THE SHOT PAPERS

THE REAL ACTIVATION. WHAT BRANDS ACTUALLY BUY WHEN THEY BUY GRASSROOTS.

Brands put real money into grassroots sport and almost none of them can say what it did. This paper is about why the reporting stops at logo impressions, what the audience already suspects, and what a sponsorship looks like when it can name the children it developed.

FOR BRAND LEADS · SPONSORSHIP DIRECTORS · AGENCIES

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1 THE ROOM THAT GOES QUIET

Grassroots sponsorship budgets buy visibility and call it impact. The people spending them know it, the audiences watching them increasingly know it, and nobody in the current model can fix it, because the model was never built to answer the only question that matters: what changed for the kids?

There is a pattern in our conversations with brands, and I am going to keep every one of them anonymous, because the pattern repeats so reliably that naming anyone would miss the point.

It usually goes like this. A sponsorship team tells me, with genuine warmth, why they back grassroots sport. The reasons arrive in a set order: it raises our brand profile, and it aligns with our elite sponsorship. Sometimes there is a third reason about community values, or a line for the annual report. The people saying this are not cynics. They believe in the money they are spending, and in most cases they fought internally to point it at grassroots at all.

Then I ask the question I have learned to ask carefully, because of what it does to the room. What changed for the kids?

The room goes quiet. Not defensive, just quiet. Somebody mentions the launch day and the photographs from it. Somebody else mentions the shirts, thousands of them, with the logo on the sleeve. There are impressions figures if the agency has done its job, and a media equivalency number that everyone around the table privately distrusts. But nobody can point to a child, a team, a coach or a season and say: this happened because we were there. The budget bought visibility. Everyone in the room knows it, and it is nobody's individual fault.

I state my own position plainly in those rooms: we don't really want to sport wash, that's not really our vibe. A logo above a pitch that changes nothing on the pitch is not a partnership, it is a billboard with better lighting. What strikes me is how often the brand side of the table agrees before I have finished the sentence. Their own customers have got sharper at telling the difference between a brand that shows up and a brand that merely appears, and the marketing teams feel that shift daily.

> **The appetite to do grassroots properly already exists inside these companies. What is missing is not intent. It is infrastructure that lets the money do something a person could point at.**

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

The money moving into sport has never been bigger, and the evidence on what audiences respond to has never been clearer. Grassroots sponsorship is the one corner of the market still reporting itself in impressions.

THE DEMAND SIDE: WHAT AUDIENCES ACTUALLY REWARD

~70%
of consumers are more likely to buy from brands offering personalised digital experiences
Deloitte Digital, 2022

12bn+
engagements on Olympic social channels around Paris 2024, more than double Tokyo
Deloitte / IOC

$3bn
women's elite sport revenue in 2026, up 340% since 2022
Deloitte, 2026

£15.9bn
grassroots football's annual social and economic value to England
The FA, 2024

Three signals sit in that row. First, audiences reward brands that treat them as individuals: around 70% of consumers say they are more likely to buy from a brand offering personalised digital experiences. Second, sport's engagement now lives in the space between events, not the broadcast during them; Paris 2024 generated over 12 billion engagements on social channels, and Deloitte's 2025 industry outlook found younger fans watching fewer live events while non-live content builds their fandom. Third, the fastest-growing commercial property in sport, women's elite sport, is one that grew from participation upwards; its revenues are up 340% in four years.

THE SUPPLY SIDE: THE VALUE SITTING IN GRASSROOTS

£122.9bn
annual social value of community sport and physical activity in England
Sport England, 2023/24

£4,300
annual wellbeing value of one active child aged 11-16
Sport England, 2023/24

£19.6bn
estimated annual cost of participation inequality in England
Sport England, 2023/24

43%
of "sporty" girls disengage from sport after primary school
Women in Sport

Grassroots football alone is worth £15.9 billion a year to England on the FA's own figures, and community sport as a whole £122.9 billion. One active child aged 11 to 16 carries roughly £4,300 a year of measurable wellbeing value, and the drift out of sport, sharpest among teenage girls, is where that value leaks away. A brand that funds participation is funding something with an audited social value methodology behind it. Almost no grassroots sponsorship is reported that way.

Put the two sides together and the mismatch is stark. On one side, proof that audiences reward brands for personal, continuous, participation-level engagement, and a form of sport whose social value is measured to Treasury-approved standards. On the other, a sponsorship product that offers neither: no personal connection, no continuity beyond the contract, and no reporting that touches the value the money supposedly serves. That is not a gap in the market so much as a gap in the product.

> **The evidence says audiences reward personal, continuous, participation-level engagement. The**

sponsorship model still sells them a logo they walk past.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

Badge sponsorship fails brands for a structural reason, not a creative one. It rents attention, reports in the only units renting can produce, and leaves nothing behind when the lease ends.

RENTED ATTENTION, EXPIRING LEASE

A badge on a shirt, a board behind the goal, naming rights on a stand: all of it is attention rented by the season, and the lease expires with the contract. The day the deal ends, the shirts are reprinted and every trace of the brand leaves the community with them. Nothing was built, so nothing remains. When renewal comes round, the only argument for continuing is habit, and habit loses to the first procurement review that asks what the money achieved.

IMPACT REPORTED IN THE UNITS THE MODEL CAN PRODUCE

Because the asset is visibility, the reporting is visibility: logo impressions, media equivalency values, reach estimates, photographs from a launch day. These are honest measurements of the wrong thing. They tell a brand how many people saw the sponsorship. They cannot tell a brand whether a single person was better off for it, because the model contains no mechanism that touches anyone's development. The report is not weak because the agency is lazy. It is weak because there is genuinely nothing else to count.

NOTHING CONNECTS THE MONEY TO A CHILD'S SEASON

Follow the money down from the sponsorship deck to a Sunday morning pitch and the trail goes cold long before it reaches a child. The funds land centrally, some of it reaches facilities or kit, and none of it is linked to the season of any individual player: who developed, who stayed, who gained the confidence to keep playing. That is the gap the room goes quiet over. It is also the gap the brand's own customers have learned to sense, which is why the sport-washing accusation lands even on brands acting in good faith.

THE LESSON FROM CULTURAL HISTORY

Sport's commercial history is not short of the alternative. The brands that hold a permanent place in sporting culture did not get there by renting hoardings. They funded the thing itself when it was unfashionable: courts and playgrounds in neighbourhoods nobody else would build in, women's competitions decades before the revenue arrived, whole events and disciplines created rather than bid for. The attention compounded to them for generations precisely because they built culture instead of buying moments. I am not claiming any of those companies as partners or models for us; the pattern is public, and the point is only that it is repeatable. Early, unglamorous funding of participation has always produced more durable brand value than any volume of rented moments.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

Badge sponsorship is rented attention. Participation infrastructure is owned impact, evidenced child by child, season by season.

The principle does not need our platform to be true, and any brand could adopt it tomorrow with whatever partners it already has. It changes one thing: what the money buys. Instead of buying a surface to print on, the sponsorship buys a working part of the machinery that develops young players, and the reporting follows the machinery rather than the logo.

The activation of the next decade, I would argue, is measurable individual development, funded by a brand and evidenced per child. Not a bigger badge, not a cleverer film, but a season of coaching that demonstrably happened because the brand paid for it, recorded at the level of the players who lived it.

THREE TESTS FOR ANY GRASSROOTS SPONSORSHIP

1 THE REMOVAL TEST
Take the logo off everything. Does anything change for anyone playing? If the answer is no, the sponsorship was a billboard, whatever the deck called it.

2 THE EVIDENCE TEST
Can you name what changed at the level of an individual player's season: sessions delivered, skills developed, confidence built? If the report can only count impressions, the money never touched development.

3 THE EXPIRY TEST
When the contract ends, does anything you funded keep working? Rented attention vanishes on the last day of the deal. Infrastructure keeps developing players, and keeps your name attached to the outcome, long after it.

Hold any proposal, including ours, against those three tests. A sponsorship that passes them stops being a marketing cost defended once a year and becomes an asset the brand owns: a documented record of development it can put in front of customers, employees and boards without flinching. A sponsorship that fails them is sport washing with extra steps, and the audience already knows.

5 THE BUILD

We built SHOT Clubhouse as the participation infrastructure the principle describes: a development engine inside grassroots sport that a brand can fund, and that produces evidence a funder can hold.

SPONSOR THE INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT THE SURFACE

The sponsorship inventory is the development machinery itself. A brand can fund a sport's development framework, so that every volunteer coach using it delivers a structured, governing-body-aligned curriculum the brand made possible. It can fund a club or a group of clubs, covering the development layer for every child there. Or it can fund a community programme, putting whole neighbourhoods of players onto a proper pathway. In each case the money buys coaching that happens, not space on a shirt. Our PERFORM engine covers 47 sports with session-by-session frameworks built on the whole-athlete methodology governing bodies teach, which is what makes the inventory real rather than notional.

EVIDENCE AT THE LEVEL FUNDERS RESPECT

Because development is recorded player by player and season by season, the impact report changes category. Instead of impressions, the brand receives the measures a serious funder asks for: players developed, sessions delivered, coaches supported, confidence built over time, retention across a season. It is the difference between a photograph of a launch day and a ledger of what the money did, and it is reported in the same social value language that already prices an active child's wellbeing at roughly £4,300 a year.

PRESENT IN DAILY LIFE, NOT PRINTED ON TOP OF IT

A senior brand strategist put it to us in one of these conversations better than I can: the opportunity is to integrate with the platform infrastructure of communities rather than sponsoring fleeting cultural moments. In practice that means the brand is present where the community actually lives its week: in the preparation before a session, the reflection after it, the milestones a player hits across a season. That presence is governed. The platform's safeguarding architecture applies to sponsors as it does to everyone else, with age-appropriate boundaries built into the structure, because a brand's association with children's sport is only worth having if it is unimpeachable.

And because the infrastructure keeps running, the association compounds. The players a brand funded in year one are still developing in year three, still carrying the record of the seasons that built them. That is what owning the impact means: the story does not reset when the media plan does.

6 THE INVITATION

If your grassroots budget should prove something, come and design the proof with us before the next renewal cycle, not after it.

If you lead a brand: bring us one market, one community or one sport. We will show you what a season of funded development looks like as evidence: the players, the sessions, the confidence built, reported in a form your board can hold. Run it alongside your existing badge deals and compare what each can prove.

If you direct sponsorship: put the three tests from part four into your next negotiation, with us or with anyone. The removal test, the evidence test, the expiry test. Any partner worth your budget should be able to pass at least one of them, and should be embarrassed to fail all three.

If you run an agency: your clients are already asking you for the answer to the quiet room. Participation infrastructure gives you a new inventory to sell and a new report to write, one that gets stronger every season instead of expiring with the contract. We would rather build that category with agencies than around them.

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

SOURCES

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The conversations described in this paper are drawn from SHOT's own discussions with brands, sponsorship teams and agencies during 2025-26. They are reported anonymously and as experience, not as measured statistics. No company referenced in the cultural history section is a partner of SHOT, and none is named by design.