

THE E-SPORTS GENERATION

Step Aside, LeBron and Dak, and Make Room for Banjo and Kazooie

Kids were already drifting away from traditional sports before the pandemic, with ramifications for the entire sports industry. The trend has accelerated in the pandemic.



By Joe Drape

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FRISCO, Texas — A miniature basketball hoop hangs from the bedroom door. Soccer trophies are prominent on the dresser. Each sport competes for the time and attention of David and Matthew Grimes. But both are losing ground to another staple of adolescence: the video game console.

David, 13, and Matthew, 11, are fledgling e-sports athletes.

David thumbs his controllers and listens to strategy talk from a YMCA coach on Monday nights. On Wednesday, he takes on all comers. Matthew has league play on Thursday. At least one weekend a month, they compete in a Super Smash Bros. Ultimate tournament.

David and Matthew are part of a surging migration among members of Generation Z — as those born from 1997 to 2012 are often labeled — away from the basketball courts and soccer fields built for previous generations and toward the PlayStations and Xboxes of theirs.

It's not a zero-sum game: Many children, including the Grimeses, enjoy sports both virtual and physical. But it's clear that the rise of e-sports has come at the expense of traditional youth sports, with implications for their future and for the way children grow up.



E-sports got a boost, especially at the grass-roots level, during the pandemic. Between at-home learning and the shutdown of youth sports, a high-tech generation found even more escape and engagement on its smartphones and consoles.

Participation in youth sports was declining even before Covid-19: In 2018, only 38 percent of children ages 6 to 12 played team sports on a regular basis, down from 45 percent in 2008, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association.

In June 2020, the pandemic's early days, 19 percent of parents with kids in youth sports said their child was not interested in playing sports, according to a survey conducted by The Aspen Institute's Sports and Society Program. By September 2021, that figure was 28 percent.

On average, children play less than three years in a sport and quit by age 11, according to the survey. Why? Mostly, because it is not fun anymore.

The implications are global. There are currently more than 2.4 billion gamers — about one-third of the world's population, according to Statista, an international marketing and consumer data firm based in Germany. There are professional teams around the world that compete in tournaments for prize pools up to \$34 million as well as tens of thousands of other competitions with prize money or contested in school and recreational leagues, accounting for more than a \$1 billion in global e-sports revenues.

The effect on traditional sports is just one of the concerns often expressed about this phenomenon. The proliferation of e-sports conjures images of children eating sugary snacks late into the night as they stare at their screens. Research, however, doesn't fully support this, with a 2019 German study finding only "a slight positive correlation" between gaming and body mass in adults, but not children.

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Some youth sports coaches seem to understand the spell video games cast over their players. In 2018, a lacrosse coach in New Jersey decided if he could not beat them, he'd join them. He gave a pregame talk that demonstrated his deep knowledge of Fortnite, and it ricocheted through social media.

"This is just like Fortnite, just like Battle Royale," he said. "Twenty-four teams, there's four left. You know what? There's four left, we've got Chug Jugs, we've got the golden SCAR. Let's go! This is no different than a Fortnite battle. Let's go win this, baby!"

The waning interest in sports is hardly surprising when 87 percent of teenagers in the United States have iPhones, according to a survey of 10,000 young people by investment bank Piper Sandler, or when 26 percent of Gen Z youths named video games as their favorite entertainment activity, compared to 10 percent who chose watching television.

"There is a lot more stuff competing for the attention of young people — e-sports is a big one," said Dr. Travis E. Dorsch, associate professor and founding director of the Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University. "As kids get older, there is more tug at them academically and socially. We're seeing a lot of dropouts. This creates a reckoning for youth sports."

The more than \$19 billion youth sports industrial complex, with its private coaching, interstate travel and \$350 baseball bats, shoulders some of the blame. Ten-month seasons in pursuit of a college scholarship in a single sport can mean that kids get yelled at by overzealous coaches and parents spend thousands of dollars on team fees and travel expenses.

Soccer trophies on the mantel. The Grimes boys say they still enjoy the sport. Jake Dockins for The New York Times

“We’re at an inflection moment of sports in America,” said Tom Cove, president and chief executive of the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, which compiles an annual report on participation in sports. “While families were at home during the pandemic, they did not have to drive their kids to practices four nights a week.

“They liked it. They decided that there must be a better way.”

For Tony and Dawnita Grimes, that way led them to the YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas and a greater appreciation for e-sports.

Let the games begin

Frisco, a city of 200,000 about 28 miles north of Dallas, is football country. It is home to The Star, the world headquarters of the Dallas Cowboys.

David Grimes wears a Cowboys T-shirt and can tell you about the team’s quarterback, Dak Prescott. When The Star opened, David was chosen to carry the helmet of linebacker Leighton Vander Esch before a preseason training camp session.

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Tony Grimes is a sales executive with PepsiCo. He played high school football growing up in South Los Angeles. Dawnita Grimes, a lawyer, was on dance and tennis teams growing up in Kentucky.

Tony and Dawnita Grimes steer their sons away from football because of the risk of injury, but encourage soccer, swimming, basketball and golf. They want the boys to be well rounded, so David plays trumpet and Matthew piano. Sometimes the scramble of school, sports and other activities led to quick dinners or late starts on homework. The Grimeses were busy but adept at conducting the rhythms of family life.

Matthew and David were already familiar with the video games Minecraft and Roblox when the pandemic began. Jake Dockins for The New York Times

Then came the pandemic. The cancellation of games left the boys with time on their hands.

“Because of Covid, I started to play video games,” David Grimes said.

Little brother Matthew was right behind him.

Their mother and father were immersed in their screens, too, and in a surrender familiar to many parents, were not as disciplined as usual about clocking the amount of time their boys were on their devices.

“Oh yeah, it was a lifeline,” said Dawnita Grimes. “They were cut off from their friends. Most hadn’t exchanged numbers, or they don’t know each other’s last names. Unless you knew their parents, it was hard to connect, and I hate to say it, except through these games.”

Tony Grimes admits that he likes picking up his boys’ controllers and trying to master another universe. Beyond the peace and quiet David and Matthew’s screen time afforded him, he had a new appreciation for the skills necessary to be competitive.

“You have to be focused, understand strategy and have good hand-eye coordination,” he said.

On a recent evening, David carried the game console downstairs so he could tell Matthew, his parents and a visitor what he had learned the previous night from the Y’s online tutorial. Both boys held their controllers gently, as if they were holding a bird.

“It’s not enough to watch the games, you have to actually play them,” David said. “So you have to find a character that you’re good with.”

“Get Hero or Cloud,” Matthew said as his brother clicked through characters.

E-sports let kids have fun with their friends even when they’re not together. Audio headsets allow players to talk — or often scream — at one another as if they were sitting side by side. Anyone who has listened to their sons or daughters competing online has heard at least one side of conversation carried out as effortlessly as the cross talk between two basketball players on the playground during a game of HORSE.

“The hierarchy you usually find in traditional sports is gone — everyone is just there,” said Dorsch, who was one of the lead investigators on the Aspen Institute research. “It’s more of a meritocracy.”

Once, Tony Grimes told his sons about Michael Jordan. Now, they tell him about e-sports characters. Jake Dockins for The New York Times

He believes that e-sports have evolved that way because of the absence of adult influence at its introductory stage.

“You go to a soccer or basketball program and you can tell immediately the 6-year-olds who are athletic and have talent,” Dorsch said. “Their parents see it and think, ‘Well, he or she could be really good with better coaching.’ ”

For kids, that can turn a passion into a pursuit. A costly one, for parents.

In a 2016 study, Dorsch and his colleagues found many households that spent as much as 10.5 percent of their gross income annually — sometimes \$20,000 or more — on personal trainers, travel costs and private teams for their children.

“Then it becomes about the adults in the room,” he said. “And they want a return on their investment.”

In the Grimes family, the love of sports was handed down the traditional way. During one-on-one games on the miniature hoop hanging from the bedroom door, Tony Grimes was always Michael Jordan and David was LeBron James. It offered Tony an opportunity to tell the boys about a hero of his youth and how he compared to a hero of theirs.

Now, those conversations are often reversed. Tony listens to David talk about why he prefers Banjo and Kazooie, Super Smash Bros. characters, over other game avatars. Instead of shooting percentages and scoring averages, the conversation is about B-button moves or side special ones that can mean the difference between victory and defeat.

“So this is my favorite character, but I’m not great at playing him,” David said, conjuring a character named Hero onto the screen. “There are some characters that you really want to get good with. I’m not. Yet.”

So, Banjo and Kazooie are more important to you than LeBron & Dak?

“Pretty much, yeah,” David said, “because those are the characters I have to play with if I want to win a match or a tournament.”

A new playing field

He has plenty of chances to compete. In April, the YMCA of America launched a national e-sports pilot in 120 of its U.S. branches. It was an immediate hit in the Dallas area, where more than 500 middle to high school age children have participated in its programs.

“We knew how popular the games were and the fact that tournaments could be held remotely gave us a way to engage with kids during the pandemic,” said Rodney Black, program director for the YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas. “The interest was immediate and continues to grow. The plan is to have an on-site gaming lounge in 2022.”

The boys playing Super Smash Bros., one of the games they play in tournaments. Jake Dockins for The New York Times

Jake Dockins for The New York Times

It was just the kind of mainstream recognition that persuaded Dawnita Grimes to open the online world a little wider for her boys.

“You hear the stories about predators, and you worry about how addictive these games are,” she said. “Here, it is organized and supervised, and you don’t have to worry about bad language and poor sportsmanship.”

David has won one tournament and Matthew beat his big brother in another. Still, neither has abandoned soccer and both are looking forward to tennis, golf and swimming in the spring and summer.

David, however, knows there are professionals who have sponsors and can make millions in tournament play. You can almost hear the youth league football coaches pulling their hair out when he talks about it.

“It’s safer than other sports. You don’t get hurt,” he said. “Well, you still have to worry about hands because if your hands get messed up, that’s a problem because you got to be able to play the game.”

He pauses, then smiles.

“It would be awesome to get paid to play video games.”