

Oral Testimony of
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Before U.S. Representative Chris Deluzio's of Pennsylvania's 17th District field hearing
"Let Kids Play: Making Youth Sports Less of a
Ripoff"

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Thank you, Congressman Deluzio, and thanks to everyone here today.

I'm Katie Van Dyck. I am an attorney and Senior Legal Fellow at the American Economic Liberties Project. For 20 years, I've advocated for consumers, small businesses, and employees fighting corporate power. In recent years, a lot of my work has focused on abuse of power in sports.

In December, I testified before a congressional committee about why youth sports has become so taxing on families' bank accounts, time, and well being. I'm here to tell you the same thing I told them: the anti-competitive corporate takeover of youth sports is hurting our kids, and Congress must take decisive steps to stop it.

A lot of you remember when youth sports was simple. We played rec league at the local park. The pizza shop sponsored our team. Coaches were volunteer parents. It didn't cost much, and it was fun. Those days are largely over.

Private equity is stealthily capturing youth sports, using the same playbook it has deployed in countless other industries, making it the next victim of a financialized economy.

Their tactics are straightforward. First, buy up all the local competitors through small deals nobody notices. Then, build a moat around their chosen sport. They buy the league, the facility, the uniforms, the apps, the tournaments, and the travel agent. Once families are locked in, squeeze out every dollar you can. That means you are forced to drive hours to expensive tournaments, pay admission fees to watch your own kid play, stay at designated resorts or risk disqualification, and buy customized jerseys that your kid is constantly outgrowing.

Here's what that looks like in Western Pennsylvania.

First, ice hockey. Black Bear Sports Group owns 11 ice rinks across the state. When they buy a new facility, the cost of ice time goes up, it sometimes even quadruples. They charge \$37 a month to watch games online, more than NFL Sunday Ticket. Black Bear's CEO runs a governing body for a league, owns teams in that league, and owns the software that ranks the teams. There are multiple obvious conflicts of interest in there.

Cheerleading has also dealt with these dynamics. Varsity Brands runs cheerleading tournaments across Pennsylvania. They have their fingers in the competitions, the training camps, the uniforms, the streaming platform. They used to control the board that makes the rules, before giving up seats as part of a class action settlement.

Youth sports is a \$40 billion industry, double what the NFL makes. That money is coming directly out of your pocketbooks. Families are spending an average of \$1,000 a year on a single sport. That's 46% higher than it was 5 years ago. And if your kid plays more than one sport, you're probably spending a lot more.

It's sending families into debt and making the class divide even wider. Only 23% of low-income kids play sports now, compared to 44% of kids from wealthier families. And the kids who do play are getting injured more and quitting earlier from burnout.

Private equity is getting away with this for a few reasons. First, they have the money that youth sports needs. Second, they have a captive audience of parents, willing to spend what it takes to give their kids the opportunities they deserve. Third, these firms prey on families desperate for a way to pay for college—promising recruiters even though they know only about 2% of kids will play past high school, most without an athletic scholarship or significant NIL deal.

But Congress can rein this in and fix it.

First, we can break up these empires. That means bans on owning tournaments and apparel companies or leagues and facilities at the same time. Second, we can demand more transparency and stop predation. We can require companies to show families all the costs upfront, and we can crack down on deceptive claims about development and recruiting. Third, we can reinforce these rules by barring firms with a record of bad behavior. If you're a vulture investor, you can't own a youth sports company. Period. Finally, we can fund public programs again, so kids have affordable places to play.

The kids of Western Pennsylvania and all over this country deserve more than a childhood for sale to the highest bidder. They deserve a place where they can learn the importance of teamwork, fair play, and perseverance. And they deserve opportunities that are affordable.

Thank you for convening with us today. I look forward to your questions.