

# Youth sport gets taste of own NFL media day

Stephen Borelli  
USA TODAY

We all want our kids to be stars. Sure, they often share those aspirations with us. But sometimes the reward they get from sports is much simpler. “I think it’s just fun to play with others, and especially with people who are close to you,” Ethan Taylor, a young flag football player from Great Britain, said while participating in the NFL’s Pro Bowl Games last week. “You can just have a laugh, and sometimes you can get competitive. If you win, you celebrate loads. If you lose, you still celebrate if you had a good time ...” He paused. “But you’re a little sad.” His coaches, and two of his teammates who surrounded him during an interview session, chuckled. What if we asked our kids, before a national audience, why they play sports? What if we asked them, before their biggest games of the season, for a prediction?

What if we put them on a world stage, like we will do with professional players this week leading up to the Super Bowl? If you are 12 and under, and your team qualified for the International Flag Championships in Orlando, Florida, you had those opportunities, and many others, to speak up during your media day. “What have your friends made of this and how jealous are they of you for being out in Orlando when we’re here in the freezing cold of London?” BBC reporter Phil Parry asked Great Britain’s players.

“Yeah, it’s absolutely hilarious,” said Douglas Timms, the team quarterback, swinging casually in his desk chair during a Zoom interview. “I have an older sister. As the younger sibling, you have to be the total bugger. You have to push for the favorite child spot. So this has definitely, like, raised my ranking.”

For the first time, the NFL had kids participate in media availabilities ahead of its U12 flag football tournament, in which coed teams from 13 countries competed. It concluded with Sunday’s final between Canada and Japan.

The media sessions gave the young athletes a chance to tell everyone about their team, their sports experiences and aspirations, and whatever else was on their mind (including how their parents act at games).

The candor of the event reminded us how much we can learn from sitting and listening to kids, and hearing about how our actions affect them.

**‘My mom’s very loud’: Sports is our kids’ experience to create, not ours**

Your son or daughter will likely tell you they play sports not for the wins but for the feeling they get in trying to achieve them.

“You get to play with boys but also connect with the girls that are on your team and you get to make plays that nobody really thought you were capable of doing, and that really makes me proud,” says Leah Kozubek, an 11-year-old rusher for Team Canada. The flag football movement, which



Great Britain’s Douglas Timms participates in media day last week at the 12U international flag championships in Orlando, Florida. NFL

has 20 million participants in more than 100 countries, is built on a premise that anyone, of any skill level, can not only be on a team, but contribute to its overall success.

The pleasure kids derive from flag football, or any sport, shouldn’t change whether they’re in a recreational game or moving through rounds of tournament play like the U12 flag teams had to do to reach Orlando.

“It’s just another way to have a fun runaround with your mates and laugh over silly things,” says Timms, great Britain’s quarterback.

Maybe you’re the mom or dad who yanks at your hair after every call that goes against your child. Or you’re the coach who berates a referee over it. Sometimes we forget sports is our kids’ experience to create.

We can get worked up over how our son or daughter performs on the field. But have you ever wondered what’s going through his or her mind while they’re playing, or listening to you from the stands? Here’s your chance.

“My mom’s definitely taking the spot for No. 1 fan, just a very loud person in general,” Timms says. “On the sideline, you can hear her. Like even in the stadium, probably, you just hear her going, ‘Go Douglas, go,’ which is always nice to hear because family is just one of the most important aspects of your life. And they just, like, they help you through everything.”

“They’ve been really helpful, but they are also very cautious about me getting hurt a lot of the time,” his teammate, Leia Bond, chimed in. “And yeah, like Douglas said, my mom’s very loud. Very loud. Like, it’s kind of awkward.”

**‘The beauty of inclusion’: What flag football teaches us**

NFL FLAG Football is contested in a rectangular space about one-third the size of a traditional football field. A pass

clock and rules that restrict the quarterback’s running forces him or her to push the ball downfield.

A kid’s effort to find the ball within the fast pace and smaller confines is often as valuable as his or her athleticism.

“Once you get on there, and you actually absorb what we’re trying to coach, anybody can make it,” says Eliel Bastien, a coach for Team Canada. “And as long as you give your 100% we’ll use you on the field.”

Flag is perhaps fastest growing among girls, who can now play it in 14 states (and counting) as a sanctioned high school varsity sport and in nearly 20 more as part of pilot programs.

This weekend, the NFL also hosted a showcase among the top U.S. girls high school flag football athletes from teams featured in the USA TODAY Super 25 flag football rankings.

Each coed team competing in the 12U international flag championships has at least two girls. Many have more.

“The beauty of flag football is inclusivity, so it doesn’t matter your size, it doesn’t matter your background, it doesn’t matter your gender,” says Jamil Springer, the head coach of Team Canada. “Flag football is a game for everybody, and I think tournaments like this is a great representation, because you have Germany, Brazil, France, Japan, China, places that I don’t think some of these kids even know exist, and this is their first time interacting or even knowing that that there’s something outside of Canada.

“So I can say, as a parent, as a coach and as an organizer, there’s nothing that beats this tournament. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for these kids, and I think they’ll remember it when they’re old like us.”

**‘Laugh at the face of adversity’: A sense of humor goes a long way**

Springer says he can “definitely fore-

see someone .... maybe several people” on his Montreal-based team playing flag football for Canada in the Olympics at some point. The sport debuts at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

“But this team, by far, is the most interesting because (of) their sense of humor,” he says of teams he has brought to this tournament. “There’s never a dull moment, even though we’ve had some tough games in Canada, at the nationals, even the regionals.

“I think that their sense of humor is the reason why they kind of get through the tough moments and they persevere, because they just laugh at every single thing possible, which is frustrating as a coach, but in the long run, we want them to enjoy this experience.

“We want them to come back from this experience saying they had a time of their life, and it’s important that they stay light and they laugh at the face of adversity, essentially.”

We can coach and parent with humor, too. When I asked two players from New Zealand’s flag football team what they liked best about being around their team, they mentioned how their coach, Mase Shaw, patiently corrects their mistakes.

“He definitely picks us up when we’re at our lowest, and he really helps us through those tough times and gives us really good advice to get a team going,” said quarterback Levi Currie.

“I don’t even pay them either,” Shaw said from behind him, eliciting smiles from Currie and wide receiver Olivia Quane.

As adults, we can take ourselves too seriously. Kids are much less likely to do so.

Sometimes, we need to follow their lead to give them the best sports experience, like when Great Britain’s team was asked about their ambitions for the tournament.

“To be honest, I don’t have the highest ambitions,” said Taylor, the backup quarterback.

His head coach, Bobby Behzadi, patted the player’s head and smiled before Taylor could continue much further.

“I’m just gonna join in,” Behzaid said. “I think what we try to manage those expectations. And I think the outcome of this tournament is not gonna be judging what’s success for us.

“We look at this team, and we know how much they’ve progressed, and the goal is that they go back, and in two years time, we look at this team and they’re all still playing.”

Now Timms, his quarterback, had something to add.

“I just have a question,” he said, raising his index finger and flashing a grin. “Does this go out to any countries, because if it does, we’re definitely gonna win.”

*Contributing: Christine Conetta Borelli, aka Coach Steve, has been an editor and writer with USA TODAY since 1999. He spent 10 years coaching his two sons’ baseball and basketball teams. He and his wife, Colleen, are now sports parents for two high schoolers. For his past columns, go to <https://www.usatoday.com/staff/2646464001/stephen-borelli/>*

# Portal may nix Nebraska spring ‘showcase’ game

Ehsan Kassim  
USA TODAY

Nebraska football’s traditional spring game might become a thing of the past.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday, third-year coach Matt Rhule said he “highly doubts” the annual spring game, one of the country’s most attended, will be played again. He blamed the transfer portal.

“I don’t know that yet, but I’ll be honest with you. I highly doubt it,” Rhule said about the future of the spring game. “I hate to say this, but last year we were one of the more televised spring games

and I dealt with a lot of people offering our players a lot of opportunities after that.

“To go out and bring in a bunch of new players and then showcase them for all the other schools to watch, that doesn’t make a lot of sense to me.”

Nebraska’s spring game was held on April 27, 2024, in front of 60,452 at Memorial Stadium in Lincoln. The game was also televised on the Big Ten Network. Following the spring game, the Cornhuskers suffered a few losses to the transfer portal.

“The word ‘tampering’ doesn’t exist anymore,” Rhule said. “It’s just an absolute free, open common market. I don’t

necessarily want to open up to the outside world. I don’t, these guys all being able to watch our guys and say, ‘Wow, he looks like a pretty good player. Let’s go get him.’ ”

While a “traditional spring” game for the Cornhuskers doesn’t seem likely, Rhule did say he wants to have the opportunity to “show off” his players to the fans in some fashion. Nebraska could hold an event on April 26 to end spring practices. The transfer portal for the spring cycle closes on April 25 this year.

“I do want to show off our players in some way,” he said. “So what exactly will it be? ... I have not worried about anything other than recruiting right now.”



Nebraska coach Matt Rhule may do something other than a spring football game after the portal closes April 25.

DYLAN WIDGER/IMAGN IMAGES

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MLB

# Dodgers ready to repeat; Cardinals look clueless

Bob Nightengale  
USA TODAY

PHOENIX – The weather is gorgeous without a cloud in the sky for the opening of spring training, but everywhere you turn there are orange traffic cones, potholes and detours.

It has nothing to do with the partying and traffic from the wild WM Phoenix Open, rather the other 29 Major League Baseball teams trying to navigate any possible way to knock off the mighty Los Angeles Dodgers.

The Dodgers, the defending World Series champions, are threatening to strangle the hope out of all their competitors with their sexy array of stars, massive \$380 million payroll, and enough talent where they could their divide their team in two and still wind up playing against each other in the World Series.

If the Dodgers can win the World Series with only three healthy starters, Shohei Ohtani and Freddie Freeman playing injured, and forced to rely on a bullpen from the first inning to the ninth, can you imagine how powerful they'll be after spending close to a half-billion dollars in the winter?

They've now got eight starters – nine when three-time Cy Young winner and future Hall of Famer Clayton Kershaw re-signs – after signing two-time Cy Young winner Blake Snell and grabbing Roki Sasaki, perhaps the greatest young pitching talent in Japanese history. Oh, and don't forget they also signed the two best closers on the market, with Tanner Scott and Kirby Yates.

Little wonder when Dodgers short-stop Miguel Rojas was recently asked if the team could break the Seattle Mariners' all-time record with 116 victories in 2001, he flatly predicted they'd win 120 games: "It's not a goal. It's an expectation."

The Dodgers are simply that loaded. Sportsbooks have the over/under on the Dodgers' win total at more than 103 and the team is the overwhelming favorite to win it all.

How would you like to reside in the National League West Division, where the San Diego Padres had the Dodgers on the ropes in last year's division series and then watched the Dodgers spend \$461 million this winter while the Padres did nothing more than bring back their backup catcher and sign a platoon for left field?

Or the Arizona Diamondbacks, who spent a franchise-record \$210 million on ace Corbin Burnes, only for the Dodgers rotation to improve even more with Snell, Sasaki and the return of Ohtani?

Or the San Francisco Giants, who spent a franchise-record \$182 million on shortstop Willy Adames, only for the Dodgers to snag their ace in Snell and outfielder in Michael Conforto?

Oh, to be in the NL Central or American League Central, where all 12 teams in the two divisions were outspent by the Athletics of Sacramento.

Well, after teams spent all winter trying to work their magic, they now will be reporting in the next two days to spring training camps in Arizona and Florida, fashioning a report card for the top six winners and losers of the offseason.

## Winners of the offseason

**Juan Soto:** Come on, \$765 million? Really? It's mind-boggling that Soto is being paid more than Shohei Ohtani, who's a cash cow for the Dodgers. Soto is a mighty fine hitter, but he's also a one-dimensional player who could end up being the Mets' starting first baseman or DH in a couple of years. This is the most stunning contract in baseball since Alex Rodriguez's record 10-year, \$252 million deal with the Texas Rangers nearly a quarter-century ago.

**Los Angeles Dodgers:** This team is so deep with pitching that there's no need for a single starter to pitch 150 innings this season, making sure that everyone is well-rested and fresh for the playoffs and World Series. The Dodgers'



The Dodgers beat the Yankees in five games in the 2024 World Series. WENDELL CRUZ/IMAGN IMAGES

toughest task of the spring will be setting aside time to get their fingers sized for their 2025 World Series rings.

**New York Yankees:** The Yankees will tell you in hindsight that their loss in the Soto sweepstakes might have been the best \$760 million they never spent. Sure, they wanted Soto, but they also concede that if they landed him, they never would have been able to build their team into the best in the American League. They signed ace Max Fried to a \$218 million contract, traded for Cody Bellinger, traded for Devin Williams and signed former MVP Paul Goldschmidt. And, for an added bonus, it sure helped that most of the marquee free agents headed to the National League over the winter, clearing the path for a Yankees' return trip to the World Series.

**Willy Adames:** Raise your hand if you thought Adames would get a guaranteed contract worth \$128 million more than free agent slugger Pete Alonso. Adames made the shrewd decision to sign early and got a fat seven-year, \$182 million payday from the San Francisco Giants. If he'd waited, who knows, he could still be sitting out there waiting for his contract like Alex Bregman.

**The team formerly known as the Oakland Athletics:** Finally, no more payroll slashing. No more distractions. No more protests. The Athletics, who lost 307 games the past three seasons, suddenly are legitimate. They improved by 19 games from their 2023 season, going 39-37 after July 1, tied for the third-best record in the American League. They even started acting like a major league team this past winter, increasing their payroll, signing starter Luis Severino to a franchise-record \$67 million contract over three years, locked up outfielder Brent Rooker to a five-year, \$60 million contract, and resisted all trade overtures for All-Star closer Mason Miller. Sure, they'll be playing the next three years in a minor league ballpark, but the stands will be filled at their 14,000-seat stadium, and they'll be cheered by the good folks of Sacramento. The biggest bummer may be dodging those bad hops in the infield with 156 games scheduled between the A's and the Sacramento River Cats.

**Left-handed starters:** What a winter it was for the lefties in the game. Max Fried, who was 11-10 with a 3.25 ERA with Atlanta, signed the richest contract for a left-handed pitcher in baseball history (eight years, \$218 million) with the Yankees. Blake Snell, who was 0-3 with a 6.31 ERA at the All-Star break, signed a five-year, \$182 million contract with the Dodgers. Sean Manaea, who has never won more than 12 games in a season with a career 4.00 ERA, signed a three-year, \$75 million deal with the Mets. Yes, left-handed starters have never been more in demand.

## Losers of the offseason

**St. Louis Cardinals:** This is a franchise we no longer recognize. They've been the class of the NL Central since the turn of this century with 11 division titles, four World Series appearances and two championships in front of baseball's greatest fans. Now, for the first time in three decades, they're settling for mediocrity while they undergo a rebuild. They haven't signed a single free agent, made one trade for utility man Michael Helman, who was about to be designated for assignment by the Minnesota Twins, and still are desperately trying to unload third baseman Nolan Arenado and the remaining \$74 million in his contract. It's going to be a long, hot summer in St. Louis.

**San Diego Padres:** They may be spending the next 20 years lamenting just how close they were to toppling the Dodgers in the 2024 NLDS. And just when they thought they were closing the gap on the Dodgers, the Dodgers went out and spent nearly another half-billion dollars while the Padres ran out of cash. They lost their closer (Tanner Scott), All-Star left fielder (Jurickson Profar), infielders (Ha-Seong Kim and Donovan Solano) and catcher (Kyle Higashioka). Most painful, they lost Roki Sasaki to the Dodgers just when they were confident he was coming their way. All they've done all winter is bring back reserve catcher Elias Diaz and sign an outfield platoon of Jason Heyward and Connor Joe. If that's not tough enough to swallow, they've been shopping starter Dylan Cease all winter trying to clear room to dip below the luxury tax threshold. Meanwhile, the ownership is muddled in a game of Family Feud with nasty lawsuits swapped between family members, leaving fellow owners to wonder if the team will eventually be sold.

**Pete Alonso:** No one's free agent value came crashing down mightier than Alonso's. It was two years ago that he turned down a seven-year, \$158 million extension. It was four months ago that he was seeking close to a \$200 million payday. He was left with a two-year, \$54 million contract with the Mets that no one could possibly have envisioned. Certainly, he could have gotten a bigger payday if he wanted to play for the Toronto Blue Jays. He even rejected a three-year, \$85 million contract in January from the Mets, which was heavily deferred, and ultimately even passed on a three-year, \$71 million proposal. Alonso was left with no choice but to bet on himself and can only hope that a year from now when he likely opts out, he can change a lot of folks' minds, particularly with no qualifying offer attached to him.

**Nick Pivetta:** Remember when the

baseball industry was surprised back in November when the Boston Red Sox gave a \$21.05 million qualifying offer to Pivetta after going just 6-12 with a 4.14 ERA? Despite Pivetta never making more than \$7.5 million in a season, he turned it down. Well, here we are, with pitchers and catchers reporting to camp, and Pivetta still is unemployed. No team is willing to give him \$21 million a year while also forfeiting a draft pick. Pivetta can either swallow his pride and accept a cheaper deal or if he is really thinking about skipping spring training, he may want to pick up the phone and talk to Jordan Montgomery and Blake Snell. They'll gladly let him know what a mistake it would be.

**Stu Sternberg:** Just when it looked like Rays owner Stu Sternberg and St. Petersburg officials finally resolved the Tampa Bay Rays' stadium mess after two decades of negotiations, along came Hurricanes Helene and Milton, blowing the top off Tropicana Field and perhaps blowing up their tentative deal for a new ballpark. All the Rays know is that they'll be spending the 2025 season playing at the Yankees' spring training complex, George M. Steinbrenner Field, with no idea of their future after the season. Will the city fix the roof permitting the Rays to return for the 2026-2028 seasons, delaying their new stadium by a year? Do the Rays want to back out of their deal by March 31 and pursue a new ballpark instead in Tampa or Orlando? The trust between Sternberg and the local politicians is now at a breaking point and could eventually lead to the team being sold.

**Seattle Mariners:** Come on, didn't they learn their lesson from a year ago? Wasn't it painful enough knowing they had the best pitching staff in baseball, one that could have carried them right into the World Series but instead sat home all winter. Now, instead of spending money to bring in offensive help, trying to sign free agents Alonso or Bregman, or trading for Alec Bohm of the Philadelphia Phillies, they're going to run it back again with basically the same offense.

This is an offense that entered the final five weeks of the season ranked last in hitting (.216), last in strikeout rate (27.7%), 28th in OPS (.666) and 27th in runs per game (3.93). And the Mariners did nothing to supplement it other than re-sign Jorge Polanco to a one-year, \$7.75 million contract and sign free agent infielder Donovan Solano to a one-year, \$3.5 million deal. That's it. Shame on the Mariners and their ownership if they waste another year. For a team that has never played in the World Series, you'd think there would be a semblance of urgency to take advantage of having perhaps the most talented rotation in baseball.

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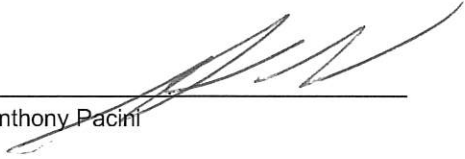
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