

Splish – Splash – Cash: Swimming in Hampton Roads



SPLISH – SPLASH – CASH: SWIMMING IN HAMPTON ROADS

“The City of Hampton envisions a city of swimmers, where residents and visitors alike enjoy water recreation with confidence in their swimming ability. Swimming is an essential skill that all children should learn; however, many Hampton—and Hampton Roads—residents do not know how to swim.”

Mary Bunting, City Manager, Hampton, Virginia

In April 2022, Nicole Anderson, project manager with Clancy & Theys Construction Company, led a tour of a large construction site in Hampton, Virginia. Located near the Hampton Coliseum, the construction site was the center of intense interest, especially among those who spend time in the water. Ms. Anderson noted the structure, when complete, would possess unique architectural features including a “paddock excavator” to filter chlorinated air out of the building to an advanced acoustic deck that would distribute sound more evenly. With large double doors to allow natural light, the facility would become home to athletes from around Hampton Roads, and, in time, host events that will bring competitors and their dollars to the region.

Now, with the doors about to open, the Hampton Virginia Aquaplex is moving to live up to its promise, inviting residents from around the region and beyond to come jump in the pool. The Hampton Aquaplex is the largest (and newest) aquatic facility in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It represents the culmination of a multi-year effort by the city of Hampton and decades of hope and encouragement from local swimmers. The Aquaplex is not just about having a more convenient place to swim or play in the pool, it is also about the potential for being an economic catalyst of sports tourism in Hampton and the greater metropolitan region.

“I’m excited. The Aquaplex will be Hampton Roads’ headquarters for competitive swimming and diving events,” said Mary Bunting, City Manager for Hampton. A swim parent herself, Bunting said Hampton Roads’ swimmers have needed to travel to other Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina cities in order to compete in facilities large enough to accommodate regional meets. The Aquaplex may not be the first Olympic-length (50-meter) pool in the region, but it has been purposely built with sports tourism in mind. The combination of an eight-lane competition pool with a state-of-the-art timing and scoring system, a second “programming” pool, elevated seating for

1,500 spectators and room for 760 competitors on deck, makes it a unique community asset.

The facility cost of \$29.5 million meant that approval of the Aquaplex was hard-won. “That’s a big number,” said Katy Arris-Wilson, president of TIDE Swimming in Virginia Beach, the region’s largest competitive club. However, the city of Hampton hopes to recoup that investment by hosting regional and national events. In July 2021, the Hampton Convention & Visitor Bureau announced the Aquaplex as host site for the 2023 USA Artistic (Synchronized) Swimming Junior Olympic Championship. “We are proud to announce this national competition as the first on the books for this sparkling new aquatic venue,” said director Mary Fugere.

Still, a few years of packed council meetings with passionate proponents and opponents has convinced the city that the Aquaplex needed to be a true community asset. “It was a hard sell for the 50% of the community that does not feel connected to swimming. It took six years of conversation to get it across the finish line,” Bunting said. Through the Aquaplex, which will replace the Hampton Aquatics Center on Butler Farm Road, the city of Hampton will provide learn-to-swim lessons for every child enrolled in Hampton Public

Schools. “We envision a city of swimmers, where residents and visitors alike are able to enjoy water recreation with confidence in their swimming ability.”

Simple geography suggests that Hampton Roads should be a regional and national leader in aquatic recreation; the region is surrounded on three sides by water. Between club and recreational swimming, high school and college competitions, swimming lessons, and life-long swimmers doing the sport for fitness, tens of thousands of Hampton Roads residents touch the water in some fashion. Yet, the region does not share the depth of facilities and quality of competition of other regions like Fredericksburg and Christiansburg in Virginia or Cary and Greensboro in North Carolina. Cost is a concern, as swimming pools typically do not generate sufficient revenue to offset operating and maintenance expenditures. Asking taxpayers to fund such a facility involves frank discussions of who swims and who pays for the facility.

The Aquaplex is a tangible investment in the sport. What else is needed to help nurture a healthy, water-safe population in the community? This chapter of the State of the Region report will look at issues such as the region’s lack of access to swimmable water, the concerning demographic differences in water safety aptitude (and the more concerning historic reason for that), and the generational shortage of lifeguards in the region. It will also ask whether the Aquaplex could be an inflection point for swimming in Hampton Roads.

Swimming in the United States and Virginia

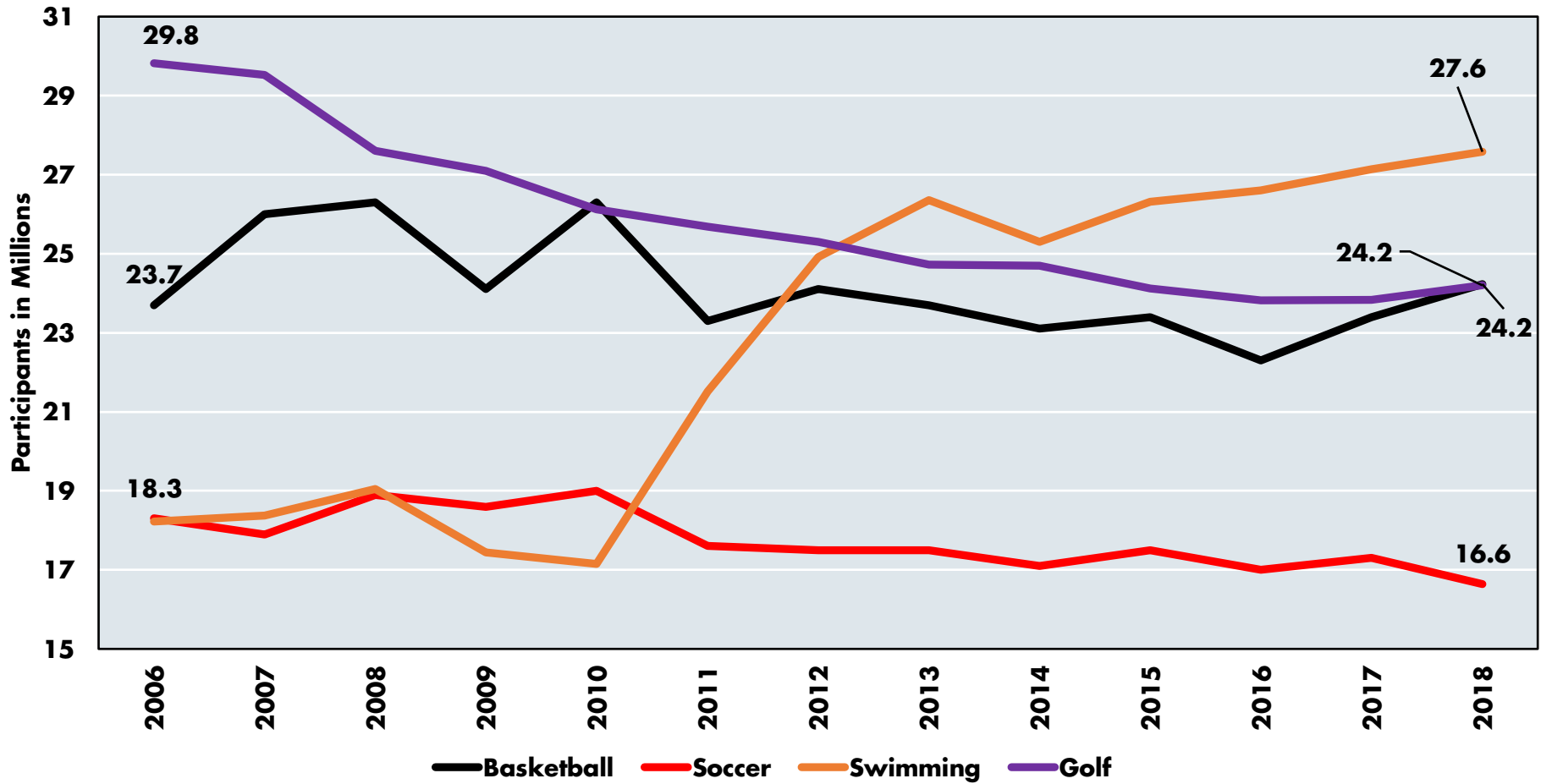
There is an important difference between what sports Americans watch and in which sports Americans participate on a regular basis. Professional baseball, basketball, football, hockey, and soccer sit atop national television ratings. In terms of individual participation, however, swimming ranks among the most popular (if not the most popular) recreational activity (Graph 1). Since 2006, swimming has ascended, with almost 9 million more individuals in the water while golf, on the other hand, has lost over 5 million active participants.

Graph 2 displays membership in USA Swimming, the national governing body for the sport of swimming in the United States, from 2000 to 2020. Membership in USA Swimming is a gauge of interest in swim team membership and a precursor to swimming in high school and college. Membership in USA Swimming is also proxy for the health of the sport as it primarily captures younger swimmers (the median swimmer was 12 years old in 2020). From 2000 to 2017, USA Swimming added 133,120 members before experiencing a slight decline in membership prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic is evident, with membership declining from 411,672 in 2019 to 363,093 in 2020, a loss of 11.8%.

While national level data on who participates in swimming by race are not readily available, we do have data from USA Swimming and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). We focus first on USA Swimming year-round swimmers. When these members and their families were asked to self-identify their race or ethnicity, approximately one-third chose not to respond in 2020. With this caveat in mind, Graph 3 displays the responses to the race or ethnicity question for 2020. The data strongly suggest, even accounting for non-responsiveness, that many USA year-round swimmers identify as white (45.2%). Only 4,490 of 294,046 respondents (1.5%) self-identified as African American or Black, with 3.4% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and 8.8% identifying as Asian.

GRAPH 1

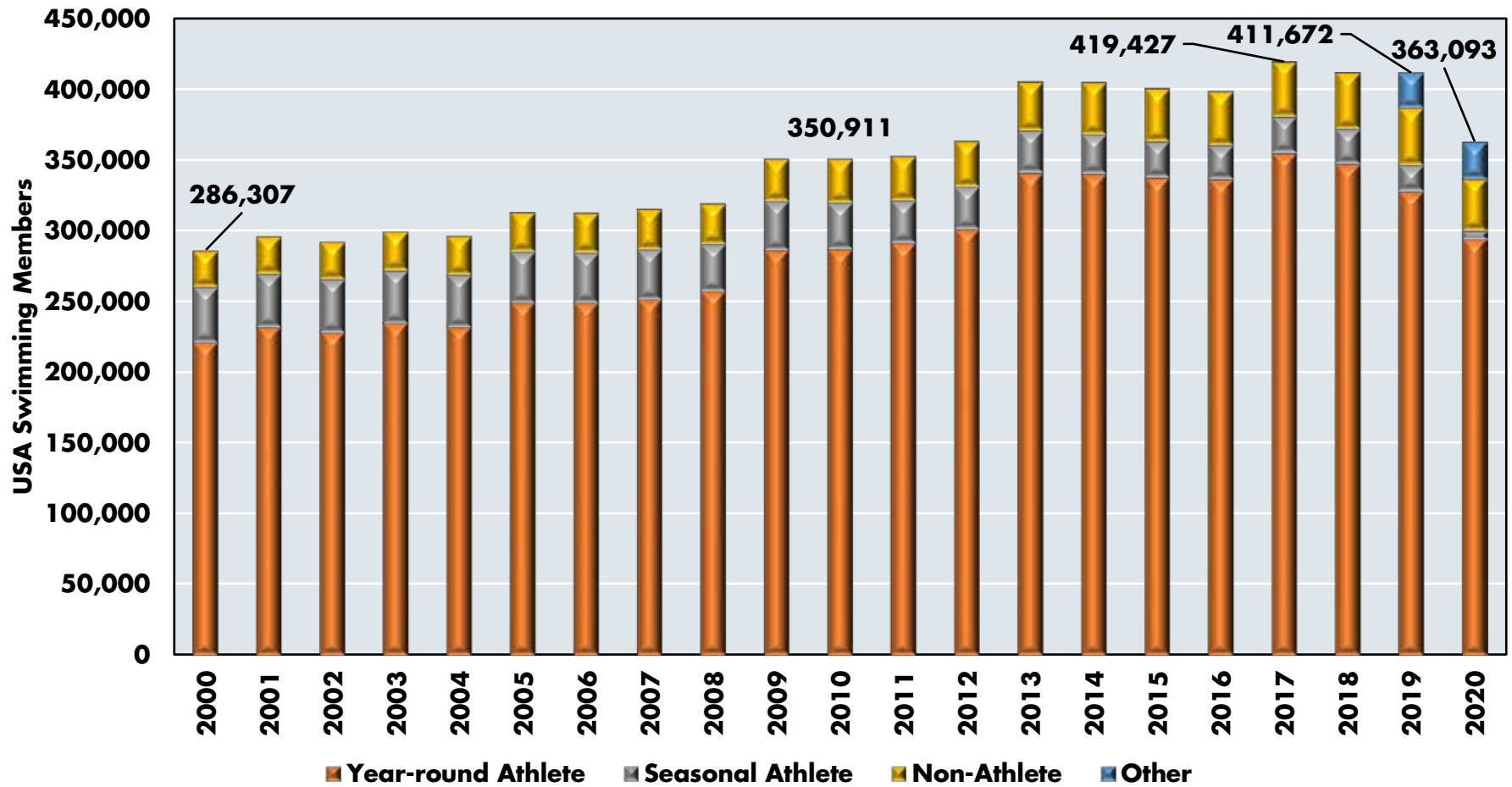
PARTICIPATION IN BASKETBALL, GOLF, SOCCER, AND SWIMMING
MILLIONS OF PARTICIPANTS
UNITED STATES, 2006-2018



Source: Statista.com. Soccer includes participants of outdoor and indoor soccer.

GRAPH 2

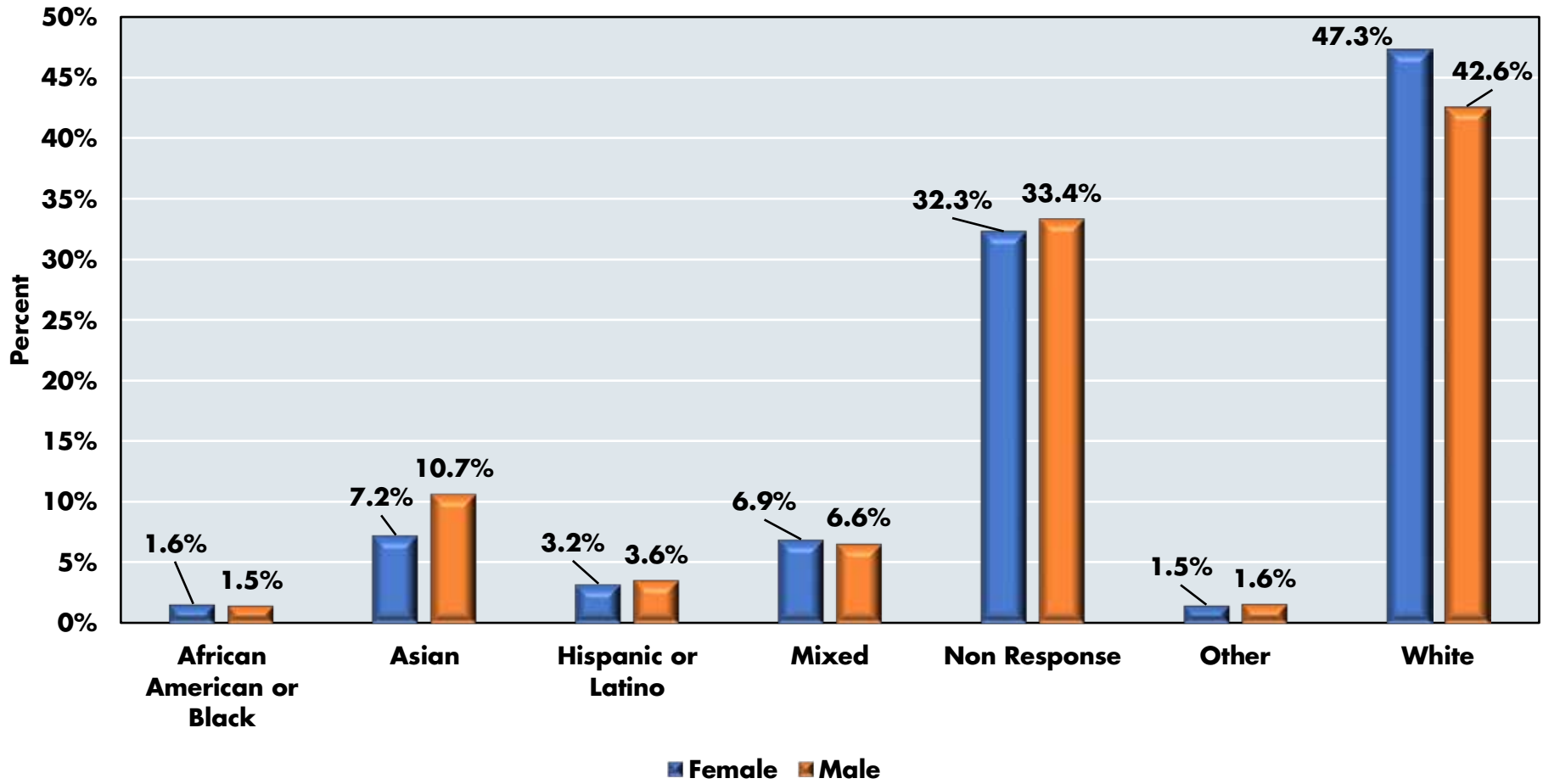
MEMBERSHIP IN USA SWIMMING
2000-2020



Source: USA Swimming 2020 Membership Demographics Report. Non-athletes are coaches, officials, board members, parents, and other individuals who do not swim. "Other" includes flex athletes (a new type of member starting in 2019) and single meet/open water athletes.

GRAPH 3

**DEMOGRAPHICS OF PREMIER AND OUTREACH MEMBERS
USA SWIMMING, 2020**



Source: USA Swimming 2020 Membership Demographics Report.

In Table 1 we compare the distribution of athletes by race and selected sport for 2012 and 2021. Compared to other major sports and the U.S. population, African Americans are underrepresented in NCAA swimming. In 2012, 150 women and 151 men who identified as Black participated in swimming at the college level. In 2021, the number of Black athletes had increased to 401. In 2021, more than 7 out of 10 collegiate swimmers were white compared to about 2 out of 100 Black swimmers. There appears to be significant weight to the argument that low levels of minority representation in youth swimming reduces the talent pipeline flowing into colleges and universities.

In Virginia, while swimming at the high school level has grown over the last decade, its growth is eclipsed by sports such as soccer and basketball. In Graph 4, we present the most recent athletics participation survey data from the National Federation of High Schools for several sports boys and girls play in Virginia. Basketball, soccer, and outdoor track and field all eclipse swimming and diving participation in 2018–2019 (the last year that pre-COVID data are available). Swimming and diving participation was roughly equivalent to cross-country for girls, but boys’ participation was about 60% of that for cross-country.

What explains the demographics of swimming? First, swimming participation appears to be tightly correlated with household income. A 2014 report commissioned by USA Swimming found, not surprisingly, that the average USA Swimming family household income was \$125,000, almost double that of the median household in the United States.¹ Almost 80% of children in families with household incomes less than \$50,000 in 2017 had “no/low” swimming ability. If parents had “no/low” swimming ability, there was a high likelihood their children lacked the ability to swim.² This held true even though many parents would like their children to swim more, especially if other swimmers were of the same race or ethnicity. The lack of minority representation in swimming, however, means there are fewer swimmers to model what swimming can do, a deficit that swimming

¹ Woessner, Geri. (2014). “Where’s the Beef? What are my sponsorship assets worth?” *USA Swimming*.
² “USA Swimming Foundation Announces 5-10 Percent Increase in Swimming Ability.” *USA Swimming*. May 25, 2017.

organizations in Hampton Roads, Virginia, and the United States are working to address.

Second, swimming facilities are capital intensive, not only to build but also to operate and maintain over time. Building a competition-size pool typically runs in the millions of dollars and does not include the costs associated with the chemicals, heating, and regular maintenance. High schools without pools on campus must find locations to swim, often at recreation centers, YMCAs, or colleges and universities. The lack of onsite facilities makes it harder to interest students in the sport and creates another logistical and financial hurdle to those who want to swim.

TABLE 1

STUDENT-ATHLETE DEMOGRAPHICS BY SELECTED SPORT, 2012 AND 2021

NATIONAL COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

Sport	2012 White	2012 Black or African American	2012 Other	2021 White	2021 Black or African American	2021 Other
Men’s Basketball	43.2%	45.9%	10.9%	37.7%	44.5%	17.8%
Men’s Soccer	68.6%	7.3%	24.1%	54.9%	8.6%	36.5%
Men’s Swimming	81.1%	1.7%	17.2%	72.7%	2.1%	25.1%
Women’s Basketball	55.3%	33.2%	11.5%	50.2%	30.3%	19.6%
Women’s Soccer	80.7%	3.7%	15.6%	72.6%	4.5%	23.0%
Women’s Swimming	83.2%	1.2%	15.5%	76.3%	1.6%	22.2%

Source: National Collegiate Athletic Association (2021) NCAA Demographics Database. 2012 and 2021 reflect 2011-2012 and 2020-2021 school years, respectively.

Ryan Gregory grew up in an athletic family, just not a swim family. “He had no idea what he was in for,” said his wife, Betsy Lavin. The couple has three nationally ranked junior swimmers, son Liam, 17, and daughters Gracie, 16, and Elizabeth, 14. “Liam wants to swim in college. Gracie and Elizabeth want to qualify for the Olympics,” Lavin said. For the family, that means practice six days per week, plus 20 to 25 weekends on the road every year, paying for gas, hotels, and food for championship meets. “It’s really frustrating. Virginia is one of the fastest (growing) swim states in the country, and there are so few good practice facilities,” Lavin said.

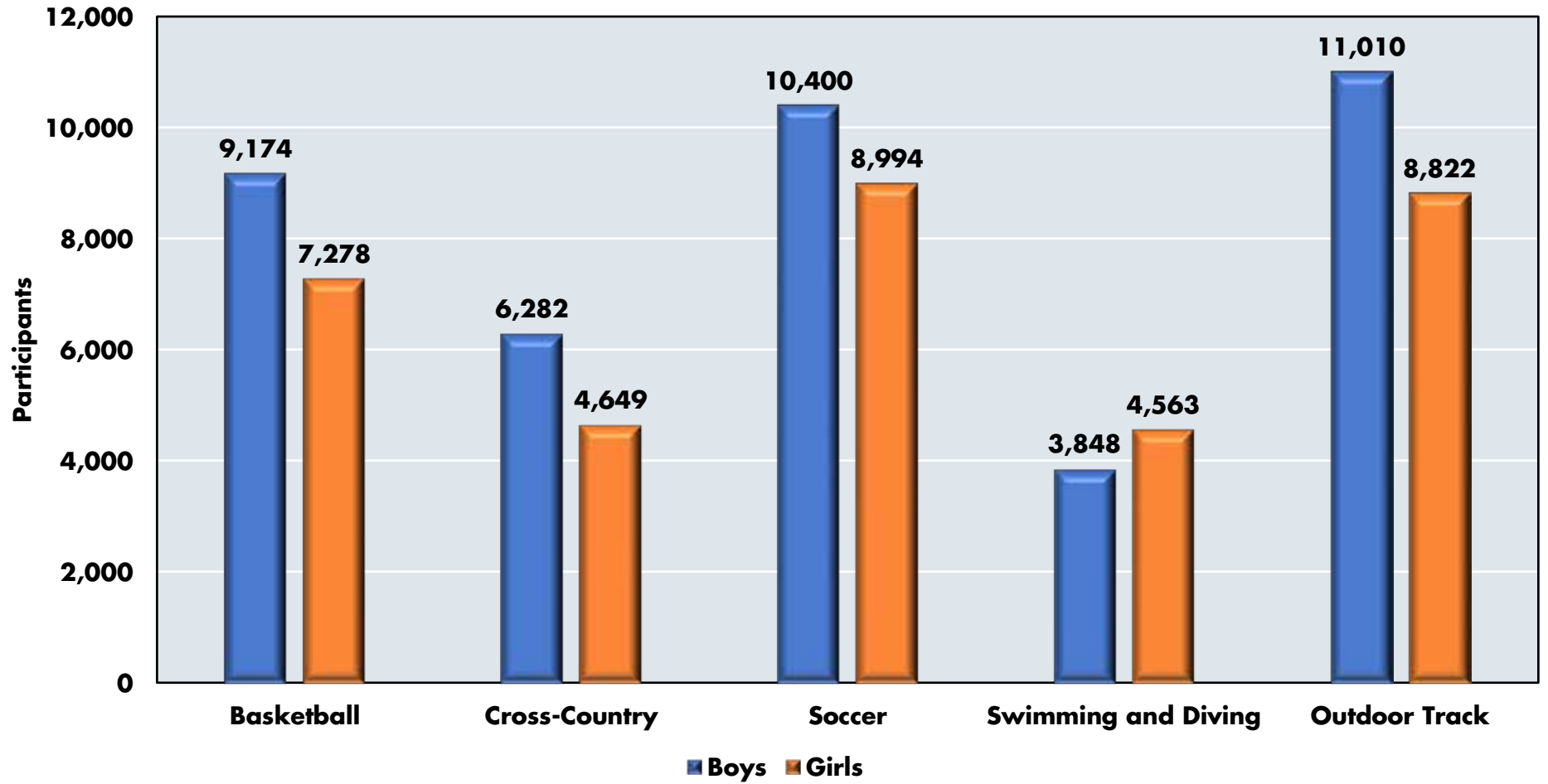
That challenge was exacerbated for a year or more by COVID-19 occupancy restriction mandates. As a workaround, Lavin and Gregory erected a small rectangular pool with a camping heater in their screened porch during the early days of the pandemic, with their kids swimming using tethers. That affordable, homemade fix meant 10 weeks of swimming in place until outdoor pools opened up. The cost savings was an anomaly. Between travel costs (multiple hotel nights during larger meets), club and meet dues (\$600-\$700 per month for the family), hydrodynamic competition suits (as much as \$600 for a girl’s suit) and other swim equipment, the bills add up quickly.

“I honestly don’t know how much it costs to swim for a month,” Lavin said. “For us it’s worth it. I like that it gives them discipline. I can probably count on one hand the number of times our kids said they didn’t want to go to swim practice.”



GRAPH 4

**SELECTED SPORT PARTICIPATION BY VIRGINIA HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES BY GENDER
SCHOOL YEAR 2018-2019**



Source: Participation Data, NFHS. https://members.nfhs.org/participation_statistics.

Swimming, Drowning, and Disparities in Ability

Though millions of Americans enjoy swimming and other water sports every year, organizations such as the Red Cross have raised concerns about the numbers of citizens who are not comfortable in the water. The Red Cross has identified five basic swimming skills that must be performed in order to demonstrate basic swimming competency. The five basic skills are: (1) step or jump into water over your head; (2) return to the surface and float or tread water for one minute; (3) rotate in a full circle and find an exit; (4) swim 25 yards to an exit; and (5) exit from the water (if in a pool, exit without a ladder). In a 2014 Red Cross survey, 80% of respondents stated they could swim but, when asked if they could perform all five skills, only 54% responded in the affirmative.³ For African Americans, only 33% of respondents believed they could perform all five functional skills.

Table 2 presents data from the Virginia Department of Health on the number of drowning deaths by age group from 2016 to 2021. An average of 111 Virginians perished annually from drowning over this period or about one Virginian every three days. While more adults died from drowning, when we account for the size of each age group, the likelihood of dying from drowning is higher for young children than adults.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 4 is drowning, and most drownings occur in swimming pools. Drowning is not limited to the youngest children, as it was the second-leading cause of unintentional injury death for children ages 1 to 14 in the United States and Virginia from 2010 to 2020 (Graph 5). Young males were more than two times more likely to die from drowning over this period than young females.⁴

³ American Red Cross (2017). American Red Cross Water Safety Poll. <https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/enterprise-assets/pdfs/Water-Safety-Poll-2014.pdf>

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) [Online]. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>. Accessed June 8, 2021.

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF DROWNING DEATHS OF ALL TYPES
BY AGE GROUP
VIRGINIA, 2016 - 2021

Age Group (years)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*
<1	0	0	0	1	0	0
1-4	6	9	7	11	5	11
5-9	2	4	4	3	0	2
10-14	1	4	2	1	0	2
15-19	3	3	5	1	13	4
20-24	8	6	9	5	8	4
25-34	16	11	19	12	16	20
35-44	13	6	15	16	15	13
45-54	20	11	13	9	17	10
55-64	20	21	19	22	19	17
65-74	9	13	14	19	10	22
75-84	7	9	9	6	6	9
85+	4	3	3	0	5	4
Unknown	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	109	100	119	106	115	119

Source: Virginia Department of Health (2022). *2021 data may be incomplete, preliminary, and subject to change.

When we examine the data by race, we observe that Black children ages 1 to 14 were more likely to die from drowning than white children from 2010 to 2020 (Graph 6). For the United States, 1.7 Black or African American children per 100,000 died on average from drowning from 2010 to 2020, compared to 1.1 per 100,000 for whites. For Virginia, the story remains the same: Black children were more likely to die from drowning over the last decade than white children.

We have already noted the financial barriers to swimming in the United States, but that cannot fully explain how we ended up where we are today. Historians of the sport of swimming trace the gap in proficiency between races to resistance to court-ordered desegregation. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation of public schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.⁵ Soon after, in 1955, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in *Dawson v. Mayor and City Council of Baltimore*, found that segregation in public parks and beaches was also unconstitutional. In part, the 4th Circuit wrote:

“...it is obvious that racial segregation in recreational activities can no longer be sustained as a proper exercise of the police power of the State; for if that power cannot be invoked to sustain racial segregation in the schools, where attendance is compulsory and racial friction may be apprehended from the enforced commingling of the races, it cannot be sustained with respect to public beach and bathhouse facilities, the use of which is entirely optional.”⁶

In the decade following these rulings, municipalities closed or withdrew funding from hundreds of public pools nationwide. In one instance, the city of Jackson, Mississippi, closed four public pools and leased the fifth to the YMCA, which operated it for whites only.⁷ The city argued that it could do so because it negatively impacted Blacks and whites equally. This action was upheld in *Palmer v. Thompson*, when the Supreme Court held that a city could choose not to provide a public facility and that the court would not invalidate this decision “solely based on the asserted illicit motivation by the enacting legislative body.”⁸ In other words, if, on its face, a decision appeared to impact everyone equally, the burden was on the plaintiffs to prove the action was driven by racial animus. In 2021, National Geographic wrote that public swimming pools were still “haunted” by the legacy of backlash to desegregation, leading to the rise of private club pools, constructed with the “assurance of not having to swim with Black Americans.”⁹

5 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483. May 17, 1954.

6 *Dawson v. Mayor City of Baltimore City*, 220 F.d 386. March 14, 1955.

7 Public pools used to be everywhere in America. Then racism shut them down. McGhee, Heather. Marketplace. February 15, 2021.

8 *Palmer v. Thompson*, 403 U.S. 217. June 14, 1971.

9 Public swimming pools are still haunted by segregation’s legacy. Blakemore, Erin. National Geographic, June 11, 2021

While there were a number of private pools in the Hampton Roads area in the 1960s and 1970s, these pools are implicitly desegregated by housing ownership and financial charges. In 1975, the city of Hampton opened its first public pool in the Old Hampton Community Center. Today, Hampton has two indoor community pools at the Hampton Aquatics Center and the Fort Monroe pool. There are also five neighborhood pools that residents can use for free during Community Pool Days (May 28-30, 2022, and June 24-29, 2022). As noted by Hampton City Manager Mary Bunting, “With Buckroe Beach, Grandview, Fort Monroe, and nearly every type of water recreation to be enjoyed here in Hampton, our residents have the potential to enjoy an improved quality of life if they are comfortable and confident when they enter the water.”

The challenges in aquatic recreation extended beyond pools. The Hampton History Museum featured “Historic Black Beaches: Bay Shore Beach and Other Memorable Sands” this year and the exhibit also included, “Memorable Sands: Beaches of Northeast North Carolina and Southeast Virginia,” a traveling exhibit from the Museum of the Albemarle in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, which looks at five beaches that African Americans flocked to in North Carolina and Virginia because they were forbidden from attending “whites only” beaches. The exhibit chronicled the rise and fall of Hampton’s Bay Shore Beach, a summertime hub of the local African American community located next to Buckroe Beach for more than 75 years.

History certainly plays a role in the gaps in swimming ability and participation, but a lack of facilities can make it difficult for those who want to swim to do so. Chesapeake is the largest city in the United States without a single public pool. When we spoke with Chesapeake Mayor Rick West in spring of 2022, he put it bluntly, “I think it’s embarrassing to be a city of this wealth ... and size without a public swimming pool.” In July, the Chesapeake City Council approved a \$9 million appropriation from the state for the construction of its first public pool, with another \$3 million anticipated in federal funding. The pool, according to Chesapeake’s Parks, Recreation

and Tourism Director Mike Barber, is expected to be the anchor for an expanded aquatics program in the coming years.¹⁰

While the YMCA of South Hampton Roads fills some of the gap, the fact remains that previous proposals to build public pools in Chesapeake have failed, including an ambitious, \$40 million proposal for a multi-use pool facility that would have been built in Chesapeake City Park. This time, momentum has built behind construction of the city's first public swimming pool at the Dr. Clarence V. Cuffee Community Center in the Campostella Commons neighborhood. In his State of the City Report in March, West announced that \$9 million in funds from the Commonwealth had been pledged for the facility, which would have a price tag of \$15 million.

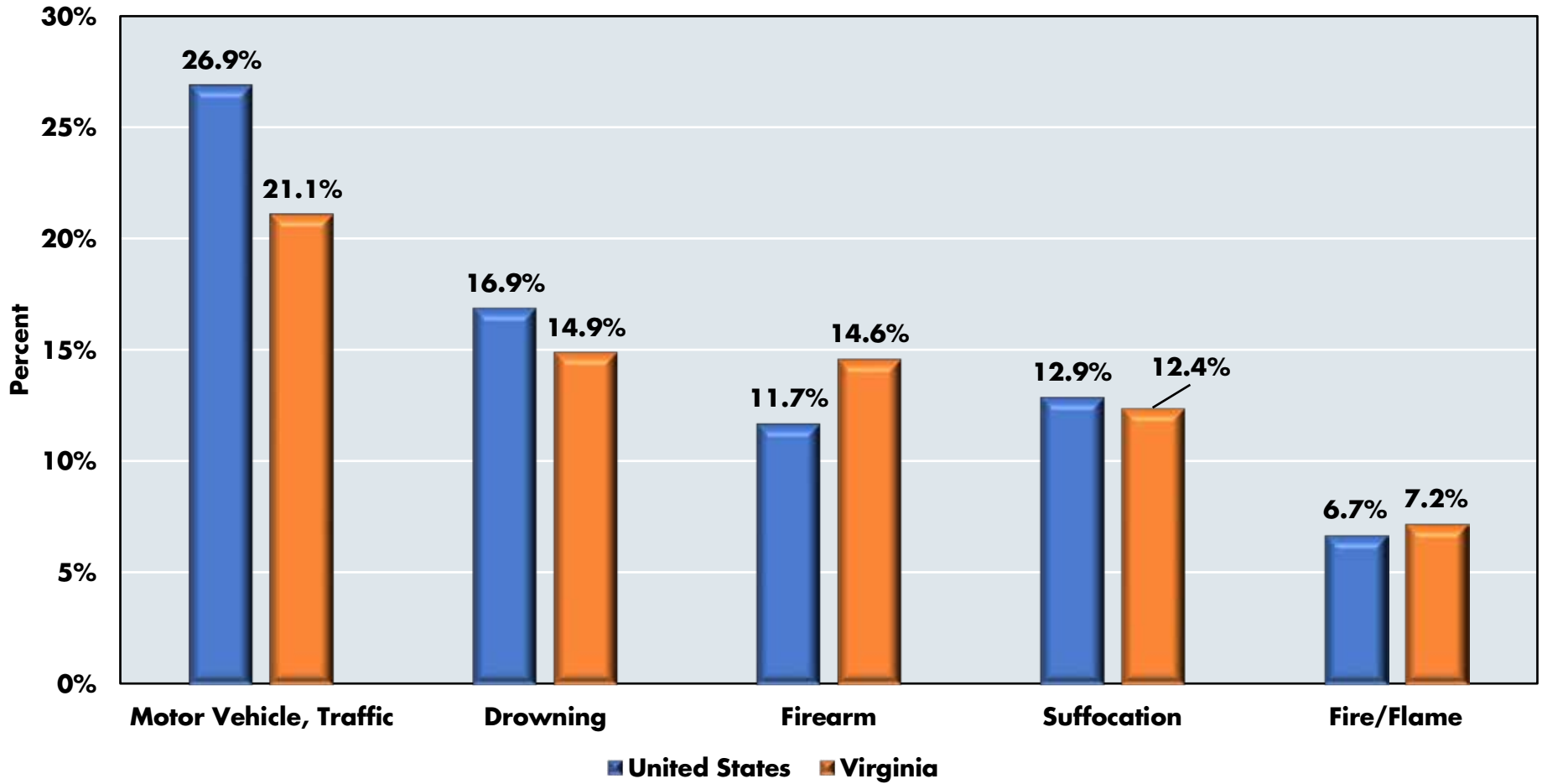
In addition to providing indoor aquatic space to a traditionally underserved part of the community, West thinks the facility could ultimately act as an economic engine, attracting local and regional swim meets. "I think when you make a statement, and you build a \$15 million facility, particularly in a community with such a history of problems, you're sending a message," West said. "Not only does this meet a critical need for the community, it's an opportunity for that community to feel like the city believes they are important."



¹⁰ <https://www.pilotonline.com/cities/chesapeake/vp-nw-chesapeake-pool-cuffee-20220705-t7ns662flzfcne6jk2zlbjui-story.html>

GRAPH 5

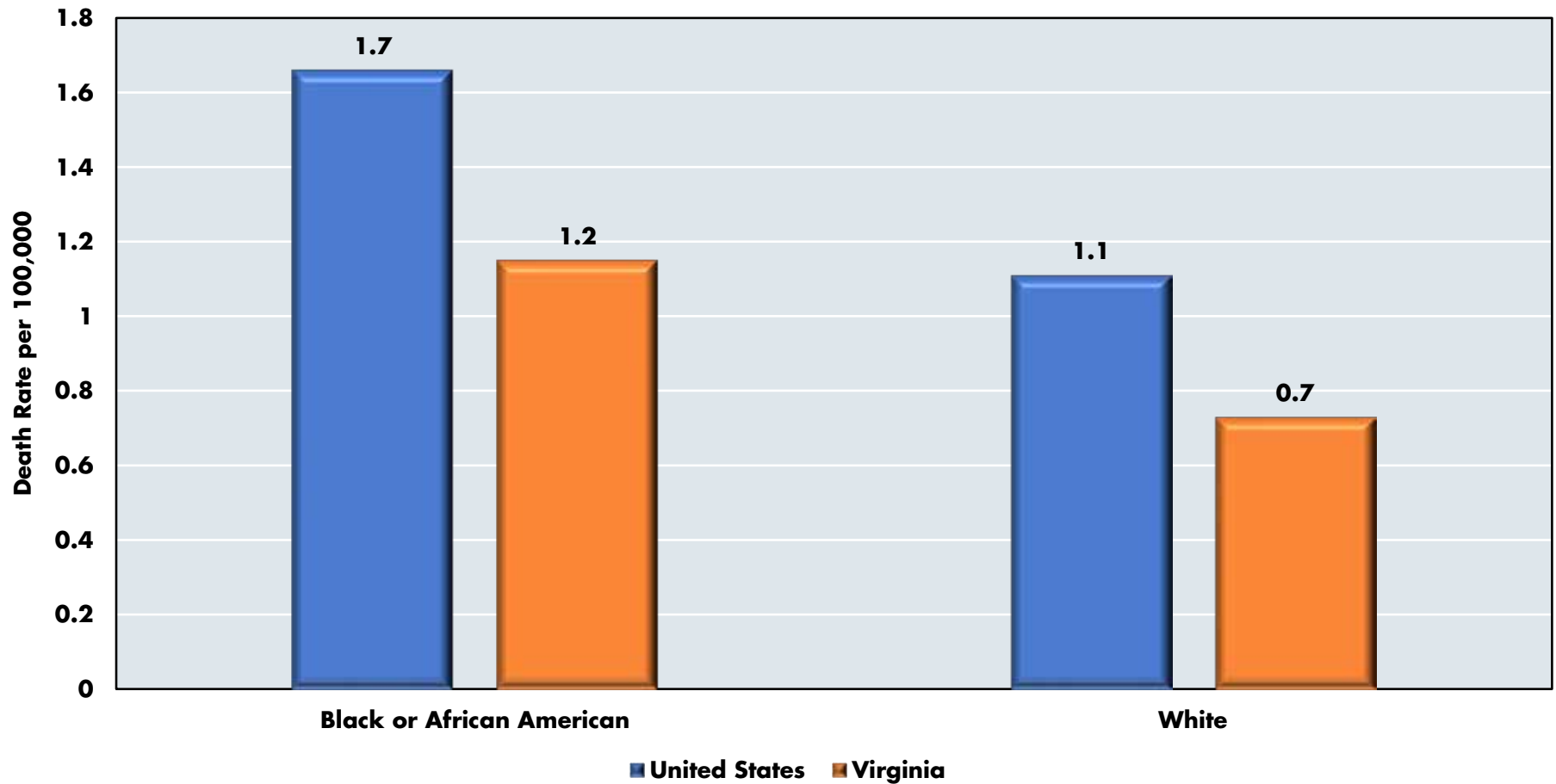
**CAUSES OF INJURY-RELATED DEATHS FOR CHILDREN AGES 1 TO 14
UNITED STATES AND VIRGINIA, 2010 - 2020**



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS).

GRAPH 6

**DEATH RATE FOR DROWNING BY RACE, CHILDREN AGES 1 TO 14
UNITED STATES AND VIRGINIA, 2010-2020**



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS).

Swim Clubs in Hampton Roads

TIDE Swimming, based in Virginia Beach, is the largest competitive club in the region. Club president Katy Arris-Wilson believes strongly that its 600-plus swimmers are getting much more than fitness from swimming their laps in the pool. “I am passionate about the sport because I know what impact that it has and can have on young people,” said Arris-Wilson, a former NCAA champion swimmer at the University of Texas.

TIDE is one of a handful of competitive clubs in the region that cater to nearly 2,000 swimmers, total. Other clubs include Coast Guard Blue Dolphins in Hampton/Newport News, Williamsburg Aquatic Club and 757Swim in Williamsburg, and Old Dominion Aquatic Club in Virginia Beach (Table 3). Those competitive teams send athletes to regional and national meets year-round. Hosting such events has been more challenging for this region because of the lack of a large, competition-ready pool.

In 2010, TIDE Swimming approached the city of Virginia Beach to assess the city’s ability to build an indoor, Olympic-size pool to both host events and develop competitive swimmers. The city of Virginia Beach balked at the \$15 to \$20 million price tag but offered land to develop it. In tandem with the YMCA of South Hampton Roads, an outdoor 50-meter pool was constructed, opening in 2015. Fundraising fell short, so a roof could not be placed on the facility. TIDE Swimmers use the facility year-round, but there are limitations on what the club can do with the facility.

“In many ways we’ve made progress,” Arris-Wilson said. “I think the ‘but’ to that is that it’s always a struggle. And the struggle ... is creating a business model that makes the sport affordable and provides the resources to the clubs to have them be successful.” Participation in the club has grown from fewer than 100 members to more than 600 in less than two decades. But without additional swimming capacity, the club is limited in how much it can further expand. “I think the pain point is clearly (access to) water,” she said.

“The YMCA of South Hampton Roads has been a fabulous partner with TIDE Swimming. But we’ve also gotten to the point where we’re a victim of our own success. We’re having to turn kids away, which we hate doing. Trying to get access to water is a nut that we’re trying to crack. We could handle the annual operating expenses. We don’t have the capital to make the investment in construction.”

TABLE 3

COMPETITIVE SWIM CLUBS IN HAMPTON ROADS

Name	Area
757Swim	Williamsburg
Coast Guard Blue Dolphins	Newport News, Yorktown, Williamsburg
Coastal Virginia Aquatic Club	Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake
Nansemond Swim Club	Suffolk
Old Dominion Aquatic Club	Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Suffolk
Reign On Aquatics	Norfolk
YMCA of Virginia Peninsulas	Williamsburg, Hampton, Mathews County, York
TIDE Swimming	Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Portsmouth
Tribe Aquatics	Williamsburg
Williamsburg Aquatic Club	Williamsburg

Source: USA Swimming (2022), does not include facilities, institutions of higher education, or community swim clubs that are not members of USA Swimming. Find a team or learn to swim, USA Swimming. <https://www.usaswimming.org/find-a-team>

The Hampton Virginia Aquaplex

Ironically, it was success with another sport that convinced the city of Hampton of the value of a competition-worthy swim venue. The 135,000-square-foot Boo Williams Sportsplex, which opened in 2008 less than two miles from the site of the Aquaplex, has hosted USA Volleyball, high school track and field competitions and other amateur sporting events. It also attracts a full schedule of national basketball events because of the high profile of its namesake. “Boo was the draw. He is a national name in AAU basketball, specifically the girls,” said Andy Ballard, vice president of Eastern Sports Management, the private management company that will run the Aquaplex. “Hampton saw the traffic that he was generating at his facility and immediately began supporting that at a very high level. They were 15 years ahead of their time.”

In 2018, the design team of Clancy & Theys Construction Co. and GuernseyTingle submitted a proposal for the project under Public-Private Education Facilities and Infrastructure Act guidelines. The accepted blueprint for the facility was included in Hampton’s capital plan in 2019, calling for \$15.8 million for a community pool (replacing the Hampton Aquatics Center), \$4.5 million for Splashdown Park — a 26,000-square-foot splash pad and lazy river adjacent to the main pool building — and \$9.15 million for a competition venue. Funding for the facility was secured through a bond issue and is being generated via a \$1 per night hotel room tax.

The challenge swim facilities face is they are expensive to build and to operate. There is no incentive for a private investor to erect a building like the Aquaplex with private funds, given the tight margins public athletic facilities frequently operate under. “Even if I’ve got the capital, I’m not dumping it in something that’s so risky that has no return,” Ballard said. What Eastern Sport Management can do is operate such a facility at closer to a break-even status. “We’re the management company. That’s the space we fill,” Ballard said. “Our charge is to always bring as many outside users to the facility and do that without subsidy.” The company partnered with the city of Hampton as the

facility manager early in the process, which Bunting said helped the city make the most beneficial decisions for the facility.

There are significant fixed costs with a new facility such as the Aquaplex, which can result in higher fees for groups in the local aquatic recreation community. The payoff comes through tourism dollars generating economic impact for the community. “What we try to do as much as possible is both teach and guide municipalities to capture as much of that revenue as possible,” Ballard said. The eight-day 2023 USA Artistic Swimming Junior Olympic Championship is forecast to generate 2,100 local hotel room nights and have a \$3.7 million economic impact for Hampton Roads. There was no cash bid for the event, just an opening rental rate for USA Artistic Swimming and the lure of hosting the first national event in the new facility, Bunting said.

Joey Stickle, a long-time local swim coach at Kecoughtan High School in Hampton, was part of a local aquatics group a decade ago whose proposal for a new pool in Hampton was rejected because it was seen as cost prohibitive. Six years ago, Stickle joined a delegation in the swim community advocating for the facility once again. This time, a trip by city councilors to visit four or five larger, regional pools helped convince local decisionmakers to proceed with the facility. “That’s what finally won people over,” Stickle said. “I think the pool in Cary, North Carolina, told us they have a meet 32 weekends of the year. All those people coming in, staying at your hotels, eating at your restaurants, shopping at your shops.” Katy Arris-Wilson of TIDE Swimming said her Virginia Beach-based competitive club is eager to cross the water to host competitive meets in the Aquaplex. “From the swim community perspective, I’m pumped. It’s going to be awesome. Will it pay off for the citizens of Hampton? I hope it does,” she said.

A review of public pools nationwide suggests they can provide benefit to citizens and communities, but they do frequently come with a price that some municipalities have deemed too steep. Among nationwide closures in the past decade have been pools in Anderson, South Carolina; Troy, New York; and Lansing, Michigan. Each were met with outcry from local swim communities, then resignation about the cost to maintain the facilities for public use. In Tennessee, a battle is underway to preserve the massive Oak Ridge Outdoor Pool, a 2.2-million-gallon, spring-fed pool originally built by the U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers for families of Manhattan Project workers. The city council voted against closure of the pool in 2019, but a private group known as Friends of the Oak Ridge Outdoor Pool maintains an advocacy campaign on behalf of the historic facility, to fend off further attempts at its closure.

On the complete other end of the spectrum lies Omaha, Nebraska, which improbably turned itself into a swimming Mecca by winning the right to host the U.S. Olympic Trials for four consecutive Olympics, ending with last summer's Tokyo Games. For each of the prestigious competitions, two Olympic-size temporary pools were erected and filled with 2 million gallons of water. The 2021 event paid significant dividends to the eastern Nebraska economy, generating an economic impact of \$74 million, according to the Omaha Sports Commission.

There are few guarantees, however, in the high-stakes world of top-flight amateur sport. The bid for the 2024 Olympic Trials has been won by the city of Indianapolis. For a community pool to be viewed as a broader asset, sometimes its impact needs to transcend dollars and cents. That is something the city of Hampton is attempting to do with the Aquaplex, providing free learn-to-swim instructions for every child in Hampton City Schools in partnership with Eastern Sport Management and the Coast Guard Blue Dolphins swim team. The partnership is also seeking corporate sponsorship, to ensure every child has a suit, towel, swim cap, T-shirt, comb, and swim bag to carry their clothing, personal items and wet gear.

Managing the Facility

Given the loudly expressed concerns about the availability of indoor aquatic facilities in Hampton Roads, one can imagine the challenge that poses to the managers of the scarce facilities. "I think that's been a challenge in the area for a while," said Tommy Miller, supervisor of aquatics and beach safety for the city of Newport News. Until the opening of the Aquaplex, Newport News owned and operated the region's only Olympic-length indoor pool, the Brittingham-Midtown Community Center. The first community center built in Newport News since World War II when it opened in 1998, the facility had a price tag of \$11 million. The 80,415-square-foot facility has indoor and outdoor basketball courts, dance and exercise studios, community rooms, and a pool deck with capacity for 500 spectators. Miller said non-aquatic visitors to the pool are impressed by its size and scope. Those involved in the sports that use indoor water realized its limitations almost immediately.

"I started with the city in 2007," he said. "When the pool was built, it was kind of on the back end of what design technology was at that time for an aquatics natatorium. By 2002, we were theoretically obsolete. We did not have enough seating for spectators. We did not have enough seating off the pool deck. Then it became a challenge to do things like a championship where you wanted to charge admission."

Within those limitations, Midtown has helped meet a critical need on the Peninsula. "I'm from York County, where they don't have any public aquatics," said Amy Rowley, recreation superintendent for athletics, aquatics and athletic field maintenance for Newport News. "Especially coming out of COVID, with so many facilities taking so long to open back up, Tommy (Miller, supervisor of aquatics and beach safety) and his staff did a real juggling act opening back up after COVID."

As public assets, Miller sees the Hampton Aquaplex and Midtown Aquatic Center as collaborators, not competitors. "Becoming a facility that can offer more opportunity to smaller groups is where we see our new niche," he said. Miller noted that having a large number of swim meets is not always the best use of a swimming pool. A smaller number of meets allows more niche groups

to use the facility and gain traction. In the end, he observed, the goal is to build up to a larger facility over time.

What the Aquaplex is not likely to do, long-term, is solve the region's chronic shortage of indoor aquatic facilities. Although in its short-course configuration, the new facility offers 18 to 24 lanes for swimming, plus diving, Miller said

more young swimmers are likely to be inspired to try the sport. "Five years from now, we'll be saying we need another pool, which is actually a good thing," he said. "People fill that space and then there's people looking from the outside asking, 'How do I get into that space?'"

Joey Stickle retired in September after 40 years at Newport News Shipbuilding. However, he shows no sign of retiring from his job that has been a lifelong labor of love, coaching swimming and acting as a promoter of the sport in Hampton Roads. A former collegiate swimmer at Old Dominion University, along with his wife, Suzanne (formerly Cox), Stickle was handed the reins of the Kecoughtan Invitational in 2004. "It got handed to me because I had four kids who were going to be swimming," Stickle said. Nearly 20 years later, the event has become one of the most prestigious invitational high school meets in the state.

"It's the only local meet where you can have all different classes, every high school in the state of Virginia," Stickle said. "We get kids who normally get to swim against each other at the high school level. And the private schools, I invite the private schools. It's very good competition, I get a lot of fast swimmers."

Stickle is excited for the meet — held the second Saturday of January every year (except for COVID-canceled 2021) — to move to the Hampton Aquaplex from Midtown Aquatic Center, where it currently is hosted. This coming January, the Kecoughtan Invitational will have its largest number of participants ever. "The meet had hit its ceiling. It's like how many people can you fit in a phone booth?" Stickle said. "Now I can have 750 swimmers on the deck and another 1,500 spectators watching. I think it's going to be great for the sport, and it's going to be great for the city. And it needs to be, because there's a lot of naysayers out there who think we shouldn't be spending money on this."

The Guy Trying to Find Enough Lifeguards

In 35 years working locally in aquatics recreation, Dan Jones has never seen a situation like this. For the past 15 years, Jones has been division head for aquatics and recreational water activities for the city of Norfolk, a position that followed 20 years working with the city of Newport News and Riverside Health Care in an aquatic recreation role. In his current position, Jones typically oversees a lifeguarding staff of 100 or more for Norfolk's pools and beaches. This year is anything but typical. "The pool of lifeguards is just gone," he said. "We can't find anybody."

In addition to the nationwide shortage of workers in every employment field, COVID-19 posed a unique challenge to the ranks of lifeguards. When facilities closed because of the pandemic, lifeguards, who are frequently part-time workers, moved to job opportunities that weren't halted by pool closures. In addition, because lifeguarding is a field where certification and training are required, the closure of aquatic facilities also shut off the pipeline of new lifeguards, who would replace the staff who left. And it robbed children of the opportunity to attend learn-to-swim classes such as the ones that will be offered at the Aquaplex.

Now, Jones is in a position of cutting pool hours and leaving beaches without guards throughout the busy summer months. "It's not a stretch to say that lives are saved by teaching kids to swim and having trained lifeguards to watch over them," Jones said. "COVID has really put a damper on things." And because of the halt in the pipeline of new lifeguard training, "we're going to suffer from this for quite some time," he said.

Lifeguards in Norfolk make \$15 an hour for pool hours and \$18 per hour on the beach, "and we're probably on the high side right now," Jones said. "It needs to be looked at as a way not just for teenagers to get part-time positions, but for full-time employment and potential careers. Certainly, the need is there. We can't run these programs without lifeguards."

The Economic Impact

Discerning the economic impact of a facility that has just opened is difficult as it involves assumptions about the future. Will the new Aquaplex attract visitors from outside Hampton Roads on a frequent basis, or will it be used predominately by residents of Hampton and the region? Will the outreach efforts by the Aquaplex succeed in attracting new swimmers, or will swimming (especially competitive swimming) remain predominantly white in Hampton Roads?

A 2015 feasibility study for the city of Hampton provides data that helps us explore these questions. The primary service area of a swimming facility located in Hampton is defined by a 25-mile radius, which places the primary service area within the Hampton Roads region. In other words, regular users of the swimming pool will come from within the region, shifting their recreational activities and dollars from one location in Hampton Roads to another. The economic impact of this shift in expenditures is minimal because money is merely being "recycled" within the region.

Will the facility require a public subsidy and who benefits? Here, the 2015 feasibility study notes that none of the proposed swimming facilities would be cost-neutral. Operating cashflow was estimated to be negative for each of the alternatives and, when one included capital replacement and debt service, the negative cash flow was projected to be more than \$1 million annually for each of the alternatives. Taxpayers, through the city budget, will need to subsidize the operation of the Aquaplex. We cannot quantify the public benefits of increasing minority participation in the sport of swimming, but reducing the risk of drowning for the city by increasing representation is one of the strongest non-monetary arguments for the Aquaplex.

Drawing upon the 2015 study, we can also examine the economic impact of visitors from outside Hampton Roads. The study assumes that 14,800 visitors from more than 60 miles away will use the facility annually. These visitors would spend more than \$2 million annually in Hampton Roads, increasing regional economic activity by more than \$1 million.¹¹ Tax revenues would also

¹¹ We use IMPLAN to generate estimates of economic impact of the Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News metropolitan statistical area. Spending estimates are drawn from page 78 of the 2015 feasibility study. Estimates are in 2021 dollars.

rise by almost \$100,000 annually for Hampton. One significant qualifier is that the Aquaplex may draw more (or fewer) visitors from outside the region over time. As the number of visitors rises (or falls), the economic impacts of the Aquaplex will shift accordingly.



Final Thoughts

Hampton Roads is a region defined by its relationship with the water. For its residents, the water can be a challenge (having to cross bridges and tunnels to move about the region) and a blessing (beaches and lakes abound). Yet, there are marked disparities in our relationships with the water. For those who know how to swim, water represents an opportunity for recreation and fitness. For those who lack the ability to swim, water is a hazard. The combination of history, lack of facilities, and expense has meant there are stark gaps in participation between the residents of Hampton Roads on the basis of race.

If you build it, will they come? In our discussions with coaches, parents, swimmers, and others in the region, there is a common complaint: a lack of competition-size swimming facilities that can host large events. This complaint rings true across a number of sports in the region and has led to a number of projects aimed to improve capacity and attract events. The Virginia Beach Sports Center is the largest (and newest) indoor sports complex on the East Coast and joins facilities such as the Hampton Roads Soccer Complex and the Warhill Sports Complex in Williamsburg. These facilities attract tournaments on a regular basis, bringing in athletes, parents, and coaches from across the state (and, in some cases, neighboring states). The Hampton Aquaplex joins this list and will serve as another sports tourism destination in Hampton Roads. Now, the region needs to collaborate for a one-stop shopping solution for tournaments, pooling its resources to attract events. Building it is a first step, but work remains to fully reap the rewards.

Address the racial divide: The proposal to build a \$29 million plus purpose-built swimming facility in Hampton sparked opposition from those concerned about both costs and who might benefit from such a project. The data strongly suggest that there is a stark racial divide in swimming ability but also points out what can be done. Increasing diversity in swimming is a positive feedback loop; that is, as diversity increases, representation increases, which, in turn, provides peer-examples for non-swimmers. Improving the capacity of all children to swim lowers risk and provides additional benefits in terms of health. Hampton, to its credit, continues to listen to its citizens. In 2019, the city's Parks, Recreation, and Leisure Services Department took the

first steps to updating the master plan for the city's parks and recreation system. Initial interviews and surveys identified an aquatics center as one of the new types of recreational facilities that should be included in the new master plan.¹² The challenge will be to reach out to underserved communities and increase participation. Otherwise, the new pool may provide most of its benefits for a minority of residents in Hampton.

Recognize the potential. Katy Arris-Wilson of TIDE Swimming left Hampton Roads in the late 1980s, embarking on an All-American swim career at the University of Texas. When she returned in the early 2000s, the region was producing fewer nationally ranked swimmers than when she left. "There were maybe five or six (competitive) teams when we returned, compared to one when I left. But we had gotten bigger, and we hadn't necessarily gotten better," she said. Through investments in its Princess Anne Olympic-size facility, and through attracting nationally recognized coaches such as Richard Hunter and Jack Roach, TIDE Swimming sent six swimmers to the 2021 Olympic trials, and athletes are "graduating" the youth program and moving on to Division 1 swimming scholarships. This includes Arris-Wilson's own daughter Kayla, a freshman swimmer at Stanford University this fall.

However, Arris-Wilson argues that both the broad-based participation model, with hundreds of kids competing in summer recreation meets, and the "center of excellence" model can thrive here. "If I look at our TIDE Swimming mission statement, it does not say: 'We want to create the next Olympians.' It says our vision is to create meaningful experiences through life and sport and team. We are about creating a culture that gives all our stakeholders a meaningful experience," she said.

Having an Olympic medalist from your region is a bit of a genetic lottery, but to Arris-Wilson, it would unquestionably help boost local swimming. "If there is one thing that non-swimmers can relate to in the sport, it's Olympic swimming. Everyone knows Michael Phelps. I think most everyone knows Katie Ledecky. To have someone like that from our area would be phenomenal," she said. "What I think it would do is elevate the profile of our sport, and get more people excited about engaging in it. And it would get municipal leaders more excited about finding ways to support it."

¹² <https://peninsulachronicle.com/2022/06/27/hampton-parks-recreation-seeking-input-to-update-master-plan/>

In her work as a private equity investor and adviser, Arris-Wilson talks with senior executives making decisions about relocating companies. She said one of the questions asked repeatedly is about available kids' sport activities. "Hampton Roads supports its youth sports, and its athletes are succeeding at national levels. I think that's a big, important branding item for us, so we're not seen as second tier," she said. "We don't need to be second fiddle to Richmond or Northern Virginia. Let's keep building on those strengths and creating a buzz."

