



THE SHOT PAPERS

THE CONFIDENCE GAP. **YOUTH SPORT MEASURES** **THE WRONG THING.**

We count attendance and we grade ability. But the thing that decides whether a child is still playing in three years is confidence, and almost nobody measures it. This paper introduces the measurement we believe youth sport is missing: the gap between how a child rates themselves and how their coach rates them.

FOR COACHES · ACADEMIES · GOVERNING BODIES · PARENTS

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THE ARGUMENT IN ONE PAGE

Youth sport counts attendance and grades ability. Neither tells you the one thing that decides whether a child is still playing in three years: whether they believe they belong there. I think confidence is the measurement youth sport is missing, and I think the strongest early-warning signal we have found in development is the gap between how a child rates themselves and how their coach rates them.

SIX FINDINGS

1. **The drift is confidence-shaped.** 43% of girls who describe themselves as sporty disengage from sport after primary school, roughly 1.3 million teenage girls. Their own top reasons are fear of judgement (68%) and low confidence (61%), not lack of interest (Women in Sport).
2. **Enjoyment collapses before attendance does.** Girls' enjoyment of PE falls from 86% at ages 7-8 to 56% at 14-15 (Youth Sport Trust, 2024). The belief goes first; the boots follow later.
3. **Meaning fades on the same curve.** Children agreeing "sport matters to me" drops from 51% at primary to 39% at secondary (Sport England Active Lives CYP, 2024-25).
4. **The loss is countable.** An active child aged 11-16 carries roughly £4,300 a year of wellbeing value (Sport England social value study, 2023/24). Every quiet exit takes it with them.
5. **Where evaluation exists, it often makes things worse.** It arrives as a test, graded against a standard the child never chose, written about them rather than with them, then filed away.
6. **The child's own voice is nowhere in the data.** Sport records what adults observe. It almost never records what the child believes about themselves, which is the number that predicts whether they stay.

The principle of this paper: measure confidence, not just competence. The gap between a child's self-rating and their coach's rating is visible weeks or months before the drop-out, if anyone is capturing both sides.

The second half of the paper shows how we built that measurement into PERFORM: a 1 to 5 confidence ladder that is explicitly not a mastery score, a 30-second Prepare and Reflect loop in the player's own words, a coach observation on the same objective, and the gap between the two surfaced to the coach while there is still time to act. An appendix sets out, checkably, how the frameworks behind it are built.

1 THE MOMENT

At a club we work with, the parents of an autistic player were worried before his development plan even started.

I am not going to tell you which club, or which sport, or anything that could point to the family. The story does not need any of it.

Their worry was completely reasonable. Structure sounded like scrutiny. A written development plan sounded like being assessed, and he already carried enough of that. School had taught the family what plans usually mean: another document about their child, written by adults, listing the ways he falls short of a standard somebody else set. They feared it would be intrusive. Another set of eyes. Another grading. Another thing to get wrong.

It had the opposite effect.

Because the plan was visible, he could see what was coming. Before every session he knew what the hour would ask of him: the topic, the focus, the question he would be asked about it. So he planned for his sessions in advance. He arrived knowing what was expected, ready for it, on his own terms. The unknown, which is where the anxiety lived, had been taken out of the room before he walked into it. His parents said it made him much happier just being there.

What struck me most is what changed and what did not. Nobody modified the plan for him. There was no special version, no reduced expectations, no separate pathway. The same structure his teammates had, the one built to develop every player as an individual, turned out to be exactly what he needed, because it was built to ask him what he thought, show him what was coming, and never grade him as a person. Structure was not the threat. Being measured against a standard he never chose, with no voice of his own in the process, was the threat. Structure with his own voice inside it was the opposite of intrusive.

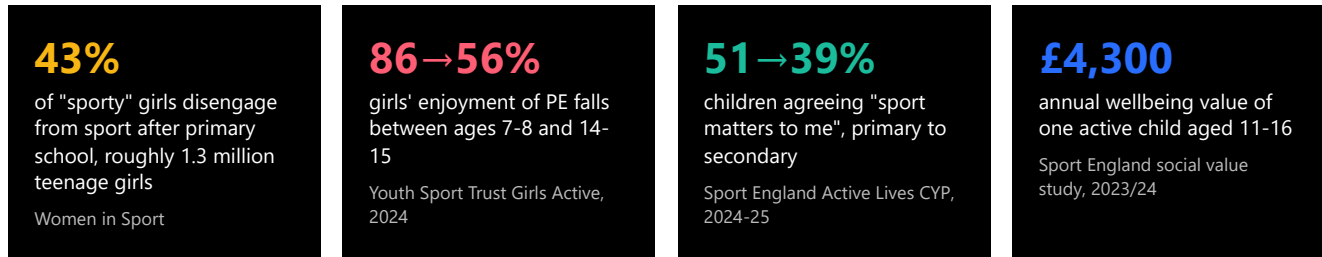
"The plan didn't test him. It told him he was seen."

WHAT I TOOK FROM IT, AND WHAT THIS PAPER IS ABOUT

One child, one club, one plan. But the mechanism underneath it, a child's own view of themselves captured and taken seriously, session by session, is the subject of everything that follows. Because the numbers say that the children we are losing from sport are not leaving because they lack ability. They are leaving because nobody noticed what they had stopped believing.

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

The evidence on youth drop-out points at the same culprit from four directions. It is not ability, cost or fixture lists. It is what children believe about themselves.



THE GIRLS WHO CALLED THEMSELVES SPORTY

Start with the most damning number. Women in Sport surveyed more than 4,000 teenage girls and found that 43% of those who described themselves as sporty at primary school disengage from sport afterwards, against 24% of boys. Scaled nationally, that is roughly 1.3 million teenage girls. These are not children who never liked sport. They are children who loved it, said so, and then left.

Ask them why and they tell you, precisely. In the same research, 68% cite fear of being judged and 61% cite low confidence. Not "I stopped enjoying the game". Not "it costs too much". The two biggest reasons are both about belief: the fear of other people's verdicts, and the collapse of their own.

BELIEF FALLS FIRST, ATTENDANCE FOLLOWS

The Youth Sport Trust's Girls Active survey tracks the same slide from the inside. At ages 7-8, 86% of girls say they enjoy PE. By 14-15 it is 56%. Sport England's Active Lives survey of children and young people shows the meaning draining out on the same curve: 51% of primary-age children agree "sport matters to me"; by secondary it is 39%. In each case the child is often still turning up while the number falls. The register says present. The belief has already gone. Attendance is a lagging indicator; confidence is the leading one, and it is the one nobody collects.

WHAT EACH QUIET EXIT COSTS

Sport England's social value work, built with Sheffield Hallam and Manchester Metropolitan universities on Treasury-approved wellbeing methodology, values the wellbeing of one active child aged 11-16 at roughly £4,300 a year. That figure turns the drift from a sad story into an invoice. Every child who fades out takes about £4,300 a year of wellbeing value with them, and the fade was visible, in their own falling belief, long before the exit. A sector that can see the leading indicator and chooses to count attendance instead is choosing to find out too late.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

It is not that youth sport has never tried to look at the individual. It is that the tools it reaches for measure the wrong thing, in the wrong way, with the wrong person holding the pen.

EVALUATION ARRIVES AS A TEST

Where player evaluation exists at grassroots and academy level, it usually looks like this: a form at the end of the season, graded against a standard the child never chose, delivered as a verdict. Whatever the intention, the child experiences it exactly the way the family in Part One feared: scrutiny. And remember what the girls in the Women in Sport research named as their biggest reason for leaving. Fear of judgement, 68%. A sector losing children to fear of judgement has, where it evaluates at all, built its evaluation to feel like judgement. We answered a confidence crisis with a grading system.

THE DOCUMENT IS STATIC AND NOBODY OWNS IT

Even the better development plans I have seen share a fate: written once, discussed once, filed. A season is a living thing; a PDF is not. The plan does not know what happened at training on Tuesday, does not change when the player's role changes, and does not follow the player when they move club or pick up a second sport. It is a photograph of somebody's opinion on one day, and by half-term it is out of date. A plan the child never sees between reviews cannot do what the plan in Part One did, which was to take the unknown out of the room before the session started.

THE CHILD'S OWN VIEW IS NEVER CAPTURED

This is the deepest failure and the one this paper exists to name. Everything youth sport records, where it records anything, is an adult's observation: the coach's grade, the scout's note, the register, the result. The child's own belief about themselves, the number that the drop-out evidence says actually decides whether they stay, appears nowhere in any system I have ever seen a grassroots club use.

So the moment a child's confidence drops below their ability, the system is structurally blind to it. The coach sees a player performing fine. The register says present. The end-of-season form, if there is one, records competence. And the child drifts towards the exit carrying a belief nobody ever asked about, until one September they simply do not come back, and everyone says they lost interest.

We built youth sport's measurement around the question adults can answer, how good is this child, and never asked the question only the child can answer: how do you feel about this? The first is competence. The second is confidence. They are not the same number, and the difference between them is the whole story.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

"The strongest early-warning signal in youth development is not ability. It is the gap between how a child rates themselves and how their coach rates them. Measure confidence, not just competence."

THE PRINCIPLE OF THIS PAPER

Here is the method, stated so that anyone can adopt it, whether or not they ever touch our platform.

Ask the child and the coach the same question about the same objective, on the same simple scale, and watch the difference between the two answers over time. Not the level of either answer. The gap between them.

WHAT THE GAP TELLS YOU

When the two ratings track together, development is healthy: the child's belief and the coach's observation agree, and both can see progress. When the child consistently rates themselves above the coach, you have a blind spot to work on gently, and usually an appetite you can harness. But the pattern that matters most runs the other way. A child who performs at a four and quietly rates themselves a two is telling you, weeks or months in advance, exactly what the drop-out research says: ability intact, belief failing. That child looks fine from the touchline. On the register they are present. In their own answers they are already halfway out the door.

No adult observation can catch this, because the coach is rating what they can see, and the problem is invisible from the outside. Only the child holds the missing number, and the only way to get it is to ask, regularly, briefly, and in a form that never feels like a test.

AN HONEST NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

I want to be straight about the status of this claim, because this paper is its first public outing. The disengagement statistics in Part Two are independent and published. The rating gap itself, as a predictive signal, is a field observation from the clubs we work with and from years spent on grassroots touchlines; it is not yet a peer-reviewed finding. The external evidence is consistent with it, girls leaving sport name low confidence and fear of judgement ahead of everything else, but consistency is not proof. We are publishing the method precisely so it can be tested, challenged and improved by people who do not work for us. If a governing body or a researcher wants the anonymised data to interrogate, my invitation in Part Six is genuine.

WHY THIS PASSES THE TEST EVALUATION FAILS

Notice what this principle does not require. No grading of the child against an external standard. No verdict. No end-of-season form. The child's answer cannot be wrong, because it is a statement about their own belief, and they are the only authority on that. That single design property is what separates measuring confidence from testing competence, and it is why the family in Part One found the plan liberating where every previous document had been a threat.

5 THE BUILD

PERFORM is how we built the principle into a tool a volunteer coach can actually run on a wet Tuesday. This is the first time we have described the rating gap in public.

THE CONFIDENCE LADDER: 1 TO 5, AND 5 IS NOT MASTERY

Every question in PERFORM is answered on the same five-step ladder. It is a confidence and learning ladder, never a quality score, and the top of it is deliberately not mastery.

1**FOUNDATION**

Early in the journey. Still learning, building belief, will get there. Framed without a trace of shame; one is a starting point, never a failure.

2**DEVELOPING**

Willing and trying; it comes and goes. Honest about inconsistency without ever making inconsistency a fault.

3**COMPETENT**

Can do it some of the time and knows it. The middle of the ladder, not a pass mark.

4**PROFICIENT**

Consistent and effective; ready for more.

5**CONFIDENT**

Owens it, loves it, and can usually show a friend. The summit is belief plus lifting others, not technical perfection.

We never ask a child whether they are good or bad at anything. A nervous but improving player is on the ladder, not at the bottom of a scoreboard.

THE LOOP: PREPARE, REFLECT, COACH

Prepare takes 30 seconds before the session. The player answers one question about the week's objective in their own words: how ready and confident do you feel about this today? **Reflect** takes 30 seconds after: how did it actually go? Both are first person, both are the child's voice, and neither can be answered wrongly. **Coach** is the third side: the coach answers an observation-based question on the same objective within a coaching window after the session, from what they saw, not from memory at season's end. Ninety seconds of the child's week, one observation from the coach, every session, all year.

FIVE PILLARS, WHOLE CHILD

Every question sits in one of five pillars: the four corners governing bodies already teach on every coaching course, technical, physical, psychological and social, plus a fifth we insist on, personal: character, habits, ownership, preparation. A child is never reduced to their strongest or weakest pillar, and the shy player whose social confidence is climbing gets that progress seen and said.

THE GAP DOES THE WATCHING

Because the player and the coach rate the same objective on the same ladder, the rating gap in Part Four stops being a theory and becomes a number the system tracks continuously. When a player's self-rating sits persistently below the coach's rating, PERFORM surfaces it to the coach: this player is performing at a level they

do not believe they are at. Not a red flag on the child, a prompt to the adult, before the drop-out instead of after it. The conversation it starts costs nothing and is the cheapest retention intervention in sport: you are better at this than you think you are, and I can prove it, because here is your season.

6 THE INVITATION

You do not need our platform to act on this paper. The principle is free. Here is what I would ask of each of you.

IF YOU COACH

Start asking, this week, even on paper. Before the session: how confident do you feel about today's focus, one to five? After: how did it go? Rate the same thing yourself. Where your number and theirs disagree, that is your coaching conversation, and the child whose self-rating sits below yours is the one who needs you most, whatever the performance looks like. If you want the structured version, PERFORM is free for every club, with the full evaluation frameworks for your sport included.

IF YOU RUN A CLUB OR AN ACADEMY

Look at your current player reviews and ask one question of them: where, anywhere, is the player's own view of themselves captured? If the answer is nowhere, you are running the system this paper describes, and your next quiet exit is already in the building. Adding self-rating to what you already do costs nothing. If you would rather not build it yourself, ours is free and takes a coach 30 seconds a player to run.

IF YOU WORK AT A GOVERNING BODY

You already teach whole-athlete development on every course you run. The measurement layer is the missing half: your pathways describe what good looks like, but nothing in the club game records what the child believes. I would like confidence measurement written into pathway guidance the same way the four corners were, and we will share our method, our frameworks and anonymised gap data with any national governing body that wants to test the early-warning claim properly. The principle matters more to me than the product.

IF YOU ARE A PARENT

The question that changes the car journey home is not "did you win?" and it is not "did you play well?". It is "how did you feel out there?". The drop-out research in this paper is, at its heart, a record of millions of children who were never asked. And if a structured development plan is ever offered for your child, ask the question the family in Part One would tell you to ask: does it capture my child's own voice, or is it another document written about them? The first kind is the opposite of intrusive. We have watched it make a child happier just being there.

Measure confidence, not just competence. Everything else in this paper follows from those five words. · shotclubhouse.com

THE METHOD: HOW A PERFORM FRAMEWORK IS BUILT

"Research-backed" should be a checkable claim, not a marketing phrase. This appendix sets out how the frameworks behind Part Five are actually made, so you can judge the workmanship for yourself.

THE SHAPE OF THE LIBRARY

PERFORM covers 47 sports. Each sport carries seven frameworks, one per level of the pathway: PLAY (ages 6-8), FOUNDATION (9-12), DEVELOPMENT (13-16), ACADEMY (16-18+), PRO, COMPETITIVE (adult amateur) and RECREATION (adult social). Each framework runs a full year as 13 four-week blocks, and every block covers all five pillars. Each cell of that grid holds three questions, Prepare, Reflect and Coach, each with five graded answers on the confidence ladder, plus five coach next steps ladder to the five answers, so the coach of the player at step one and the coach of the player at step five both know what to do next. The whole library is localised into five languages, with native-speaker review rather than raw machine output.

THE ISOLATION TEST

The failure mode of content at this scale is sameness: write 65 rows in a flow and they converge on interchangeable filler. Our rule is the opposite. Every cell is written in isolation, as if it were the only row that existed, and in character. Two people are in the room for each one: a genuinely qualified coach at that level in that sport, looking at only that objective, and a real athlete at that level, a real seven-year-old at PLAY, a real academy 17-year-old, a real adult at RECREATION, answering in their own words. Then the test: could this question or answer be lifted onto a different objective or pillar without anyone noticing? If yes, it is generic, and it is binned. No question, answer or next step is ever reused across rows. Read any row cold and you should be able to name the sport, the level, the pillar and the objective from the words alone.

GROUNDING IN THE REAL PATHWAYS

No framework is invented from a blank page. Each sport's themes and progression are grounded in the relevant governing body's published pathway: the FA's England DNA for football, the ECB's long-term player development pathway for cricket, the LTA's Padel Strategy 2024-29 for padel, the GAA's Gaelic Games Player Pathway for Gaelic games and hurling, and their equivalents across the library. We use the pathways for structure and progression, never copied text, and each sport carries a research note recording exactly which pathway informed it.

ANCHORED TO THE REAL SEASON, HONESTLY LABELLED

A development year that starts in September is wrong for half of sport. Each sport's 13 blocks are anchored to its real calendar: cricket starts in April, rugby league in February because Super League is a summer competition, Gaelic games in January against the GAA's master fixtures, football in September. Youth tiers default to the school year, senior tiers follow the competitive calendar. And we keep an honesty convention on every one of those decisions: each start month is labelled Confirmed, verified against the governing body's published fixtures, or Reasoned, set from domain knowledge and re-checked when the sport's frameworks are generated. Where we have reasoned rather than verified, the record says so.

THE BAR

Structure is enforced by an automated validator; voice and the isolation test are judged row by row against the coach and athlete personas for each level. A framework that passes the validator but reads like a template fails. The point of all of it is the same as the point of this paper: a child answering a PERFORM question should feel spoken to, in their sport, at their level, in their own language, and never, at any step of the ladder, judged.



SOURCES

Every statistic in this paper is cited at claim level below. Where a claim is our own field observation rather than published research, the text says so where the claim is made.

PUBLISHED RESEARCH

- Women in Sport, research on teenage girls' disengagement from sport (survey of 4,000+ teenage girls): 43% of "sporty" girls disengage after primary school vs 24% of boys, equivalent to roughly 1.3 million teenage girls; 68% cite fear of judgement and 61% cite low confidence.
- Youth Sport Trust, Girls Active survey, 2024: girls' enjoyment of PE falls from 86% at ages 7-8 to 56% at ages 14-15.
- Sport England, Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2024-25 (published December 2025): children agreeing "sport matters to me" falls from 51% at primary age to 39% at secondary age.
- Sport England with Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester Metropolitan University, Social value of community sport and physical activity in England, 2023/24 (WELLBY methodology, HM Treasury approved): annual wellbeing value of an active child aged 11-16 of approximately £4,300.

METHODOLOGY SOURCES (APPENDIX)

- The FA, England DNA and the four-corner model of player development (technical, physical, psychological, social), as taught across FA coach education.
- The ECB's long-term player development pathway (cricket); the LTA Padel Strategy 2024-29; the GAA Gaelic Games Player Pathway and GAA master fixtures schedule; and the equivalent published pathways of the governing bodies for each of the 47 sports in the PERFORM library, recorded per sport in our internal research notes.
- SHOT PERFORM framework specification, voice persona method and season cadence register (internal, available to governing bodies and researchers on request).

OUR OWN CLAIMS, FLAGGED

- The story in Part One is told with the family's situation anonymised: no name, no club, no sport. It is reported as the family and club described it to us.
- The rating gap as an early-warning signal (Parts Four and Five) is a SHOT field observation from the clubs we work with, published here for the first time so it can be independently tested. It is not yet a peer-reviewed finding, and the paper says so in Part Four.
- Descriptions of current evaluation practice in Part Three are drawn from SHOT's conversations with clubs, coaches and coach educators during 2025-26 and are reported as experience, not measured statistics.

The SHOT Papers are a series. The Wilderness covers what happens to volunteer coaches after the badge. The Confidence Gap is the flagship. Written by Liam McDowell, founder, SHOT Clubhouse.