of the wider community to which it belongs, and visibly challenge existing perceptions of the physical space as a place that people pass by without knowing what it is. Club stakeholders, including volunteers, coaches, Board Directors and administrative personnel, for example, spoke of animating different spaces and personnel, partnering and engaging with festivals and events in the wider community, and facilitating incentives (i.e. placement hours or volunteer credits) or opportunities for club members to engage as ambassadors in the broader geographic community.
- **Advocate:** Develop partnerships to support and sustain advocacy efforts to address long-term challenges with school and school board relationships. Fueled but not limited by the Pandemic, ARC has achieved increasing demand and positive retention indicators of success among new

community members who have tried the sport for the first time. Considering its history as a late adoption sport, a key to sustaining and building upon the momentum and trajectory ARC has been on with rowing is exploring avenues for a wider diversity of young people to “try it” and be exposed for the first time. Schools have been identified as a key strategic entry point for potential excursions, field trips, and collaborative learn-to-row programming partnerships, and the Club has worked to reduce financial and other access barriers while building relationships with individual area schools. However, partnership agreements and permissions with local school boards have been a challenge, and ARC is encouraged to continue developing a consistent approach to advocacy in this area, grounded in quality rowing experiences which are healthy, supervised and safe and where it can join and leverage partnerships and evolving coalitions to build synergies and quality relationships between school and community sport providers, and to ensure non-swimming water sports such as rowing are part of ongoing change efforts.

Ausome Ottawa

A focus group with eight stakeholders representing a mix of past participants, parents, front-line staff and recurring volunteers was facilitated to explore the concept of an ideal safe sport experience through the lens of Ausome Ottawa and its participants and stakeholders. This included ideas for improving the quality and reach inclusive programming in sport for youth across multiple cultures and ages.

Implementing A Safe Sport Environment and Brave, Positive Culture for Youth

The concept of an ideal safe sport environment resonated with focus group participants, who provided context about how Ausome promotes a safe, positive, and brave sports environment for their youth. At Ausome Ottawa, a safe sport environment is ensured when staff have opportunities to learn about, recognize and accommodate the needs of each athlete to help foster their individual strengths and improvement at their own pace. In doing so, staff and volunteers ensure that physical program spaces are welcoming, work to build a culture of inclusivity by encouraging young athletes to be themselves and building supportive relationships with them, and work to promote an ‘anything is possible’ mindset to youth and parents so that they can thrive in sport. In practical terms, safety and inclusion are intertwined at Ausome Ottawa and defined by five keys to success for supporting young people with autism to thrive in sport:

- Inclusive staff and volunteers are most directly set up for success through an intentional volunteer-participant one-to-one match to encourage and support individual youth to be as comfortable as they are while engaging at their own pace.
- Access to welcoming and physically safe spaces and activities to promote a “try it” mindset while mitigating injury or harm.
- Psychologically safe spaces rooted in healthy relationships and transparent communication between youth, parents/guardians, volunteers and staff.
- Promotion of individual strengths to facilitate development and improvement at the pace of each youth.
- Advocacy to youth and parents/guardians to challenge stigma and promote the belief that they and their child(ren) can thrive in any sport.

Opportunities for Change

The highest intervention priorities for Ausome Ottawa to further elevate the reach and quality of safe and inclusive sport experiences, environments and cultures for the diversity of young athletes with autism include:

- **Enhancing Multilingual Engagement:** Ausome Ottawa fosters a strong sense of community, encouraging connections between the athletes, volunteers, staff, and parents. This sense of community has allowed for the inclusion of athletes across different ages, abilities, and needs. However, the services, while of high quality, are predominately available in English, while the organization is experiencing increasing demand and referrals from multicultural and multilingual families. Therefore, the highest intersectional priority opportunity for Ausome Ottawa is to develop its capacity, reach and quality of inclusive programming for participants who do not speak English or have English as their second language. This leads to specific strategies and tactical reforms Ausome Ottawa is considering.
- **Ausome Online:** While many sports thrive in person, multiple participants expressed that Ausome's online content during the Pandemic lockdowns was impactful and engaging for them at home. The Ausome Online platform provided an opportunity to expand its reach and impact. It could offer youth the ability to participate in videos that can be translated into multiple languages through translation services or fluent volunteers for improved accessibility.
- **Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers:** Recruiting volunteers from similar linguistic backgrounds can help bridge communication gaps and better support families. Recognizing and rewarding volunteers through programs like "Volunteer of the Month" and providing incentives (e.g., recommendation letters, socials) can motivate and retain volunteers, leading to continued engagement of volunteers who can communicate with non-English-speaking families.

- **Open House:** Ausome could host a brunch for new families, featuring a panel of parents, staff, and professionals in the Autism field to welcome newcomers. This event could serve as an open community house, provide education, and foster a sense of belonging. By bringing together individuals with the shared experience of being impacted by ASD, the brunch could provide an opportunity for new families, helping them feel more integrated into the Ausome community.

Ausome could also extend the “try it” mindset toward the effort made with non-English families, with the understanding that not every tool or approach will work as effectively for every youth or parent/guardian. Examples of suggestions to consider as part of an initial suite of approaches identified by focus group participants include:

- Use of visual communication by consistently putting common words on the walls of physical spaces through stickers and portable posters in multiple languages (i.e. water, bathroom, simple phrases to convey great job or other strength-based language) that can be taken to any programming space.
- Incorporate into volunteer and staff onboarding the learning of a few vital initial phrases across the primary language at home, which can then be augmented by accessible translation programs.
- Include athletes’ and family members’ proficiencies in English and non-English languages to the athlete record to inform expanded recruitment tactics for new volunteers online, through social media, and with outreach to prospective organizational partners in secondary and post-secondary schools and non-profit cultural partners.

Secondary Themes

The effectiveness of the volunteer and staff pairing, or “match,” at Ausome is key to the safe, brave, and “develop at your own pace” youth experience that Ausome strives toward. Opportunities to further elevate the quality and impact of the match on the young athlete experience include:

- **Address gaps for youth aging out:** Mixed feedback was shared, with some stakeholders advocating for the transition to aging out opportunities, such as volunteerism and others who identified that not all alumni have the expressive skills required and may continue to benefit from programming support. Suggestions raised during this discussion include incorporating programming for volunteer-competency life skills into programming to intentionally prepare for *life after Ausome* at younger ages until or unless resources and capacity exist to offer an 18+ programming option for adults who may have aged out.
- **Maintaining Engagement:** A digital library of pre-recorded classes could elevate Ausome's reach and impact at home and beyond, enable repeat engagements, and provide an opportunity for youth aging out of the programs to access on-demand sessions to stay connected to programming beyond volunteerism.
- **Mentorship:** Providing a mentorship program with alums who are aging out of Ausome can help them stay connected to the program since many people mentioned that they have not found a safe community outside of Ausome.
- **Learn:** Consistently promote bravery and resilience among volunteers and staff, especially among incoming volunteers as they are onboarded. This means encouraging an early understanding that not every method will work the same for each athlete. Being brave and resilient also means that volunteers and staff should adopt a mindset of trying new strategies and tools to learn from and inform individualized approaches.

- **Document:** Updating individual data or records periodically after the long-form initial intake is important because the needs, preferences, frustrations, likes and effectiveness of individualized approaches can meaningfully change the longer an athlete is engaged with Ausome. Given that individuals' needs can change, providing an easy way to obtain and access up-to-date information can help to inform individualized planning, hedge for risk further, help onboard new volunteers or staff (if required), and help prepare for the transition as the maximum program age approaches. This information can be obtained more consistently through a simplified, recurring intake form or by building upon existing athlete records.

Toronto Football Club (TFC) Academy

Small group and semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven athletes from TFC Academy, in addition to individual one-on-one discussions with adult stakeholders of the organization. Objectives were to explore the concept of an ideal safe sport experience through the lens of young athletes at the TFC Academy, and ideas for how TFC can provide safe and inclusive player-centered care and programming to support their development in soccer and for life after soccer.

Themes of safe sport and brave cultures resonated with interview participants, who provided context about what the concept of safe sport means to them, how TFC Academy promotes a safe, positive, and brave sports environment for their youth, and feedback for the organization to consider incorporating into future activities. At TFC, players elaborated that their ideal sports environment involves a culture of joy, trust, and love, where peers, teammates, captains, coaches, and individuals at all levels of the organization support each other through goals on the pitch and support the individuality of each other as more than an athlete when off the pitch. In practical terms, a safe and player-care-supported culture can be embedded into the organizational structure, and players identified five keys to success for supporting youth and players to develop within soccer and in life beyond soccer:

1. Access to physically safe and well-maintained spaces with diverse supports to help players access the resources they need to perform.
2. The investment of club resources into holistic player care and support personnel within its organizational structure has enabled young athletes to have a clear understanding of who to go to access support and assistance with different types of needs (i.e., sport development, school, inclusion, life or personal development goals and challenges).
3. Access to timely strength, conditioning, and medical personnel to promote physical development and rehabilitation from injury.
4. Provision of ongoing training and professional development for coaches and staff on a spectrum of sport environment and culture issues, including but not limited to safe sport, EDI in sport, bullying and hazing, and a healthy return to play.
5. The intentional incorporation of Sport for Development programming that centers experiences and opportunities to develop players' readiness for life after soccer.

Opportunities for Change

The effectiveness of TFC at inclusively impacting youth and players in soccer requires consistency and care through learning about each athlete as a person, the implementation of development opportunities for its players in and out of soccer, and leveraging the power and privilege of its platform to affect meaningful structural change across the youth soccer system. Opportunities to elevate the quality, reach and impact of safe and inclusive soccer development for youth athletes at TFC Academy include:

- **Redefine:** Review Academy practices, approaches, training and development programs for opportunities to intentionally promote a culture that aligns with the holistic concept of an ideal safe sport environment as defined by players. Training and professional development modules

in safe sports, for example, have been more narrowly focused on general awareness of safeguarding and maltreatment in sports and implementation of safe sports response, reporting and accountability processes in the context of incidents. Yet, when reflecting on what an ideal safe sport environment means to them, players vocalized the language of love, inclusiveness, being viewed as more than an athlete and strength-based pro-social concepts which can support a culture of prevention and reducing the likelihood of serious safe sport issues occurring. There is a focus on creating a safe space for athletes to share personal experiences and seek help when needed, such as reporting bullying or discussing mental health. As mentioned earlier, this aligns with the goal of increasing athlete comfort and trust.

As part of the ongoing efforts to redefine what safe sport means at TFC Academy, the academy is developing and implementing strategies to foster a positive and inclusive culture based on the feedback from the focus group. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Addressing issues head-on:** Being blunt and honest about what discrimination and racism entail and discussing prevalent issues, such as homophobia and antisemitism, to educate them about how these issues can manifest in their surroundings and social circles.
- **Ongoing, consistent education about discrimination:** Consistent education about discrimination is crucial to eliminating it and confronting systemic issues rather than pursuing one-off efforts. For instance, the academy conducts presentations on various forms of discrimination, how to converse with players, and what language to use.
- **Sharing the Redefinition:** The organization expressed interest in Ontario Soccer implementing their redefinition of safe sports practices within soccer to best support athletes. It is important

to spread a broader message regarding safe sports in soccer, especially to community clubs who may have difficulty accessing information on this topic.

- **Inclusive Spaces for Dialogue:** Focusing on creating inclusive spaces for young men and young men of colour to discuss their feelings and mental health openly is important because it allows athletes to discuss how they want to be supported, what the barriers to speaking up about their mental health are, and how the organization can commit to continuously improving and addressing the holistic needs of athletes.
- **Document:** Whereas players spoke extensively about the value of being able to access Academy personnel to support with both school and individual player care needs and challenges, their experiences and feedback appeared to be specific to the particular support personnel involved. As EDI and player care, for example, are relatively new portfolio areas in the history of the Academy, ensuring impactful player-centered approaches and playbooks of support are reflected in documented policies and practices of the organization to help ensure their sustainability from others to learn from and adapt.

TFC Academy is also currently developing and implementing strategies for the long-term to sustain the culture of trust that their current manager of club engagement and academy player care has built and sustained. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Building guidelines for sustaining positive impacts:** Developing playbooks and guidelines for future coaches and the future manager of club engagement and academy player care is important to ensure their efforts to build trust with the athletes can be replicated. It is important to document the strategies they are currently using to build rapport and trust to ensure that the club's positive role models can continue to have a lasting impact. By doing so,

future leaders within the organization can learn from these efforts and work towards maintaining a positive culture in the long term.

Secondary Themes

The opportunity to elevate and promote the quality of capacity-building for young athletes emerged from the discussions with the academy's athletes and organizational stakeholders. This was seen in the following suggestion:

Promote: Integrate key insights and learnings from the Change the Game collaboration into sector capacity-building initiatives such as its Community Coaches Open House initiative to leverage the experience and platform of TFC to impact and influence how positive, safer, and braver approaches to youth soccer development can be realized across the system through the role of the coach. Players reflected extensively on the outsized influence of the role of coaches on the internal culture and “feel” of the team through role modelling (good or bad) of language and behaviours that trickle down through captains, leaders and individual players. In doing so, they further expressed a high regard for the off-the-pitch supports available to them at the Academy. They also shared that they have not always felt comfortable asking for help or raising challenges to coaches throughout their life journey in soccer, including on grassroots community teams and environments where an additional support structure did not exist.

University of Toronto BIPOC Varsity Association (BVA)

Three semi-structured interviews were implemented with University of Toronto BIPOC varsity athletes from different types of sport (football and track and field) to explore the concept of an ideal safe sport experience through the lens of BVA participants and stakeholders

and ideas for improving the quality and reach of inclusive programming in sport for youth from across multiple cultures and ages.

Building on the principles outlined in the Change the Game survey findings, the perspectives of BVA members further enriched the concept of a safe sports environment within the context of varsity athletics at the University of Toronto. For BVA, safe sport is not just about the absence of harm but the active creation of a space where inclusivity and security are paramount. This vision encompasses the physical, emotional and psychological realms, ensuring every athlete feels an integral part of the community. The approach includes a multifaceted strategy that fosters a welcoming atmosphere, provides anti-racism training, implements outreach programs, practices inclusive leadership, ensures effective communication, and maintains accountability through clear reporting mechanisms. Furthermore, BVA emphasizes the importance of educational initiatives to bridge understanding gaps among athletes, and cultivating a culture of mutual respect and empathy. This comprehensive approach underscores the belief that a truly safe sport environment is one where every individual is empowered to thrive, contribute, and grow.

Based on the insights shared by the interviews, recommendations have been crafted to enhance safety and inclusivity within the varsity sports community at the university. These recommendations offer intentional ways to build a safer, more inclusive environment where student-athletes feel supported. Fostering a culture where everyone feels valued, respected, and supported in their athletic journey requires collaboration among athletes, coaches, and institutions.

To address the challenges faced by student-athletes, BVA can take proactive steps to foster a more inclusive, sensitive, and safe environment in the sport community at the University of Toronto, within three main areas. The first, under the banner of Building Representation, includes the following ideas and steps:

- **Diversity-Driven Recruitment Initiatives:** BVA can develop and implement strategies to increase diversity among coaching staff and leadership roles. This could involve targeted outreach efforts and partnerships with organizations that support BIPOC individuals in sports.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Establish mentorship schemes where experienced BIPOC athletes mentor new members, fostering a sense of belonging and community. This initiative can help build a supportive network that encourages sharing experiences and challenges.
- **Inclusion Advocacy:** Actively advocate for and support policies that enhance diversity and inclusion within all leadership levels. BVA can promote policy changes that ensure equitable representation.

The second is the creation of clear pathways for reporting, in the following ways:

- **Robust Reporting Mechanisms:** Establish and communicate clear, confidential procedures for reporting racial incidents or discriminatory behaviors. Ensuring these mechanisms are well-known and trusted is key to protecting individuals and fostering a culture of accountability. It's also crucial to communicate clearly to athletes why they should report, and what will happen as a result.

The third is the need to addressing the culture of ‘playing injured’ through the following ideas and steps:

- **Educational Initiatives on Injury Awareness:** BVA can work on educational campaigns highlighting the risks of playing through injuries, emphasizing the long-term health implications and the importance of prioritizing athlete well-being over immediate performance.
- **Supportive Policies for Injured Athletes:** Advocate for and help implement policies that protect athletes' positions and scholarships during injury recovery periods. This can alleviate the pressure to play through injuries and encourage a healthier approach to recovery and sports participation.
- **Coach and Staff Training:** Provide training for coaches and sports staff focusing on recognizing and responding to injuries appropriately and fostering an environment where athletes feel safe to report injuries and take the necessary time to recover.

Discussion

(Re)defining What Safe Sport Means to Youth

When asked what the ideal safe sport environment means to them, youth participating in MLSE Foundation’s 2023 Change the Game survey called for a system that (re)defines safe sport and sport culture based on the diversity of youth perspectives in sport. For the MLSE Foundation and the participants of the Change the Game Research Study, this means zero tolerance for bullying or discrimination and a physically and psychologically safe and accessible environment where youth are

supported by peers and coaches to feel comfortable as themselves, have fun, and be there for each other in sport and in life.

The concept of safe sport is centred around the idea of safeguarding, which encompasses four key constructs: preventing maltreatment, preventing other forms of impairment, providing safe and effective care, and ensuring that every person can experience the best possible outcomes in sports. This final point is key to what differentiates safeguarding from other common prevention models of safe sport definitions, whereby safe sport means preventing negative outcomes from occurring. For example, the Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC) states that “safe sport refers broadly to athletes’ right to participate in sport free of maltreatment (such as bullying, neglect, and physical, psychosocial and sexual abuse) or any form of violation against human rights” (Sport Information Resource Centre, 2023). While this definition touches on important aspects of preventing harm, the results of this study build on and extend it to include proactive elements that are meant to enhance participant experience. Based on what we have learned from youth and partners in this project, the primary motivation for engaging in sports is to have a positive experience, enjoy oneself, connect with others, and create positive relationships. People do not choose to play sports primarily because there is no maltreatment; rather the absence of maltreatment is the minimum requirement and not the ultimate goal to which sport participants strive.

Operationalizing Positive, Safe and Brave Spaces for Youth in Sport

Although there was and should be consistency in how organizations define preventing maltreatment and other unsafe outcomes, there was a wide range in this study in their definitions regarding how to ensure that everyone can achieve the best possible outcomes. This was important because every organization serves a diverse youth population from intersectional identities. An environment where peers and coaches support youth to feel comfortable as themselves, have fun, and

be there for each other in sport and life is crucial. The findings of this study suggest that there needs to be consistent responses to maltreatment (e.g., trauma-informed for sexual assault), but also intersectional diversity in thought and approach which take into consideration the cultural nuances and needs of different participants to ensure that the best possible outcomes are sought. For example, Ausome Ottawa and TFC Academy are two organizations with youth whose needs differ due to their populations' intersectional identities. Therefore, their approaches to creating a positive environment and the roles of coaches and leaders differ significantly. The approach advocated for here would ensure that safe sport definitions fit the youth populations and cultures of each organization, providing a positive experience while consistently upholding a zero-tolerance policy for harm.

The “How” of Change

Individual areas of change and the recommendations cited above were designed to be adaptable and feasible for implementation across various sporting contexts. The recommendations focused on practical steps that could be taken to enhance safety, such as improving training for coaches on inclusivity and mental health, upgrading equipment and facilities to meet improved safety or accessibility standards, and implementing policies or practices that foster a culture of respect and support.

This comprehensive approach aims not only to map the current state but to understand the underlying currents that shape youth sports participation. It was an endeavor to bring to light the nuanced interplay of factors that either facilitate or hinder a safe, inclusive sports environment. The ultimate goal is to leverage these insights towards more equitable, engaging, and accessible sports opportunities for all youth across Ontario, and beyond.

In framing this report, the project's findings serve as a critical foundation, offering a lens through which to scrutinize and understand the challenges and opportunities within the youth sport

ecosystem. It sets the stage for a deeper exploration of what it means to create a sporting environment that not only welcomes but nurtures every young individual, irrespective of their background. This report aimed to distill these insights into actionable recommendations, charting a course toward a future where every child in Ontario can play, engage, and thrive in a safe and supportive sports setting.

Co-Creation, From Insight to Action

The culmination of the Change the Game project, embodied in this report, marks a potentially pivotal moment in the ongoing journey towards realizing a safer, more inclusive, and equitable sports landscape for the youth of Ontario. The findings and recommendations distilled from the voices of over 25,000 diverse participants are not merely observations; they are a call for transformative action. They shed light on the nuanced barriers to access, engagement, and equity that many young athletes face, offering a roadmap to dismantle these obstacles and foster environments where every child has the opportunity to thrive through sport. Beyond this deficit-oriented focus, this research report identifies and proposes promising, context-specific tactics and strategies for addressing fundamental issues in real-life youth sport settings – concrete approaches that are likely transferable to other settings.

At its heart, this project is about more than sports, but also focuses on communities becoming more accepting, supportive, and empowering. The playbook-style menu of recommendations is designed to provide a strategic framework for coaches, volunteers, and sports leaders, offering practical, actionable steps to enact change across participating environments. From prioritizing positive and safe spaces to addressing accessibility and inclusivity issues head-on through a “what’s the next move” growth mindset, each actionable recommendation is a step towards a future where the promise of sport as a tool for personal and community development is accessible to all.

What is Next?

This research leveraged and expanded upon the insights of the three Change the Game surveys to date to produce youth-driven policy and programming recommendations and pilot action items. In this way, the ongoing work contributes to making youth sport in Ontario more inclusive, just, and safe for all participants.

Moving forward, we know that the pursuit of best practices to foster a safe culture in youth sport requires further and consistent evaluation. Within the scope of this one-year project, it was not possible to evaluate fully the implementation or outcomes of the pilot actions recommended by the research team and co-developed with the collaborative partners. This type of evaluation is an essential next step in determining the extent to which promising and emergent ideas can be implemented into a best practice. It will also be necessary to expand the scope of the work to engage more people from more places, more sports, and more levels as the Change the Game project continues to scale.

In looking towards the future, it is clear that the path to a safer, more accessible sport environment for youth is both challenging and rewarding. The findings and recommendations of this report are not the end but designed to offer a call to action for all stakeholders in the youth sports ecosystem to collaborate, innovate, and dedicate themselves to the goal of ensuring every young person in Ontario has the opportunity to experience the transformative power of sport, and to have the opportunity to apply their voice in determining what this means to them. In embracing this challenge, we can collectively shape a future where the values of equity, inclusivity, and safety are not mere ideals in youth sport, but realities.

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