



THE SHOT PAPERS

THE DROP-OUT.

WHY CHILDREN DRIFT, AND HOW TO SEE IT COMING.

Children rarely quit sport in a single moment. They fade, and by the time the register notices, they are already gone. This paper is about the quiet exits I watched from the touchline, why the systems we run cannot see them, and what it would take to see one coming while there is still time to act.

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SHOT Clubhouse Limited · Company no. 16350767 · 86-90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE

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1 THE MOMENT

I did not set out to run a football club. Five girls wanted somewhere to play, and nobody else would take them.

So we started with five. Then it was 20, then 100, and within a couple of years the not-for-profit I had set up was coaching hundreds of boys and girls every week. Some had disabilities. Some had mental health issues. Most just wanted to play football. We begged pitches, roped in parents as coaches, and learned very quickly that scaling the on-the-field coaching is really, really hard. But the thing that stayed with me was not the growth. It was the leaving.

Every season, the same quiet exits. The kids born late in the school year, always slightly smaller, always slightly behind, working twice as hard for half the praise. The bench kids, who trained all week and watched from the side on Sunday. The ones whose confidence dipped exactly when the game got serious, when the friendly kickabouts turned into leagues and trials and squads picked on Tuesday nights.

Here is the part that took me years to understand. Not one of them ever told me they were leaving. There was no conversation, no announcement, no letter. A girl who had been at every session for two years would miss a Saturday. Then another. Then a parent would mention she had "a lot on at school". Then the kit did not come back and the name quietly dropped off the register, and by the time anyone said the word "quit" out loud, she had been gone for months.

I replayed those exits for a long time afterwards, and the uncomfortable truth is that the signs were always there. The girl who stopped asking questions at training. The boy who used to arrive first and started arriving last. The player who shrugged instead of answering when you asked how she thought she had played. I saw those signs and did not have the language, the time or the tools to act on them. I was one volunteer with hundreds of kids and a register that told me who was present, never who was fading.

Nobody hands in a resignation letter at 13. The first missed Saturday becomes a second, then a season, then a childhood without sport.

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

What I watched on one set of pitches, the national data confirms at scale. The teenage transition is where sport quietly loses children, and the losses are not random.

43%

of "sporty" girls disengage from sport after primary school, roughly 1.3 million teenage girls

Women in Sport

1.25x

the odds advantage the oldest children in an age group hold over the youngest, strongest in adolescence

Smith et al., meta-analysis, 2018

49.1%

of UK children meet the 60-minutes-a-day physical activity guideline

Sport England Active Lives CYP, 2024-25

6x

how much more often low-income children quit sport because of cost (US data)

Aspen Institute Project Play, 2025

THE GIRLS

Women in Sport, surveying more than 4,000 teenagers, found that 43% of girls who considered themselves sporty at primary school disengage from sport in their teens, against 24% of boys. Scaled nationally, that is roughly 1.3 million teenage girls. The reasons they give are not about the sport itself: 68% cite fear of judgement and 61% cite low confidence. Youth Sport Trust data tells the same story from inside school, with girls' enjoyment of PE falling from 86% at ages 7 to 8 to 56% by 14 to 15.

THE LATE-BORN

The relative age effect is one of the most replicated findings in youth sport research. Copley and colleagues' 2009 meta-analysis of 38 studies across 14 sports established it as a consistent, structural bias, with the risk highest for adolescents at selective levels. Smith and colleagues' 2018 meta-analysis of 57 studies put a number on it: the oldest children in an age group hold a 1.25 to 1 odds advantage over the youngest (95% CI 1.21 to 1.30), and the effect strengthens in adolescence and at higher levels of competition. In plain terms, the kids born in the summer months are systematically less likely to be selected, retained and developed, for the crime of being born late.

THE WIDER DRIFT

Only 49.1% of UK children meet the 60-minutes-a-day activity guideline, and the share of children agreeing "sport matters to me" falls from 51% at primary to 39% at secondary (Sport England Active Lives CYP, 2024-25). In the United States, where family costs are better measured, children from low-income households quit sport six times more often because of cost, with average family spend at \$1,016 a year (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2025; US data, but the direction of travel is familiar here). And every child who fades takes value with them: Sport England puts the annual wellbeing value of one active child aged 11 to 16 at roughly £4,300.

Girls, late-born children, bench players, low-income families. Different labels, one pattern: the drop-out concentrates exactly where nobody is watching the individual.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

Everyone in sport agrees drop-out is a problem. The systems we run to address it fail in three specific ways.

THE REGISTER ONLY SEES THE REGISTERED

Governing bodies count the children who are registered with them, and only those children. A player who leaves one club and joins another looks identical, in the data, to a player who leaves sport altogether; a player who drifts to casual kickabouts in the park disappears entirely. The honest reading is that the national picture of drop-out is assembled from the children the system can still see, which is precisely not the group we are worried about. When a governing body reports its participation numbers, the fading child is invisible twice over: first at the club, where the register records absence without meaning, and again nationally, where she is simply a row that stopped renewing.

THE STRUCTURES REWARD EARLY MATURITY

League tables, representative squads and early selection all point the same way: towards the child who is biggest, fastest and most physically mature right now. That is what the relative age effect measures, and the incentives run all the way down. A coach whose team is judged on Sunday's result picks the January-born child over the August-born one, not out of malice but because the system scores him on winning, not developing. The late developer, who on the evidence may be the better athlete at 18, gets less pitch time, less coaching attention and less belief, and draws the obvious conclusion about whether sport wants them. We select for birthdays and call it talent.

DROP-OUT IS STUDIED AFTER THE FACT

Almost everything we know about why children leave sport comes from asking them afterwards. Exit surveys, retrospective research, annual participation studies: all valuable, all far too late. By the time a child is answering a questionnaire about why they stopped playing, the decision is months old and the window to change it is closed. Drop-out is treated as an event to be recorded, when everything I saw on the touchline says it is a process: a fade in attendance, engagement and confidence that runs for months before the final absence. We have built an entire evidence base on the autopsy and almost nothing on the vital signs.

The tools watch the aggregate and interview the departed. Nobody is watching the individual child while she is still in the room.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

THE PRINCIPLE

Drop-out is not an event. It is a slow fade that is visible months in advance, if anyone is watching the individual instead of the register.

This principle does not require software, and it does not require SHOT. A coach with a notebook could apply it tomorrow. It requires three shifts in what youth sport chooses to watch.

WATCH PATTERNS, NOT PRESENCE

A register records that a child was absent. A pattern shows that a child who attended forty consecutive sessions has now missed three of the last six. The first is administration; the second is a signal. The same applies to lateness, to early departures, to the parent who used to stay and watch and no longer does. None of these facts is alarming alone. Together, tracked over time for one named child, they are the most reliable early warning youth sport has, and today almost nobody records them as anything more than a tick or a blank.

WATCH ENGAGEMENT, NOT JUST PERFORMANCE

The fading child often plays fine right up to the end. What changes first is everything around the performance: she stops volunteering answers, stops asking to try new positions, gives one-word reflections where she used to give paragraphs. Coaches see this instinctively and call it "going quiet". A serious approach to retention treats a child going quiet as data worth capturing, because it usually arrives months before the first missed Saturday.

WATCH CONFIDENCE, NOT JUST COMPETENCE

Ask a child how they think they are doing, and ask their coach the same question. When those two answers track together, development is healthy. When a widening gap opens, when the coach sees a capable player and the player sees a failure, that gap is the fade made measurable. The girls in the Women in Sport research told us this directly: they left over fear of judgement and low confidence, not lack of ability. Competence rarely walks out the door. Confidence does.

Do these three things for every individual child, and drop-out stops being a mystery revealed by an annual survey and becomes something a coach can see coming in time to have one conversation, make one change, give one child a reason to come back on Saturday. The whole argument of this paper is that the fade is visible. Someone just has to be looking.

5 THE BUILD

We built the principle into PERFORM, the development engine inside SHOT Clubhouse. Everything in this section is a direct answer to something on the previous pages.

INDIVIDUAL TRACKING, NO RANKINGS

PERFORM tracks every player as an individual against their own development, across 47 sports, using the whole-athlete frameworks governing bodies already teach. There are no league tables, no player rankings, no comparison charts. That is a deliberate design decision, not a missing feature: the moment you rank children, you rebuild the machine that rewards early maturity and tells the August-born child where they stand. A player's record shows where they were, where they are and what comes next, and nothing about where anyone else is.

THE FADE, SURFACED AS AN EARLY WARNING

The signals I could not hold in my head for hundreds of kids, the system holds for every one of them. Missed sessions surface as a pattern, not a blank cell. Player reflections, captured in around 30 seconds after a session, surface when they go flat: shorter, lower, disengaged compared with that child's own baseline. And because players rate their own confidence alongside the coach's assessment, a widening gap between how a child sees themselves and how their coach sees them is visible as it opens. Each of these alone is a nudge. Together they give a volunteer coach what an academy gives a professional: a reason to have the right conversation with the right child weeks or months before the first missed Saturday, while one conversation can still change the ending.

A RECORD THAT TRAVELS

A child's development record belongs to the child, through their Sport Head ID, and travels with them between teams, clubs and even sports. The player who moves clubs no longer arrives as a stranger and leaves as a gap in someone's register; their new coach inherits the story so far, and the system can tell the difference between a child who moved and a child who left. For governing bodies, this is the missing layer: a view of the individual journey across the whole landscape, rather than a count of whoever happens to be registered this season. Drop-out becomes measurable as what it actually is, a journey that stalled, rather than a renewal that lapsed.

The club and coach layer of SHOT Clubhouse is free, permanently. Watching for the fade cannot be a premium feature, because the children most likely to fade are concentrated in the clubs least able to pay.

Nothing here predicts the future. It simply records the present carefully enough, per child, that the fade stops being invisible.



TAKE YOUR SHOT

Somewhere in your league, your county or your club, a child who loves sport missed last Saturday, and nobody has noticed yet. Here is what to do about it, by role.

- **If you run a governing body:** ask your data team one question: can we see an individual child's journey across clubs and seasons, or only the register? If the answer is the register, talk to us about what the individual layer looks like for your sport.
- **If you run a league:** audit what your structures reward. If the answer is early physical maturity, you are funding the relative age effect. We will happily share how development tracking works without a single ranking or table.
- **If you run a club:** PERFORM is free for every club, team, school and coach, forever. Put your squads on it this season and your coaches will see the fade signals this paper describes, for every child, from the first session.
- **If you fund sport:** stop accepting attendance counts as evidence of retention. Ask your grantees to show individual journeys over time. We can show you what that evidence looks like, child by child.

Take your SHOT. Own it. Make impact. · shotclubhouse.com

SOURCES

- Women in Sport, research on teenage girls' disengagement from sport (survey of 4,000+ teenagers): 43% of "sporty" girls disengage after primary school vs 24% of boys, ~1.3 million teenage girls; 68% fear of judgement; 61% low confidence
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- Copley, S. et al. (2009), Annual age-grouping and athlete development: a meta-analytical review of relative age effects in sport: 38 studies, 253 samples, 14 sports; consistent relative age effect, highest risk for adolescent males at selective levels
- Sport England, Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2024-25 (published December 2025): 49.1% of children meet the 60-minutes-a-day guideline; "sport matters to me" 51% at primary to 39% at secondary
- Youth Sport Trust, Girls Active survey 2024: girls' enjoyment of PE falls from 86% (ages 7-8) to 56% (ages 14-15)
- Aspen Institute, Project Play State of Play 2025 (United States data): children from low-income families quit sport six times more often due to cost; average family spend \$1,016 per year
- Sport England / Sheffield Hallam University / Manchester Metropolitan University, Social value of community sport and physical activity in England, 2023/24: annual wellbeing value of an active child aged 11-16 approximately £4,300

The touchline observations in Part One are the author's own experience running a grassroots not-for-profit football club and are reported as experience, not measured statistics. US-sourced figures are flagged as such and used for direction, not UK magnitude.