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EARNED: Thought-Leadership Piece

If Sport Is Supposed to Be for Everyone, Why Can't Everyone Play?

By Lauren Hobart, President and CEO, DICK'S Sporting Goods

For years, we've talked about sports as a meritocracy. If you work hard enough, practice long enough, want it badly enough, and even burn yourself out, you'll find your way onto a field, court, or into a pool. But that narrative ignores a reality many families live with every day. Talent doesn't disappear; access does.

Youth sports in America are becoming more expensive, specialized, and more exclusionary. Participation fees continue to rise, equipment costs add up, and travel expectations continue to grow as local teams turn into national commitments. With this, millions of kids leave sports behind not because they stop loving the game, but because the system makes it impossible to stay in it. At DICK'S Sporting Goods, we often say that "everyone is an athlete." I've said it publicly because it is what I truly believe. But that belief carries responsibility. If sports truly belong to everyone, then access cannot depend on zip code, income, or who can afford the newest and nicest gear.

As a business leader, I've learned that values are only meaningful when they show up in decisions and intentional action. Sometimes, that means doing things that are not universally popular. In 2018, DICK'S made the decision to stop selling assault rifles,¹ knowing it would cost us financially. At the time, I said, "The fact that we could follow all the rules and sell this guy a gun when he clearly shouldn't have had one really just was the last straw." That moment clarified who we are as a company and who we're willing to stand up for.

¹ Lardieri, Alexa. "Dick's Sporting Goods Stops Sale of Guns in 125 Stores." *US News*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2019-03-12/dicks-sporting-goods-stops-sale-of-guns-in-125-stores>.

Youth sports access is no different. This is not an isolated issue or charitable afterthought; it is a structural challenge that affects the future of athletics, community health, and leadership development. Through the DICK’S Sporting Goods Foundation² and our Sports Matter Initiative, we’ve invested more than \$210 million to help underfunded sports programs, rebuild fields, and provide quality resources so kids can get back in the game. Moreover, since 2014, these efforts have helped millions of children access sports opportunities they otherwise would not have.³

Yet, this work is not about philanthropy alone. It is about sustainability. Undoubtedly, sports cannot thrive if participation becomes a privilege for small groups of people. Thus, when access narrows, diversity narrows, innovation and excellence narrow, and the cultural relevance of sports suffers. Younger generations understand this fundamentally, in that they experience sports not just as competition but as identity, culture, and connection. They expect brands and institutions to reflect those values and take responsibility for the systems they influence. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not a marketing trend. It is a long-term commitment to operating with accountability and earning the trust of our athletes.

The future of sports will not be built only in professional arenas, but in community gyms, school fields, and local programs where access determines participation. If we want sports to remain a force for confidence, belonging, and opportunity, we have to protect that access. At DICK’S Sporting Goods, we’re committed to doing that work. Because when more kids get the chance to play, sport becomes stronger for everyone.

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Strategy Note

² “Who We Are.” *Dicks Sporting Goods*, <https://www.sportsmatter.org/s/who-we-are>.

³ “Person Details - Lauren R. Hobart.” *Dick’s Investors*, <https://investors.dicks.com/governance/board-of-directors/person-details/default.aspx?ItemId=e033407d-a471-45f5-912a-ade257db5574>.

This thought-leadership piece is written and designed to reinforce DICK’S Sporting Goods’ credibility as a values- and experience-driven industry leader by addressing youth sports access as a core social equity issue. The tone and messaging of the piece are based on Lauren Hobart’s documented leadership voice, which has consistently emphasized inclusion, responsibility, and informed decision-making, as reflected in her *Fast Company*, DICK’S Investors, and Stanford Business⁴ interviews and public statements. By incorporating direct quotes and referencing real initiatives such as Sports Matter, the op-ed maintains authenticity while avoiding promotional language. Publishing in *Fast Company* positions the brand within a broader conversation about leadership, culture, and long-term business responsibility, strengthening earned credibility and aligning the campaign with Gen Z values around access, equity, and purpose-driven brands.

⁴ “Lauren Hobart, MBA ’97.” *Stanford Business*, 30 September 2015, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/alumni/news/catalyst/lauren-hobart-mba-97>.

Works Cited

- Lardieri, Alexa. "Dick's Sporting Goods Stops Sale of Guns in 125 Stores." *US News*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2019-03-12/dicks-sporting-goods-stops-sale-of-guns-in-125-stores>.
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