The decline of outdoor activity among Gen-Z: A need for reviving street sports for community, art, and career development

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, outdoor activities dwindle, affecting the physical and social development of young people. The Venice Basketball League in Los Angeles, California stands out as a haven, blending sports, art, and community, inspiring careers, and transcending societal divides. Amidst challenges, it offers hope, reminding us of the vitality of authentic connections and the transformative power of street culture in shaping vibrant communities and professional careers. As society grapples with the challenges of digital connectivity, the revival of street sports offers a beacon of hope – a reminder of the organic spaces where connections are forged, creativity thrives, and individuals can express themselves authentically.

KEYWORDS

basketball, streetball, kosárlabda, Los Angeles, community, community building, Venice beach

A MODERN EPIDEMIC: FROM THE REALITY TO THE VIRTUAL LIFE

Where are all the kids from the block?!

In an era dominated by digital technology, virtual reality and personal connections, the younger generation is less and less involved in outdoor activities. The allure of screens, social media, and virtual entertainment has drawn many away from the traditional joys of playing outside [1]. This shift towards an indoor, sedentary lifestyle has impacted the physical and social development of today’s youth, resulting in decreased activity levels and overall well-being [2]. Activities like streetball, football, skateboarding, parkour, and graffiti art, have seen a significant decline in participation as the digital age has taken over. Unfortunately, this trend got another negative impact from the SARS-CoV-2 virus disease (COVID-19), which resulted in the pandemic and related lockdowns, home offices and so on [3].

The modern outdoor activities in metropolitans

Although some may view these outdoor activities as “just hobbies”, they serve as vital components to a healthy routine, a sense of community, a creative outlet, and even career growth [4]. They bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds, fostering a sense of camaraderie and belonging. The local skatepark or basketball court becomes a meeting ground where friendships are forged, skills are shared, and mutual respect is cultivated. These outdoor spaces act as open galleries where budding artists can express themselves and showcase their talents, contributing to the vibrant cultural tapestry of their communities. These environments foster creativity and help combat feelings of isolation prevalent among today’s youth (Figs 1 and 2).

There is clear evidence that time spent outside has benefits for our overall health and productivity. A study from Harvard Medical School highlighted that exposure to natural light
helps regulate the body’s internal clock, improving sleep quality, which in turn boosts cognitive function and productivity. Jimenez et al. [6] reported that spending time in natural environments can improve mood, reduce stress levels, and enhance overall well-being (Fig. 3).

THE ART OF MELTING ARTS

For many reasons, the decline in outdoor activities and street sports is a concerning trend, but amidst this decline, beacons of hope and inspiration exist. Enter the Venice Basketball League known as the “VBL” – a mecca where street cultures collide and thrive. Nestled in the heart of Venice Beach – Los Angeles, California this league stands as the pinnacle of streetball, drawing together diverse elements of art, music, athleticism, and community empowerment.

At the Venice Basketball League, every street culture converges in a spectacular display. The courts themselves serve as canvases for vibrant graffiti art, illustrating the fusion of sports and artistic expression. Hip-Hop Disc Jockeys spin beats that electrify the atmosphere while dancers move in rhythm, and rappers deliver raw verses, painting vivid stories of street life. It becomes a melting pot where art and music blend seamlessly with the spirit of streetball (Figs 4 and 5).

This league is not limited to basketball alone; it allows various sports from skateboarding to freestyle soccer, creating a tapestry of athleticism that transcends boundaries during the basketball game’s halftime shows. It is an inclusive environment where rookies can spread their wings and find their voice (Fig. 6).

STREET SPORTS: A CAREER INCUBATOR

The Venice Basketball League also serves as a catalyst for career development. It provides a platform for emerging talents in entertainment and media to intern, collaborate, and showcase themselves. Master of Ceremonies (known as MCs) and all kinds of artists refine their skills on the courts, while media personalities share knowledge, capturing the essence of the league and amplifying its impact. For example, Ivana Reds (@ivanareds) was the first sideline reporter of the VBL and this exposure gave her a chance to start her professional career in sports broadcasting at Fox News and Telemundo Deportes. J.C. Thompson (@voiceofvenicebeach) is known as MC Mouthpiece, always...
loved to do “comedy roasting” and commentating on the sidelines of LA streetball courts. After he merged his passions, his motivating and hilarious way of describing the game has made him one of the most known underground sports commentators all around California. It is a fact that these spaces serve as incubators for talent, enabling young people to turn their passion into a profession (Figs 7 and 8).

The influence of the Venice Basketball League extends beyond Venice. It inspires and influences street communities worldwide, sparking the inception of similar initiatives in different cities and countries. The league’s ethos of...
community, creativity, and empowerment spreads actively, nurturing budding communities and showing how the fusion of sports, art, and music can unify and empower diverse populations. It attracts NBA (National Basketball Association) players and Coaches, Harlem Globetrotters, NFL players and all kinds of Hollywood artists who are in love with the game (Figs 9 and 10).

**A JOURNEY FROM BUDAPEST TO LOS ANGELES**

Former Semmelweis student Adam Toth, who was a Hungarian college basketball player in the USA, brought this American streetball culture to his childhood home court in Budapest. His streetball festival, 525 CUP, which has been running for 16 years, allowed Adam to continue his basketball career after numerous injuries sidelined him. Adam has spent the last three summers in Venice Beach as a volunteer, building a media portfolio as the main videographer of the league. The Venice Basketball League showed him a new path to his NBA dreams as an organizer and social media producer. Studying and making organic connections in the world of sports allowed him to be a successful Hungarian journalist, mentor and most importantly, Basketball Activist.

![Fig. 8. Ivana Reds who started her media career at Venice and made it to Fox Sports, always comes back to the Venice Finals to interview the best of the game. Photo Credit: Adam Toth](image)

![Fig. 9. More than 100 new players show up every year at the annual VBL Draft where teams select their new additions for the upcoming season. Photo Credit: Adam Toth](image)

![Fig. 10. The 525 Square in Budapest, Hungary. Location of the Hungarian streetball festival – 525 CUP – Home court of Adam Toth. Photo Credit: Adam Toth](image)
By building a community event on his court from an early age, Adam received the “2020 Sportsperson of the Year” Award [6] in his home district from the local mayor. Creating the 525 CUP Tournament for all ages and genders has activated his neighbourhood as never before, even during the pandemic when it was only allowed to create open-air activities. Creating this sports circle and showcasing it online allowed him to reconnect with the US Basketball culture and Venice Beach allowed him to continue his streetball activities on a higher level in the most elite streetball league in the World (Fig. 11).

BUT OVERALL... ARE THE STREETS SAFE?

The Venice Basketball League is the perfect symbol of harmony. Even though Los Angeles has never been famous for being a safe place, especially during the pandemic, when Venice Beach was the epicentre of homeless people [7]. Venice was always the melting point of races. You could see everyone around the courts. From the homeless drug addicts, through the tourists and Hollywood artists to the millionaire company owners who all want to be part of this vibrant energy that Muscle Beach brings out of everyone. At the same time... streetball is seen as a black sport [8] since you need good genes to handle the concrete and the tough competition if you are not on a pro level. We talked about the VBL being a career incubator on all levels, which is also true for all the athletes, who come here from all around the World. We preach unity through the game that we love, and we give multiple chances to people who want to restart their pro basketball careers.

IS STREET SPORT A SOLUTION FOR MIXING “COLOURS”? 

Racism is an everyday topic in the USA, but the VBL wants to tear down that wall. Racism is an extremely sensitive topic, but we do agree on the fact that street sports (especially with the cooperation of music) are the best way to speak a mutual language no matter where you are coming from.

During the pandemic, we all witnessed what happened on the streets during the George Floyd protests [9]. But the Venice team did something remarkable that no one had done before. Their groundbreaking project called the Hoopbus is a non-profit basketball movement which is built on a classic American yellow school bus, with basketball backboards built on the front and the back. This way they created a moving basketball court, that could pull up in any neighbourhood and create a bloc party in a second. During the pandemic, the bus did a cross-country tour to ease the tension of what the George Floyd marches created. As soon as the bus stopped in the middle of the crowd in downtown Chicago, all the problems were solved with the love of the game. In a couple of minutes, you could see white police officers play one on one against black protesters... and I think we can stop here because this is enough to say about what street sports could do to any community. This was one of the most important moments of streetball history that not a lot of people know about. Since then, the Hoopbus have been travelling all around the States to find rundown streetball courts in low-income communities. The main mission is to help local artists refurbish the court in the most colourful way, influence the youth and the local mayor about the importance of sport and teach everyone about gun prevention and drug use.

This project was so successful that the NBA implemented the Hoopbus in their 75th-anniversary commercial’s main story (Fig. 12).
As a European-born basketball player, I could have never imagined what the reality was of the streets in the USA. I understand that most parents do not want their kids playing outside, but in reality, you have to exercise and connect with people. The league in Venice teaches that there are no boundaries. Anyone can contribute to the game. No matter what age, gender or race we are talking about. The League’s number one mission is to teach their followers all around the world, what sports really should be about. And that is to have a healthy body with a healthy mindset. No prejudice allowed, just show us your game and then go home as a better person.

CONCLUSIONS

The decline of outdoor activity among Gen-Z has led to a loss of participation in street sports, impacting community building, underground art, career opportunities, and personal growth. Yet, beacons like the Venice Basketball League in California illuminate the path forward. This league serves as a testament to the power of street culture in shaping communities, sparking careers, and inspiring global change. As society grapples with the challenges of digital connectivity, the revival of street sports offers a beacon of hope – a reminder of the organic spaces where connections are forged, creativity thrives, and individuals can express themselves authentically.

You can read all the news about the Venice Basketball League at www.veniceball.com.

On Instagram you can follow the Venice Basketball League as @veniceball and Adam as @carterleague.

REFERENCES