

The **Attention** Game

How “beyond the broadcast” engagement strengthens sports fandom





New modes of engagement have redefined what it means to be a sports fan

In February 2019, Steven Soderbergh's basketball movie, *High Flying Bird*, landed on Netflix, following a well-received premiere at the Slamdance Film Festival two weeks earlier.¹

It told the story of a fictional NBA lockout through the eyes of a sports agent and his rising-star client. In the film, players are forced to explore new ways of monetizing their personal brands, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and distributing clips directly to their fans via social media and streaming platforms.

At the time, the premise felt both familiar and slightly absurd, calling to mind memories of the roughly 5-month season lockout of 2011. In hindsight, it looks remarkably prescient.

While the structures of league ownership remain intact, and live games still anchor the business, *High Flying Bird* anticipated many key elements of today's sports landscape. New rules introduced in 2021 finally afforded collegiate athletes the ability to profit off of their Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL), allowing for the development of new models of monetization and fan engagement. Changing consumer habits and new digital platforms, meanwhile, have spawned an entire ecosystem of social sports content, from standalone clips and fan edits to podcasts hosted by some of the biggest names in the industry.

To some, this evolution threatens the traditional, broadcast-centric model of fandom. But research conducted by NRG provides reason for optimism: the expanding sports attention ecosystem is not necessarily cannibalizing the live product. In fact, social activations—when done well—can make fans more invested, informed, and eager to tune into key games.

In 2026, fandom stretches across platforms, formats, and communities, creating a broader and more continuous relationship with the sport itself. In this report, we explore how that expanded ecosystem is resetting the barometer for engagement, creating new opportunities for leagues, media partners, and brands to strengthen long-term fan investment in an increasingly fragmented attention economy.

In this report, you'll find...

01

The expanded timeline of sports attention

02

The reward cycles shaping modern fandom

03

A framework for measuring multimodal sports engagement and future potential

Methodology

Unless otherwise specified, data in this report was collected between March 25th and April 28th 2026 from NRG's new Sports IQ tracking program, consisting of weekly surveys of 2,500 US sports fans. Respondents in these surveys were aged 13 to 64, had access to sports content on at least one device, and expressed interest in at least one professional or collegiate league. All sports leagues and properties evaluated were actively in season during the period in which fieldwork was conducted.

¹Henry Barnes, "[High Flying Bird review - Soderbergh scales new heights on Netflix](#)," The Guardian, February 7th, 2019



Viewers and athletes are embracing an increasingly individualized model of sports fandom

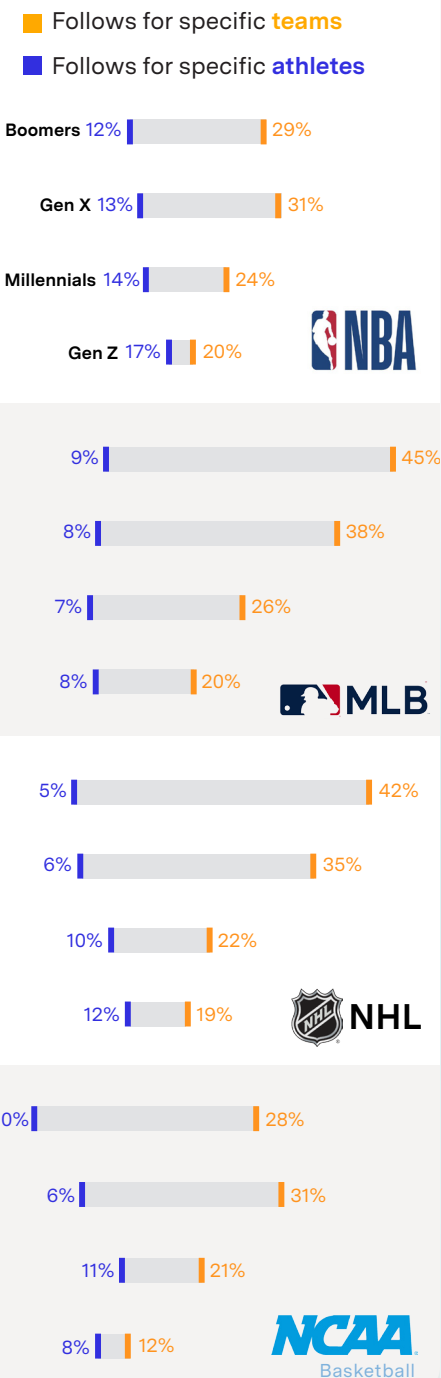
Traditionally, sports culture has been rooted in shared identity and collective experiences: a favorite team, a hometown, a family tradition, a sense of community. Today, however, fandom is looking increasingly individualized, as several trends coalesce to reshape the way that fans engage with sports content:

- 01** Fans are increasingly loyal to individual athletes rather than the teams they play for
- 02** Leagues and broadcasters are promoting experiences that center the individual viewer rather than the collective experience
- 03** Streaming providers are de-centering the household, building services around personal accounts and devices

For now, fandom across America's biggest leagues still tends to be driven by teams rather than players. But among younger audiences, athlete-driven fandom is gaining ground quickly. Compared to Boomer and Gen X fans, Millennials and Gen Z are comparatively less likely to credit their fandom to team loyalty, and more likely to attribute it to interest in one or more individual athletes.

Drivers of fandom: teams vs. athletes

Why fans of specific leagues say they follow that league²



Athletes have always been celebrities, but the social media era has given them unprecedented control over how they build and maintain relationships with fans.

As Soderbergh foresaw in 2019, players now have increasingly easy access to a multitude of direct channels to audiences that exist outside traditional league and broadcast structures.

At the collegiate level, NIL rules have accelerated this shift, allowing athletes to monetize themselves as individual brands while transferring schools more freely.³ As one respondent surveyed by NRG put it, "It's basically free agency at this point."

On the other side of the screen, viewers have embraced increasingly individualistic modes of content consumption.

Fans scroll through highlights on their phones, listen to podcasts through headphones, place bets through apps, and follow important storylines on their social feeds. Even live viewing has become more individualized; rights are being snapped up by SVOD platforms, meaning that broadcasts are now tied to individual logins, devices, and credit cards rather than just the household television.

²Respondents were asked to select all reasons that described why they followed specific leagues; data shown here for two reasons out of 21 provided.

³Amanda Christovich, "The Year Schools Paid Their Players," Front Office Sports, December 23rd, 2025

Multimodal engagement has deepened fans' connections to the teams, leagues, and athletes they follow

For leagues, broadcasters, and brands, a fragmented sports landscape can feel challenging to navigate. But it also creates more opportunities than ever to reach and engage with consumers.

When all of these touchpoints work together effectively, they can build and sustain fandom rather than compete with the live product.

Sports now reaches audiences across more moments, moods, and formats than ever before. “Beyond the broadcast” forms of engagement are not entirely new. But new technologies and recent cultural shifts have made them more accessible, more frequent, and more deeply woven into everyday life.

Legal sports betting, for example, once required an in-person trip to a casino or sportsbook. Today, it's embedded directly into mobile apps and even integrated into live broadcasts through QR codes and second-screen features. In many ways, its growth mirrors the rise of consumer-friendly trading platforms like Robinhood, which similarly simplified and normalized financial activities that once felt intimidating to the average consumer.

The closely related world of prediction market trading has expanded even faster; since 2024, these platforms have seen growth to the tune of 130x in dollar volume, 180x in transactions, and 150x in monthly active users.⁴ For many of these platforms, sports markets have been the predominant drivers of that growth.⁵



Podcasts have undergone a similar evolution. The format itself is hardly new, but they have become one of the primary ways in which younger audiences follow sports and process culture more broadly. No longer relegated to providing background noise for the daily commute, top podcasts can now compete directly for attention with premium TV and streaming content. Responding to this trend, Netflix recently announced a major deal with iHeartMedia that will bring video versions of popular podcasts—including sports programs like *The Bill Simmons Podcast* and *The Ringer Fantasy Football Show*—to its platform for the first time.⁶



⁴Amir Hajian and Filippo Armani, “[Prediction Markets: The Next Frontier of Financial Markets.](#)” Keyrock, 2026

⁵Dan Santaromita and Hannah Vanbiber, “[Are prediction markets just sports betting by another name? How legal battles are taking shape.](#)” The Athletic, March 9th, 2026

⁶Wendy Lee, “[Netflix and iHeartMedia announce video podcast deal.](#)” Los Angeles Times, December 16th, 2025

Critics often argue that this shift toward clips, highlights, podcasts, and second-screen experiences is eroding interest in live games. Some have even suggested that leagues like the NBA should shave games off their seasons, both for the sake of the oft-injured stars and to accommodate the shortened attention spans of fans for whom TikTok and other social platforms are a primary mode of engagement with sports content.⁷

Their concerns are easy to understand. Fans today are faced with a deluge of entertainment options, all available instantly across a wide variety of screens and platforms. At the same time, watching an entire season has become more complicated and expensive as rights deals spread games across an ever-expanding list of streaming services and subscription tiers.

And yet, it's not all doom and gloom. **NRG's research shows that fans who engage with sports across multiple formats—whether through social media, podcasts, newsletters, fantasy pools, or other mediums—are actually more engaged with the live product.**

Impact of “beyond the broadcast” engagement on live sports viewership

Additional time fans spend watching live broadcasts, in a typical week, compared to those who don't regularly participate in this activity



Watching clips and highlight reels



Participating in a fantasy league



Playing sports video games



Following athletes and teams on social media



Listening to sports podcasts



Betting on sports

Fans who regularly listen to sports podcasts, for example, watch over an hour more live sports content per week, on average, than those who don't. Even clips and highlights, often framed as a substitute for live viewing, correlate with an additional 32 minutes of live sports watched per week.

Live broadcast viewing accounts for 25% of the hours all fans spend engaging with sports across platforms and touchpoints. Among younger generations, this share decreases, but the total time spent with sports across platforms and touchpoints rises, highlighting the opportunity with “beyond the broadcast” fandom.

For leagues, broadcasters, and commercial partners, the proliferation of fandom touchpoints creates an opportunity to build deeper and more continuous relationships with audiences. **Each moment of engagement can serve as a bridge to the next one, keeping fans engaged between games, throughout the offseason, and across different stages of life.**

We may never be able to return to the simplicity of earlier broadcasting eras where broadcast viewing was the default mode of engagement, but sports fandom can still grow stronger when industry stakeholders embrace the multimodal models of consumption that consumers are clamoring for.

⁷Tony East, “A Shorter NBA Season? Rick Carlisle And Steve Kerr State The Case,” *Forbes*, March 23rd, 2026

Live broadcasts remain one of the most effective tools for balancing immediate satisfaction and long-term fan investment

How sports touchpoints build fan investment over time



The idea of a sports fan has expanded well beyond the image of a nightly viewer sitting in front of the television. Fandom today is more participatory and more active than ever before. And increasingly, what matters is not just how much attention fans give to sports but the quality of that attention.

At a psychological level, fans are drawn to experiences that deliver different kinds of gratification beyond the live game itself. Some are immediate: the rush of a winning bet, or the satisfaction of reacting to a stunning play in real-time alongside other fans on social media. Others unfold over time: developing a deeper understanding of the sport, feeling emotionally invested in a team's long-term future, or building a sense of identity and community around a fandom.

These experiences may look very different on the surface, but they share some important traits. Each gives the consumer a form of emotional, social, or cognitive value, while also providing leagues, rightsholders, and commercial partners additional ways to maintain fan engagement between marquee live moments.

Beyond the tangible rewards such as dollars, fantasy points, and likes/shares/comments, sports touchpoints can be categorized according to the type of value they create for fans and the psychological need states they fulfill.

The need states addressed by sports engagement

Short-term rewards:

Changing the emotional state

- “ It makes me happy
- “ It surprises me from time to time
- “ It challenges me, in a good way

Long-term rewards:

Laying groundwork for the future

- “ It makes me more invested as a fan
- “ I learn from it and feel more informed
- “ It makes me feel connected or part of a community

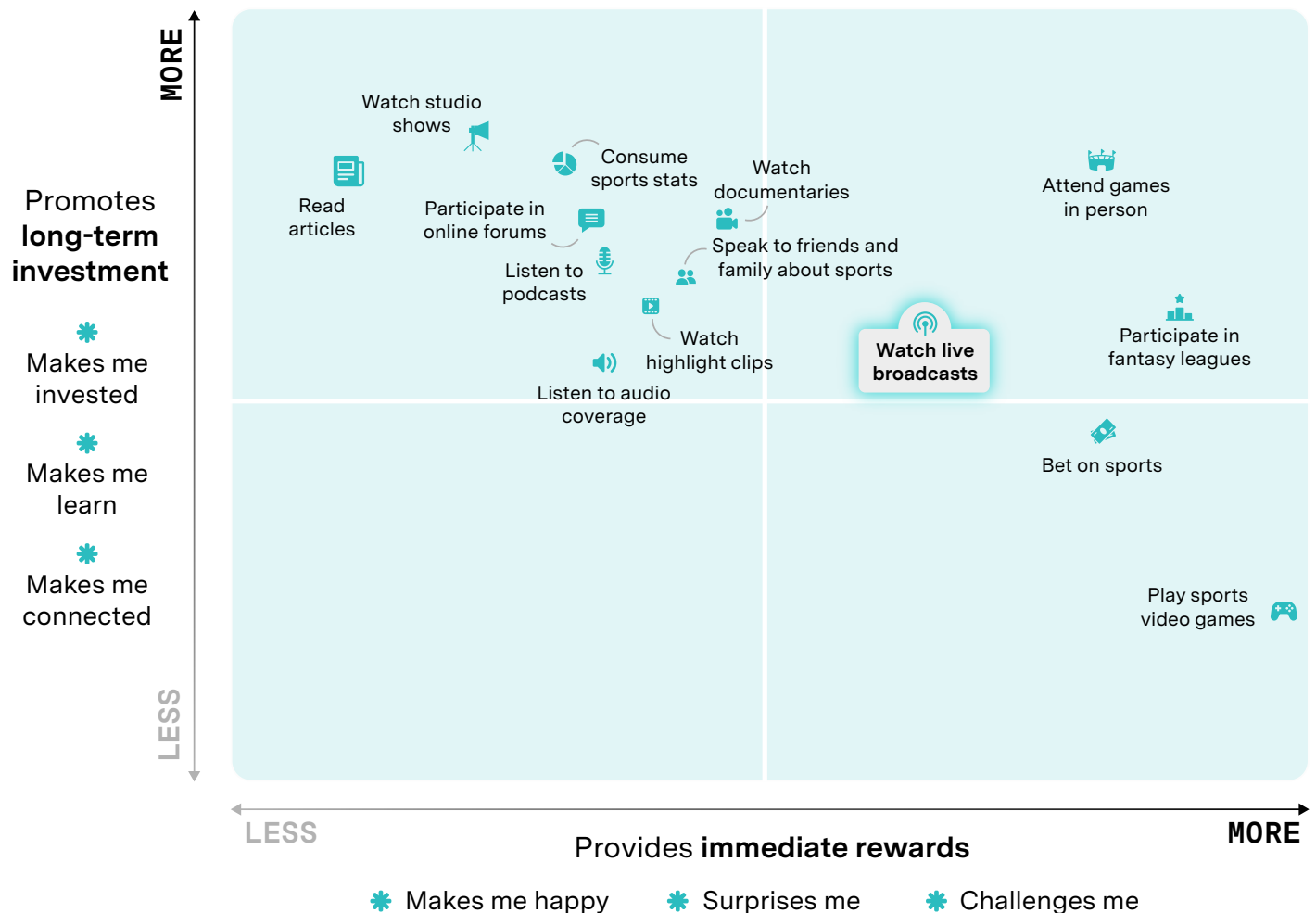
Seen through this lens, it becomes clear that each touchpoint serves a different role within the broader sports ecosystem. **The live broadcast remains uniquely powerful because it balances both immediate excitement and long-term emotional investment.**

Most surrounding activities lean more heavily toward one type of reward or the other, which is why they tend to function as a valuable supplement to the live viewing experience, rather than as a replacement for it.



How different forms of sports engagement deliver on viewers' psychological needs

Aggregate metrics reflecting what sports fans say they get out of these different activities



To reflect shifting fan behavior, NRG developed a new framework for measuring multimodal sports engagement

When leagues engage fans across multiple touchpoints, building habits and driving quality attention, they increase top-of-mind interest in watching live as well as long-term investment in the sport as a whole. To reflect this seismic shift in how viewers consume sports content, **NRG has developed a new framework for quantifying the impact of the full ecosystem of engagement for a given sport, built around three key tracking metrics.**



The three pillars of the **sports**^{IQ} framework

01

Attention Quotient:

How well does this sport engage its attainable audience across the full attention ecosystem?

02

Future Investment:

Will consumers care more about this sport in five years than they do today?

03

Top-of-Mind Viewing Anticipation:

What sports are consumers most excited to watch right now?

01

Attention Quotient:







How well does this sport engage its attainable audience across the full attention ecosystem?

The first, and perhaps most important, of these metrics is the Attention Quotient. Reported as a percentage, it is a composite score that captures how effectively a sport or league reaches fans across the different ways they already consume sports media and culture.

During each sport's annual season, and at key pulse points throughout the year, avid and casual fans are asked which activities they use to engage with that sport. Importantly, consumers are only evaluated against touchpoints they already participate in at the overall sports level. This creates a more realistic measure of attainable engagement rather than a theoretical maximum.

For example, if a consumer says they generally watch sports documentaries and also expresses interest in WTA Tennis, they become part of the attainable audience for WTA Tennis documentaries. If WTA Tennis earns an Attention Quotient score of 37%, that means that polled fans are engaging with the league across 37% of the sports touchpoints they already use overall.

The modes of engagement that contribute to sports' Attention Quotient

 Read articles	 Watch studio shows
 Participate in online forums	 Consume sports stats
 Listen to podcasts	 Listen to audio coverage
 Watch highlight clips	 Speak to friends and family about sports
 Watch documentaries	 Watch live broadcasts
 Attend games in person	 Play sports video games
 Bet on sports	 Participate in fantasy leagues

The Attention Quotient correlates strongly with two additional tracking measures that complete the picture of the sport's total engagement health: **Future Investment**, and **Top-of-Mind Viewing Anticipation**.

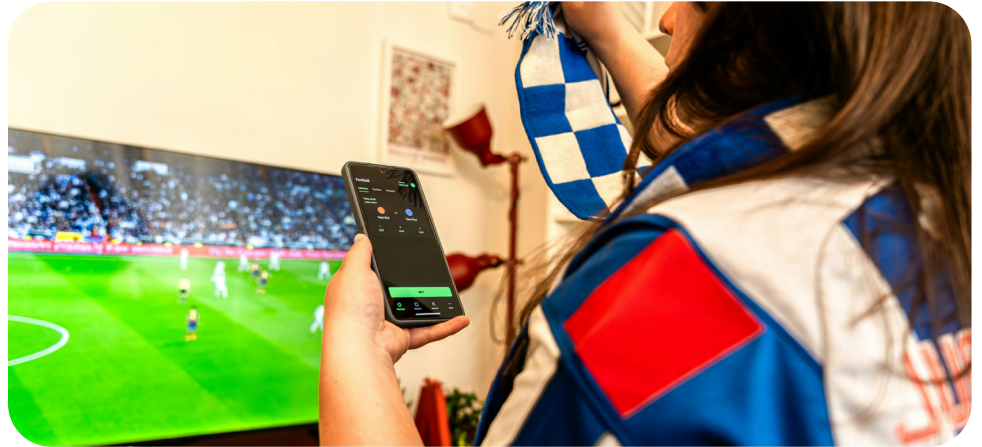
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Future Investment:

Will consumers care more about this sport in five years than they do today?

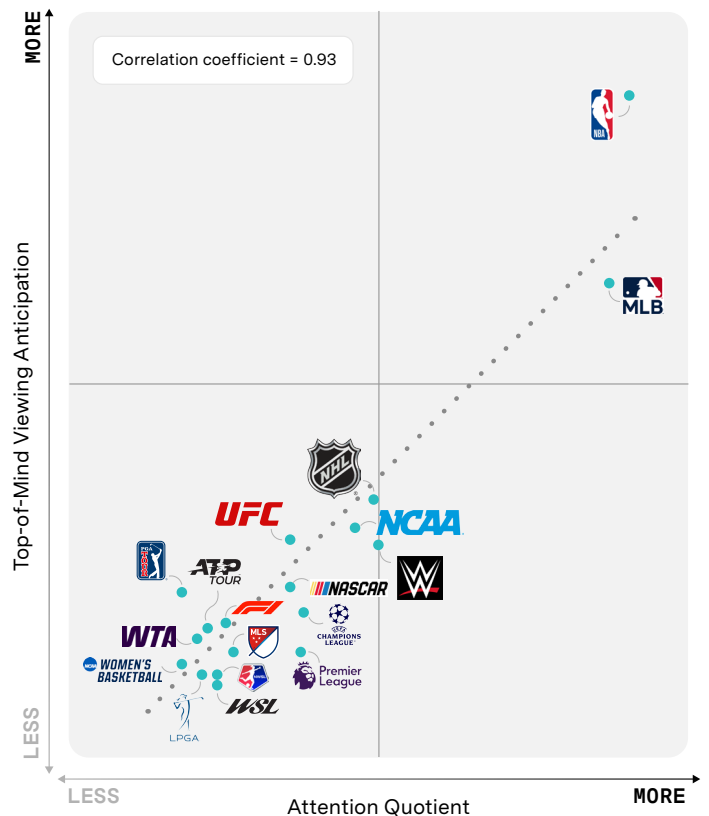
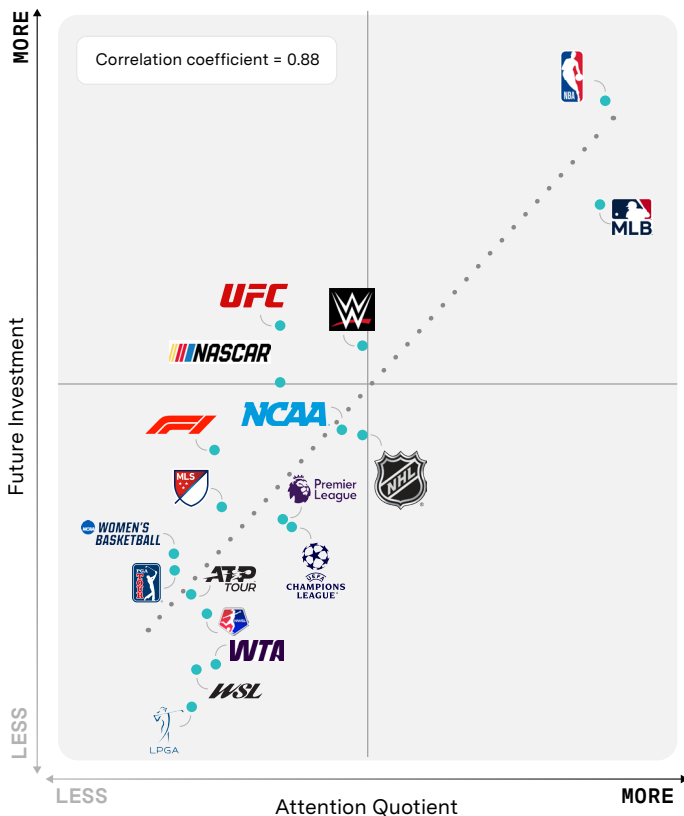
After reflecting on their current relationship with different sports and leagues, respondents are asked whether they expect to care more about each one in five years, less than they do now, or about the same. Scores are reported as a net outlook measure: the share who expect to care more minus the share who expect to care less.

This metric is collected year-round among all non-rejectors of each league, providing a read on the long-term trajectory of fandom and emotional investment.



How Attention Quotient correlates with other key fandom metrics

For leagues in season between March and April 2026



03

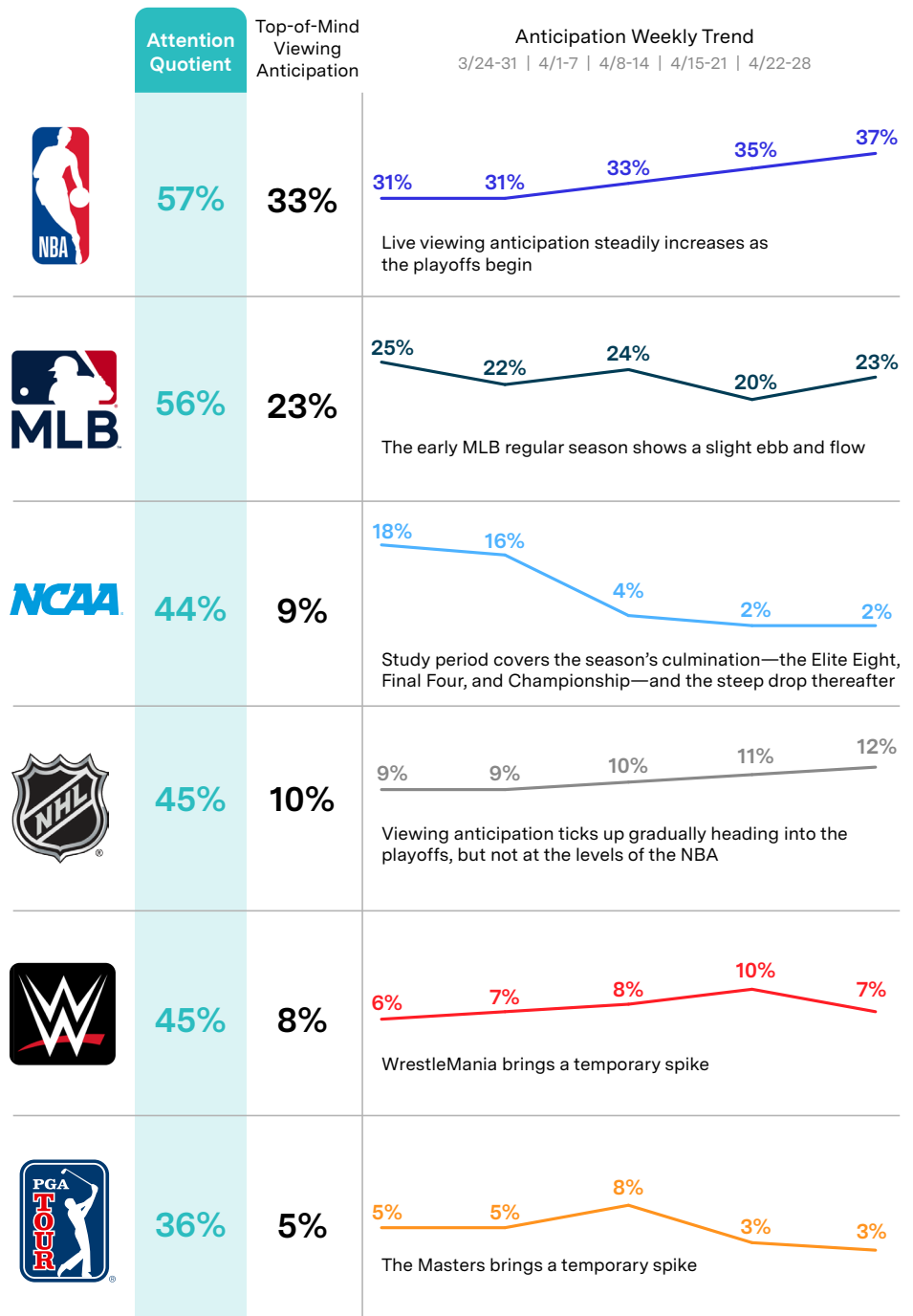
Top-of-Mind Viewing Anticipation: What sports are consumers most excited to watch right now?

The third measure focuses on immediacy. To capture it, NRG asks respondents an open-ended question about the sport, league, or event they are currently most looking forward to watching live.

The results prove that audiences aren't strictly short-sighted: in early 2026, responses ranged from highly immediate answers such as "the Knicks game tonight" to future tentpole events like the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Even during the offseason, both professional and college football appeared consistently in responses. But because the measure is unaided and encourages respondents to think about upcoming events, it is naturally influenced by seasonality and the sports calendar.

Unaided anticipation measures have long been core tools within NRG's tracking framework because they capture what is most salient to consumers in the moment. Within this model, Top-of-Mind Viewing Anticipation serves as the clearest indicator of near-term live interest, while Attention Quotient and Future Investment provide a steadier measure of the depth and durability of a sport's fandom.

Anticipation trends for major leagues

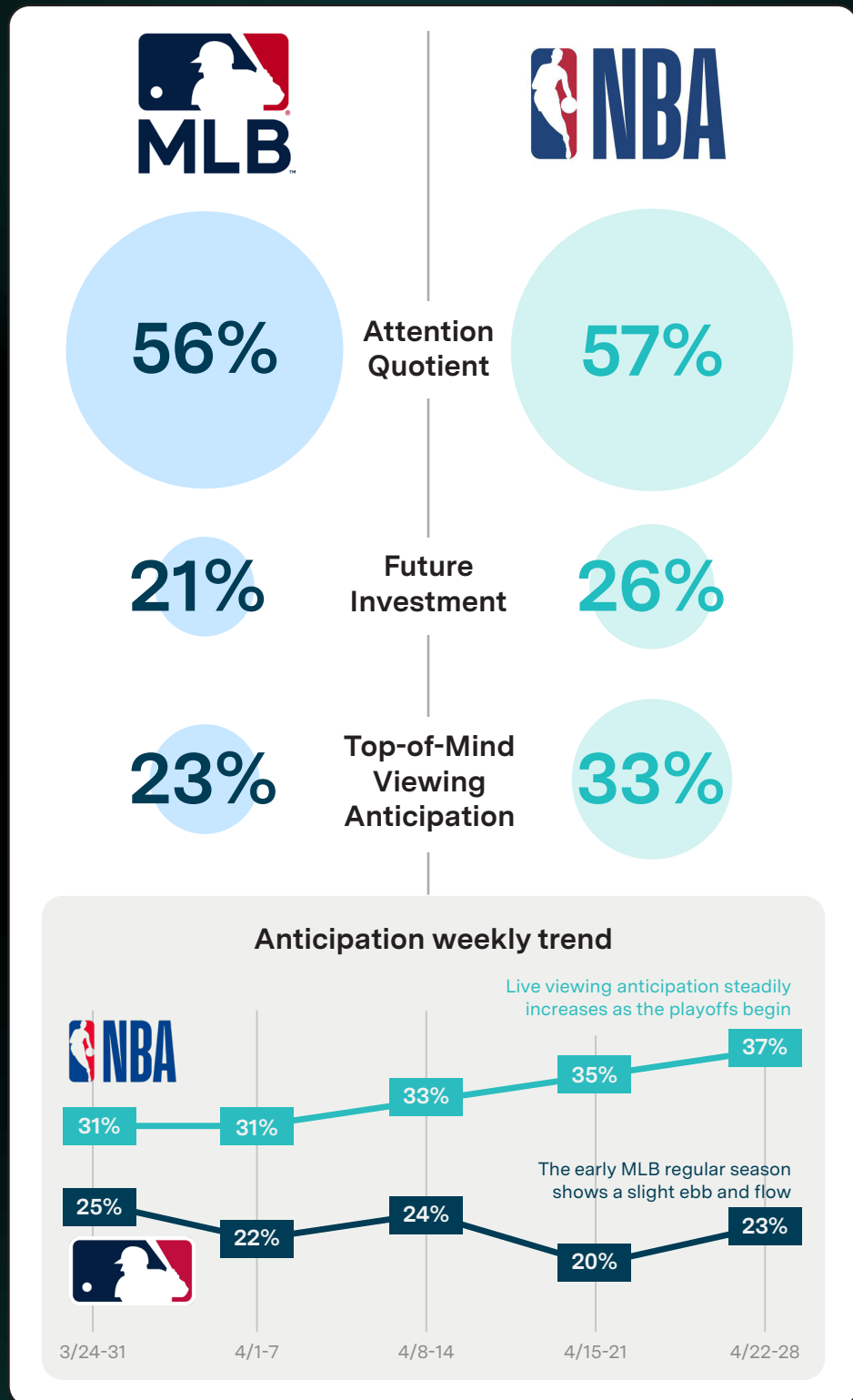


CASE STUDY: Comparing multimodal engagement for MLB and the NBA

To see how this framework operates in practice, it helps to compare two leagues at different points in their calendars: the NBA and MLB.

Despite an older-skewing fanbase, baseball has regained momentum throughout the 2020s, at times even surpassing the NBA in viewership for tentpole moments.⁸ A March 2026 feature in *The Athletic* framed the discussion in simple terms: which league deserves to be considered America’s second-biggest professional sport behind the NFL?⁹ The article weighed team valuations, rights deals, attendance figures, and available ratings data, ultimately landing on a complicated answer. The NBA, it concluded, held the advantage in social and online conversation, while the “vibes” favored MLB.

NRG’s Sports IQ data broadly points in the NBA’s favor as well, though with an important caveat. The two leagues have a nearly identical Attention Quotient, suggesting that MLB’s overall engagement ecosystem provides an effective foundation for continued interest throughout the season and beyond.



⁸Anthony Stitt, “[World Series Tops NBA Finals in TV Viewership](#),” *Forbes*, November 4th, 2025

⁹Stephen J. Nesbitt, Mike Vorkunov, and Evan Drellich, “[Has MLB overtaken the NBA as America’s No. 2 league?](#),” *The Athletic*, March 26th, 2026

The NBA holds a 10-point lead in Top-of-Mind Viewing Anticipation, though timing plays a major role in that result: the NBA was entering the playoffs during fieldwork, while MLB was just beginning its regular season. The metric is still an important one to consider; many fans actively follow both leagues, and spring sports calendars regularly force direct competition for audience attention on the same nights. **Even so, MLB's near parity on the Attention Quotient makes the broader "No. 2 league" debate far more competitive than current viewing anticipation alone would suggest.**

Future Investment also leans toward the NBA, though by a narrower margin. The league's five-point advantage on this metric sits between its stronger lead in unaided viewing intent and its much smaller edge in overall breadth of engagement. Taken together, the three measures provide a holistic and comprehensive picture of fandom health for each league, one that encompasses both short-term salience as well as long-term investment.

Both leagues are also entering periods of significant transition that could shape fan perceptions and engagement for seasons to come. New media rights deals have recently kicked in across both sports. As a result, an increasing share of games now sits behind streaming subscriptions, creating more fragmented access points for consumers.

The presentation of those broadcasts matters as well. When the most recent NBA season kicked off in the fall, NBC enjoyed positive feedback for its lean into nostalgia,¹⁰ while newcomer Prime Video drew praise for the quality of its studio analysis.¹¹ MLB's recent Opening Night experiment on Netflix was a ratings success, but generated a far more divided response among reviewers, with some embracing the spectacle and others reacting negatively to a flashy reinterpretation of a sports property steeped in ritual and tradition.¹² Similar debates have emerged around the presentation of events like The Masters.¹³



¹⁰"NBC's return to NBA coverage draws rave reviews," Sports Business Journal, October 22nd, 2025

¹¹Rashad Grove, "NBA On Prime' Is a Game-Changer On the Sports Landscape," BET, October 24th, 2025

¹²Andrew Marchand, "On 'Netflix Opening Night,' fans just wanted to watch 'The Show,'" The Athletic, March 26th, 2026

¹³Kylee Hansen, "ESPN accused of 'desecrating' The Masters with controversial coverage decision," AOL, April 10th, 2026

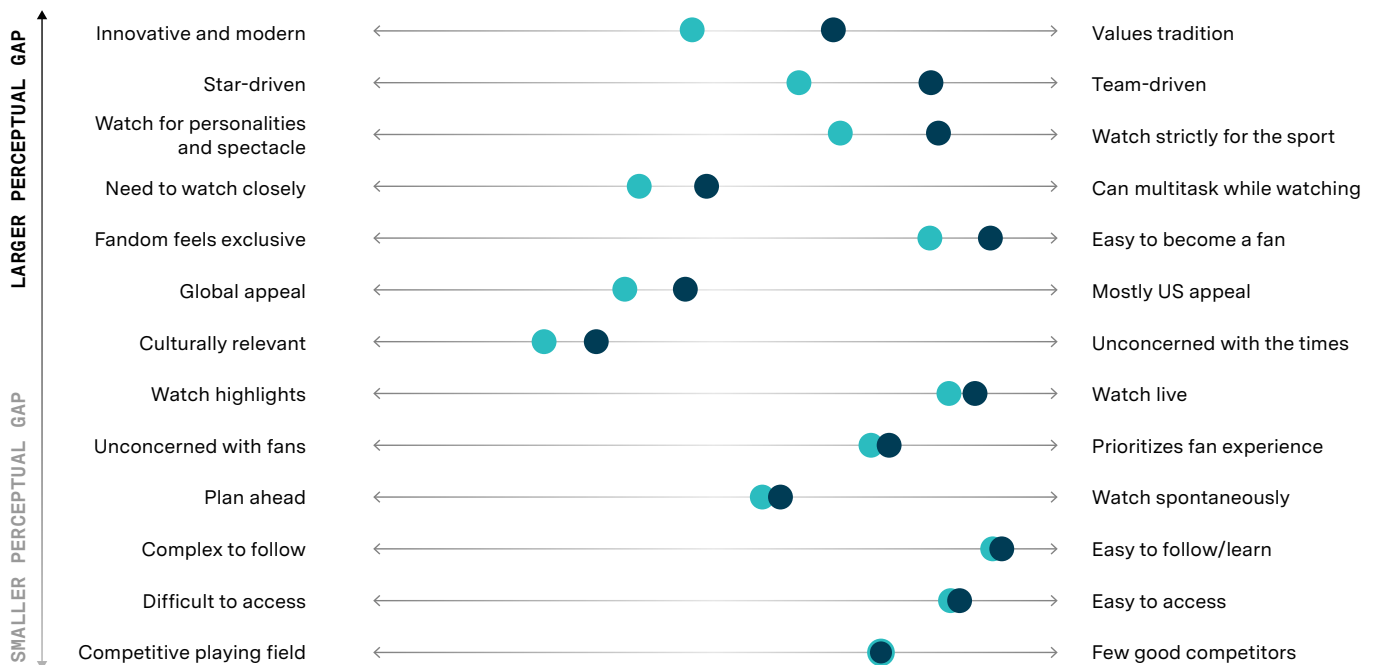


Outside the broadcast booth, both leagues continue to test new formats and rule changes. MLB has introduced the pitch timer and experimented with the Automated Ball-Strike Challenge System.¹⁴ The NBA has rolled out the NBA Cup and Play-In Tournament while also adjusting lottery rules in an effort to reduce incentives for tanking.¹⁵ Both leagues continue pushing international growth and global talent development, while MLB also faces unresolved labor tensions surrounding player compensation and the possibility of another lockout in the years ahead.¹⁶

All of this feeds back into the broader question of perceptions and “vibes”: not just what fans watch, but where they believe a league is headed. **In NRG’s league perception data, MLB still carries a distinctly traditional identity.** Across 13 statement pairings, the gap between “innovative and modern” compared to “mostly values tradition” represents the largest perceptual difference separating MLB from the NBA. Among the 19 in-season leagues and sports properties compared by NRG, MLB skewed more strongly toward “tradition” than any other property. Only the PGA came close.



League perceptions among fans: MLB vs. the NBA



¹⁴Mike Mazzeo, “[The drama of ABS creates a new kind of sports inventory for MLB,](#)” Sports Business Journal, May 15th, 2026

¹⁵Liam McKeone, “[Adam Silver Reveals New Lottery Rules Would Allow NBA to Change Draft Order to Punish Tanking Teams,](#)” SI, May 14th, 2026

¹⁶Evan Drellich, “[MLB labor talks will begin in the next couple weeks. What’s the process, and what’s at stake?](#)”, The Athletic, April 29th, 2026

Of course, these perceptions may shift over time—and likely will, given MLB’s recent moves to draw in younger audiences. NRG’s Originals IQ streaming tracker offers a useful parallel: Disney+ still leads the market as a service seen as “good for the whole family,” but that association has declined by double digits since the Hulu integration brought more adult-skewing content into the platform. Sports leagues can experience similar shifts as product decisions accumulate over time.

The response to MLB’s Automated Ball-Strike Challenge System illustrates this tension clearly. Reactions among fans surveyed by NRG leaned more positive than negative overall, but they also revealed an ongoing push and pull between modernization and tradition within the sport’s identity.

MLB fans respond to the league’s Automated Ball-Strike Challenge System



“I like it. As a fan I want the right call all the time.”
– F, 15

“I think it’s a great addition to MLB. It feels like a little game anytime it comes on and makes the experience more exciting.”
– M, 27

“This makes baseball fun.”
– M, 34

“Not a fan. Balls & strikes should be left to the umpire as he sees fit. There has to be a human element left to the game.”
– F, 54

“It serves as a middle ground between traditional human umpiring and a fully automated robot umpire system. I think it’s innovative and modern.”
– F, 35

“This is the best thing for Major League Baseball.”
– M, 25

“I love this addition to MLB and I would like to see more accountability in sports (in general) as it pertains to officiating games.”
– M, 50

“Baseball has worked for a century on the integrity and ability of the umpires. An instant replay in football is one thing because the playing field is so vast. The same is not true for a strike zone. This is going to make games that are already very long even longer. Horrible choice.”
– M, 53

“I love the new system. It allows for checking the umpire’s calls while including a new game of skill and strategy revolving around when to use challenges.”
– M, 33

“Too many rules and notches in baseball now. Wish it was more traditional like it was.”
– M, 53

Comparing engagement profiles: MLB vs. the NBA

Percentage of league fans who engage with the sport through each of these touchpoints



Touchpoint	MLB (%)	NBA (%)	Delta
Play video games	47%	62%	+15
Bet on games	52%	67%	+15
Participate in online forums	33%	43%	+10
Participate in fantasy leagues	29%	37%	+8
Watch studio shows	49%	57%	+8
Watch highlight clips	64%	66%	+2
Listen to podcasts	44%	45%	+1
Watch documentaries	41%	41%	0
Speak to friends and family	68%	68%	0
Follow on social platforms	55%	55%	0
Consume stats	72%	70%	+2
Read articles	51%	46%	+5
Attend games in-person	61%	47%	+14
Listen to audio coverage	54%	38%	+16

That dynamic also appears in the touchpoint-level engagement data. While the overall Attention Quotient measures total ecosystem reach, the activity-level breakdown reveals where leagues overperform or underperform with specific audiences. Between the NBA and MLB, the largest gaps appear in video games and sports betting, both activities that satisfy shorter-term gratification need states and both driven by younger generations.

Because the Attention Quotient measures the share of attainable activities each fan participates in, overlap across categories helps keep MLB highly competitive overall even when the NBA leads in several individual areas. The detailed touchpoint view then becomes a diagnostic tool, helping identify where a league is strongest, where vulnerabilities exist, and where opportunities for future growth may emerge.

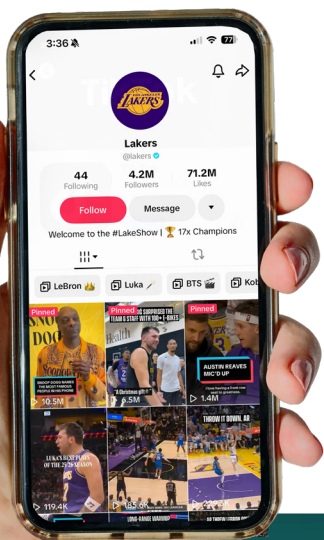
Ultimately, this matters because sustained fandom depends on sustained relevance. **Fans need reasons to keep caring between marquee live moments: the highlights, the bets, the rivalries, the coaching drama, the water cooler conversations, the sneaker release, the trade rumor, the playoff race.** Every touchpoint has the potential to reinforce the next one, keeping the sport culturally present and emotionally meaningful long after the final whistle.

Effective multimodal engagement will be crucial for creating the next generation of sports fans

If the history of sports and sports broadcasting teaches us anything, it's that fandom is a living organism that needs constant nourishment. Reaching consumers across multiple touchpoints is an important first step, serving to keep the sport present in their daily lives. For leagues, broadcasters, and commercial partners, the larger challenge is how to turn that engagement into something more durable.

Within this expanded model of fandom, two priorities stand out:

- » Maximizing the ROI of each touchpoint, directly or indirectly, including by linking one form of engagement to another
- » Using those touchpoints to create stronger person-to-person connections that can carry fandom across generations



Top drivers of engagement among sports fans

Tell us a little more about how you typically engage with...

(league average)

01 Watch clips online or on social media

02 Talk about it with my family, friends, and co-workers

03 Follow scores, standings, odds, and/or athlete statistics

04 Watch analysis or pre/post-show studio coverage

05 Follow teams and/or athletes on social media

What makes you decide to watch specific games when you do?

(league average)

01 It's an exciting matchup

02 My friends/family are watching

03 My favorite team is playing/competing

04 It's on at a convenient time

05 I'm watching a rivalry

#1
for Gen Z

That second goal matters because the same forces that have fragmented attention have also intensified the desire for connection, especially among audiences raised in digital-first environments. NRG's recent Gen Alpha moviegoing research points to this clearly: younger consumers still place enormous value on shared entertainment experiences, even as media consumption becomes more individualized.¹⁷

¹⁷"Gen Alpha Saves the Box Office?", National Research Group, August 29th, 2025

Sports fandom shows similar patterns. Across leagues measured in NRG's Sports IQ program, friends and family consistently rank among the most important reasons people become fans, choose to watch games, and discover new events or teams to follow.

For Gen Z in particular, the communal side of sports remains especially important. Watching games with other people ranks as their top motivator for tuning in live.

The generational picture becomes even more revealing when consumers are asked to think beyond their own personal experiences. In addition to asking respondents whether they expect to care more or less about a sport five years from now, Sports IQ also asks them to predict how much the generation after them will care about each sport once they reach the same age. Among consumers under 45, perceptions of their own future fandom tend to align closely with how they view the next generation's interests.

Women's sports stand out especially strongly in this exercise, with many younger audiences expecting at least one women's league to become even more culturally important among the next generation of fans.

One notable exception emerges around the NBA. Gen Z respondents expect their own long-term interest in the league to remain strong, but they are less confident that Gen Alpha will maintain the same level of attachment, particularly as the NBA approaches the eventual retirement of many of its defining superstar figures.

For leagues, the opportunity is to challenge those assumptions. Multimodal engagement provides the mechanism for doing so. **The more consistently sports can meet fans across platforms, formats, and social settings, the more opportunities they create to sustain emotional investment over time.**

Implemented effectively, these touchpoints can turn fragmented attention into lasting fandom, while giving one generation of fans new ways to pass that passion on to the next.

Fans' expectations for future interest in the leagues they follow



Driving fandom in an era of multimodal engagement

5 key takeaways for leagues

01 Fandom is no longer tethered to individual moments in time

Live broadcasts remain essential, but fandom now stretches across social media, podcasts, betting, gaming, highlights, and streaming platforms. Leagues that connect these touchpoints effectively are better positioned to sustain audience attention year-round.

02 Beyond-the-broadcast engagement strengthens live viewing

Fans who engage with sports across multiple formats consistently spend more time watching live games. Clips, podcasts, fantasy sports, and social content often reinforce the live product rather than compete with it.

03 Athlete-driven fandom is reshaping audience behavior

Younger fans are increasingly forming attachments to individual players alongside, or sometimes ahead of, teams. NIL rules and direct-to-consumer platforms have accelerated this shift across professional and collegiate sports.

04 To nurture enduring fandoms, leagues need to combine immediate gratification with long-term investment

Successful sports ecosystems deliver quick emotional rewards while also building deeper feelings of knowledge, identity, and community. Different forms of engagement play different roles here, and leagues will need to balance them against each other to drive lasting fanship.

05 The future of fandom will depend on shared experiences

Even in an increasingly individualized media environment, fans still crave interpersonal connection. Across generations, friends and family remain central drivers of sports engagement, discovery, and live viewing behavior.

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Sports IQ is NRG's new year-round gauge of the evolving sports attention landscape, tracking how fans discover, consume, and engage with sports. Spanning 60+ leagues, 90+ broadcasts, and 100+ tentpole events, it delivers real-time intelligence on fan engagement, attitudinal diagnostics, and platform attribution and subscription value, serving as the comprehensive source of truth for maximizing the value of sports media.

For more on trends in sports and sports broadcasting, explore our previous articles and reports, or reach out to us directly at inquiry@nrgmr.com.



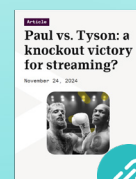
Changing the Game?

How soccer is revolutionizing the way Americans think about women's sports



In Pole Position?

How Formula 1 finally broke into the US market



Paul vs. Tyson: a Knockout Victory for Streaming?

Analyzing the impact of marquee streaming events on sports fandom



Miss Americana meets America's Game

Measuring the Taylor Swift Effect at Super Bowl LVIII

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