



Engaging Newcomers through Fanship

A Novel Approach to Soccer Participation

PROJECT REPORT



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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gaps in sport participation for new-to-Canada participants are driven by several factors, including financial barriers, time commitment and competing interests, systemic racism, language barriers, political and cultural differences, unfamiliarity with sports and the Canadian sport system, a disconnect from mainstream leagues, and a lack of sufficient information on how to get involved in organized sport.¹ Researchers² found that among young African new-to-Canada participants in Metro Vancouver, the need to reconstruct social networks, a disconnect from sport organizations, and a lack of outreach fueled accessibility gaps to organized sport participation.

Given these considerations, Sport for Life hypothesizes that a fan experience model could reduce cultural and social barriers to sport participation among participants who are new to Canada. This model has been successful in achieving health-related objectives, both in Scotland³ and elsewhere in Canada.⁴

Sport for Life worked in close collaboration with the Ismaili Youth Soccer Academy (IYSA) in Burnaby, Greater Vancouver area, and Winnipeg Newcomer Sport Academy (WNSA). With insights from Canada Soccer, IYSA and WNSA took the lead in recruiting the participants and hosting the activities with the support of the partners, contributors, and supporters. The University of Western Ontario (UWO) Centre for Studies in Family Medicine provided the evaluation framework that the lead partners reviewed and approved. Research assistants were hired from within each community to host the focus groups. Near the end of the pilot, Sport for Life conducted a process evaluation in the form of interviews with the project partners, while UWO analyzed the interview findings. The project partners worked together to prepare the final report.

In this pilot, we observed challenges with logistics, language, and administration that were not expected. In these instances, we were able to pivot and revise the program to still provide valuable experiences and test our hypothesis. The result was more youth participation and exposure to soccer fanship in Canada. Our participants were able to see themselves reflected in the players from local soccer clubs, university soccer players, and professional soccer players in MLS and in the World Cup.

As a result of their experience in the soccer fanship pilot, many youths became more familiar with the Canadian sport system than they had been and in many cases had more knowledge than they previously had about how to get involved in soccer and other sports. The fan-based activities contributed to reduced social and cultural barriers to new-to-Canada participant engagement in soccer and other organized sport opportunities for those unfamiliar with the Canadian sport system, those who may lack sufficient information on how to get involved in organized sport, and those who may lack social connection to the community.⁵

1 Institute for Canadian Citizenship. (2014).

2 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299460345_Bridging_the_Gaps_Access_to_Formal_Support_Services_among_Young_African_Immigrants_and_Refugees_in_Metro_Vancouver

3 <https://www.fitfootballfc.com/>

4 <https://www.hockeyfansintraining.org/the-hockey-fit-program-and-beyond/>

5 <https://sportforlife.ca/blog/newcomer-soccer-fanship-project-launched-in-winnipeg-and-greater-vancouver/>

2.0 BACKGROUND

New-to-Canada children, youth, and adults are at greater risk of physical inactivity, compared to non-immigrant peers.⁶ Newcomers also faced the largest decline in life satisfaction in the face of COVID-19.⁷ Despite immigration accounting for more than 80% of Canada's population growth in recent years, and the country welcoming a historic 401,000 newcomers in 2021 and 420,000 newcomers in 2022,⁸ COVID-19 exacerbated inequities in sport participation among those who are new to Canada, widening the gap in sport participation, in comparison to non-immigrant peers.⁹ Based on these statistics, Sport for Life derived that the underlying cause of inequalities in physical activity for new-to-Canada participants is that they face an entirely different sports system, as well as language and cultural barriers, than those that may exist in the countries from which they originate.

This pilot was designed to explore the impact of fan-based activities (e.g., recruitment via fan networks, connections to professional players as part of program activities, establishing forums for fans participating in programming to connect, etc.) on reducing social and cultural barriers to new-to-Canada participants engagement in soccer to those unfamiliar with the Canadian sport system, those who may lack sufficient information on how to get involved in organized sport, and those who may lack social connection to the community. As roughly 25% of the population (approximately nine million people) in Canada are newcomers, Sport for Life saw an opportunity to connect new-to-Canada youth to organized sport. With increased fanship and capacity-building, Sport for Life hoped to inspire youth to increase physical activity levels and improve their quality of life.

3.0 SAMPLE POPULATION

WNSA and IYSA were chosen as the project delivery partners for three key reasons:

1. They are both located in communities where many newcomer families have settled.
2. They both support newcomer families in connecting to the community through a series of sports experiences, soccer being a main activity.
3. Neither organization were, at the time of the pilot, a member club of Canada Soccer.

The project targeted youth (from ages 8–19) from newcomer populations. For this project, we define newcomers as individuals who arrived in Canada less than five years before the start of the project. Individuals from these populations may have unique intersectionalities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, marital and family status, education, ability, etc.). When recruited, participants had to be new-to-Canada youth who had tried to participate in sport but ran into issues (e.g., finance, equipment, couldn't register, etc.). The program participants were a total of 120 youth; 60 in Winnipeg, 60 in Burnaby, Greater Vancouver.

6 Pan-Canadian Health Inequalities Data Tool. (2017); Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2018).

7 Statistics Canada. (2020).

8 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2021); (2022).

9 Canadian Heritage. (2021); CFLRI. (2022).

Burnaby

In Burnaby, recruitment efforts for the sample population were led by the Ismaili Youth Soccer Academy (IYSA). IYSA conducted a thorough needs assessment, identifying important barriers for new-to-Canada participants, including access to equipment, financial aid for registration, and transportation. They developed an effective communication strategy utilizing various channels such as Instagram, their email databases, a community-based WhatsApp group, the IYSA website, and reaching out through local religious community networks. In addition, IYSA held recruitment and information booths at social events at the Mosque, where newcomers are already engaging and receiving community support for health, education, finances, etc. They collaborated with their settlement committee within the Ismaili Council for British Columbia. Once they had a group of interested youth, through data collected via a form or having conversations with the youth, they were able to screen out the people who were already involved in sport, so they knew that the sample population was experiencing the problem defined.

In Burnaby, the demographics for those who participated in the Fanship activities were 35 girls, 33 boys, and two who preferred not to self-identify. The participants emigrated from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, India, Pakistan, Liberia, and Tanzania. The demographics for those who engaged in capacity-building activities were 1 girl and 14 boys. These participants emigrated from Nigeria, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, India, Pakistan, and Tanzania.

Number of Participants	Ages	Gender	Country of emigration
Fanship	13–18 years	Female: 35 Male:33 Prefer not to say: 2	Afghanistan, Tajikistan, India, Pakistan, Liberia and Tanzania
Capacity-building Activities	9–14 years	Female: 1 Male: 14	Nigeria, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, India, Pakistan and Tanzania



Winnipeg

In Winnipeg, recruitment efforts for the sample population included promotion of the program via soccer fan networks and online and social media engagement (see posters linked [[English](#) and [French](#)] and attached in the appendix), local soccer clubs and associations, and the WNSA network. Other recruitment centered on partnerships with local immigration agencies, settlement agencies, cultural associations, youth groups, and social service organizations supporting newcomers.

Before finalizing the pilot participants, WNSA asked the youth whether they experienced the problem as outlined. They validated that these were youth not already participating in sport and excluded anyone from the pilot who had referenced participating in a sport experience in Canada.

The demographics for those who participated in the Fanship activities were 25 girls ages 8–17 and 35 boys ages 8–17. The participants emigrated from the following countries: Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Ghana, DR Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Peru, China and Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, the demographics for those who participated in the capacity-building activities were two girls and twelve boys. These participants emigrated from the following countries: Ghana, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

Number of Participants	Ages	Gender	Country of emigration
Fanship	8–17 years	Female: 25 Male: 35	Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Ghana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Peru, China, and Kazakhstan
Capacity-building Activities	10–14 years	Female: 2 Male: 12	Ghana, Kenya, D.R. Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Afghanistan



4.0 METHODOLOGY

The pilot was run in the year 2023 and was focused primarily on racialized new-to-Canada youth in both Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Burnaby (Greater Vancouver), British Columbia, areas with large newcomer populations and youth thought to be experiencing a gap in newcomer sport participation. Winnipeg and Burnaby are cities with different populations, demographics, and climates, and it is important to note that the same thing was not tested in both locations. Sport for Life partnered with IYSA and WNSA to lead the project. These partners were chosen due to existing relationships and knowledge of their community members experiencing the problem to be tested. The fanship activities ran for approximately six months, from June–July to December 2023. The results were monitored and measured by University of Western Ontario researchers. For each location, outlined below are the fanship and capacity-building elements and their details, as well as expectations going into the pilot, the assumptions, and limiting factors. In terms of scope, due to challenges with registration with Canada Soccer, the pilot rollout differed slightly from its original design, while still retaining the plan's efficacy.

Sport for Life hypothesizes that a fan experience model could reduce cultural and social barriers to sport participation among participants who are new to Canada, namely unfamiliarity with the Canadian sport system, a lack of sufficient information on how to get involved in organized sport, and a lack of social connection to the community.

The primary element of this experience was fanship, which we define as an individual's psychological attachment or connection to a specific fan object (like a celebrity, film, or sports team). Capacity-building was offered, but there was not a large uptake in these opportunities due to timing and other factors. For this report, we define capacity-building as training in the foundational elements of soccer. Trained coaches facilitated the capacity-building element to inspire youth to want to register for sport and participate in sport themselves.

The fanship elements were chosen because the partners thought fanship would encourage community-building and belonging, inspire women and diversity in sports, and provide a safe environment for demonstrating and promoting fanship in Canada.

Winnipeg

A. Fanship & Capacity-building – Winnipeg

As an organization with a large number of racialized new-to-Canada youth participants who love physical activities and sport, WNSA assembled a team in its community to coordinate and deliver its intended activities to provide the project participants with unique experiences. They reached out to existing partners in the community and leaned on established relationships to offer the youth unique experiences. In terms of capacity-building, player development initiatives included skill development drills, specifically for receivers and opening drills.

As part of the official pilot, there were several fanship elements in Winnipeg. These were chosen because they were large local events and would expose the youth to various aspects of soccer fanship. Attending the Manitoba African Cup of Nations was thought to be especially relevant to new-to-Canada participants from Africa, where youth might see players from their countries of origin play in Canada. The university soccer experiences were relevant to youth who might consider attending university, whether they have ideas to play soccer (or any sport) or participate in fanship at that level. Valour FC was chosen because it is a professional level of soccer and it was important for the youth to experience elite-level

soccer to understand the level of focus and commitment required for a sport to become your livelihood. Exposure to Bonivital, one of the largest soccer clubs in Winnipeg, was included in the pilot to expose the youth to an entry-level aspiration so that, by building their skills, they could potentially join Bonivital or a similar club in the future. All of these events were chosen because they offered exposure to an experience that would make soccer, participating or spectatorship, on various levels, feel achievable, relevant to their lives, and encourage a sense of community.

Manitoba African Cup of Nations (Summer, June–August)

This annual tournament features 16 teams representing their African country of origin and is an effort to unite communities and create a safe space for youth. The event began with a flag-bearing procession, followed by matches where youth participated as ball retrievers. On a side field, informal soccer games, skill development, and scrimmages were organized. This family-friendly event, complete with food and music, was a great opportunity to introduce families to the diversity of the local soccer scene. A parents' meeting was also held to provide information on how to register for soccer clubs.

- **Numbers:** 55
- **Led by:** WNSA
- **Themes:** Community engagement, Skill development, and Introduction to local sport.

Manitoba African Cup of Nations Championship (August)

This championship event was a festival that served to unite communities and give athletes a platform to showcase their talents. Representatives from countries including Ghana, Eritrea, DRC, Congo, and Senegal participated. The pilot provided transportation, food, drinks, tent/chair rentals, sunscreen, and a "Register for Indoor Soccer" tent staffed by a Jumpstart/KidSport ambassador. The festival also included music performers, activities for youth, a bouncy castle, a food truck, face painting, and giveaways (Valour FC/other soccer gear). VIPs, including Valour FC players and politicians, were invited.

- **Numbers:** 45
- **Led by:** Mark Gavlov, Tariq Mohammed, and three new-to-Canada parent coaches.
- **Themes:** Small-sided games and Community festival.

Valour FC Games (August–September)

This fanship experience exposed participants to Valour FC, a professional soccer club in the Canadian Premier League that plays at Princess Auto Stadium. The event demonstrated a large-scale professional league and showcased the fan experience for those unfamiliar with the Canadian sport system. With representation from many countries, youth could be inspired by players from their country of origin. During the games, participants were included by superfans and engaged in fan activities. Valour FC committed to providing 60 tickets for this pilot.

- **Numbers:** 55
- **Led by:** WNSA
- **Themes:** Professional sport exposure, Fanship, and Community connection.

CIBC & Bonivital Soccer Club Event (October 4)

WNSA youth participated in a special collaborative practice at the Bonivital Soccer Club, one of the largest clubs in Winnipeg. Canada Soccer and CIBC partnered to deliver a unique experience with swag, food, and a session on goalkeeping with Olympic gold medalist, Stephanie Labbé.

- **Numbers:** 35
- **Led by:** Bonivital coaches and retired Team Canada goalie, Stephanie Labbé.
- **Theme:** Goalkeeping.

University of Manitoba Bisons Women's Soccer Game (October 8)

This fanship experience exposed participants to collegiate sport and was a source of inspiration. Youth served as ball retrievers and had opportunities at halftime to play in unstructured games on the sidelines.

- **Numbers:** 28
- **Led by:** WNSA
- **Themes:** Collegiate sport exposure and Active participation.

University of Manitoba Bisons Women's Soccer Session (November)

This was a skill development session at the university facility. The coaching staff and collegiate players executed a practice that was unique and appealed specifically to the girls in the program, followed by a “meet the player” social with pizza.

- **Numbers:** 55
- **Led by:** The University of Manitoba Bisons assistant coach and players.
- **Themes:** Shooting & Finishing.

WNSA Community Sport Festival (December 28)

This was a multisport event with over 100 people in attendance. The soccer sessions included skill development and scrimmages. Bonivital coaches assisted with the event and provided membership information for new-to-Canada youth who live in their area.

- **Numbers:** 40 (for soccer)
- **Led by:** WNSA and Bonivital coaches.
- **Themes:** 3v3 mini soccer tournament ft. Sports Without Boundaries group.

Futsal Sessions (February)

These skill-building sessions were held at the University of Manitoba. The pilot provided transportation, hot dogs, and drinks for each participant.

- **Numbers:** 25–30
- **Led by:** Bonivital coach Kyle
- **Themes:** Futsal rules, equipment, and skills.



B. Expectations, Assumptions, Limiting Factors – Winnipeg

Generally, we expected new-to-Canada families to be introduced to and participate in the Winnipeg soccer community by attending events, and organizations like WNSA would collaborate with mainstream soccer clubs, Manitoba Soccer, and Canada Soccer to create an inclusive environment where new-to-Canada participants felt welcome to participate in soccer activities. Despite challenges faced, the pilot aimed to achieve several key outcomes, among which are an awareness of local soccer clubs and an understanding of how to join when ready.

Originally, the intent was to use a survey to get feedback about the effectiveness of engagement initiatives in the soccer community. However, when we surveyed new-to-Canada youth, we learned this was not a good way to get meaningful or complete feedback. Due to language barriers as well as patience to complete a survey, WNSA communicated to Sport for Life and the University of Western Ontario Centre for Studies in Family Medicine researchers that an alternative method was needed. When we tried the survey with four of the youth, they could not complete it independently, and it took them about 15 minutes to complete just the first page. The alternate method of asking youth to record their response to specific survey questions was far more effective and engaging.



As with any project, the team had to respond to change and be resourceful. This came into play when initially the Radius Lab at Simon Fraser University was slated as the evaluation and monitoring partner for the project, but due to capacity challenges, they indicated in April 2023 that they were no longer able to participate in the project. Sport for Life then reached out to the University of Western Ontario (UWO), Department of Family Medicine, as they had been the lead researchers in a similar type of fanship initiative for the sport of hockey. The UWO team joined as partners in the project in the summer.

Burnaby

A. Fanship & Capacity-building Sessions – Burnaby

As for training and capacity-building, IYSA joined forces with Sport for Life to register IYSA coaches as well as new-to-Canada participants in a variety of capacity-building eLearning programs, such as [Cultural Awareness in Youth Sport](#) & [Welcome to Canada: Engaging New to Canada Participants in Sport and Physical Activity](#). IYSA reached out to Canada Soccer and offered an educational session called *Pathway to Coaching in Canada* on September 28, 2023. IYSA met with BC Soccer on August 22, 2023, with the help of staff at Canada Soccer to inform BC Soccer of the challenges that IYSA is having with obtaining a membership to host capacity-building opportunities. BC Soccer informed IYSA that they can apply for the “Associate Membership” to host coaching and referee courses, along with competing in sanctioned tournaments in B.C. IYSA reached out to Burnaby Football Club to ask for some spots in their upcoming coaches’ courses as a backup to the membership process taking too long or not being approved by BC Soccer.

Team Canada World Cup Viewing Party (July)

This was a viewing party for the Team Canada Women’s World Cup game vs. Nigeria, held at a local restaurant in Vancouver. The event was created specifically for new-to-Canada participants to gather, create a sense of community through sport, and feel connected. IYSA provided Canadian gear, food, and beverages to all attendees.

- **Numbers:** 40
- **Led by:** IYSA
- **Theme:** Community in sport.



IYSA Canada vs. Nigeria watch party, July 20, 2023



IYSA at Whitecaps Game, October 4, 2023



IYSA at Whitecaps Game, October 4, 2023



IYSA at Whitecaps Game, October 4, 2023

Vancouver Whitecaps Fanship Experiences (July, October, and November)

The Vancouver Whitecaps Foundation was a key partner, helping IYSA secure tickets for new-to-Canada participants to attend three separate Major League Soccer (MLS) games.

- **July 12:** Vancouver Whitecaps vs. Austin FC (Numbers: 42). *Highlight: The participants enjoyed that the Whitecaps won the game, which ended Austin’s four-game unbeaten streak.*
- **October 4:** Vancouver Whitecaps vs. St. Louis FC (Numbers: 48). *Highlight: IYSA participants had the opportunity to be flag bearers on the field for this game and were also given food vouchers for refreshments.*
- **November 5:** Whitecaps vs. Los Angeles FC (Numbers: 53). *Highlight: This was a playoff game, and the participants enjoyed the increased stakes that meant the winner advanced to the next stage of competition. Two participants explained the playoff structure to others unfamiliar.*

Team Canada vs. Australia Women’s Game (December)

This event was a unique experience, as it was Christine Sinclair’s final game in Burnaby. Following the match, IYSA hosted an intimate meet-and-greet with her for its community members.

- **Numbers:** 60
- **Led by:** IYSA
- **Highlight:** Professional sport experience and Athlete interaction.

Additional IYSA Initiatives

These skill-building sessions were held at the University of Manitoba. The pilot provided transportation, hot dogs, and drinks for each participant.

- **Mentorship Program:** IYSA provided mentorship for new-to-Canada participants during social events while training for the national 2023 Ismaili Illume tournament.
- **Equipment Donation Drive:** IYSA gathered lightly used equipment from the community and organized an event to offer it to new-to-Canada participants. Light snacks and refreshments were served while participants socialized with each other and with members of IYSA.

- **Community Walk:** IYSA hosted a World Partnership Walk in collaboration with the City of Burnaby and the World Partnership Walk team. Numerous new-to-Canada participants took part in this walk, which was also attended by the acting mayor of Burnaby and city councillors.
- **Coach and Capacity Building:** IYSA provided coach training through FSQ Sport, referee training, and other capacity-building programs for both IYSA members and new-to-Canada participants.
- **Recruitment and Promotion:** In spring 2023, IYSA promoted registration for its summer soccer training through multiple channels, including internal e-registration forms, word-of-mouth, recruitment from the existing coaching network, and posts on the IYSA Instagram account and the Ismaili community website. This outreach helped to promote IYSA and attract individuals new to Canada to observe summer training and take part in fanship experiences, supported by a community of volunteers.

B. Expectations, Assumptions, Limiting Factors – Burnaby

Expectations

The expected outcomes of the pilot included recruiting 120 racialized new-to-Canada children and youth in Burnaby, Greater Vancouver. The program sought to establish genuine social connections through activities like attending Vancouver Whitecaps games and professional matches to cultivate a strong sense of community and belonging. Moreover, IYSA aimed to promote cultural awareness among mainstream coaches and administrators while familiarizing new-to-Canada participants with the Canadian soccer system, thereby creating pathways for continued participation in organized sports. This initiative aimed to foster an inclusive and supportive environment for all involved, ensuring a brighter and more promising future for the soccer community.

Assumptions

Assumptions for the pilot included that participants would:

- Develop an increased sense of connection to and understanding of soccer in Canada and be inspired to seek opportunities to participate in the sport post-program (as players, coaches, administrators, volunteers, or referees).
- Indicate an increased sense of belonging and social connection as a result of participating in the fan-based program.
- Express an interest in participating in another organized sport offered through a local sport organization.

Limiting Factors

Limiting factors that arose included transportation to events and participation logistics for new-to-Canada participants. With the assistance of IYSA's Youth and Sports Board, the pilot was able to offer rides, parking expenses, Uber, and taxi vouchers; however, this remained a barrier for some individuals.

Another limiting factor was language. IYSA encountered instances at some events where local translators could have assisted in interacting with new-to-Canada participants. While a translator was offered at one event, it may have been helpful to have this service available more frequently.

In addition, the application process to become sanctioned by a Provincial Sport Organization (PSO) was daunting and confusing to some. IYSA recognizes that materials (e.g., manuals, workshops, and facilitators for training) may need to be replicated in multiple languages, as English is not the first language for some new-to-Canada participants and their Canadian-born children.

Finally, as in Winnipeg, the initial plan was for the Radius Lab at Simon Fraser University to serve as the evaluation partner. Shortly before the project was due to kick off, they indicated that they were unable to continue, and an alternate partner was found: the Centre for Studies in Family Medicine at the University of Western Ontario.

5.0 OBSERVATIONS

As a result of the intervention, our team was able to observe the impacts on the sample population, including new-to-Canada youth fully engaged in the fanship experiences in Burnaby and Winnipeg. Participants were excited about the local professional and university sporting events and had opportunities to interact with and observe athletes during meet-and-greets. This personal interaction made the experience more relatable, as participants saw the athletes as people and got to learn about how sports impacted their lives.

Burnaby

More specifically, an administrator from one of the facilitating organizations spoke passionately about the fanship project, stating it was a major success in boosting the skills of young participants and involving parents despite transportation obstacles—a known, but previously untested, barrier to sport participation. IYSA leadership shared an inspiring update on the project, noting that it overcame initial delays to ultimately empower female new-to-Canada participants and serve as a successful pathway for building community through sport. They also recognized the impact and importance of improved budget management and external coordination that the pilot offered. Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback for the program, the organization expressed genuine interest in expanding it with additional support from Sport for Life, aiming to make an even greater impact.

Through our collaboration with Burnaby Football Club and with the guidance of senior leadership assistance at IYSA, new-to-Canada participants were able to register for organized soccer programs with Burnaby Football Club.

New-to-Canada participants were able to register for organized soccer programs with the Burnaby Football Club, thanks to a collaboration guided by senior leadership at IYSA.

Winnipeg

Administrators from WNSA shared that they observed the project's success in bringing families together. They also acknowledged the necessity for improving the soccer system despite resource and integration obstacles, stressing the significance of tackling these challenges to create meaningful change.

Observations from Sport for Life leaders highlighted the triumphs and obstacles they encountered in the project. Despite facing initial unexpected hurdles with implementation and registration, they were encouraged by the parents' positive feedback. The project fostered deeper connections with existing partners and offered opportunities to form new ones. They emphasized their ongoing commitment and enhanced support for grassroots organizations.



A representative from Canada Soccer joined the project team in person to co-host one of the Canada Soccer Workshops. She observed the success of the workshop and expressed genuine interest in collaborating further with Sport for Life to promote inclusivity and expand similar pilot projects.

Recurring themes that arose included the importance of improved resource management, enhanced coordination, and ongoing efforts to drive inclusivity and innovation within the sports community. Participants expressed their desire to build on these successes and work together to cultivate an even more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone involved.

Another key observation was the importance of co-creation and collaboration between partners, which is a valuable approach for future programs. When all parties feel invested and believe their perspective is taken into account, there is a greater chance of achieving desired outcomes. The strong participation from our project partners was, in part, a result of this collaborative effort.

6.0 FINDINGS

Qualitative feedback from the pilot participants was collected in multiple formats: surveys, focus groups, and self-recorded responses. Multiple formats were used because some of the youth had challenges with the written survey, which was unexpected. Consequently, we found that hosting focus groups or having the pilot participants record themselves with devices was a more effective way to collect their feedback. We learned that for any similar project, the data collection format should be considered carefully, and all partners should be consulted and in agreement about the approved feedback methods.

Participants from WNSA and IYSA indicated that playing soccer, attending professional soccer matches, meeting a local university player, and attending a CIBC event were the most memorable parts of the pilot experience. They described how these events were enjoyable because they got to meet new people, make new friends, and laugh a lot throughout the activities, largely due to the welcoming nature of the coaches. Some participants mentioned specific sport-based activities as their favourite elements of the project, including goalie training, learning how to catch low and pass, and even getting an opportunity to play other sports, like badminton. In conversations with program leaders, several pilot participants from both IYSA and WNSA shared that as a result of the experience, they had a better understanding of sport in Canada. For IYSA, participants described how they had since begun participating in volleyball and/or boxing as a result of their experience in the pilot. For WNSA, participants explained that they were most interested in the following sports: basketball, badminton, volleyball, football, tennis, skating, swimming, gymnastics, and track.

Outside of the project scope, we observed the benefits of exposing parents and families to the community-building aspects that participation in sport can provide.

Overall, participants in both pilots directly addressed the issue that was a catalyst: the gaps in sport programming for new-to-Canada participants. These gaps are driven by several factors, including unfamiliarity with sports and the Canadian sport system and a disconnect from mainstream leagues. The feedback shows that after fanship experiences, cultural and social barriers to sport participation among new-to-Canada participants have the potential to be reduced. The Canadian sport system, and a disconnect from mainstream leagues. The feedback shows that after fanship experiences, cultural and social barriers to sport participation among newcomers has the potential to be reduced.

Burnaby

When asked about the project elements they enjoyed the most, participants from IYSA responded that they most enjoyed attending a Vancouver Whitecaps game. They noted how exciting the game was, particularly the end of the match, and appreciated many of the other aspects of attending in person, such as seeing celebrities in attendance (Michael Buble and Will Ferrell), the food, music, scoreboard display, and the overall energy at the event. The participants also enjoyed seeing one another at the event and commented on how long it had been since they last connected. This feedback showed an increased sense of connection to and understanding of soccer in Canada among participants.

“When I went to the last (Vancouver) Whitecaps game, there were a lot of people. And the other game with LAFC was so good! The team is so good. Yeah, they are better than the Whitecaps. I liked that game.”

Sense of belonging and social connection

Participants from IYSA believed that taking part in the project changed their sense of belonging within their community because of the atmosphere when watching a game.

“When you are in the crowd, you feel connected to your community. You feel a part of it because everyone is cheering and excited.”

They also described how each time they got together for program activities as it was a chance for them to meet new people and make new friends.

“Ya, one of our Ismaili leaders says (that) being with the Jamat (larger community) gives us blessings (where we are) energetic and we get to know each other. And from that point, we’re getting much stronger. And we become more united and especially when joining these events with soccer, whatever events it is, it is so much fun, and it gives us togetherness, we feel that. And it’s very blessed.”

Capacity to engage in soccer as coaches, administrators, volunteers and referees

There were mixed responses from participants regarding their interest and capacity to engage in soccer beyond playing or being a fan of the sport. Many indicated they would like to either remain with the sport (if they played as an athlete) or become more involved (if they identified as a fan). For example, participants from IYSA reported that the sport is fun, regardless of your role, and so they would like to continue to serve in some other capacity in the future.

“I’d like to be a coach for IYSA. In the summer, I’ll try. Yeah. But for my future, I want to become not a coach or not a referee, but first a professional soccer player. When I become old, I want to become a coach.”

Sense of connection to and understanding of soccer in Canada

For participants from IYSA, this project changed the way they felt about soccer because it was the first opportunity they had to see a professional game in-person.

Winnipeg

For one participant, the indoor practice with the women's soccer coach for the University of Manitoba Bisons was their favourite part because "she helped specifically for the girls".

Participants from WNSA unanimously indicated that the project changed their sense of connection to and understanding of soccer. They described how they like soccer more now because:

- they got to experience attending a game in-person,
- their coaches taught them how to improve their skills,
- they learned more about different positions (e.g., goalkeeping), and
- because "it's fun as a fan".

Some attributed the "fun as a fan" comment to having the opportunity to meet "real" (i.e., professional) players and coaches. Before the program, none of the participants had attended games with their friends and family, but after attending the Valour FC game, they described how they would like to watch more games in the future. Some participants described how they previously were not interested in the sport but thought it was fun once coaches and goalies were introduced. For others, this was their first time being exposed to the sport. Further feedback included:

"This first soccer game played, or like learning about soccer, was here in the program. I haven't played soccer before [this program]."

"I wasn't really a big fan of soccer, but then after I joined, I got to learn new skills and passing and going and stuff like that."

"It's like my first time and I liked the Whitecaps [game]. [It's] so interesting when you see the games in person than on TV and [the] Whitecaps [game] was so good."

So yeah, my opinion is getting better at something but not even playing it (...) watching it is really fun too."

"I used to not know what soccer was and I just used to sit down and watch TV. Since [joining] when at school, and didn't know what soccer [was], then [I] went to [the] soccer program [and] I know what it is and how to play."

Participants from WNSA felt that the project improved their sense of belonging because of the efforts of their coaches.

"I mean [it] made me feel very welcome cause all the coaches help you with this stuff. You don't really know [much] and they try their best to make you learn."

Others reported that they had not given much thought to roles beyond being an athlete.

"To be honest, I didn't think about coaching a soccer team or being a referee somehow. But maybe if tomorrow, if I get any chance, I would like to join."

For another individual, they were not interested in coaching soccer but would be interested in becoming a certified basketball coach for the next generation of athletes. They reported that they used to play soccer but lost their passion for the sport after injuries and discovered basketball.

Similarly, participants from WNSA indicated they would like to continue being involved with soccer and suggested serving as player substitution volunteers as one way to do so.

“I’d like to really like to be a [player substitution] helper and when I grow up I wanna teach like small kids as a helper.”

The majority indicated that they would like to serve as coaches, while one individual believed they would make good referees “because I technically know all the rules well.”

“Yes, I would like to be involved in helping with more soccer games. I’m just seeing myself. I like soccer a little bit and like more and more so more as a player, coach or referee.”

Sport for Life also conducted interviews with the partners halfway through the project and again, and more in-depth, at the end of the project. In addition, throughout the project Sport for Life held monthly meetings focused on gaining feedback from the partners on what strategies were most effective and where they experienced challenges. As part of this evaluation, a Sport for Life staff member met with representatives from WNSA, IYSA, UWO, Canada Soccer, and Sport for Life and asked the same set of questions of each person. During these conversations, we observed that the interview participants enthusiastically shared in-depth stories about their projects. One of the research assistants gave a comprehensive overview of activities, timelines, challenges, and successes while pointing out areas for improvement, such as pretesting the data collection instruments (surveys) in advance. The interviews highlighted the unique challenges each project faced, but more importantly, showcased the significant success in promoting sport and physical activity.

The research assistants held two focus groups at different periods to help extract valuable insights and data to support our fanship experience initiatives.

- November 19, 2023 (2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.): An “Appreciation Event” for new-to-Canada participants was held at Boston Pizza, with 32 attendees.
- February 24, 2024 (11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.): An “IYSA New Year’s Social” for new-to-Canada participants was held at Rec Room Brentwood, with 40 attendees.

Demographics of the Focus Groups:

- November 19: 30 participants (approximately 14 female, 16 male; 26 under age 18, 4 over age 18). Ethnic backgrounds included: 15 African descent, 11 Central Asian, and 4 South Asian (Indian/Pakistani).
- February 24: 40 participants (21 female, 19 male; 15 under age 18, 25 over age 18). Ethnic backgrounds included: 14 African descent and 26 Central Asian.

IYSA distributed a capacity-building survey from UWO to coaches who were registered for coaching courses.

In short, Sport for Life believes there is evidence that the fan experience model contributed to reducing the cultural and social barriers that were previously identified as an issue for new-to-Canada participants. The survey responses, increased interest in sports, and outstanding experiences in fanship are factors leading us to this conclusion.

Other participants indicated they are hopeful they can still play when they are older and described the position they would like to play, rather than serving in some other capacity. There also appeared to be a lack of familiarity with the roles and responsibilities of these positions.

“I don’t know what a referee is. Like, the guy who blows the whistle? Those people are rude. They show the little red cards.”

7.0 EXTERNAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The concept for this project has merit in creating an influence on the lives of youth. We were able to expose participants to fanship and several levels of sport in Canada. This experience could certainly contribute to encouraging youth to get involved in organized sport, and reducing some cultural and social barriers, but this pilot cannot draw those conclusions definitively. Fanship is such a unique experience and is culturally significant across all ages. The only way to expose people, including youth to fanship is to make it palpable. In practice, this looks like carving out intentional experiences that make people feel part of the culture.

Attending games or events is only part of the experience. Based on our feedback, the pilot participants felt most engaged and inspired by the on-the-field experiences. Those experiences are harder to replicate, of course, especially with bigger names and stars, but even the flag-bearing experience was notable to the pilot participants. Holding onto the flag of their country of origin in their new community was significant. We highly recommend weaving the cultures and countries of origin into the fanship experience.

We chose a variety of fanship events in our pilot and recommend others looking to replicate the experience do the same. We found university-level events to be special because the student-athlete experience is so unique - all our youth can relate to being a student. University sporting events are also accessible in that there are more of them than there are professional sporting events. University sporting event tickets are usually more affordable to acquire, so the barrier to entry is low. We noticed that fanship did not dampen at the university-level events, so those are a great entryway to encourage fanship. As expected, professional-level soccer (in this case, both the MLS and national teams) was engaging for the youth in this pilot.

Details were an important part of the experience. T-shirts, team swag, and food/snacks were important elements of fanship, as they are part of the experience at all levels of sport in Canada. The participants were initially less familiar with these elements, but as the events in both cities recurred, we found they asked about swag before it was allocated, tried to acquire t-shirts that were shot into the audience, enjoyed the typical snack foods and beverages enjoyed at sporting events, and in some cases even engaged with mascots. These elements are an important part of the Canadian cultural experience in



sport and there is evidence that increased engagement in these elements contributed to reducing social barriers. We would highly recommend t-shirts, team swag, mascot experiences, and food/snacks as part of any fanship experience.

Having on-field capacity-building events during a game was among our more successful sessions. These experiences seemed to make the soccer experience for some of the youth. Adjacent to the soccer field where high-level soccer was being played, our participants had a chance to learn some skills and attempt to replicate what they'd seen just moments earlier.

8.0 NEXT STEPS

In this pilot experience, we found that with an intentional introduction to the sport of soccer and direct engagement through spectator events, the pilot participants were able to learn more about soccer and the Canadian sport system and build connections with one another as well as community organizations such as the Vancouver Whitecaps and Valour FC.

As a result of this pilot, Sport for Life will focus on the creation of the New-to-Canada Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity Pathway document and supporting resources for local sport organizations. We have also developed community resources for new-to-Canada participants and have a project underway to support [Equity Deserving Groups](#). This project aims to break down barriers and create opportunities and support for 30 organizations participating in sport in Canada.

As a result of this pilot, Sport for Life will target local community organizations and settlement groups to encourage youth participation in sports. An example of this in action is the Wellness through Community Connections project, a partnership with the Intercultural Association of Victoria and the University of Victoria to improve social connection opportunities for newcomers to Greater Victoria through sport and physical activity programming. This will result in an increased sense of belonging and community engagement and optimized health and wellness.

In this pilot, Sport for Life was reminded that it takes a lot of time to build trust in these relationships. When that trust is built and developed, our role in this project was to empower WNSA and IYSA to deliver the fan experiences—we could not do it for them. We had to display patience and understanding that everyone is at a different point in their journey. What may seem simple for one person may not be simple for others.

A key learning that Sport for Life will prioritize following this experience is the importance of patience and meeting people where they are. We learned that community-based organizations function differently from NSOs. We also recognize the critical importance of providing ongoing education to NSOs and PSOs on the benefits of inclusivity and possible policy changes to make sport more accessible to all.

When we were delayed starting the pilot, we had to adjust quickly to the revised timelines and build in alternative events and plans. In addition, new-to-Canada participants varied in their familiarity with soccer—many had seen it and were aware of the sport, while others had very limited knowledge—so it was important to be patient with them and adapt our program to accommodate the varied levels of familiarity.

9.0 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, while we cannot say with certainty that we proved the hypothesis, as a specific evaluation to support it was not conducted, we can say that through the networks we expanded and the fanship and capacity-building events we created, our participants experienced reduced social and cultural barriers. These barriers often affect new-to-Canada participants' engagement in soccer and other organized sport opportunities due to factors such as unfamiliarity with the Canadian sport system, a lack of information on how to get involved, and a weak social connection to the community.

Both IYSA and WNSA pilot participants had the opportunity to experience many soccer activities that connected them to the sport in their communities, allowed them to experience fanship in Canadian sport, and may have inspired them to participate in soccer or other sports as new-to-Canada participants. For those less familiar with the sport, the program helped them understand the game, created a sense of unity in spectatorship, and allowed them to interact with others in their peer group. Participants shared that they not only became more interested in soccer but also saw new opportunities to engage in the sport beyond playing, including coaching and officiating. Some participants who initially had little to no exposure to soccer before the program expressed excitement about their newfound understanding and enthusiasm for the game. It also seemed to open their minds to participation in other sports and in other roles within soccer beyond playing (see the "Newcomer Fanship Project Impact" videos in the appendix). Our youth continue to say, "We want to play with the Canadian kids," but various structures and systems continue to make that difficult.

The WNSA pilot was built on several assumptions:

- The Canada Soccer Association and Manitoba Soccer Association would readily support and schedule activities.
- WNSA could bridge existing soccer events within the community.
- Soccer activities would lead to connections with local clubs.
- New-to-Canada families would feel comfortable registering their children.
- The organizations involved would build coaching and officiating capacity.

However, the pilot faced several limiting factors. Delays occurred as WNSA awaited a membership exception from Canada Soccer, which pushed the program's start to late July from its planned April launch. As a result, WNSA was not able to participate in official events, and key partners had to step back due to scheduling conflicts. Additionally, Canada Soccer did not recognize the training provided to coaches and referees, preventing formal integration into existing development pathways.

The University of Western Ontario's Centre for Studies in Family Medicine was a great partner in this pilot, assisting us when our initial partner was unable to fulfill their commitment. Canada Soccer helped provide training resources and co-hosted a workshop for pilot participants. Valour FC provided tickets to our pilot participants. The IYSA and Whitecaps Foundation were a big help; every time we requested to go to a game, they helped secure tickets (free or discounted, prime seating, etc.). The core group of partners worked together well and reached out to our networks, including the BC Soccer Association and Whitecaps Foundation, who contributed in various ways to make this experience meaningful. Through these types of collaborations for a common goal of providing a quality experience and skill development for racialized new-to-Canada participants, the result of this pilot demonstrates that a fanship experience can drive engagement from participants who do not usually participate in the sport experience, as a player, coach, referee, or as part of soccer event management.

The impact of these experiences was reflected in participants' statements about wanting to continue engaging with soccer. Additionally, experiences such as carrying the flag at a match and seeing professional athletes up close helped reinforce their connection to the sport and to their new communities. We'd like to express immense gratitude to WNSA and IYSA for engaging with us on this pilot and for trusting our process. We appreciate their collaboration and flexibility as we worked through the logistics and coordination of these efforts toward our common goal.

We are grateful to the following partners:

- Canada Soccer for its support and the in-kind training provided.
- The University of Western Ontario's Centre for Studies in Family Medicine for tracking metrics and for data and analytical support when our initial partner, Radius Lab at Simon Fraser University, was unable to fulfill its role.
- Sports Without Boundaries.
- The Valour Football Club and Vancouver Whitecaps for the tickets and subsidies to attend soccer matches, providing many of our youth with their first professional sport spectator opportunities.
- The Manitoba African Cup of Nations for allowing WNSA youth to participate as ball retrievers and in informal soccer playing opportunities.
- The Burnaby Football Club for the equipment donation.
- The University of Manitoba women's team and coaches for the skill development practice and an opportunity to meet the players.
- CIBC and the Bonivital Soccer Club for their event.



10.0 APPENDICES

Promotional posters

[English](#)



[French](#)



Project video



[Newcomer Fanship Project: Overcoming Barriers for Newcomers to have a fan experience in Soccer](#)

Testimonial videos

[Newcomer Fanship Project Impact: Dacious Richardson](#)

[Newcomer Fanship Project Impact: Ijah Monteiro Da Silva](#)

[Newcomer Fanship Project Impact: Faith Bantoe](#)



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