

# **THE RELEVANCE REPORT SPORTS**

**2026**

**USC ANNENBERG  
CENTER FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS**



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***THE RELEVANCE REPORT***  
***SPORTS***  
**2026**

**USC ANNENBERG  
CENTER FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS**

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
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**USCAnnenberg**  
*Center for Public Relations*

# SPORT BRINGS US TOGETHER

**BY /** Fred Cook  
Director,  
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**IN A POLARIZED WORLD,** almost everything feels divisive. But sports have the power to unite us. In that spirit, this year's Relevance Report, our 10th edition, is all about sports.

PR is about storytelling — and right now, the most powerful stories are being told on the field. The heart-break of loss, the thrill of a last-second win — we all feel it, no matter who we are or where we come from.

Here are a few of the topics driving the moment:

- Women's sports are surging. Arenas are full. Sponsorships are growing. New heroes are stepping into the spotlight.
- NIL has flipped the script for college athletes. They're not just playing games anymore. They're building brands, signing contracts, and living under the same scrutiny as seasoned pros.
- Technology has turned fans into participants. Streaming, podcasts, and social media have given everyone a platform.



Right now, sports are especially relevant in Los Angeles. With the World Cup and the Olympics on the way and 17 professional teams already here — featuring global icons like Shohei Ohtani, Son Hueng-min and LeBron James — L.A. is at the center of the sports universe. And the Annenberg School is connected to all of it.

The Relevance Report is not written in one voice. It's a collaboration of professionals, professors and students — each with a unique opinion on how sports are impacting business, society and the PR industry.

Together, their perspectives remind us that sports are more than entertainment. It's communication at its most powerful.



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**Fred Cook** is the director of the USC Center of Public Relations, a professor of professional practice at USC Annenberg, and the chairman emeritus of the global PR firm Golin. During his 35-plus years at Golin, he has had the privilege to work with a variety of high-profile CEOs, including Herb Kelleher, Jeff Bezos and Steve Jobs, and manage a wide variety of clients, including Nintendo, Toyota and Disney. His book, "Improvise: Unconventional Career Advice from an Unlikely CEO," is the foundation for his popular USC Annenberg honors class on Improvisational Leadership.

# **THE TRUE MEANING BEHIND SPORTS**

BY / India Starr



***Sports have always been about more than kicking a ball, swinging a bat, or throwing a ball in a hoop.***

***It's all about connection.***

***Week after week, we tune in to witness greatness in action and to hear stories of resilience, sacrifice, determination and grit.***

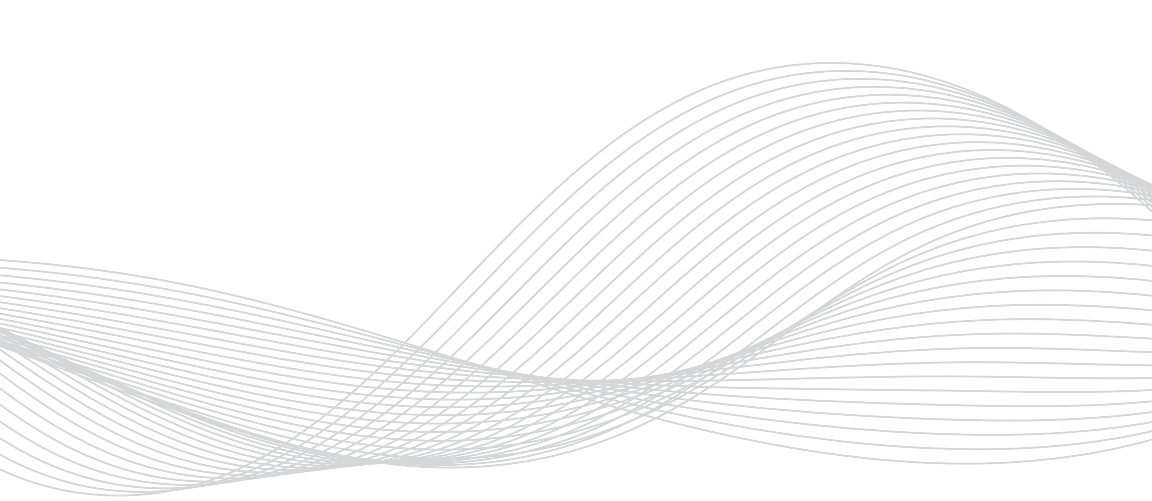
***We laugh, we love, we cry, and we celebrate all wins and losses in the process.***

***Through these stories, we begin to see through the label of "athlete" and recognize each individual for who they are: human.***

***We are reminded that we all breathe, sweat, and bleed the same.***

***We are reminded that we can and will uplift each other regardless of our differences.***

***We are reminded that compassion is stronger than competition.***



***This is what sports are all about.***

***It's time to turn to one another for love and support instead of allowing perceived differences, disinformation, and biases to continue to win. Because at the end of the day, we all play on the same team.***

***So when the game clock strikes zero, our work isn't over. We have a new responsibility: to carry this feeling in our daily lives and to remind ourselves and others that we are more alike than different.***

***And that starts with us.***

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**India Starr** is a data-driven storyteller with a passion for strategic communication and creating brand narratives. She is currently in her second year pursuing a Master in Public Relations and Advertising degree at USC Annenberg, where she is a graduate fellowship recipient and serves as a Research Assistant for USC Center for PR. Starr is also a former college athlete, having played women's basketball at the California State University, Chico.

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**SPORTS AS  
SOCIETY'S MIRROR**



# FROM THE FIELD TO THE FUTURE: HOW SPORTS HELP US HUMANIZE

BY / Melissa Waggener Zorkin



A sporting event is never just a game. It's a reflection of who we are — our aspirations, our challenges, our drive to push boundaries. People of every background, belief, and ability come together in one place, at one time, to witness something bigger than themselves. All of us remember the buzz of high school sports and the joy of cheering on our hometown teams. For example, I'm thinking of a Seattle Kraken game at the Climate Pledge Arena with my team at We. Communications.

That night reminded me of the real power of sports — not just to entertain, but to unite and inspire. From new We. team members to senior leaders, we high-fived and groaned in unison. We weren't just spectators — we were participants in something deeply human. And we weren't just at a hockey game — we were experiencing the future, in real time.

Seattle's Climate Pledge Arena isn't just a venue. It's a sustainability innovation lab, built to demonstrate what's possible. We watched players skate on ice made from rainwater collected on the roof. Electric Zambonis hummed quietly across the rink. We ate locally sourced food off compostable plates. These might seem like small details — but they told a big story. One you could feel, not just read about. That's the power sports give communicators: a stage to show, not just tell.

At the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, our client Intel leaned into that opportunity. Instead of describing its AI, it created experiences that let people feel its impact — from an interactive lab where fans discovered their ideal sport through real-time analysis, to tools that helped athletes with disabilities navigate Olympic and Paralympic facilities. It wasn't about explaining AI technology — it was about demonstrating what it makes possible for humans.

And that power isn't limited to global stages. Whether it's a local team testing smart wearables that reduce injury risk or a youth league partnering with community health groups, sports offer fertile ground for human-centered storytelling. They give brands permission to connect not just with minds — but with hearts.

That's the shift communications must make. We're no longer simply describing innovations — we're creating environments where people can experience them. And there's no better environment than sports. It's where tension and triumph live side by side. Where strangers become teammates. Where complexity gets translated into joy, belonging, and belief. Because these aren't just feel-good moments. They're proof points.

When we use stories to humanize complexity, when we bring people into the experience of what's next, we don't just communicate progress. We accelerate it.

And that's the power of what we, as communicators, can do together. ■

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**Melissa Waggener Zorkin** is the Global CEO and Founder of We. Communications. Zorkin has cultivated long-term partnerships with many revolutionary brands in the technology, health, and consumer sectors. With more than 1,500 employees, We. Communications is a powerhouse agency in more than 100 international markets. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

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# WHY WOMEN'S SPORTS ARE THE BRIGHT SPOT IN TODAY'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR PR AND BRANDS

BY / Jennifer Acree



The media industry is at an inflection point. Across both legacy and digital platforms, economic pressure has led to layoffs, shrinking budgets, and a widespread retreat from original reporting. But one sector is bucking this trend: coverage of women's sports.

Once relegated to the sidelines, women's sports are now commanding record-breaking audiences, with NWSL viewership growing fivefold and the WNBA Draft viewership skyrocketing by 328%.

Driven by compelling athlete narratives, highly engaged communities, and a wave of strategic media and advertiser support, women's sports present a powerful opportunity for communicators and brands to build lasting cultural relevance.

## The "Why Now?"

The audience has always been there; what's new is the industry finally showing

up to meet it. As Nielsen CEO Karthik Rao put it, the shift around women's sports has moved from a slow evolution to a full-blown revolution.

At the heart of this momentum are athletes who are more than just competitors; they're entrepreneurs, activists, and cultural icons. Stars like Alex Morgan and Sue Bird, who co-founded Togethxr, aren't just reshaping sports culture; they're building profitable media businesses. Togethxr recently reached profitability, tripled year-over-year earnings, and doubled its valuation, bringing in over \$30 million in revenue this year. Its model, centered on athlete-led storytelling, branded content, and cultural merchandise, proves women's sports media's potential.

Fandom in women's sports also runs deeper than team loyalty. It's rooted in community, shared values, and a desire to champion athletes as full people. Gen Z in particular gravitates toward "shoulder content" that highlights an athlete's training, advocacy,

setbacks, and triumphs that surround the game. ESPN’s “Full Court Press” offers an intimate look at rising women’s basketball stars, while Naomi Osaka’s new docuseries explores her return to tennis and motherhood. These stories build emotional connection, grow athlete brands and prove that the future of women’s sports is as much about narrative as it is about performance.

**The Proof is in the Investment**

Major investments across the media ecosystem are matching this surge in interest. Legacy players are stepping up like USA Today, which launched Studio IX, a dedicated vertical for women’s sports. The Associated Press is also expanding coverage and adding beat reporters, and The Athletic and Yahoo Sports have partnered to grow their footprint.

This investment in new platforms extends from dedicated streaming shows like Roku’s “Women’s Sports Now ” and audio networks from iHeartMedia’s Women’s Sports Audio Network to the social media landscape, where outlets like Bleacher Report are creating dedicated channels like B/R W for TikTok and Instagram.

Perhaps the clearest signal is in advertising. Ad spend on women’s sports more than doubled last year. Campaigns placed in women’s sports content were 40% more effective than the average primetime ad. Agencies like Publicis Groupe and GroupM have even launched dedicated teams and marketplaces to help brands tap in. Women’s sports, no longer niche, are a high-return investment that builds equity and connection.

**The Playbook for Communicators and Brands**

For PR professionals and marketers, the rise of women’s sports presents a playbook built on authenticity, relevance, and cultural alignment. The opportunity isn’t in scores

and stats, it’s in the human stories that bring these sports and the individual athletes to life.

Communicators should lean into narratives of advocacy, entrepreneurship, and resilience. Brands that support these athletes and platforms aren’t just buying attention; they’re earning trust. They’re reaching younger, more diverse, and more socially conscious consumers in ways traditional media can’t.

And in an era when consumers expect brands to take a stand, women’s sports offer a rare chance to do so credibly. Supporting women’s sports is a clear signal of values, equity, and long-term vision.

**Conclusion**

The rise of women’s sports is both a bright spot in a challenging media landscape and a signal of where things are headed. It’s proof that when the right stories are told to the right audiences at the right time, consumers are engaged.

Brands and communicators face the decision not of whether to engage, but how to do so strategically, authentically, and meaningfully, as the future of sports media is already here — driven by women. ■

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# FROM GAME DAY TO PAY DAY: HOW COLLEGE SPORTS RISK LOSING ITS FANS

BY / Kirk Stewart



In the words of famous philosopher Charles Barkley, “College athletics is so f—d up right now. I don’t know what they’re gonna do to fix this thing. It’s out of control. I don’t know how you’re gonna put toothpaste back in the tube.”

He’s right, but despite its flaws, the current system appears to be working for many in the ecosystem:

- **The coaches**, many of whom have huge multi-million-dollar contracts, including 10 Division I football coaches with contracts exceeding \$10 million a year.
- **Division I athletes** who were awarded an estimated \$1.67 billion in name, image and likeness (NIL) deals for the 2024-2025 season, and the agents who brokered them.
- **The nearly 9,000 collegiate football players (from all divisions)** — who entered the NCAA student transfer portal during the 2023-2024 cycle in an attempt to freely transfer to another university with no adverse consequences.
- **The Power Four Conferences**, which have television broadcast rights agreements that today, total an estimated \$17.2 billion, a revenue in which their member institutions share.

But what about fans? How are they faring? Fans are becoming increasingly emotionally disconnected from collegiate sports and their respective teams, and quite frankly, growing increasingly fatigued with being the primary funders of a system that they are growing progressively dissatisfied with. There are several primary drivers:

## 1. The Money

With the settlement of the House vs. NCAA lawsuit, universities can now pay a maximum of \$20.5 million directly to athletes, with the pool increasing 4% annually during the 10-year agreement.

Beyond that, collectives can continue to structure NIL deals for athletes that are now at least vetted by a third party under the auspices of the new College Sports Commission.

**The Issue:** This new model places enormous financial pressure on athletic departments. As a result, many programs across the country have introduced “talent fees,” per-seat contributions, surcharges on tickets and concessions, and even new student tuition fees to cover athlete compensation and escalating operational costs.

These and other measures create donor fatigue and strain fans' willingness to provide the emotional and financial investment that once defined college athletics.

**2. The Transfer Portal**

In collegiate sports, there is now free agency every year for any player in any sport who wants to transfer to another university for any reason — lack of playing time, dissatisfaction with the coaching staff, or a desire to earn more NIL money at another institution.

For example, UNC brought in 41 new football players via the transfer portal ahead of the 2025 season, Oklahoma State (30), Arkansas (30), Arizona (29), Texas Tech (21), and LSU (18). Closer to home, USC brought in 11 basketball players via the portal for the 2024-2025 season and 9 for the upcoming season out of a total team of 15.

But it's not limited to men's sports. This past season, nearly 30% of the slightly more than 5,000 Division I women's basketball players entered the portal.

**The Issue:** This roster churn makes it much harder to connect and build loyalty to a team that is new every year. And it's no piece of cake for the coaches either, who not only have to recruit incoming freshmen but re-recruit their entire current team each year. It seems that loyalty only goes one way these days.

**3. Conference Realignment**

Big-time conference realignment began about 15 years ago and continues today — all in an effort for schools to maximize television and media revenue in expanded conferences, create greater NIL opportunities for athletes, and gain a competitive recruiting edge for players who desire to play on a bigger stage.

**The Issue:** In the process, many high-profile, traditional rivalries that drove intense fan interest in collegiate sports across the country, particularly football, were lost.

The lost football rivalries include Texas vs. Texas A&M, Pittsburgh vs. West Virginia, Nebraska vs. Oklahoma, Penn State vs. Pittsburgh, Florida vs. Miami, Arkansas vs. Texas, and Oklahoma vs. Oklahoma State, to name just a few. USC lost its traditional student and alumni “weekenders” vs. Stanford and California.

In addition, realignment has created conferences that make no geographic sense — a positive for the networks, but dramatically increases team travel expenses and alienates many local fans. As a result, fans, who long served as the lifeblood of college sports, now feel like secondary cogs in a system that increasingly prioritizes dollars, media and image rights, and short-term wins over tradition, community, engagement, and loyalty.

To be sure, this new model for collegiate sports is not sustainable in its current form, particularly for devoted fans.

Going forward, athletic departments will place an even greater emphasis on fundraising, maximizing revenue, controlling costs, and improving the in-person game day experience, among other things. They, along with some combination of the new commission, the NCAA, Congress, and a proposed Presidential commission — or some other new entity — need to bring some sanity to the current state, and take a much closer look at what's ultimately in the best interests of the fan.

Because without the fans, college sports become nothing more than a made-for-TV movie. ■

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**Kirk Stewart** is the founder and chief executive officer of KTStewart, a consultancy focused on strategic communications and reputation management. He has more than 30 years of experience leading global communications, including serving as vice president of global communications for Nike. Stewart is also an adjunct professor at USC Annenberg, sharing his expertise in corporate positioning and brand reputation. He is a USC Annenberg alumnus, and is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# THE ICE IS MELTING

BY / Miki Turner



Thirty-four years ago Mariah Burton Nelson, a former Stanford basketball player, wrote a book called *Are We Winning Yet? How Women are Changing Sports and Sports are Changing Women*. My response to her question was included in a column I wrote for the *Oakland Tribune* called “A Victory on Ice.” Like Nelson, I explored the ongoing inequities in women’s sports focusing on the stereotypes associated with race and sexuality.

Well, we have certainly come a long way baby, but I’m pretty sure that Nelson and I would agree that we would only have to make minor tweaks to our 1991 narratives in 2025. Women athletes are still losing when it comes to equal pay, endorsements, and in the way some are perceived in the media.

The catfights perpetuated by some outlets and social media platforms are disturbing and distracting. It really is OK if Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese aren’t good friends. Haters will hate, but we should care less that a White woman has become the face of a league that is 85% Black.

We just want to watch them play.

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Like many of us who have willingly covered the games women play for more than 40 years, I’d like to believe this current evolution in women’s sports is more than a moment. I’m hoping that it is a sustainable movement that will redefine the perceptions of female athletes. JuJu Watkins, A’ja Wilson, Coco Gauff, Simone Biles, Nelly Korda, Clark, Reese, and all other women in their peer group are not only benefactors of Title IX, but also two other major movements in this country — Civil Rights and the Equal Rights Amendment.

Like all great movements, you win a few battles, but the war rages on. These young women are armed for battle. They are literally standing on the shoulders of all the warriors who came before them, demanding change and reform so that those who come behind them can lace up their sneakers, cleats and spikes and play the games they love.

That’s winning.

They, however, want and deserve more.

More money. More power. More messaging.

They are fighting for more zeros on their paychecks — like the women who came before them. The USA women’s soccer team won its fight. Legendary women’s tennis players Billie Jean King, Venus and Serena Williams won their battles back in the day. Let’s hope the WNBA rewards its players by honoring the message on the T-shirts they wore during the recent All-Star game: “Pay Us What You Owe Us.” And, that NCAA schools do likewise when it comes to student-athletes getting their rightful cut of the name, image and likeness (NIL) deals.

Other women athletes are also asserting their power by wearing their hearts on their T-shirts. This summer, the Angel City Football Club protested the cruel and inhumane treatment of Latino immigrants in Los Angeles by wearing shirts that read: Immigrant City Football Club on the front and Los Angeles is for Everyone/Los Angeles es para Todos on the back. A small gesture, but a loud message.

Words matter. Just ask Senator Raphael Warnock. When Atlanta Dream’s minority team owner and incumbent Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler publicly criticized the Black Lives Matter movement and objected to her team wearing “Say Her Name” T-shirts in memory of Breonna Taylor, the team’s

reaction was fast and furious. They created another T-shirt backing Warnock, Loeffler’s Black male opponent. “Vote Warnock” shirts were worn by players throughout the league and male athletes from other pro leagues. Warnock won. Women won.

Actions, however, sometimes speak louder than words. This is why some female athletes may need to lower the volume before they lose everything. To truly evolve, they must stop allowing themselves to be objectified and ridiculed if they really want to win.

Think about it. Have you ever seen LeBron James post a picture of himself in a Speedo on X? Ladies, you don’t have to play that game. You’re already inches away from where you need to be to win it all—respect, admiration and fame. Build your brand so that it builds you up. You matter.

In this current climate, it’s far more important to use your platform to bust the stereotypes. Don’t reinforce them by cursing out bouncers on Instagram because you can’t get into the club. I’m talking to you Stud Budz.

It’s not about the followers and clickbait. It’s about the leaders. Be you, but just be better. That’s how you win. ■

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**Miki Turner** is an award-winning journalist, author, and producer who now channels her decades of experience into teaching the next generation of journalists at USC Annenberg, where she is an associate professor of professional practice. She has held roles at ESPN, the NFL Network, MSNBC, AOL, BET, and various newspapers, and she teaches courses in photojournalism, sports commentary, digital storytelling, and sports production. She is a USC Annenberg alumnae.

# THE POWER OF PLAY: SPORTS AS A CATALYST FOR EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT

BY / Jessica Adelman



When I think about relevance — what matters, what moves us, what shapes our future — I return to the power of sport as a force for transformation. Sports have taught me teamwork, grit, sportsmanship, and the value of showing up — especially when it's hard.

After graduate school, I rode my road bike across America. For massive stretches at a time it was just me and the road facing an average of 85 miles a day of sheer persistence. Years later, I crossed the finish line at Ironman Lake Placid, exhausted but exhilarated. I only dared to undertake these challenges based on a childhood of sports, which included competitive swimming and the ultimate team sport: “crew” for those who know it. These experiences didn’t just shape me — the hours of hard work and camaraderie prepared me for leadership and for life.

Our Mars partnership with the Washington Spirit of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) is a meaningful personal and professional endeavor. What started with our SNICKERS® logo on a jersey has grown into a One Mars community-first partnership that lives in our backyard and inspires our Associates.

It isn’t just about logos and activations. It’s about relevance. Women’s sports are no longer a side story — women’s sports are THE story. Between 2022 and 2024, revenue from women’s sports grew 4.5 times faster than men’s sports, with projections estimating a \$2.5 billion market by 2030. These aren’t anomalies — these are signals of change.

The U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT) has been a beacon in this movement. Their fight for equal pay wasn’t just about dollars — it was about true equality. Their \$24 million settlement with U.S. Soccer set a precedent, and their willingness to

fight for what’s right inspired millions. At the 2024 Paris Olympics, women made up 53% of Team USA — the largest female delegation in history. These athletes don’t just win medals — they win minds and change times.

Three standout players from the Washington Spirit — Trinity Rodman, Ashley Hatch, and Tara McKeown — are proudly representing the US women’s national team (USWNT), further shaping the future of the sport, while inspiring future athletes and girls everywhere.

M&M’S also partnered with Aubrey Kingsbury, the Spirit’s veteran goalkeeper and two-time NWSL Goalkeeper of the Year. During the offseason, we supported her passion for baking through a unique “name, image and likeness” NIL-style collaboration — a topic we covered at the USC Center for PR Advisory Board meeting put directly into practice. Aubrey traded her goalie’s gloves for oven mitts and interned at a local bakery, learning the business side of her dream to one day open her own bake shop. At Mars, we were proud to support her entrepreneurial spirit because true mutuality means consideration and care for the whole person.

Much of this momentum is made possible by visionary leadership — none more impactful than Michelle Kang, majority owner of the Washington Spirit. She has expanded globally, acquiring French and London-based women’s teams, and launching Kyniska, the first multi-team organization focused on professionalizing women’s football. Kang is not just building teams — she’s building a movement.

In previous Relevance Reports, I’ve written about the dangers of polarization and the erosion of truth in public discourse. I’ve argued that relevance is earned — not claimed — and that today’s leaders must be fluent in both strategy and

empathy. I’ve called on communicators and corporations alike to galvanize young people to participate in civil society and to lead. Because relevance isn’t just about being seen — it’s about driving positive societal impact in the world around you.

As a lifelong athlete, a mother of three, and a corporate leader, the lessons I learned through sport — resilience, cheerful optimism even when you’re on the physical and emotional brink, teamwork, leadership — are those needed to create a better world. And I believe that by investing in women’s sports, we’re not just changing the game — we’re changing our future. ■

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**Jessica Adelman** is senior vice president of corporate affairs at Mars Wrigley and communications & change leader for the integration management office supporting the proposed Mars and Kellanova merger. She oversees global communications and serves as vice chair of the Mars Wrigley Foundation. Previously, Adelman was chief corporate affairs officer at Kroger, where she co-created the Zero Hunger | Zero Waste Plan, recognized on Fortune’s Change the World List. She has also held leadership roles at Syngenta and Cargill. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# THE PLAYING FIELD AS FOUNDATION: HOW SPORTS BUILD CAREERS AND COMMUNITIES

BY / Sona Iliffe-Moon



I learned more about leadership from the bench than I ever did from the spotlight. Whether you're leading the team or watching from the sidelines, sports teach valuable lessons about team dynamics, strategic thinking, resilience and contribution. I didn't have access to organized sports until high school, so by the time I joined soccer, I was behind my peers in skill and often found myself on the bench. That perspective, though, proved formative. As captain of the cheer squad, I was out front; as a soccer player, I was often watching from the sidelines. In both roles, I discovered that sports shape character through every position you play.

From the sidelines, I learned to read patterns — a masterclass in systems thinking essential in navigating complex stakeholder environments. Captaining the cheer squad taught me that leadership means ensuring everyone feels valued and works towards the same north star — skills that prepared me for strategic communications at Meta, Nestlé, Toyota, Lyft and now Yahoo.

Both experiences taught me that wins and losses don't always tell the full story. The process can be just as important as the outcome, which is why in sports, just like in communications, it's important to study which approaches worked, which missed the mark, and how to pivot so you're ready for the next play.

## ***The Invisible Curriculum***

Former student-athletes comprise over 70% of corporate executives, with 94% of female C-suite executives having played sports — reflecting sports' invisible curriculum in leadership development.

Consider the young soccer player learning to read the field while managing time, pressure and team dynamics simultaneously. It doesn't just pay off in the game but compounds into a mini executive training over time. The ability to assess complex, rapidly changing situations while maintaining composure under pressure becomes the foundation for boardroom decision-making decades later.

Youth sports teach balancing individual excellence and collective success. The star basketball player who learns that personal

statistics mean nothing without team wins understands collaboration in ways no classroom can teach. Athletes enter the workforce fluent in shared goals, mutual accountability and making others better — skills that define exceptional leaders. Sports operate on compressed timelines that mirror professional urgency. The quarterback has seconds to make decisions that determine outcomes; the future executive has the same decisiveness already hardwired.

**Building Communities Today**

Living in the Bay Area has shown me how sports create shared identity. When the Golden State Warriors made championship runs, strangers were high-fiving on BART and genuine collective joy transcended typical social divisions. I’ve felt similar connections as a former Angeleno and with my hometown teams in Philly, though these loyalties create delightful conflicts — like trying to decide which hat to wear for a Giants-Phillies game.

Today, watching my kids navigate lacrosse, tennis and competitive dance, I see these dynamics continuing. Tournament weekends create instant communities among parents who might never otherwise connect. When my daughter’s lacrosse team includes kids from five different schools, sports become a powerful integration force.

Working at Yahoo has given me a front-row seat to the connections and community built through fantasy sports. For decades, Yahoo Fantasy has helped connect unexpected groups often across multiple generations — grandparents teaching strategy to grandchildren, college roommates maintaining decades-long friendships, coworkers strengthening professional relationships. Going well beyond superficial digital interactions, shared sports fandom can create sustained and genuine relationships and community. Recognizing this power,

our team continues to make the Yahoo Sports and Yahoo Fantasy apps more community-oriented. New features like Discussions, Mega Threads, and Fantasy Feed enable fans to gather around games and react to and chat about every relevant play, transforming passive consumption into active community participation. The digital and physical sports worlds complement rather than compete.

**What We Can Do**

Sports are proven game-changers for building leaders and communities. Here’s a mini playbook:

- **Learn from every position:** Whether starting or on the bench, develop strategic thinking and team awareness that translates to professional pattern recognition.
- **Captain something:** Take leadership roles in community sports, workplace rec teams, or fantasy leagues to practice motivating diverse teams.
- **Show up consistently:** Join leagues or local pick-up games to build the “social glue” that strengthens communities.
- **Bridge generations and boundaries:** Use fantasy leagues and sports fandom to connect across age groups and social circles.
- **Treat outcomes as intelligence:** Apply the sports mindset of learning from wins and losses to business reviews and career development.

From bleachers to boardrooms, sports remain an important classroom for leadership development and community connection. Find your field and get in the game. ■

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**Sona Iliffe-Moon** is the chief communications officer at Yahoo where she oversees global corporate, consumer, and internal communications for Yahoo News, Finance, and Sports. With over 20 years of experience, she has led strategic communications for major companies including Facebook, Instagram, Lyft, and Toyota. Prior to Yahoo, Iliffe-Moon worked at top PR agencies Weber Shandwick and Hill & Knowlton and served as a foreign affairs officer in the Bureau of Arms Control at the U.S. Department of State. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# BRANDED AND BURDENED: ATHLETES OF COLOR BALANCING ACT

BY / AJ Domingo



Professional athletes have always been central to entertainment. But with social media amplifying their platforms, athletes' roles and responsibilities are no longer limited to competition. So precisely what are their roles?

With such high-platform visibility, athletes are expected to be public personas and brand themselves perfectly. Performance no longer occurs only on the field or court, but everywhere they go. Their online presence has become a battleground where they consistently combat ingrained narratives and work to shape their public images beyond athletic performance. Athletes of color carry an even heavier load, all under the intense scrutiny of media and public opinion.

Once a person of color (POC) becomes a professional athlete, their public status is accompanied by carrying the weight for visibility where their race has been

historically underrepresented. Their presence alone challenges systemic barriers, positioning them as role models for marginalized groups. Athletes of color are often expected to symbolize hope, represent their culture with integrity, break barriers without 'breaking rules,' be catalysts for social change, and uplift communities through philanthropic efforts. Becoming the "perfect role model" without flaws was nowhere in their professional contract, nor was it written that they must become a beacon for their community. Yet, many are embracing this.

Athletes are trained to compete rather than to confront systems, but for athletes of color, silence in the face of injustice often feels like betrayal. They are expected to be activists and face the emotional labor that comes with it.

While athlete activism is not new, social media has amplified its reach — increasing expectations for athletes of color to utilize

their platforms to address injustices such as racism, discrimination, and oppression, realities their communities face daily. However, while their platforms can garner community support, this is also accompanied by substantial audience backlash.

**WHILE ATHLETE ACTIVISM IS NOT NEW, SOCIAL MEDIA HAS AMPLIFIED ITS REACH — INCREASING EXPECTATIONS FOR ATHLETES OF COLOR TO UTILIZE THEIR PLATFORMS TO ADDRESS INJUSTICES SUCH AS RACISM, DISCRIMINATION, AND OPPRESSION, REALITIES THEIR COMMUNITIES FACE DAILY.**

Athletes of color are expected to denounce injustices and absorb social media backlash publicly, while also navigating pressure from their teams, leagues, and brand consultants to remain non-controversial and “brand safe.” Speak out and get labeled as “difficult,” jeopardizing sponsorships and job security.

Athletes of color cannot ignore that injustices disappear with fame: Their activism must be digestible, non-disruptive, and comfortable for the mainstream. They must curate spotless narratives, mastering the art of tone, practice self-censorship, and remain polite in the media. A single misstep on social media easily reinforces racist bias stereotypes, tarnishing a meticulously constructed image expected of them. Mainstream media tends to have greater

aggression towards female athletes of color, especially when they deviate from traditional gender roles. For example, when female athletes of color are competitive and passionate about their sport, they are labeled as “aggressive,” a judgment not equally applied to their white peers. Their behaviors are unfairly generalized to reflect on an entire group, adding pressure to constantly “represent well.”

On the other end, athletes of color may feel pressure to downplay their cultural heritage to appeal to the media and avoid being labeled as “radical.” Think of certain hairstyles, languages, or expressions that are indeed policed and subtly discouraged in elite spaces, holding athletes of color to unfair standards of carrying the weight of representation, respectability, and resistance in ways their white counterparts rarely have to. ■

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**AJ Domingo** is a first-generation college student and double major at USC, earning an undergraduate degree in business administration from USC Marshall and a Master in Public Relations and Advertising degree from USC Annenberg. He serves as a research associate at the USC Center for PR, focusing on media studies and the intersection of communications and industry trends.

# A TALE OF TWO HEADLINES

BY / Emmy Snyder



Australian Open. Roland Garros. Wimbledon. US Open. Each Grand Slam is famous for its surface, aesthetic, and most importantly, atmosphere.

Whether it's the August heat, the clamor of New York City, or the stampede of influencers who couldn't care less about tennis, one thing is certain: the atmosphere at the US Open is unmatched, and emotions run high.

The 2025 US Open was no exception to the rule; if anything, it raised the bar. It's only natural that the pandemonium contributes to some strong emotions on the court, but the language media uses to reference on-court eruptions varies starkly by the players' gender and race. The issue took center stage this year when Jelena Ostapenko faced off against Taylor Townsend. As White and Black women, Ostapenko and Townsend are subject to different levels of scrutiny and favor along the lines of their identity, and this became evident in this year's

media coverage. Ostapenko exploded when she accused opponent and victor Townsend of having "no education" following a second-round elimination. Shouting and red-faced, she didn't get a rise out of Townsend. Despite Ostapenko's tirade being clearly one-sided, CNN ran the headline: "Why the absence of a common act of tennis sportsmanship led to heated on-court argument at the US Open." The headline implies that Townsend stooped to the level of her opponent despite refusing to engage in an "argument" whatsoever. Further, the headline leads the reader to believe that Ostapenko's excuse for the tirade (a missing apology after a point won at the net) is in some way plausible, and not a pathetic excuse for an ugly moment when the mediocre player's feelings got the better of her.

The difference between Ostapenko and Townsend? Ostapenko's outburst was, at best, a heat-of-the-moment expression of racialized comments she didn't mean and,

at worst, an ugly unveiling of true colors that became a supposedly two-sided “argument” rooted in tennis etiquette. Townsend, extending a calm hand to congratulate Ostapenko on a “good match”

**IT’S ONLY NATURAL THAT THE PANDEMONIUM CONTRIBUTES TO SOME STRONG EMOTIONS ON THE COURT, BUT THE LANGUAGE MEDIA USES TO REFERENCE ON-COURT ERUPTIONS VARIES STARKLY BY THE PLAYERS’ GENDER AND RACE.**

and suggesting that Ostapenko needed to “learn how to take an L”, becomes an equal participant in the so-called argument. Of the slew of articles surrounding the situation, most described Ostapenko’s point of view, implying that Townsend was an equal participant or ignored Townsend’s participation altogether. But few praised Townsend for her conduct on the court, much less how she continued to respond when she addressed the issue in the press conferences that followed. When asked about the incident, Townsend said, “You’re not going to insult me, certainly after I carried myself a certain type of way with nothing but respect. And if I show respect to you, I expect respect as well.”

All the bedazzled Labubus, *Sincaraz* finals, and remarkable match points in the world cannot conceal the ugly misogynoir that mars tennis, the sports world, and our society more broadly. Ostapenko and Townsend are not outliers, but a high-profile

example of a consistent trend that sees Angel Reese and Caitlin Clark suffer similar discrepancies. Especially when writing about marginalized communities who already suffer layers of discrimination, the writer has a responsibility to double, triple, and quadruple check that the language they employ, or fail to employ, does not cause further harm.

While the discrepancies in their coverage and language may not be intentional, journalists must make an intentional effort to remove those discrepancies rooted in the systemic inequalities that persist. ■

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**Emmy Snyder** is a writer dedicated to highlighting stories of community, grit, growth mindset, and athletics. Her undergraduate degree in communication and Spanish from the University of Michigan serves as a foundation for her current work on the research, podcast, and social media teams at the USC Center for PR. She is pursuing a Master in Communication Management degree at USC Annenberg, where she hopes to grow her writing skills and apply them to women’s sports organizations.



**THE BUSINESS  
IS THE GAME**



# HOW WOMEN ATHLETES ARE RECLAIMING AND RESHAPING THE SPORTS MEDIA LANDSCAPE

BY / Willow Bay with Anahita Mehra



The revolution wasn't supposed to sound like this — two World Cup champions giggling over coffee, their mics catching the clink of ceramic mugs and the occasional, unscripted confession. Yet here are Christen Press and Tobin Heath, cross-legged on what looks like a living-room couch, dismantling the sports-media industrial complex one candid conversation at a time. Their weapon of choice? A podcast called The RE-CAP Show that the soccer luminaries host, produce and own.

Welcome to the new world order, where athletes have discovered the ultimate cheat code: ownership transforms everything. Why beg for coverage when you can call the shots?

A recent study we conducted with USC Annenberg's Norman Lear Center titled *Owning the Narrative* maps this seismic shift. In what has become a multi-billion dollar business, athletes are carving out their own media pathways, creating, distributing and monetizing original content. Podcasts, in particular, have become a major force in this vibrant new media landscape, with top shows amassing over 7 billion views on

YouTube, 725 million likes on TikTok and 37 million Instagram followers.

Amid this flourishing marketplace, however, the gender gap is glaring. The study finds that only 20% of these podcasts — about one in five — feature a woman as host or guest. Despite record-breaking audiences for women's sports, women athletes remain underrepresented as media makers, owners and decision-makers.

Which is why what Courtney Williams and Natisha Hiedeman pulled off during WNBA All-Star weekend felt like a watershed moment. Their Twitch show, StudBudz, broke every rule of media coaching — shot on phones, streamed live without an editing net, unpredictable enough to make PR teams nervous. Yet, thousands tuned in. It was chaotic, funny, honest, authentic — and, crucially, theirs. Because they owned the channel, they could determine the format, the tone and the story. That freedom to bypass the gatekeepers and distribute content directly to fans is where the magic of athlete ownership lies.

Other pioneers are scaling the model. Serena Williams built 926 Productions;

Naomi Osaka launched Hana Kuma. Alex Morgan, Sue Bird, Chloe Kim and Simone Manuel founded TOGETHXR, “a sports and lifestyle media company created for women to amplify their voice with a strong focus on representation and equality.” Bird and Megan Rapinoe’s A Touch More, Katie Hoff and Missy Franklin’s *Unfiltered Waters*, and Alysia Montañó, Molly Huddle and Roisin McGettigan’s *Keeping Track* all embody the same principle — don’t wait for coverage, make your own.

The timing could not be better. Media coverage for women’s sports reached 15%, a record in 2024. Audiences are tuning in to watch women play in record numbers: the WNBA and NWSL hit new ratings benchmarks last year, with the NCAA women’s basketball championship topping the men’s game. The momentum is global. England’s Women’s Super League and women’s tennis are all seeing record boosts. All of that is fueling even more growth rolling into 2025. New networks and platforms — like Women’s Sports Network, Just Women’s Sports and All Women’s Sports Network — are rapidly expanding, eager to engage with a new generation of fans.

Press told Sports Illustrated, “The business of women’s sports in a lot of ways fails the athletes and the fans because it was just a copy-paste of what men built, but the product of women’s sports is quite different. Now we have these new kinds of media opportunities and entities that are able to start to redesign what the media landscape looks like for women’s sports.”

She is right, when women athletes own the mic, the pipeline of stories changes. Our study reveals what this looks like in practice: the average show devotes **65% of discussion to sports and 35% to life**. When women host, that balance shifts — with more authentic and nuanced storytelling, less play-by-play. Episodes with women

address women’s issues **4.5 times more than men’s shows**, pulling neglected stories into the spotlight. It also shifts commercial value, redirecting sponsorships to the athletes who build the audience.

Our study captures both the promise and the gap. The promise: athlete-owned media has become a trusted, fast-growing alternative to traditional sports talk. The gap: women athletes are still only a fraction of the owners, even as their sports break audience records. The challenge now is to build scaffolding — production support, smarter sponsorships and global collaboration that empowers women to launch their own shows and scale them.

If the last generation of women in sports fought for visibility, this one is fighting for — and beginning to win — **ownership**. And in doing so, they are defining contemporary sports culture and transforming the future of sports media. ■

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**Willow Bay** was named the first female dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism in 2017. A broadcast journalist, media pioneer and digital communication leader, she has advanced student-centered, industry-engaged curricula and programs, increased access to new technology and data solutions, and expanded scholarship support for the next generation of media innovators. Leading academic and industry engagement at the intersection of media, technology, sports and business, she has amplified USC Annenberg’s thought leadership around critical issues such as media innovation, the role of communication technology in the public interest, digital media literacy, and sports and social change. Bay and her husband, Bob Iger, are controlling owners of the Angel City Football Club, the most valuable franchise in women’s sports.

**Anahita Mehra** is a strategic communicator and storyteller at the crossroads of sustainability, gender justice, and digital advocacy. She is pursuing a Master of digital communications at USC Annenberg while working as a research associate with Dean Willow Bay’s office, the Center for Climate Communication, and the USC Center for PR. Anahita has led global campaigns with the UNGA, WEF Davos, and COP, and in India drove survivor advocacy and youth entrepreneurship projects to advance sustainable development.

# EVERYONE HAS A SPORTS STORY

BY / Josh Rosenberg



**T**he more things change, the more sports stay the same. Sort of. There's more money involved, the global stage is smaller, and the scandals more salacious. But they remain a unifying story, provoking a singular kind of collective joy and despair, anticipation and exclamation — the same emotions that make for a great PR campaign. In a world increasingly influenced by AI and misinformation, sports are grounding. We may argue about stats, but not the rules of the game.

A shot happens once, live, no second chances, and for a few minutes or a couple of hours, we all focus on one individual, one play, one game. Which is remarkable, given the millions of other things jockeying for even a second of our attention in 2025. That fleeting moment becomes a shared plot twist in a larger narrative, making sports the last remaining monoculture.

For all of the reasons above, sports are storytelling gold. And what is PR, if not storytelling? You don't need to love the game to love a good story. There are beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and underdogs, rivalries and redemption

arcs, outrageous characters, rich history, international intrigue, and tons of money. If you're a PR professional, pick your poison. Sports is built on narrative, just like good PR. Storytelling is the heartbeat of effective PR. It's what transforms facts into feelings, campaigns into conversations, and brand messaging into meaning. In a crowded media landscape, stories give us a universal topic of conversation. People talk, share, and make it their own. That's how to earn a place in culture.

Of course, you can't just tell a story you think your audience will love. You must tell a story that makes sense for your brand, that connects the fan truth to the brand truth — the emotional, human experience of being a lover, follower, and supporter of something and what your brand stands for at its core. In 2025, building a brand means operating a lot like a fandom. Fostering community, respecting rituals, and building loyalty. Brands at the center of the cultural conversation align these truths and tell their story authentically. Sports are one of the most powerful ways to do that.

Take Netflix's Drive to Survive for example. When it launched in March 2019, the show reframed Formula 1 for American audiences, not through engines, but through character arcs. Rivalries, underdog stories, and personalities made F1 culturally relevant in a media landscape that previously only gave little light to the sport. Brands like Amex (our client) have tapped F1's rising popularity by creating exclusive fan

**YOU DON'T NEED TO LOVE THE GAME TO LOVE A GOOD STORY. THERE ARE BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES, AND ENDS, HEROES AND UNDERDOGS, RIVALRIES AND REDEMPTION ARCS, OUTRAGEOUS CHARACTERS, RICH HISTORY, INTERNATIONAL INTRIGUE, AND TONS OF MONEY.**

experiences and immersive activations that bring Card Members closer to the track. From the other side, Red Bull has used sports to position itself as more than an energy drink company. The brand is a global symbol of adventure, action, and thrill. Known for platforming niche sports like slacklining and cliff diving, Red Bull consistently uses sports to connect with passionate audiences. The real magic isn't just the spectacle, but the storytelling that follows. Cinematic high-light reels, intimate athlete profiles, and behind-the-scenes editorial content transform one-off stunts into lasting cultural moments.

Similarly, our client Chipotle has a history of writing itself into popular sports narratives. During this year's NBA Finals, the

brand cast the game's villain, The Coach's Challenge, as the main character. Every time a team's head coach called for a replay review, Chipotle kept the story going while the game was on hold by giving fans the opportunity to turn a loss into a win and score a free burrito. Because sports unify regardless of which team you're rooting for, they're easily leveraged to break through culture. And they will only grow in cultural power and scale from here. With major global events like the 2026 World Cup and the 2028 Olympic Games coming to North America, the entry point to reach the masses will be at our doorstep. For brands and PR teams willing to listen to fans, embrace story over slogan, and find authentic ways into the moment, sports are more than just a marketing channel, it's the ultimate opportunity to connect. ■

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**Josh Rosenberg** is co-founder and CEO of Day One Agency. Josh is a communications strategist and digital media authority with extensive experience shaping marketing communications programs for some of the world's leading brands, including American Express, Chipotle Mexican Grill, Facebook, Nike, Comcast, Abercrombie & Fitch, Motorola and Ferrara. He is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# COMMUNICATIONS: THE ROI MULTIPLIER FOR GLOBAL SPORTS SPONSORSHIPS

BY / J.J. Carter & Emily Frager



Few things bring the world together in real time like sports. But events like the Super Bowl, the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the FIFA World Cup are also high-stakes marketing battlegrounds where brands compete for relevance and trust. Sponsors investing at this level face an unforgiving playing field: record rights fees, a fragmented media landscape, fan expectations for in-person experiences, and data-rich proof of business impact.

Brands know the broadcast isn't the finish line. It's the starting pistol. Those that truly win put communications at the center, connecting event moments to human stories for employees, customers, partners and communities while protecting reputation under the brightest spotlight. It's the multiplier that turns attention into trust and participation into performance that investors recognize.

## What communications at the center really mean

It starts with leadership across the C-suite embracing communications as a strategic function that earns business from customers and confidence from investors.

**For the CEO: Lead from the front.** Global sports make strategy visible and shows investors how events support growth through market access, smart partnerships and pricing power. Use these moments as a product lab to connect with customers and lift employees with stories of human potential. Set targets with finance and report outcomes clearly.

**For the Chief Communications Officer: Own the narrative before, during and after the event.** Stress test for the real risks at event speed, from ambassador miscues to a political flashpoint or a product issue on site. Stand up monitoring with legal and operations, and pre-wire responses across markets. Maintain clarity on decision rights to safeguard momentum and business continuity.

**For the CMO: Pair integrated multi-platform storytelling with the energy only live sports can deliver.** Blend local and global strategies. At the FIFA World Cup, top sponsors co-create with athletes, creators and media, activating in 30+ markets while holding discipline and purpose.

### The activation blueprint

Beyond leadership alignment, success requires operational excellence:

- **Build with intention:** Tie every activation to revenue, market entry or customer value alongside material impact where credible and aligned with stated values. Deliver messages consistently across your channels.
- **Operate at event speed:** Stand up a cross-functional command center before kickoff. Set escalation protocols, scenario playbooks, misinformation tracking and decision rights. Align with rights holders and legal on real-time engagement. Rehearse relentlessly. Every minute counts.
- **Put people at the center:** Co-create with influencers who reflect your customers. Empower employees with content, viewing parties, volunteer roles and cultural context to multiply trust and advocacy.
- **Make impact visible and measurable:** Choose proof points like accessibility, grassroots access and carbon reductions where they are real, then report with CFO-grade rigor. Back partners who were present before and after the games. Purpose work should be business-linked and outcome-oriented.
- **Measure what matters: Define success early with finance and operations.** Move beyond impressions. Track enterprise-linked metrics like brand trust, product interest, retail and partner signals, search lift, employee pride, leadership access, and crisis speed. Strong comms can protect market cap and justify investment.

### Case in point: An agile World Cup pivot

Days before the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, Budweiser parent AB InBev faced an in-stadium beer ban. Because they had run scenario planning, they were prepared to adapt in real time, shifting to post-tournament celebrations. The 'Bring Home the Buds' campaign delivered beer to fans in winning countries, turning logistical and reputational risk into storytelling advantage and reinforcing positioning with consumers, partners and stakeholders.

### The opportunity ahead

The advantage window is closing. North America will host World Cup matches in 2026 and the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games. These events will break records for reach, spend, risk and complexity. Companies that operationalize communications across marketing, legal, HR and ESG will protect reputation, expand impact and unlock greater sponsorship value through performance signals investors will track. In this arena, communications is the edge. It turns attention into action, participation into performance and highlights into durable business impact. ■

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**J.J. Carter** is president and chief executive officer of FleishmanHillard. Regarded as a trusted advisor to iconic brands in their biggest moments and on the largest global stages, Carter has counseled clients through IPOs, CEO transitions, groundbreaking product launches, complex mergers and global sponsorship activations. He previously launched the agency's first-ever sports marketing practice, providing guidance for the NBA's international expansion into China, and led global accounts with Visa, Nike's Jordan Brand, Callaway Golf, the Women's Tennis Association Tour, Electronic Arts and GoPro Inc.

**Emily Frager** is the chief client officer at FleishmanHillard, where she leads global client service strategy across the agency's network. She brings over two decades of experience in marketing and communications, including leadership roles at FleishmanHillard's offices around the United States, as well as serving as chief marketing officer at Lennar Ventures.

# THINK HIGHLY PAID ATHLETES ARE OUT OF REACH? READ ON...

BY / Rick Rhodes & Barby K. Siegel



The business of sports and athlete endorsement deals is now more intertwined than ever before. Despite major increases in professional sports franchise valuations, collegiate sports branding rights and players' earnings, athletes remain the most cost-effective brand spokespeople when compared to contemporaries in film, TV and music. The numbers back this up: Consumers are 66% more likely to purchase from a company that sponsors sports (Sports Business Journal, 2025), and over 40% of Gen Zs trust and have purchased from companies that partner with their favorite athletes (Forrester, 2025).

Each year, the valuations of teams and leagues reach new levels. The skyrocketing values can be attributed to significant deals negotiated between the leagues, teams, broadcast, and streaming companies. For example, the NFL's recent 11-year media rights agreement to broadcast its games through 2033 is valued at \$110 billion.

Similarly, the NBA's 11-year term is valued at \$76 billion, while the WNBA and major collegiate conferences like the SEC and Big Ten each have contracts valued well into multiple billions of dollars. These record arrangements are a result of live sports remaining the most powerful form of appointment television. Advertisers pay a premium for live sporting events that are DVR-proof opportunities to reach target audiences in real-time.

These new valuations are helping drive record-setting contracts for player services. Stephen Curry is earning \$60 million, Shohei Ohtani \$70 million and Dak Prescott \$60 million in the NBA, MLB and NFL respectively for the current season. NBA players Victor Wembanyama and Cooper Flagg are on pace to earn nearly a billion dollars in on-court salaries by the time they are 31 years old.

Considering the aforementioned numbers, one would think athlete endorsement deals

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are cost-prohibitive compared to contemporaries in other fields. Not so. Many factors fuel athletes’ significant value as brand spokespeople. First, athletes’ on-field value is immune to failed endorsement campaigns, whereas in entertainment, public image is everything; negative press can lead to canceled projects, tours, and reduced fan engagement. As a result, entertainment talent typically commands premium fees to compensate for the risk of potential criticism.

Second, athletes are motivated to plan for post-career life as a professional sports career is typically only three to five years. Athletes view endorsements as opening doors to broadcasting, business, and other ventures post-retirement. Third, name, image and likeness (NIL) rules in college have significantly increased the talent pool for marketing campaigns.

Finally, athletes’ values reflect simpler institutional structures between sports and entertainment. Partnering with entertainers typically involves compliance with guilds like SAG-AFTRA, which can increase costs by 30% or more for union fees, not to mention higher costs for union-compliant productions. In most situations, athletes are not members of these entertainment guilds, so the cost of doing business with a union vs. a non-union member is significant.

In closing, both professional and collegiate athletes deliver significant value and Return on Investment (ROI) compared to stars in different fields. Athletes should be seriously considered in a company’s marketing mix. Over the next few years, brands will have extraordinary opportunities, as the U.S. hosts the 2026 FIFA World Cup and 2028 Summer Olympics. California, in particular, will provide the stage to both — and serve as host for Super Bowl LX, Super Bowl LXI and the 2026 NBA All-Star Game. Brands can score by recognizing athletes not only as powerful, trusted connectors to consumers worldwide, but as some of the most cost-effective ambassadors in marketing today. ■

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**Rick Rhodes** leads Global Sports & Entertainment at Zeno Group. Zeno is an award-winning, global integrated communications agency, born from PR, operating across North America, Europe and Asia.

**Barby K. Siegel** is global chief executive officer of Zeno Group, the award-winning, global and integrated communications agency. Zeno works with some of the world’s most influential companies to drive real business and societal impact. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# THE NEW ARENA OF INFLUENCE: HOW COURTSIDE SEATS LEAD TO CELEBRITY VISIBILITY, VIRALITY, AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

BY / Grace T. Leong



The power of the Jumbotron has eclipsed the power of the silver screen in the game of visibility and influence. Celebrities are deliberately showing up not just as fans of the game and its athletes, but also as strategic players in the game of visibility. From Taylor Swift at NFL games and Jack Harlow sitting courtside at the NBA Finals, it's clear: sporting events have become one of the most powerful stages for celebrities to boost relevance, align with culture, and dominate headlines.

Appearing at IRL events is not new — but it has evolved. For over a century, celebrities have leveraged IRL visibility to maintain fame, from attending opera

and Broadway premieres in the 1920s to clubbing at Studio 54 in the '70s and red carpets in the '00s.

With today's sporting events boasting capacity crowds and record-breaking attendance, sports competitions have become even more influential than red carpets, fashion shows, premieres and nightclubs as the “it” place to be seen. At HUNTER, our specialists in talent and media relations credit this pivot to the rise of social media and the viral nature of photos taken by fans and influencers, as well as the depth and reach of live broadcasts and an insatiable appetite for content that goes well beyond what's happening on the field

and extends to who is in the stands, who they are with, what they are wearing and even what they are eating and drinking.

**The NBA: A Courtside Catwalk**

Nowhere is cultural relevance courted more than with the NBA. Courtside seats are among the most high-profile celebrity placements in entertainment, frequently zoomed in on during TV broadcasts and plastered across sports blogs and fashion feeds. Carefully curated in sporty attire, celebrities are dressing for the sports-casters’ shots, knowing that game day fits can go viral in seconds and increase their cultural capital.

Jack Harlow became the poster child for this trend in 2022 and 2023, turning casual appearances into full-blown media moments. One courtside visit during the Eastern Conference NBA Finals led to millions of impressions on social media, countless memes, and even a KFC campaign parodying his presence.

**For the LOVE of the game**

As fame itself shifts, more celebrity couples seem to be using courtside seats and sporting events to hard-launch their romances. Timothee Chalamet and Kylie Jenner put on a very loved-up display at the US Open and then were regularly seen supporting the New York Knicks throughout the 2025 playoff season, which happened to coincide with his upcoming movie releases.

In late 2023 and into 2024, Taylor Swift’s appearances at Kansas City Chiefs games in support of her boyfriend Travis Kelce sent viewership and engagement skyrocketing. According to Nielsen, viewership among young women (18–34) rose by 37% during the weeks Swift attended games. Her mere presence generated over 1.2 billion social media impressions across platforms,

proving the PR power of a well-placed romance in the right box seat.

**Ownership, Branding, and Business**

Some celebrities go further than using the stadium as their new red carpet. Ryan Reynolds’ co-ownership of Wrexham AFC turned a small Welsh soccer club into a global brand, fueled by the hit docuseries Welcome to Wrexham. The team’s social media following grew by over 1,000%, and Reynolds gained tremendous visibility for his benevolent fandom of an underdog. Similarly, LeBron James has invested in Liverpool FC and Major League Pickleball, signaling a long-term vision where celebrity, sports, and business overlap.

**The New Arena of Influence**

Sporting events are no longer just games — they’re high-stakes PR stages. In 2025, celebrities understand that being seen at the right game, in the right seat, wearing the right look, and with the right seatmate or ownership interest can yield more cultural capital than a global press tour. In the era of algorithmic fame, sports arenas have become the new front row — and celebrities are making sure the world is watching them as they get themselves in the game. ■

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**Grace T. Leong** is the CEO and partner of HUNTER a leading marketing communications practice with offices in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and London and talent across North America. Leong has built her career and public relations agency by providing strategic marketing communications counsel to national consumer brand teams and CMOs within Fortune 100 companies such as Kraft Foods, Mondelez, McNeil Consumer Health Care and 3M. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# HOW GENESIS IS USING GOLF TO REDEFINE GLOBAL LUXURY BRANDING

BY / Michael Stewart



Luxury brands have long relied on heritage, exclusivity, and tradition to project prestige. Golf, often considered the sport of choice for old-school luxury, can easily fall into that cliché. But Genesis, Hyundai Motor Company's standalone luxury brand, is rewriting the playbook.

Through a bold, globally integrated golf strategy, Genesis is using sports not as a backdrop for traditional luxury, but as a stage for storytelling, cultural exchange, and brand evolution. The result is a fresh vision for how to partner with a major professional sports league.

At the center of this strategy is Genesis's role as the first global official vehicle of the PGA TOUR and PGA TOUR Champions, announced earlier this year. For a brand less than a decade old and still building general awareness and differentiation in the crowded luxury vehicle space, golf has become a critical arena for establishing identity and credibility.

The game's emphasis on precision, performance, and global reach mirrors Genesis'

own aspirations, while providing a platform to connect with audiences from Los Angeles to Scotland to Seoul.

In addition to its global sponsorship, Genesis' footprint now spans three flagship events:

- **The Genesis Invitational in Los Angeles:**

A historic tournament held at The Riviera Country Club, reimagined through curated hospitality and community initiatives like California Rises, which contributed more than \$8 million to wildfire recovery this past year.

- **The Genesis Scottish Open:** Co-sanctioned by the PGA TOUR and DP World Tour, where Korean design and hospitality meet Western tradition, offering a unique opportunity to connect with European audiences.

- **The Genesis Championship in Korea:**

Highlighting the brand's roots while investing in youth sports and social impact.

Genesis also signed on as the first founding partner of TGL, the new prime-time team golf league backed by Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy's TMRW Sports. TGL's tech-infused,

progressive approach to golf aligns well with Genesis' efforts to provide broader access to innovative experiences.

These sponsorships offer opportunities for brand storytelling across TV, digital platforms, and in-person activations. Together, they create a globally coordinated way for Genesis to introduce its brand and products and build lasting connections with target audiences.

What makes this strategy stand out is its emphasis on experience over generic exposure. One of the brand's pillars is its focus on Son Nim hospitality, a Korean expression that translates to "honored guest" or "customer." It reflects a philosophy deeply rooted in Korean culture and sets Genesis apart from its competitors.

At these events, Genesis crafts immersive, participatory experiences that bring people closer to the brand. From interactive fan zones and digital storytelling to philanthropic partnerships, Genesis is leveraging golf to demonstrate what it stands for. The brand has significantly elevated hospitality and on-site experiences for players, fans, and media. These events are regularly cited as among the best on the PGA TOUR, and Genesis has effectively integrated its vehicles into both the experience and broadcast.

This approach reflects a broader shift in how brands engage with sports. Sponsorship alone is no longer enough. In an era of fragmented fandom and participatory media, relevance requires active storytelling. Genesis' playbook offers a blueprint built on three principles:

- **Authenticity:** Aligning brand values directly with the spirit of the sport.
- **Relevance:** Designing culturally resonant experiences across markets and geographies.

- **Fluency:** Communicating consistently and seamlessly across borders, communities, and demographics.

With Los Angeles poised to host the Olympics, the Super Bowl, and the FIFA World Cup in the coming years, the city is becoming an epicenter of global sports and storytelling. Genesis' presence at the Genesis Invitational presents a major opportunity to elevate both the brand and the tournament as one of the premier events in the country.

Relevance today is earned. Genesis demonstrates that sports are not just about visibility, it's about credibility, connection, and community. By reimagining golf as a platform for modern luxury, Genesis shows how communications can drive a brand's growth and evolution. ■

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**Michael Stewart** is director of public relations and communications at Hyundai Motor America. He leads corporate and marketing communications for Hyundai Motor North America and Genesis Motor North America, including corporate reputation, executive visibility, thought leadership, and support for advertising and marketing programs. He is a USC Marshall alumnus and a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

## PLAYING AT THE CENTER OF CULTURE

BY / Kelly McGinnis



When we set out to reignite the Levi's® brand, we weren't just selling denim. We were reclaiming a cultural icon.

From Woodstock to the Berlin Wall, Levi's® shows up when people care — then sticks around long after the headlines fade.

The hard part today? Culture shifts by the second and splinters by the scroll. Our challenge is to keep showing up in ways that feel real.

Our chairman emeritus, Bob Haas, said it best: "We are the embodiment of the energy and events of our times, inspiring people with pioneering spirit." That's not a plaque-on-the-wall quote; it's a daily challenge to listen harder, learn faster and connect where emotion and community actually meet. Sports has been one of our most dependable ways to do that.

We've been in the game a long time. In the 1880s, LS&Co. employees fielded a baseball team to play other San Francisco squads —

homegrown and hands-on. By the late '70s and early '80s, we were outfitting athletes on the world stage. Different eras, same play: show up where the passion lives, earn our place and leave the moment better than we found it.

Here at home, we've stood shoulder to shoulder with the San Francisco Giants, celebrating with the city through those 2010, 2012 and 2014 championship runs. And in 2013, we partnered with the San Francisco 49ers on what would become Levi's® Stadium. The magic of stadiums is that they pull sports, music, food, tech and community under one roof — real people, real feelings, in real time.

Lately, we've extended that energy through collabs like Levi's® × Starter and Levi's® × McLaren Racing — blending sport and style in ways fans actually wear, not just repost. The lesson holds: you can't manufacture relevance. You earn it, by showing up in the rooms (and arenas) that matter, listening

first and making the most of your spot at the center of culture when you've earned the invite.

Sports keep us authentic. They're unpredictable, emotional and communal, everything culture is at its best. For Levi's®, staying relevant means honoring those moments and standing with fans — win, lose or overtime. We're not chasing culture; we're living in it, we're helping to shape it. That's where Levi's® belongs: in the shared joy — and the heartbreak — that keeps people coming back week after week, game after game. ■

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**Kelly McGinnis** is senior vice president and chief communications officer for Levi Strauss & Co. She oversees global corporate affairs, including media relations, internal communications, government affairs, community relations, and the Red Tab Foundation, and is part of the company's executive leadership team. McGinnis previously served as vice president of global communications at Dell and held agency leadership roles at AxiCom, Fleishman-Hillard, and Weber Shandwick. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

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# SLIM JIM X WWE: A BLUEPRINT FOR STRATEGIC BRAND PARTNERSHIPS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

BY / Jon Harris



In today's fragmented media environment, brands face mounting pressure to remain not only visible across a multitude of consumer touchpoints but also culturally relevant. For legacy brands in particular, the challenge lies in balancing heritage with modernity — honoring the past while engaging a new generation of consumers. Slim Jim's revitalized partnership with the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) exemplifies how strategic alignment with a culturally relevant platform can reignite brand equity, engage modern audiences, and deliver measurable business impact.

## A Legacy Reignited

Slim Jim's relationship with WWE is not new — it's a revival. The brand's explosive commercials from the 1990s helped embed Slim Jim into the DNA of sports entertainment and pop culture, with Randy Savage's "Snap Into a Slim Jim" catchphrase becoming synonymous with the product. Fast forward to 2023, when Slim Jim reentered the WWE universe with a renewed, multi-platform, multi-year alliance, redefining how legacy brands connect with modern audiences. This was more than a nostalgic callback; it was a strategic decision to reintroduce Slim Jim to a new generation of fans

through a platform that shares its bold, irreverent spirit.

## Strategic Immersion Across WWE's Ecosystem

Rather than limiting itself to traditional sponsorship, Slim Jim pursued a fully integrated, multi-platform strategy. During the past three years, the brand has embedded itself across the WWE's most high-profile properties:

- **Premium Live Events:** Slim Jim sponsored matches at the WWE's Premium Live Events such as Wrestlemania. These activations included integrations, branded billboards, AR (augmented reality) replays, and in-match graphics — ensuring the brand and its savage energy were visible to both in-stadium attendees and broadcast viewers during emotionally-charged Superstar moments
- **Custom Video Content and Social Campaigns:** The brand launched six high-energy TV commercials that showcased Slim Jim with some of today's most popular WWE Superstars while paying homage to the legacy of Randy Savage. There's also been a steady stream of social content and digital activations including superstar posts and fan sweepstakes,

generating billions in impressions and millions of engagements

- **Weekly Programming:** In 2025, Slim Jim became the “Center Ring Sponsor” of Monday Night Raw, now streaming globally on Netflix. In addition to TV spots and mat signage weekly, this included a first-of-its-kind prop branding initiative with Slim Jim branded tables — turning product placement into some of the most viral and shared Superstar moments
- **Retail and Digital Impact:** The partnership extended beyond the ring into retail to ensure the Slim Jim and WWE connection drove impact at point of purchase. This included the deployment of co-branded displays that resulted in a +38% unit sales lift and convenience store digital assets like Gas Station TV across that aired across thousands of retail locations.

These results underscore the campaign’s effectiveness in driving both brand visibility and consumer action.

### Lessons for Marketers: Why This Partnership Works

Slim Jim’s collaboration with the WWE offers several key takeaways for marketers evaluating sports and entertainment partnerships:

#### 1. Cultural Alignment Is Non-Negotiable

Although brand sponsorships are ubiquitous in the world of sports, Slim Jim and WWE share a brand DNA that’s rooted high-energy entertainment, irreverence, and fan-first engagement. This alignment made the partnership feel authentic and palatable — not forced — and allowed both brands to amplify each other’s voice.

#### 2. Nostalgia Can Be a Strategic Asset

By tapping into its historical connection with WWE, Slim Jim re-engaged lapsed fans while introducing its legacy to a new audience of digital natives. Nostalgia, when used strategically, can be a powerful bridge between generations.

#### 3. From Tentpole to “Always-On”

The evolution from event-based activations to a consistent weekly presence on Monday Night Raw reflects a sophisticated

understanding of modern media consumption. In a world of constant content, brands must think beyond one-off moments and build sustained visibility.

#### 4. Digital-First Execution Drives Results

Slim Jim’s success was not just about visibility — it was about engagement. From TikTok to Instagram to in-ring branding, the campaign was designed for a digital-first audience. The result: billions of impressions and millions of meaningful interactions.

#### 5. Partnerships Must Deliver ROI

Slim Jim’s multi-year investment has yielded millions in gross media value. For marketers, this underscores the importance of measuring not just reach but return.

### Conclusion: A Playbook for Modern Brand Building

Slim Jim’s revitalized partnership with WWE is more than a marketing success story — it’s a blueprint for how legacy brands can remain relevant in a fragmented, digital-first world. By aligning with a culturally powerful partner, executing across platforms, and measuring impact rigorously, Slim Jim continues to transform from a nostalgic snack into a culturally embedded brand with renewed momentum.

For marketers weighing the pros and cons of sports and entertainment partnerships, the lesson is clear: when the alignment is right, the execution is immersive, and the strategy is data-driven, the results can be transformative. ■

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**Jon Harris** is a senior vice president and chief communications officer for Conagra Brands. He is responsible for the strategic development, direction, and implementation of corporate communication and reputation management programs across the organization. He previously led Communications at Hillshire Brands and Sara Lee Corporation, and has held leadership positions at Bally Total Fitness Corporation, PepsiCo, Ketchum Public Relations, and Medicus Public Relations. He is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# BEYOND THE LOGO: WHY PARTNERSHIP BEATS PLACEMENT IN SPORTS SPONSORSHIPS

BY / Erica Rodriguez Pompen



In sports, the roar of the crowd and the speed of competition capture the world's attention, but beyond the track or field, companies that invest PR resources in sports can build impact that lasts long after the game. For those of us in communications and marketing, sports have become a proving ground where brand storytelling, community impact, and cultural momentum can intersect.

Too often, sponsorships are approached like transactions — a handshake deal, a logo on a jersey, a mention in the highlight reel. But sponsorships can deliver something richer. In today's landscape, audiences want more than presence; they want meaning. They expect brands and athletes to come together with authenticity and purpose, to tell stories that reflect values, inspire communities, and create lasting impact.

## **Creating Purpose-Driven Collaboration**

At Arm, partnerships have always been at the heart of our success. We've created the

world's most pervasive CPU architecture, an unrivaled ecosystem of partners and a global community of more than 22 million software developers building on Arm. Our experience shapes how we think about sponsorships: they aren't about visibility, they're about alignment and shared purpose.

Take our partnership with the Aston Martin Aramco Formula One™ Team. Formula One is often seen through the lens of speed and spectacle, but beneath the surface it's the most technically demanding sport in the world. As the world's leading AI compute platform — powering everything from smartphones to supercomputers with unmatched performance and efficiency — Arm recognizes the value of precision, sustainability, and innovation. These are qualities that are also embedded in every race, making the partnership feel natural. Both organizations share a DNA of high performance and forward-thinking innovation, and both are committed not only to

leading and winning today, but also to empowering the next generation.

**Co-Created Storytelling That Inspires**

As the Official AI Compute Platform Partner for the Aston Martin Aramco Formula One Team, our partnership goes beyond the racetrack. Together, we are co-creating content and experiences that invite audiences behind the scenes. We highlight the engineers pushing boundaries with AI, the diverse talent breaking into motorsport careers, and the communities inspired by STEM education.

These stories resonate because they are authentic, not imposed. Today’s fans expect transparency and access; they want to feel connected to the people, values, and innovations driving the sport. When brands approach sports as collaborative storytelling rather than logo placement, they can spark deeper, more meaningful engagement.

**Why PR Should Lean Into Sports as a Social and Technological Accelerator**

Sports are more than entertainment. They are accelerators of cultural, social, and technological change. Athletes are using their voices to drive conversations about equity and justice. Fans are shaping narratives online, fueling grassroots storytelling. NIL deals are giving student-athletes new ways to monetize their identity and influence, making sponsorship more accessible and democratized.

For communications professionals, this opens new terrain. Sports provide a platform to experiment with fresh approaches to communication: using AI to personalize fan experiences, creating immersive content that blends digital and live moments, or designing initiatives that open doors for underrepresented groups in sports and technology. These opportunities remind us that relevance today isn’t about volume — it’s about value.

**Looking Ahead: The New Playbook**

The future of PR in sports is not about logo size, but about authentic connection. Successful brands will treat sponsorships as shared journeys: measured not only in performance metrics but in impact, inclusion, and innovation.

Sports will always be a stage for competition and spectacle. But for communicators, they also present an opportunity to tell meaningful, engaging stories that transcend the game itself. More broadly, done right, sports partnerships can become catalysts for cultural connection, technological progress, and lasting social change. ■

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**Erica Rodriguez Pompen** is the vice president of external communications at Arm, where she leads a global team, overseeing communications strategy, content, and engagement for the company. She was previously the head of global communications at Micron Technology and has held agency leadership roles in San Francisco, Hong Kong, and Amsterdam spanning consulting, business development, and operations. Rodriguez Pompen has also served as an executive board member to local schools, a mentor, and an advisor to start-ups in the U.S. and Asia. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# LUXURY BRANDS ARE ENTERING THE SPORTS ARENA...

BY / Nina Kaminer



In the ever-evolving luxury playbook, brands are betting big on sports to drive relevance and reach. In the last year, they have been flooding the zone — sponsoring sporting events, tapping athletes as brand ambassadors, campaign stars and design collaborators, immersing in leagues by designing uniforms, merch and trophy cases, and even investing in teams themselves.

The athletes brands are engaging with are younger than ever, no longer just the reigning icons but now even stars on college teams or those entering professional sports like at draft events. And surging fan bases for soccer, F1 racing and women's sports are creating new opportunities to engage.

The connection between luxury and sports follows the slow burn of fitness and wellness as major lifestyle trends that have spawned luxe workout wear (the Hermès Yoga collection), exercise equipment (the Dior collaboration with Technogym), and healthy food (Hailey Bieber's \$20 Erewhon smoothie). But it's also the culmination of an economic force — the democratization of luxury — making both aspirational and high net-

worth customers key to billions of dollars of profits. Sports can reach both groups, offering wide exposure on TV and social media, while allowing brands to tailor exclusive experiences to top clients.

Luxury automotive, watch and fashion brands have long supported elite-level tennis, equestrian, golf and boating events. Chanel got in the game this year by sponsoring the Oxford-Cambridge boat race, but now they are also engaging in mass sports, including football, basketball, baseball, and particularly soccer, a sport with popularity reaching more than half the globe.

Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy has been a major corporate player. Following a starring role in the 2024 Olympics that had Louis Vuitton trunks appearing during the Opening Ceremony, LVMH upped its commitment to sports this year by signing a 10-year sponsorship deal with Formula 1 and taking a majority stake in French soccer club Paris FC, creating ample opportunities for the group's 75 brands.

The luxury/sports love affair also follows a generational shift forcing heritage businesses

built of another century to appeal to a more diverse and younger population, as well as to more women, to ensure their survival.

Taking advantage of the increasing popularity of women's sports, Coach became official luxury handbag sponsor of the WNBA and WNBA Draft orange carpet this year, while Prada (which dressed Caitlin Clark for the 2024 WNBA Draft) partnered with China's Women's National Football Team.

New brands are also rising in the luxury/sports space, including Franco and Giacomo Loro Piana's SEASE sportswear, drawing on their family's legacy with stealth wealth brand Loro Piana; FIFA 1904 launched this year with the Lanvin Group; and the Richemont-owned Gen Z golf brand G/Fore.

The world of the athlete has expanded beyond sports into fashion and pop culture. Shows and movies such as "Ted Lasso," "Running Point," "Stick," "Drive to Survive," "Challengers" and the blockbuster "F1," starring Brad Pitt with cameos of Lewis Hamilton and other racing greats, have made sports part of the daily conversation, appealing to luxury brands seeking cultural relevance and an emotional connection with consumers, both crucial to maintaining and gaining market share in today's downturn.

However, athletes are an alternative to the overexposure of Hollywood celebrities, representing long-lasting qualities of perseverance, resilience and hard work, rather than fleeting good looks and glamour. They make headlines and wield influence as power couples (Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce, Hailee Steinfeld and Josh Allen, and Aisha and Steph Curry) when they dress for tunnel walks and the Met Gala.

Brands are using their popularity to amplify key moments. When Dior released the first photos of its hotly anticipated debut men's collection by Jonathan Anderson in June,

it wasn't on a fashion model, it was on French footballer Kylian Mbappé who has 126 million followers on Instagram.

Beyond the pros, college sports branding has evolved since the implementation of name, image and likeness (NIL) rules that allow student-athletes to profit from endorsements. A 2024 campaign with Armani Beauty featured more than 250 college athletes, highlighting social media content promoting the Acqua Di Gio and Stronger With You Intensely fragrances, and leveraging their Gen Z appeal and followers.

In an increasingly fractured world saturated with misleading content, consumers are craving authenticity, transparency and community. Sports deliver that, helping brands create a sense of belonging and connection that transcends borders, generations and differences. The humanity and ritual of sports open new avenues for storytelling that align with luxury's timeless value proposition, and can continue from one season to the next. Because selling heritage is a marathon, not a sprint. ■

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**Nina Kaminer** is the founder and president of Nike Communications, a full-service communications firm specializing in the marketing of luxury brands. Under her direction, the agency has led brand transformation for best-in-class brands including Rosewood Hotels & Resorts, Four Seasons, Montblanc, Leica, Baccarat, Frette, Grey Goose, Bombay Sapphire, Maserati and Wheels Up. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

Nike Communications is completely unaffiliated with Nike Inc.

# HOW ASIA PACIFIC AND THE MIDDLE EAST ARE RESHAPING THE GLOBAL SPORTS LANDSCAPE

BY / Tala Booker



The center of gravity in global sports has shifted, and the numbers speak for themselves. Saudi Arabia spent \$2.3 billion on soccer sponsorships in 2022 alone. The Indian Premier League (IPL) — for those of us Americans, that's cricket — signed a staggering \$6.02 billion streaming deal for 2023-2027, placing it alongside the NFL and the English Premier League in cost-per-match terms. Gulf sovereign wealth funds now account for nearly a quarter of all sports investments globally.

This is a transition that has been taking place for several years, but it is now clearer than ever that the business of sports is globally connected.

This change has created new financial realities and communications opportunities that should force a rethink in how we approach and counsel brands on their sports sponsorship. At Via, where our passion lies in solving complex cross-border communications and brand challenges, this represents an interesting new dynamic.

## *Our new landscape is increasingly international*

Aside from the investment figures, sports content that reaches global audiences increasingly originates in Riyadh, Mumbai, Doha and beyond. Competitions and events are being hosted across both APAC and MENA more frequently, and athletes are increasingly drawn to these regions. The dominance that leaders in Europe and North America previously had in the sports industry is experiencing a rebalancing.

This creates fresh challenges for global businesses, brands, and agencies that have built their expertise around established markets. Broader cultural fluency is now essential, and organizations using sports to engage with markets across MENA and APAC need to consider local politics, sensitivities, and global perceptions of these regions. Get it wrong and there is significant potential for backlash. Several high-profile cases have demonstrated this in recent years, perhaps none more clearly than the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, which drew consumer criticism from Western markets.

The risk landscape in sports now looks very different, and our risk antenna must be alert as communicators. What works in one market can have significant negative impacts in others. A sponsorship or campaign that plays well in Dubai or Riyadh may receive a negative response in London or New York without acknowledgment of audience concerns and criticisms. Risk mapping, stakeholder and audience analysis, and crisis preparation should be part of early planning for any sponsorship deal.

**Why this change is here to stay**

Several things make me confident this is a permanent fixture in the sporting landscape. Demographics, for one. APAC and MENA have the youngest, fastest-growing populations in the world. Younger age groups are highly engaged and are likely to remain so in the years to come. Many projections suggest the APAC sports market is likely to continue to grow at a considerable rate annually well into the next decade.

Then there is the infrastructure. Saudi Arabia is building 15 new stadiums for the 2034 FIFA World Cup. Qatar spent over \$200 billion on World Cup infrastructure and saw its GDP jump 4.8% that year. China has previously detailed that it wants sports to represent 2% of GDP by 2025. These are generational commitments that will have long-lasting impacts.

Institutional capital is following, if not pioneering this trend, with investment flowing both into and out of the region. Global private equity firms such as CVC Capital and Silver Lake have targeted IPL teams, Australian Soccer’s governing body, A-League, and other Asian sports properties. Qatar Sports Investments owns Paris Saint-Germain and became the first foreign sovereign wealth fund to buy into a major US sports franchise in 2023. Abu Dhabi’s Sovereign Wealth Fund, Mubadala, has recently lent its name to the Washington, DC Open for tennis.

**What this means for communicators**

As industry professionals, we need to be even more globally minded and audience-obsessed. The brands and agencies that will stand out are those with strong cross-border expertise, are equipped with protocols for navigating complex geopolitical environments, and develop strategies that respect cultural nuance.

My former colleague, Andrea De Vincentiis, global head of brand partnerships for HSBC, believes “APAC is not a market in itself but a region made up of many distinct markets, each with its own nuances. Having a plan per market, based on local insight and trends, is vital for successful partnership activation.” Success will mean building teams with regional expertise, establishing local partnerships, and developing narratives that can flex across different contexts without losing coherence.

Adidas offered a useful model at Qatar 2022: It proactively acknowledged concerns surrounding the tournament and provided concrete examples of actions it was taking, while continuing its sponsorship.

The transformation is accelerating rather than settling. As countries across Asia continue to invest in infrastructure, talent and events, their influence in sports will continue to grow, and they will continue to be seen as attractive destinations for investment. Those who adapt quickly will remain part of the most important conversations, even when those conversations happen in languages and cultural frames they do not intuitively inhabit. ■

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**Tala Booker** is founder and CEO of cross-border communications and marketing agency Via. Via act as a cross-cultural bridge, helping businesses, investors, and founders strengthen their brand’s visibility when expanding, deepening, or navigating Asia Pacific and Middle East. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# NAME, IMAGE, LIKENESS AND SPORTS PUBLIC RELATIONS

BY / Daniel T. Durbin



From the earliest philosophical discussion of athletic festivals in Plato's *Laws*, sport has been defined as a public activity in which discourses of praise and blame are created from the competitive performance of athletes. The bodies and public performance of athletes have always been the primary medium for promoting values, selling products, and, today, public relations. So, from the first statues in Olympia and the first stories of Olympic achievement, to today's social media landscape, the name, image and likeness (NIL) of athletes has been the foundation of sports narratives, promotion and public relations.

The current NIL debate grew from publicity rights lawsuits of the mid-20th century. "Publicity rights" refers to the right to own and exploit the name, image, or likeness of a public figure. From the nineteenth century forward, ownership in professional and college sports worked under the assumption that they owned the publicity rights of all athletes. This continued into the 21st century in college sports.

In 1970, the Major League Baseball Players Association launched the first of a planned

series of lawsuits, *Uhlaender vs. Hendricksen*, to establish ownership of NIL by athletes. Though it has been challenged many times, the MLBPA won this lawsuit establishing the precedent that the athletes themselves own the right to their own name, image and likeness and the financial exploitation of those.

Since the athletes' NIL is the first line of all publicity in sports, this issue now shapes the public relations practices of all sports. The rise of the Internet and social media have made NIL even more central to public relations for athletes, teams and leagues. The two most followed individuals on Instagram are global football stars Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. Ten out of the top 50 Instagram accounts are those of athletes or sports franchises. This means that twenty percent of the most powerful voices on Instagram's global social media are sports voices.

Social media has significantly broadened the streams of public relations. While ownership once controlled nearly the entire message of sports PR, that message is now divided between athletes and their representatives, teams, leagues, sports media bodies (such as

Fox Sports and ESPN), influencers, and fans. This poses obvious benefits and challenges.

A fairy tale story, such as the recent engagement of singer Taylor Swift and NFL tight end Travis Kelce, now brings a mind-boggling array of positive press, promotion and exploitation. Blanketing popular culture and music, sports, celebrity and much of the news cycle, this story has the potential for pervasive and positive public relations on a scale never before seen in human history. Perhaps the most viewed NILs of recent months were images of Kelce and Swift as they became engaged.

Conversely, when the viral spread of an athlete's image is tied to a scandal, it can prove equally troubling. The recent scandal involving Dodgers' star player Shohei Ohtani might well have been buried by a friendly news media 70 years ago. Though Ohtani was never accused of wrongdoing, Ohtani's assistant was convicted of embezzlement and sports gambling. This proved a global scandal, especially because Major League Baseball has a 100-year-old absolute ban on gambling. The media was flooded with the story, and Ohtani's NIL was linked to sports gambling addiction for audiences who knew little or nothing about baseball as a sport.

The swift evolution of online media helped break down the longstanding control of college athletes' NIL by their universities. As universities tried to control media output by not allowing student-athletes to have social media accounts, postings by friends, fans, sports media and the general public demonstrated that a player's NIL could no longer be wholly controlled by their institution. Quickly, college athletes asserted their publicity rights and social media pushed the NIL discussion well beyond university athletic departments.

As media (including media created by artificial intelligence) continue to expand, the NIL of professional athletes will become

ever more the contested center of sports public relations. Athletes will exert control over much of their NIL through social media accounts. Ownership and governing bodies will continue to exploit the athletes' NIL for positive public relations. Sports media will do much the same. Athletes will prove both a boost and a threat to their own NIL in public actions captured on cellphones. And fans will likely prove the biggest change and challenge in the evolving public relations landscape.

For all intents and purposes, fans once took part in sports as its silent majority. They wore jerseys and other gear from favorite athletes and teams, perhaps visited games and cheered. But mostly, they watched sports at home on television. Today, fans can enter the same media space as athletes — Instagram, TikTok, X — and exploit the name, image and likeness of athletes to build their own social media followings. Claiming only to offer opinions or humor and satire, while potentially numbering into the billions worldwide, it will be difficult to wrest control of an athlete's NIL from the massive media input of fans and influencers over time.

The Internet, then, is likely to become an ongoing public relations battleground over control of an athlete's NIL between their own posts, those of their leagues and teams, those of news and sports media, and those of fans and influencers. ■

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**Daniel T. Durbin** is a professor of communication and director of the Institute of Sports, Media and Society at USC Annenberg. He created the African-American Experience in Major League Baseball oral histories project and has published widely on sports, media, popular culture, and rhetoric. Durbin is a frequent commentator on sports and society, appearing hundreds of times across major outlets including CBS, NBC, CNN International, BBC, NPR, HBO Sports, and the Los Angeles Times. His current research interests include rethinking the entire process of sport as a performative public discourse.

# INTER-GENERATIONAL TEAMMATES: OBSERVATIONS FROM A PROFESSIONAL MENTORSHIP PARING

BY / Dale Legaspi & Aanal Doshi



A pair of former athletes share perspectives on some of the key topics in communications, related them to lessons they learned from sports.

## Talent

***“Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships.”***  
**(Michael Jordan)**

**Dale:** Somewhere along the line in corporate America, “human resources” became “talent.” While the new name is more appealing to everyone, it does allude to some inherent challenges. Just as a coach recruits and develops talent to fill a winning lineup, organizations must evaluate and upskill talent to succeed. Amassing talent is difficult, but leaders must also ensure their teams work cohesively and can respond rapidly to dynamic and competitive markets.

**Aanal:** Corporate PR is a fantasy league where only the best of the best are recruited. The others are replaced by AI. The best teams always give their culture-building responsibilities to the rookies, like Doc Rivers did with the 2007 Boston Celtics. My job is to focus on the basics — be on time, speak your research, unload the

dishwasher, and get the job done. Earning your team’s trust and respect is the prequel. The fun starts when you’ve proven yourself. Forget the ladder and enjoy the process of mastery.

## Culture

***“We were trying to create a brand but also a culture.”*** **(Phil Knight)**

**Dale:** Why have we seen so many “super teams” flame out fantastically? The usual culprit is culture. Just as athletes can spit out clichés in interviews, organizations can virtue signal, but talk is cheap. Mission statements are well and good, but what is the underlying value system that guides critical decisions? That invisible layer is its culture, which can be most visible with leadership but is pervasive throughout.

No amount of external communication can prop up an organization that has lost it.

**Aanal:** Gen-Z isn’t thinking about mission statements or healthy workplace environments — that’s the norm now. We’re thinking about thought leadership. We’re thinking about becoming LinkedIn influencers, sitting on panels with veterans, and reposting our company’s posts on Instagram. But, this isn’t about fame, it’s about staying

relevant. Doc Rivers' philosophy of Ubuntu became part of the team's culture, and in many ways, Gen-Z is looking for philosophies that feel fresh, provide more autonomy and embody empathetic leadership. That's the type of culture I will stay loyal to.

**Success**

***"You can't do the same thing the same way and be successful for a long period of time."* (Billy Beane)**

**Dale:** Baseball is famous for advanced statistical analysis (i.e. the quote above), but while Billy Beane's Oakland A's teams were immensely successful despite being small-market, they never won it all. The stats that drove success over 162 games did not play out the same way in a 5- or 7-game series because metrics are not created equally. The right ones at the right time determine who wins. Context is important, and we need to constantly revisit measurement accordingly.

**Aanal:** Success looks different to different people, but there are two parts that always overlap— preparedness and relationships. I can guarantee that anyone who consistently shows up to a room prepared will be successful in their chosen field sooner or later, regardless of inequities. Secondly, cultivate those relationships— grab coffee with journalists and walk into your MD's room just to ask about their son's vacation. Be interested in your people, and pay the way forward.

**Adaptability**

***"Flexibility is the key to stability."* (John Wooden)**

**Dale:** Technological advancement is redefining communications processes. While we cannot control the speed or magnitude of disruption, we must avoid spending cycles trying. Today, that means getting in front of generative AI, which has evolved from copilots we prompt to agents we deploy to handle tasks autonomously. As a result, we are all managers now —

regardless of seniority level. Existing people managers, though, must arm our junior colleagues to ensure they are not being automated out of their jobs.

**Aanal:** Quantum is going to replace AI, AI is replacing the job market, and Snapchat is now a thing of the past. Moonshots are business-as-usual now. Gen Alpha values experiences over aesthetics. AI can predict when you will get cancer, and whether this new guy you're talking to is "the one". The more things change, the more they stay the same, or something like that. It may be a scary time for those of us just entering the workforce, but we're in charge of this new digital revolution. We can be content creators (or create AI influencers), do mock interviews with veterans on Reddit, or navigate agency life by having AI polish our portfolios. The world is our oyster.

Nine innings, four quarters, three periods, two halves, launch date, election day, fiscal year end...it doesn't matter. Winning begins way before the game even starts. As strategic communicators, it is always on us to serve as the eyes and ears for the organizations we represent, but positioning everyone for success requires the right team working toward the right goals and objectives. The rest is remaining focused and filtering out noise. ■

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**Dale Legaspi** is a 15-year PR veteran and former USC baseball player. He has built a career on lessons he learned from his time as a student-athlete and, later, a coach. He now leads multiple corporate technology accounts at Zeno Group and serves as an adjunct professor at USC Annenberg.

**Aanal Doshi**, a former collegiate basketball player, is entering the PR world with fresh eyes, a global perspective and the kind of Gen Z mindset that questions everything, even the status quo. She is a second-year PR and advertising graduate student at USC Annenberg. With over 2.5 years of agency experience overseas and now part of the Tech PR team at Zeno Group, Aanal is deeply passionate (obsessed) with AI, product innovation and Euroleague basketball.

# HOW ENTERTAINMENT IS CHANGING THE GAME FOR SPORTS AUDIENCES

BY / Siena Oh



We are in an era where pop culture influences have shifted from external observers to active and strategic participants in sports. With the rise in digital storytelling and media, superstars like Taylor Swift and Ryan Reynolds are bringing record numbers to franchises through personal relationships, major events and team ownership. By leveraging these figures, teams convert casual consumers into dedicated fans by attracting diverse audiences and transforming regional franchises into globally recognizable assets.

## Personal Relationships

The “Taylor Swift Effect” has revolutionized the NFL through the global pop star’s relationship and engagement with Kansas City Chiefs’ tight end Travis Kelce. After Swift’s debut at Arrowhead Stadium in 2023, Kelce’s jersey sales skyrocketed by nearly 400%. According to NBC, Swift brought an audience of female teenagers the NFL had previously untapped, with a 53% increase in viewership of girls between the ages of 12 and 17.

Swift’s appearance on the Kelce brothers’ New Heights podcast led to record-breaking

viewership with 1.3 million concurrent viewers on the live YouTube premiere of the episode, crashing the stream. The episode has accumulated an astonishing 22 million views, with an increase of over 600% in female listeners.

The couple announced their engagement on Instagram. The post surpassed 1 million reposts in 6 hours, a record for the platform. After one month, the post stood at 37 million likes (and untold more views), a top-10 in Instagram’s history.

The relationship and its milestones highlights the global and cultural influence that Swift has had in reshaping the NFL’s audience and redefining the intersection of sports and entertainment.

## Major Events

The annual Super Bowl has become a spectacle beyond the game itself. Commercials and the iconic halftime show are now central to its appeal, creating a mutually beneficial relationship where both performers and the NFL see boosts in ratings and revenue.

The halftime show draws attention to the NFL, with rumors of Swift herself being the performer for the 2026 game as it heads to Santa Clara. Michael Jackson’s 1993 halftime performance changed the trajectory of the halftime show forever, shifting viewership from national to international by making his performance stand out like its own event. It marked the first time in Super Bowl history that viewership increased from the first half to the second. Although performers are not paid for their time, they earn millions through pure exposure. For example, 2024 performer Usher gained a 550% boost in his Spotify streams, and his 2005 hit and show opener “Caught Up” surged 2000% in streams.\*

Commercials are often skipped by viewers or seen as breaks for them to get a snack or look at their phones. But some surveys show that 42% of Super Bowl viewers tune in specifically for the advertisements. Advertisers pay handsomely for 30 seconds of screen time to get their commercials shown to global audiences.

**Team Ownership**

Another way popular culture figures break into the sports industry is through team ownership. Notable examples include the acquisition of Wrexham A.F.C. by actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob Mac (née McElhenney) and the founding of Angel City FC by celebrities such as Natalie Portman (and new ownership under Willow Bay).

Wrexham was once the Welsh soccer team that no one in America had ever heard of until Reynolds and Mac gave the team a complete refresh. The FX documentary “Welcome to Wrexham” brought media attention to the franchise by humanizing the club through personal accounts from players and the broader community. Reynolds and Mac bought the team for around £2 million in 2021, building it up to a net worth of over

£150 million. Since the purchase, Wrexham has brought in three times the amount of ticket sales, near capacity crowds, and a whole new global community.

The Angel City FC ownership team has revolutionized the sports industry while coexisting alongside the Dodgers and Lakers in a major sports landscape. The franchise creates a community dominated by females and LGBTQ+ individuals, underrepresented in sports. ACFC aims to build something larger than the game by making the fiercest, most inclusive community in football. Continuing to bring in new audiences, new team owner Bay (USC Annenberg’s Dean) emphasizes affordability as a way to engage younger demographics.

The integration of entertainment and sports, driven by pop culture figures, is no longer a peripheral trend but a central strategy. It fundamentally reshaped audience demographics, global reach, and the business model of sports franchises. As we move forward, the line between athlete and entertainer will continue to blur, making the strategic leverage of cultural icons essential for any sports brand seeking to remain relevant and expand its influence. ■

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**Siena Oh** is a current sophomore studying Public Relations and Advertising at USC Annenberg. She is also pursuing a double minor in customer analytics at USC Marshall and disruptive innovation at the Iovine and Young Academy. She has a passion for branding, outreach, and strategy, with a strong focus on the sports industry and a love for USC Football. She is a research associate at the USC Center for PR.



**NEXT GEN  
FANDOM**



# WHY STORYTELLING WILL DEFINE THE FUTURE OF SPORTS

BY / Matthew Harrington & Brendan Prunty



As the world sets its sights on the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, an undeniable truth emerges: These next two years will provide us all with a generational storytelling moment.

Most fans won't know the athletes competing until a story pulls them in. Who knew about women's rugby until Ilona Maher helped put it on the map? Or saw a bespectacled Stephen Nedoroscik conquer the pommel horse for a thrilling bronze? These aren't just highlight reels, they're stories that connect with us — the stories that allow us to see ourselves in others. Once that connection is made, it stays with you.

That's not just our opinion, either. Sean Gregory, senior sports correspondent for TIME, told us: "I think a good story stands out more these days." And he would know: In the past year, he has written cover stories about global women's basketball phenom Caitlin Clark, F1 superstar Lewis Hamilton, and Premier League icon Erling Haaland, all while also digging deep on stories like a profile of a law professor taking on the sports betting industry.

We can't lose sight of what the story is — and more importantly — why it matters. People are drawn to people. But they are drawn to them because of their stories. They don't connect with a starting lineup or medal count or a broken record, unless there's connective tissue to bring it all to life.

This also puts a premium on storytelling. While the formats may be evolving — from newspapers and podcasts to TikTok and behind-the-scenes social clips — the principle is the same: Great storytelling is built on emotional truth, not corporate gloss.

This is especially powerful in sports, where authenticity isn't just appreciated, it's expected. Audiences, particularly Gen Z, are increasingly skeptical of polished personas and brand-heavy narratives. Edelman's 2025 Trust Barometer found that 72% of people say they trust individuals more than institutions — a sentiment that carries over into how they connect with athletes and teams.

So, what makes a great sports story today? It's human at the core — but it's also

layered. Stories that endure tend to feature shared values, personal transformation, emotional stakes, and a sense of place. But they can also be humorous. Or unexpected. Or contrarian. These are the arcs that move people — because they reflect what we’re all navigating in some form.

And brands have a critical role to play. They are no longer just sponsors — they are participants in the storytelling. Whether through long-form films, creative campaigns, short-form social, or talent partnerships, brands help shape the cultural context around sports. The best ones don’t try to own the story. They help tell it in ways that are additive, inclusive, and authentic.

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As communicators, we have a responsibility to unearth and elevate these narratives — and to do so in new formats and at a faster pace. That means returning to core storytelling principles while adapting to a modern, multi-platform world. To get this right, we must:

- **Lead with people, not products:** Highlight perseverance, identity, emotion, and growth. Make it personal.
- **Embrace format fluidity:** Let the story drive the platform — a TikTok can carry as much weight as a Sunday feature.

- **Tap into the power of local:** Stories rooted in community feel more real — and are more trusted.
- **Build with others:** Work with athletes, creators, media, and communities to co-develop content that reflects a shared perspective.

With the U.S. hosting both the World Cup and the Olympics in the coming years, we are entering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to not just tell stories, but to tell them on a global scale to a global audience. Done well, these stories will build trust, create relevance, and leave a legacy that lasts long after the medals are awarded. And in a world that is wading deeper and deeper into technology and AI, isn’t it comforting to know that the reality of storytelling in and around sports, remains rooted in the human equation?

Because when the games end, and the lights go out, it will be those stories — and the people behind them — that we remember. ■

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**Matthew Harrington** is the executive vice chairman of Edelman. During his four decades with the firm, Edelman has grown tenfold. A trusted C-suite adviser, Matthew is a specialist in corporate positioning and reputation management, working with some of the world’s largest and most complex organizations. His expertise includes crisis communications, merger and acquisition activity and IPOs. He is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

**Brendan Prunty** is co-Head of UEG Sports and merges nearly two decades of sports knowledge and insight with high-level strategic communications, bringing client campaigns to life with authentic storytelling. Before joining UEG and Edelman, he was a recognized sportswriter for The New York Times, Esquire, Rolling Stone, Sports Illustrated, and the Newark Star-Ledger.

# THE CYBER STADIUM: WHY PROTECTING FAN DATA IS THE NEXT FRONTIER IN SPORTS SECURITY

BY / Heather Rim



The sports industry has always been a powerful platform for fan passion, loyalty and community. But today, that community lives not just in stadiums and sports bars, it thrives in apps, digital wallets, smart venues and fantasy leagues. With every tap, swipe and scan, the modern fan journey generates a trove of valuable, behavioral, and often highly sensitive personal data.

And it's a gold mine for threat actors.

This digital transformation has opened new doors for personalized experiences and new threat vectors for cybercriminals. In the race to engage fans in increasingly immersive ways, protecting their data is vital. Cybersecurity is now a sports industry imperative. It's a trust signal, a brand differentiator, and can also be a potential reputational risk.

## **The Digital Playbook of the Modern Fan**

From biometric stadium entry to app-based concessions to dynamic pricing for

merchandise, sports franchises are now data platforms as much as they are teams. In cities like Los Angeles, which is poised to be the epicenter of global sports in the lead-up to the 2028 Olympics, this transformation is accelerating at warp speed.

Fan data encompasses much more than names and emails. It includes:

- Geolocation and behavioral tracking
- Purchase histories and payment details
- Social media activity and influencer insights
- Personally identifiable information (PII) gathered through loyalty programs

According to Nielsen, 96% of sports fans engage in second-screen behavior during events, creating a continuous stream of data across multiple digital touchpoints.

## **The Rising Threat to Fan Trust**

Cyberattacks in the sports and entertainment industry are on the rise. According to IDC, organizations in media, entertainment, and sports experienced a 34% year-over-year

increase in cyber incidents in 2024, largely due to expanding digital ecosystems and fragmented vendor networks.

The reality is stark: When fan data is compromised, the brand — not the hacker — bears the reputational fallout. The damage can be both immediate and lasting in sports, where identity, loyalty and emotion are deeply intertwined.

**Why Communications and Marketing Leaders Need a Seat at the Cyber Table**

Protecting fan data is not solely a cybersecurity issue; it's a brand strategy. It's also one that communications and marketing leaders must actively shape. Here's why:

- **Reputation is real-time.** Data breaches demand an immediate, coordinated response. Yet only 36% of organizations surveyed by Forrester have a formal incident response plan that includes PR and marketing.
- **Transparency earns loyalty.** Fans value brands that are clear about how data is handled. Every disclosure and opt-in is a chance to reinforce your values and deepen trust.
- **Marketing owns the tech stack.** Many CMOs now manage nearly as many software platforms as their CIO counterparts, underscoring marketing's role in vendor risk management and platform security.

The savviest brands are integrating cybersecurity into their messaging, not as fear, but as proof of integrity and innovation. When done right, security becomes an experience enhancer.

**A Model for Responsible Innovation**

Security doesn't have to stifle creativity. In fact, it's quite the opposite. With zero-trust frameworks and strong data governance, marketing and communications teams can craft bold, data-driven experiences with confidence.

At Optiv, we help sports, entertainment and media organizations build cyber resilience into the fan experience from the start, whether it's securing smart venue infrastructure, evaluating third-party app risks, or protecting sensitive fan identity data. The goal isn't just to block threats. It's to build trust.

With Los Angeles hosting the World Cup in 2026, Super Bowl in 2027 and Olympic Games in 2028, now is the time to elevate fan security from a compliance issue to a core brand differentiator.

**The Competitive Edge of Cyber Trust**

In sports, momentum can shift in an instant, and so can public perception. The brands that win are those that can anticipate change, respond with confidence and clarity, and earn trust at every turn. As marketing and communications leaders, we have a critical role to play in making the digital stadium just as secure and inspiring as the physical one.

Because in the era of always-on engagement, trust is the ultimate competitive advantage. ■

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**Heather Rim** is the chief marketing officer at Optiv, leading efforts to enhance brand visibility, generate demand, and engage stakeholders, while also serving as executive sponsor of the company's ESG program and Optiv Women's Network. She is a seasoned global marketing and communications executive with over 20 years of experience driving brand growth. She is a USC Annenberg alumnae, and is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# HOW AI IS TRANSFORMING VENUES AND THE FAN EXPERIENCE

BY / Maryanne Lataif



In an era where digital innovation touches nearly every aspect of our lives, sports and entertainment venues are undergoing a remarkable transformation. From AI-powered ticketing systems to immersive visual experiences, technology is reshaping how fans engage with sports and live events. The result? Smarter, more efficient operations, new personalized experiences, and a future where the line between physical and digital entertainment continues to blur.

Modern venues are embracing AI-driven ticketing platforms that streamline the entire guest journey and experience—from purchase to entry. These systems use machine learning to forecast demand, dynamically adjust pricing, and detect fraudulent activity in real time. Biometric technologies such as facial recognition and fingerprint scanning are also gaining momentum, enabling fans to enter venues with a simple glance or touch. This not only speeds up entry but also enhances security and reduces the risk of ticket fraud.

Through advanced AI technologies, venues can deliver hyper-personalized experiences before, during, and after events. By

analyzing data from ticket purchases, mobile apps, and social media, they can recommend food, merchandise, and even seat upgrades tailored to individual preferences. Fans can arrive at a sporting event and receive a push notification offering a discount on their favorite snack, or be guided to the nearest restroom with the shortest line—all through a venue app. These micro-personalizations create a seamless and enjoyable experience that keeps fans coming back.

Behind the curtain, AI is revolutionizing how venues operate. Predictive analytics help managers anticipate crowd flow, staffing needs, and concession demand, allowing for better resource allocation, reduced waste, and improved safety. AI-powered surveillance systems can detect unusual behavior or potential threats in real time, while smart HVAC and lighting systems adjust automatically based on occupancy and weather conditions — cutting energy costs and minimizing environmental impact.

Technology is also enhancing the production experience at venues. For example, during live events like award shows, AI can support

lighting cues, sound mixing, and stage automation—ensuring seamless, high-quality presentations every time.

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of AI in sports and live entertainment is its ability to turn data into actionable insights. Venues can analyze attendance trends, concession sales, and social sentiment

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to refine offerings and marketing strategies. This data-driven approach leads to smarter decisions, stronger ROI, and more satisfied audiences.

Additionally, venues like The Sphere in Las Vegas and Cosm in Inglewood are pushing the boundaries of audience engagement. The Sphere features a 160,000-square-foot LED display and a spatial audio system that envelops the audience, creating a fully immersive environment. Cosm offers a concept called “shared reality.” Its 87-foot, 8K LED dome surrounds viewers with ultra-high-definition visuals and spatial audio, simulating the feeling of being courtside at a game or in the front row at a concert.

Both venues are leveraging AI to enhance interactivity. The Sphere’s AI systems adapt visuals and audio based on crowd reactions, creating a dynamic feedback loop between performers and the audience. At Cosm, fans

can choose camera angles, interact with overlays, and participate in live polls — transforming passive viewing into an active, gamified experience.

We can expect even more personalized and immersive experiences as AI technologies evolve. From AI chatbots that handle customer service to blockchain-based ticketing that greatly reduces scalping, the industry is entering a digital renaissance.

For venues and performers, it means greater efficiency, insight, and creative opportunity. For fans, it means more convenience, personalization, and engagement. Imagine attending a sports event where you can toggle between player cams and live stats on your personal devices, or a concert where your seat determines your visual perspective. In the end, technology isn’t replacing the magic of live entertainment — it’s enhancing it in ways we’re only beginning to imagine. ■

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**Maryanne Lataif** is senior vice president of corporate communications for AEG, the world’s leading sports and live entertainment company. In this role, she oversees strategic communications, corporate communications, M&A, executive communications, crisis communications and internal communications, as well as promoting the company’s overall brand and reputation through authentic, transparent and informative storytelling. She is a USC Annenberg alumnae, and is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# WHERE THE HELL IS MY MONEY GOING: A GEN Z PERSPECTIVE

BY / Sierra Sohn



“Where the hell is my money going?” It’s the question many Gen Z fans ask when faced with the rising cost of attending a sporting event. From parking fees to ticket surcharges, the price of entry has skyrocketed, but the fan experience often feels stuck in the past. For a generation that grew up in the era of TikTok, pop-ups, and immersive concerts, just watching the game isn’t enough. If sports teams want to capture Gen Z loyalty, they must create experiences that extend beyond the scoreboard and make every dollar feel worthwhile.

Here is the Gen Z expectation. Gen Z isn’t just buying a game; they’re buying an experience. For this audience, value means more than 48 minutes of basketball or nine innings of baseball. They crave immersion, shareability, exclusivity, and community. They want Instagrammable moments that provide the perfect backdrop, TikTok worthy surprises, fan-first behind-the-scenes access they can boast about long after

the final buzzer, and meaningful connections with other fans, athletes, or causes. Music and entertainment have already figured this out. Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour gave friendship bracelets and Easter eggs that turned concerts into cultural milestones. Coachella transformed into a festival of brand activations, influencer content, and fashion moments as much as it is a music event. Sports need to meet this same standard: creating belonging through experiences that feel bigger than the scoreboard.

Right now, many sporting events fall short. A young fan might spend \$200 on an NBA ticket only to walk away with overpriced nachos and a fleeting memory of the score. With a generation already skeptical of big institutions, from Ticketmaster to streaming platforms, this lack of added value fuels dissatisfaction. That said, there are glimmers of innovation. The NBA Cup gave fans fresh storylines, new branding, and moments that broke through the noise.

College athletes leveraging NIL deals are building personal brands and communities, extending fan connections through personal storytelling and social media. These examples prove that when sports lean into narrative and experience, Gen Z notices. The challenge is making these efforts the rule and not the exception.

So how do teams, leagues, and PR professionals reimagine the fan experience for a generation asking, “Where the hell is my money going?” It starts by thinking not just like event organizers but cultural curators.

- **Interactive Pop-Ups:** If there is one thing anyone knows about Gen Z, it's that they love a good pop-up. Few other generations are waiting in line for 9 hours for a product launch or branded photo-booth. Transform arenas into event spaces. Imagine walking into a photobooth sponsored by the team's newest partner or stepping into a VR zone that simulates a player's perspective on the court. These activations turn waiting in line into part of the entertainment.
- **Digital Momentum:** The fan experience shouldn't end when the game clock runs out. Exclusive AR filters, behind-the-scenes content, athlete Q&As reserved for ticket holders that aren't just blasted on the big screen. Curate moments that hold a buzz and live after fans leave the stadium.
- **Cause Connection:** Build a culture. Create a connection. Gen Z cares deeply about purpose and impact. Supporting a team becomes supporting a movement when teams connect games to charitable causes or highlight athletes' activism. Give fans a sense of meaning behind their money.
- **Merch and Memory Moments:** Concerts have proven the power of take-home mementos. Sports teams can create similar keepsakes: limited-edition patches, “you had to be there” moments, fan-

designed merch drops, or collectibles tied to specific games. These tokens extend the story beyond the seat.

Each of these touchpoints is more than marketing. They are storytelling moments. They are opportunities to transform a ticket into a journey and a fan into a community member.

For Gen Z, attending a game isn't just about watching sports. It's about feeling part of something bigger, something that lasts beyond the final whistle. Communications professionals have the opportunity (and responsibility) to shape these experiences in ways that make every ticket feel like a trip into culture. The future of sports PR depends on answering Gen Z's question: Where the hell is my money going? The right response is not a line item on a receipt. The right response is an experience so memorable, so sharable, and so meaningful that fans never have to ask again. ■

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**Sierra Sohn** is a second-year graduate student at USC Annenberg studying Public Relations and Advertising who is passionate about brand engagement and crafting compelling narratives. Her background includes international experience in tourism public relations, campaign strategy, and media analytics, as well as hands-on work in behavioral intervention education. She has collaborated on PR campaigns for emerging brands and destinations, developing creative solutions that connect with diverse audiences.

# SPORTS AND SPORTS GAMBLING AS INFORMATION ECONOMY

BY / Rook Campbell, PhD



Conversations among sports governing bodies indicate an evolving perspective more favorably disposed toward connections between sports and sports betting industries. In fact, a tone of real eagerness, applauding a positive relation between sports and sports betting, resounds more and more nowadays. There is real interest for sports leagues and franchises — not only in understanding, but perhaps even in capitalizing on regulated sports gambling.

As technological innovations change the nature of sports and their audiences, their governing bodies must retrofit the architecture of their property holdings to handle new challenges and seize new opportunities. Technologies expand the availability and type of sports viewership for local and global audiences. As media platforms create seemingly endless viewing offers for audiences anywhere, anytime, media technologies also enhance entertainment as a participatory medium, creating novel opportunities for viewer interaction. For example, mobile technologies, GPS, real-time statistical analysis (algorithm),

and live streaming with interactive video enable digital audiences to interact in the sports experience. Such technologies allow sports viewers to toggle between tennis court or stadium views or select camera angles. Interactive platforms are good for fans — and also good for fantasy sports and gambling consumers. Not only can the demand for these new technologies change sports consumption practices, but it can also disrupt sports authority.

Developments between the sports betting and sports sectors must be read alongside shifts witnessed in sports media as innovations in television, satellite, and digital broadcast re-oriented actors and created new opportunities for acquiring social, political, and economic capital. Anticipating shifts and helping to lead new opportunities in sports markets requires understanding some of the defining characteristics of contemporary sports' assets.

The economy of sports markets depends less on collecting live venue gate receipts from fans seeking to celebrate athletes on the pitch or in the arena. Rather sports business accrues its pulse from the global

broadcast reproductions of these spectacles. The product of sports broadcast and betting markets? Digital information and its reproduction. Ultimately, these information bits become the global sports market's fundamental product.

In fact, information has come to constitute both the primary labor resource (raw material) and the end product of culture-industry markets, like sports. Globalization, according to Communication scholar Manuel Castells, can be understood as an information society paradigm where knowledge and information are critical elements in all modes of development, since the production is always based on some level of knowledge and in the process of information. However, what is specific to the informational mode of development is the action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity (Castells, 2000: 17).

The fundamental aspects of an information economy are present in creative industries where the mainstay products are intellectual properties (IP) that circulate in culture and entertainment industries like music, film, sports and publishing.

As technologies create opportunities for productivity and profitability, they inevitably shift — disrupting or consolidating — established proprietary relations. Take, for example, the way online gambling recasts the physical and social relations of brick-and-mortar gambling venues. With online gambling, bookmakers no longer rely upon only local storefronts to gather high volumes of punts.

To be sure, technologies act only alongside the political, social, economic and legal interests that expand or constrict profit and/or regulatory possibilities. In the case of name, image and likeness (NIL), media broadcast and marketing demand long

predated athlete ability — though prohibited — to take advantage of commercial opportunities. Once U.S. Courts legally articulated intellectual properties for NIL, labor and monetary relations between student-athletes, schools, sports conferences and the overarching sports governing body, the NCAA, began to reshuffle dramatically. We continue to witness the resulting flux, reorganizing the sites of sports money and labor flows due to these changed ideas that materialized an IP. While NIL may center less upon newly emergent media technology, it does poignantly illustrate the power of legally redefining sport's IP holders.

### **SPORTS BUSINESS ACCRUES ITS PULSE FROM THE GLOBAL BROADCAST REPRODUCTIONS ... THE PRODUCT OF SPORTS BROADCAST AND BETTING MARKETS? DIGITAL INFORMATION AND ITS REPRODUCTION.**

As a secondary sports market, fantasy sports found amplified life of consumer participation as online technologies reworked capacities for live, instant interaction across global locations. I briefly touch on fantasy sports to indicate that a nested sports sector and its information assets can rework fan engagement, broadcast attention and interaction throughout the sports ecosystem. We can expect further

information asset creation in sports and its secondary markets, particularly in areas linked through gambling.

A relatively unique IP decision involving sports and sports gambling sectors appeared in France in 2010. French courts notably reworked gambling laws by creating a new product for its sports industry when they articulated a sports Betting Right. In France, sports Betting Rights became a device that the court instantiated through a legal ruling that endowed French sports event owners (e.g., owners of the Tour de France or Roland Garros) with an exploitable property right: a sports betting right. In this way, the game results or other performance details became proprietary holdings of their French event owners. For example, by virtue of these new Sports Betting Rights, the Amaury Sport Organisation, owners of the Tour de France, could license its betting rights to regulated sports betting entities, and thus profit share in gambling revenue. While further justificatory and responsibility details are involved, here, the important feature is the innovation of this new kind of IP.

Whether we witness other legal jurisdictions innovate equivalent IP as a market and/or regulatory solution for industry growth or not, these kinds of information economy assets and issues might be seen as important alerts to the kinds of commercial wrestling that link sports and secondary sports industries. As sports and sports betting markets converge, courts may be willing to legally articulate new IP, that is, creating what some call thin-air products. Understanding how actors create, assert, and exchange these thin-air products to perform, distinguish, and acquire particular powers is fundamental to sports authority. The materialization of abstract properties such as betting rights

may prove effective not only for revenue generation but also for endowing actors with critical resources of political, social, and economic capital. Beyond the specific landscape of sports betting, the information economy of sports as an entertainment business requires understanding how to respond to and harness IP innovations linked to technological innovations. ■

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**Rook Campbell, PhD** is a clinical professor of communication at USC Annenberg, where he teaches across the areas of advertising, sport, globalization and media. Rook's work as a scholar, community leader, and storyteller is concerned with the ordinary, everyday encounters of sport, play, and games. As a professor, he explores the politics, money, and culture of sports. These academic workings may be laden with theory, but ultimately, the primary sports stakeholder is simple: Sport is about humans and lived experiences.

Castells, M., 2000. *The Rise of the Network Society The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

# WE CAN DEFINITELY SETTLE THE LEBRON AND MJ GOAT DEBATE, BUT IT'S GOING TO GET WAY WEIRDER

BY / Michael Kittilson



LeBron is my GOAT. Most points in NBA history. Four rings across three franchises. A one-man game plan who guarded all five positions and dragged the 2007 Cavaliers to the Finals with a supporting cast that wouldn't start for most high school varsities.

I'm done defending it. Done with the circular arguments about Jordan's "killer instinct" or his 6-0 Finals record, as if losing in the first round is superior to losing on the world's biggest stage. It is a debate that, by its very nature, can never be settled.

Until now. Because in a year, maybe less, AI will settle it for us.

Picture a Saturday night in 2026: Game 7 of the NBA Finals. It's the 1996 Bulls versus the 2013 Heat. Jordan posts up LeBron. Pippen switches onto Wade. Every spin move, every help rotation, every fourth-quarter impulse is transformed into probability matrices firing in real-time. Both teams battling in only ways data can remember.

Fantasy basketball is spreadsheets pretending to be sports. This is the resurrection of

athletic primes through machine learning. Call them Synthetic Leagues; call them whatever helps you sleep after watching your childhood hero get absolutely bullied and cooked by Giannis Antetokounmpo.

The technology is already here, scattered across different platforms like Infinity Stones waiting for someone to snap them together: Player tracking data going back decades. AI that can predict movement patterns from limited footage. Machine learning models that understand what a player did, when they did it, and against whom, even if the why remains maddeningly elusive.

**BETTING MARKETS WILL EXPLODE INTO EXISTENTIAL CHAOS. YOU'RE BETTING ON GAMES BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO MIGHT BE DEAD, GOVERNED BY AN AI REFEREE APPLYING RULES FROM YOUR SELECTED ERA. VEGAS WILL EITHER COLLAPSE OR ACHIEVE ITS FINAL FORM. POSSIBLY BOTH.**

Here's where it gets dangerous: Anyone can be a GM now.

Draft night. You're on the clock. Do you take '88 Jordan first overall, knowing you'll get peak athleticism but potentially volatile teammate dynamics? Or '18 LeBron, who could make four G-Leaguers a playoff team? Maybe you're the chaos agent who takes '00 Shaq first and dares everyone else to find enough bodies to throw at him.

Build your roster. Navigate the salary cap, adjusted for era. Manage personalities. Because the AI knows that Kobe and Shaq work until exactly 2003, that Kyrie gets weird after three seasons anywhere, that Draymond Green will either be your championship glue or punch his teammate in the jaw, depending on variables no one quite understands.

Then watch it unfold. Fully rendered games you can watch, analyze, and inevitably scream at your screen about. Your '92 Dream Team running the modern Warriors' death lineup. Your hand-picked collection of defensive savants from across five decades trying to solve prime Steph Curry. Your beautiful, chaotic experiment of putting five versions of LeBron on the same team, just to see what happens, or finally finding out if a team of five Shaqs could ever successfully attempt a 3-pointer.

This technology will commit violence against our most sacred sports opinions, and I'm here for every second of it.

That uncle who swears hand-checking made everything harder in the '90s? We can test it. The nephew who thinks Ja Morant would've destroyed those "plumbers and firefighters" from the '60s? Let's find out. The Reddit user with 10,000 words on why Arvydas Sabonis would've been the GOAT if he'd come to the NBA in his prime? Here's your chance.

Every lazy sports take will face its algorithmic reckoning. "Different era" becomes a variable to test. "You had to be there" transforms from conversation-ender to hypothesis.

But the beautiful paradox is this: In killing these debates, Synthetic Leagues create infinite new ones. When the simulation shows Jordan averaging 45 against modern defenses, the arguments will evolve. We'll debate the AI's methodology, its weighting of psychological factors, and create conspiracy theories about algorithmic bias.

Current players will realize their digital ghosts can play forever. Torn ACL? Your synthetic self is dropping 40 tonight. Retired at 35? Your algorithm plays until the heat death of the universe. LeBron's virtual prime will generate revenue for his great-grandchildren. Some rookie will sign away his synthetic rights for quick cash and spend the rest of his life watching his digital twin earn millions he'll never see.

Betting markets will explode into existential chaos. You're betting on games between people who might be dead, governed by an AI referee applying rules from your selected era. Vegas will either collapse or achieve its final form. Possibly both.

The same technology that settles whether Jordan could guard Curry will eventually decide whether you get drafted. Real NBA teams will run thousands of synthetic seasons before calling your name. Your digital twin will have played its entire career before you play your first game. College recruiters will watch your ghost fail a thousand times before offering a scholarship. The algorithm that knows when Kyrie gets weird will predict when you'll crack under pressure at your accounting job. We're building a world

where your synthetic self must succeed before you get the chance to fail.

By 2030, the line between watching and playing dissolves. Five years after that, basketball becomes something we inhabit. The question shifts from ‘Who’s the GOAT?’ to ‘Which version of yourself would you draft?’ because by then, we’re all in the simulation.

Basketball has always been about imagination. Synthetic Leagues amplify that imagination, for better or worse. They will turn every fan into a basketball god, capable of bending space-time to create the ultimate team, the perfect matchup, the game that settles everything.

So yes, LeBron is still my GOAT. The algorithm might prove me wrong. But that’s the beauty of Synthetic Leagues: We’ll finally get answers to our impossible questions. And then we’ll find new impossible questions to argue about.

The debate never dies. It just gets a better graphics engine. ■

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**Michael Kittilson** is a brand strategist at the intersection of artificial intelligence, communication, and culture. He leads strategic growth and AI capabilities at the Acceleration Community of Companies, works as a Senior Fellow/Consultant with One Earth, and has held research and communications roles across USC in climate, innovation, and athletics. He is a USC Annenberg and Center for PR student alumnus.

**BY 2030, THE LINE BETWEEN WATCHING AND PLAYING DISSOLVES. FIVE YEARS AFTER THAT, BASKETBALL BECOMES SOMETHING WE INHABIT. THE QUESTION SHIFTS FROM ‘WHO’S THE GOAT?’ TO ‘WHICH VERSION OF YOURSELF WOULD YOU DRAFT?’ BECAUSE BY THEN, WE’RE ALL IN THE SIMULATION.**

# FROM HEARTBEATS TO HEADLINES: THE COMMUNICATION POWER OF ATHLETE HEALTH DATA

BY / Ava Nicols



Imagine a star quarterback’s “Recovery Score” from his Whoop strap — a dismal 24% — leaks hours before the championship game. Analysts question his readiness, betting lines shift, and fans panic. He plays poorly, and the narrative is set: the data foretold the outcome. But what if the reading was misleading? A restless night could be misinterpreted as a physical collapse. This tension illustrates the power and peril of wearable data in modern sports.

Wearable technology has become a central component of performance management for both elite athletes and everyday users. Devices such as Whoop, Oura, Garmin, and the Apple Watch track metrics including heart rate variability, recovery scores, and sleep quality. Once confined to labs, these insights now circulate widely, altering not only athletic preparation but also fan engagement and media reporting.

By making advanced health monitoring accessible, wearables have transformed the very language of sports communication. As biometric data moves beyond locker rooms and into the public sphere, it becomes part of athletic storytelling.

Athletes share metrics on social media, while journalists and fans interpret these numbers to build narratives of resilience, vulnerability, or decline. This process reshapes trust and transparency in sports: data once considered private is now a public signal, open to celebration or misinterpretation.

Yet, the accuracy of this information remains contested. While manufacturers highlight precision, independent studies show mixed results. Heart rate sensors generally perform well at rest or during steady-state exercise but lose reliability in high-intensity or contact sports, where motion artifacts can distort readings. Sleep tracking features identify broad patterns but often fail to classify stages of sleep accurately compared with clinical standards.

Gender bias in algorithms further complicates matters, as devices often rely on male-centric models that overlook hormonal and physiological differences. These limitations mean that the “objectivity” of wearable data is less absolute than it appears. Narratives built on flawed numbers risk distorting public perception of athlete performance and health.

At the same time, wearables have become powerful marketing tools. Companies enlist high-profile athletes — Cristiano Ronaldo, Rory McIlroy, Patrick Mahomes — not only as endorsers but as proof-of-concept demonstrations.

An athlete’s public reliance on a device signals legitimacy, transforming biometric tracking into an aspirational lifestyle for fans and consumers. This dual function boosts sales and strengthens the credibility of wearable technologies, extending their reach beyond sports into wellness culture.

The entertainment industry also capitalizes on these metrics. Broadcasters incorporate biometric graphics into live coverage, while fantasy sports and betting platforms integrate health data to enrich engagement.

**WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY HAS BECOME A CENTRAL COMPONENT OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FOR BOTH ELITE ATHLETES AND EVERYDAY USERS... ONCE CONFINED TO LABS, THESE INSIGHTS NOW CIRCULATE WIDELY, ALTERING NOT ONLY ATHLETIC PREPARATION BUT ALSO FAN ENGAGEMENT AND MEDIA REPORTING.**

Olympic champions such as Katie Ledecky and Lindsey Vonn, both Oura ambassadors, exemplify how athlete data becomes narrative content, marketed as both inspiration and entertainment. By monetizing personal health information, sports media reframe data points into stories that fans consume alongside scores and highlights.

This integration has profound implications for the athlete–fan relationship. Sharing recovery scores, strain indexes, or resting heart rates allows athletes to present themselves as authentic and transparent. Fans, in turn, interpret these glimpses as insider access to the demands of training and competition.

Trust may deepen when athletes appear candid, yet the same disclosures can backfire if data is sensationalized. A low recovery score becomes a weakness in the hands of a media outlet eager for drama. Thus, biometric communication functions as a double-edged sword: it fosters intimacy while exposing athletes to new forms of scrutiny.

Ultimately, wearable technology illustrates a feedback loop between sports and communication. Athletes use data to shape their narratives, while media and fans reinterpret that information to construct broader cultural meanings. These exchanges extend far beyond performance — they influence business models, fan loyalty, and the perception of athlete identity itself.

As sports enter this data-driven era, the challenge lies in balancing transparency with critical literacy. Athletes, fans, and journalists must recognize both the value and the limits of biometric tracking. Health metrics can enrich narratives, but they are not infallible predictors of success or failure. The future of sports will depend not only on how data is collected but on how it is communicated, interpreted, and trusted. ■

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**Ava Nicols** is a sophomore and SoCal native studying journalism at USC Annenberg. She enjoys writing feature stories and covering lifestyle, health, and wellness headlines. She currently serves as the assistant to Fred Cook and is a research associate at the USC Center for PR.

# SPORTS, DATA AND THE FUTURE OF FANDOM

BY / Nikki Thomas



The datafication of athletes is increasingly central to sports fandom. Statistics in sports are not new — the box score, for instance, originated in 1858 as a means to track the performance of baseball players — but they have never before been so dominant in our sporting milieu. Fantasy sports, once a fringe activity championed by a small collective of board- and card-gamers, has blossomed in the 21st century, drawing 62.5 million participants in 2022 in the U.S. and Canada alone. Sports betting, illegal (if only technically) in all 50 U.S. states in 2018, is now permissible in all but 10. The Fantasy Sports and Gaming Association estimated in 2023 that about a quarter of American adults engage in the practice.

What do these trends tell us? Certainly, that sports fandom is not as different from media fandom as one might assume. Sports fandom is often lauded for its masculinity, dichotomized as macho relative to ‘geek’ fandom of media like Dallas or Star Trek.

These fans were agents of cultural production. They didn’t just watch Star Trek on TV; they created zines packed with original Spock fanfiction. They crafted fan economies. Geek fans were, as early fan scholar and USC Annenberg professor Henry Jenkins noted in a seminal work, “textual poachers” — more than mere observers, they are participants in the making of culture and meaning.

The archetypal sports fan of today has evolved to be more participatory. They might not be writing fanfic, but the modern sports fan isn’t just sitting back and watching the big game on Sunday, either. Extracurriculars — drafting your fantasy football team or crafting parlays, interacting with other fans and even players through new media — have become almost as important, if not more so, than the game itself.

New media have empowered sports fans to become more connected. But the increased importance of metrics and statistics in

**THE PROBLEM IS THAT WE STILL DON'T REALLY KNOW WHAT IT MEANS FOR US AS A SOCIETY THAT OBJECTIFICATION AND DATAFICATION ARE BECOMING BORDERLINE INESCAPABLE FACETS OF SPORTS FANDOM.**

sports culture is also troubling. We've ramped up the surveillance and the use of data in our performance of our fandom. The athletic body, established from the early days of sports as a site for the mapping of cultural and gendered ideals, has become even more complicated by our insistence on its objectification.

There's a dissonance, then, between the hyperconnectivity offered by new media and the coldness of the bio-valuation of athletes that has become a central affordance of our new sports fan practice. Fans are only one link in that chain — sporting leagues and gambling companies like DraftKings and FanDuel are among the actors responsible for this changing sports and media ecosystem.

The problem is that we still don't really know what it means for us as a society that objectification and datafication are becoming borderline inescapable facets of sports fandom. What kind of fandom is employed when we watch a game not because we enjoy the team, but because we have money on a player getting over 8.5 rebounds? How have the changes in sports fandom changed our relationships to each other? And given the rapid professionalization of college sports, won't someone think of the children?

I don't mean to poke fun at the moral panic of it all. These are interesting questions that are difficult for scholars to answer simply because we can't produce research fast enough to keep up with the industry. Legislation on sports betting is constantly changing. The COVID-19 pandemic completely skewed how fans, athletes and brands interact on social media. Student athletes couldn't even benefit from name, image and likeness (NIL) deals just five years ago.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be doing the work to interrogate the world we are co-creating. What kind of fans do we want to be? What kind of journalists? What industry standards can we set to ensure we're engaging with sports data and new media meaningfully?

The future of sports fandom relies on us engaging these and other questions about humanity and subjectivity. ■

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**Nikki Thomas** is a journalist, cat mom, Philly sports fan, and PhD candidate at USC Annenberg. Her research centers on the emergent social dynamics of sports fandom as informed by new media and datafication, with a particular focus on how the American sporting environment has redefined the relationships between fans and athletes.

# RACING TO THE OLYMPICS: MOTORSPORTS' BLAZING PATH

BY / Sowmya Chandrasekaran



**M**otorsports have become the new blazing glory. With Formula 1 setting record-breaking viewership numbers and social media engagement for all things racing on the rise, one can't help but wonder what the future holds for the sport. As a traditionally classified luxury sport, does it have the potential to break through to a larger audience? Could it one day become an Olympic event or inspire more athletes to pursue it out of genuine passion?

As a spectator, it's easy for me to see how rapidly F1 and motorsports have grown over the past few years. With films, music, documentaries, and reality shows spotlighting the world of racing, the sport has been propelled firmly into mainstream pop culture. For instance, Netflix's "Drive to Survive" has been credited with expanding F1's fan base in the U.S., a market that long lagged behind Europe in enthusiasm. Like any sport that gains visibility, this surge has also created a wave of enthusiasts eager to learn, train, and even compete professionally.

F1's recent trajectory highlights this shift in strategy. From leaving the Indianapolis track

years ago to adding the Miami and Las Vegas circuits in just the past three years, the sport's growing presence in the U.S. is no coincidence. It's part of a broader plan to capture the American market, tapping into audiences hungry for high-octane entertainment. As an outsider and viewer, it seemed straightforward to me: With more players, more fans, and increasing visibility, wasn't the next logical step making motorsports an Olympic sport?

To gain a more grounded perspective, I spoke with Shyam Kumar, a motorsport star in the Indian Motorcycle Racing Championship and a national dirt cross champion. His insights, particularly on the financial realities of the industry, revealed a different side of the story. Unlike most sports, motorsports require advanced technology, expensive equipment, and extensive infrastructure, which makes them far less accessible.

The costs involved are staggering. Despite high enthusiasm, many aspiring athletes drop out because training, learning, and competing come with ever-rising expenses. A single season can demand sponsorships, specialized vehicles, travel, and a team

of technicians. For comparison, an athlete in track and field may need shoes, a coach, and a training facility, but auto racing requires an entire ecosystem just to get started. As Kumar emphasized, unless governments and leading motor-sport associations step in to provide incentives, improve access, and recognize the sport's growing popularity, motorsports will struggle to move beyond its "luxury sport" label.

This challenge also raises questions about its Olympic potential. The Olympic Games are rooted in accessibility, where athletes from across the globe, regardless of resources, can compete. Sports like swimming, gymnastics, or sprinting only require basic infrastructure to train millions worldwide. Motorsports, by contrast, face structural barriers that prevent them from being democratized in the same way.

Yet, there are precedents worth noting. Skateboarding, surfing, and even break-dancing, once seen as niche or culturally bound activities, have reached the Olympic stage recently. What they had in common was an overwhelming cultural presence, youth appeal, and a passionate grassroots movement that eventually demanded recognition. Motorsports already enjoy the first two; it lacks grassroots accessibility.

In Kumar's words, "It could take several decades, perhaps 50 to 60 years, for motorsports to truly become mainstream. The reality is that, unlike other sports, its growth cannot be driven by public demand alone. Instead, it depends heavily on decisions made by governing bodies, associations, and the public sector. Without subsidized infrastructure, training academies, and stronger developmental programs, aspiring racers will continue to be left behind".

Still, the strides in global visibility are undeniable. The younger generation

has embraced the sport not just for its adrenaline rush, but also for its cultural relevance. Merchandise, music, and collaborations with fashion brands have extended its influence beyond the racetrack. In this sense, motorsports are already mainstream in culture, if not accessibility.

The future of motorsports lies at a cross-roads. Will it remain a high-gloss spectacle consumed from afar, or will it evolve into a sport where participation is possible across borders and backgrounds? The answer depends less on fans and more on whether those in authority recognize the moment and act. Only time will tell if this rising wave of enthusiasm will be enough to fast-track motorsports toward an Olympic platform or remain in the exclusive lane of luxury sports. ■

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**Sowmya Chandrasekaran** is a second-year graduate student in public relations at USC Annenberg with an academic background in Economics. A classically trained vocalist and instrumentalist from Chennai, she is passionate about integrating her creativity with strategic communication. She recently completed a summer internship with Red Bull India, and has prior experience in entertainment and nonprofit PR, contributes to the ElevAsian desk at the Annenberg Media Center, and is an active member of PRSSA.

# EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES FOR SPORTS TRAINING, BIOMECHANICS, AND INJURY PREVENTION

BY / Chinelo Ogoror



When we think about the future of sports, one emerging advancement is personalized sports biomechanical training, which merges technology and advanced technical training. Sports biomechanics truly stands as one of the major pillars of modern sports science. It provides a complex way to analyze the often invisible and intricate details of human movement — subtleties that usually go unnoticed by the naked eye, yet can make all the difference when we think about sports performance and injury prevention (Adlou et al., 2025). This advancement can lead to significant improvements in performance, with the potential to elevate an athlete from being just average to podium status. Furthermore, biomechanics plays a significant role in enhancing injury resilience by helping athletes move with greater intention, balance, and efficiency (Adlou et al., 2025).

## **Designing for Difference: A New Framework for Training**

Traditionally, coaches have taught athletes to follow a standard form or technique for the given sport — whether that means how to pitch a baseball, how to shoot a basket-

ball, or how to serve in volleyball. However, the reality is that this one-size-fits-all approach overlooks the individual differences that exist among athletes.

Every person brings a unique set of biological and biomechanical characteristics — differences in body structure, mannerism, natural movement patterns, muscle composition, and even limb proportions — all of which deeply affect how they perform. An athlete with a longer wingspan relative to their height may have biomechanical advantages in positions that require reach, like a middle blocker in volleyball. Acknowledging these anatomical differences can help tailor training strategies to enhance performance based on each athlete's unique physical profile.

This becomes especially important when considering elite and professional sports, where high-caliber athletes are already competing at a high level. In an environment like this, the margin for winning and losing comes down to small incremental statistics. Therefore, even incremental improvements in movement, technique, or force generation can lead to statistically significant advantag-

es. This is where sports biomechanics, supported by advanced technologies like sensor systems and real-time motion analysis, becomes truly invaluable.

**Opportunity Cost in Elite Sports Innovation**

Sports biomechanical training can be something that is highly scalable. This is because once one team begins to implement performance technologies that offer even a slight competitive advantage, other teams must adapt or risk falling behind. In high-stakes competition, any method proven to produce better outcomes — whether in accuracy, power, recovery, or injury prevention — quickly becomes a strategic necessity. This gives biomechanical-driven training the potential to force innovation and evolution across the sports industry.

**Application in Sports: Baseball**

Research institutes, such as the Southwest Research Institute (SwRI), are developing innovative training methods that utilize sensor technology to analyze athletes’ movements. Their project features the Engine for Automatic Biomechanical Evaluation (ENABLE™), a portable and user-friendly system aimed at enhancing athletic performance by optimizing pitching accuracy and enabling real-time mechanical adjustments (Southwest Research Institute, 2023).

**Application in Sports: Basketball**

Basketball is a great sport for biomechanical analysis because players come in various shapes and sizes, yet the hoop is at a constant height of 10 feet. This creates a unique opportunity for sports biomechanical training where, as athletes with different body types utilize personalized movement strategies. For example, a shorter guard may benefit from biomechanical training that emphasizes explosive upward force, quicker release angles, and optimized jump shot

trajectories. A taller center might need training focused on balance control, center-of-mass adjustments, and knee loading mechanics during rebounding or pivoting (Southwest Research Institute, 2024).

**Application in Sports: Injury Prevention in Women’s Sports & Female Anatomy**

One of the most impactful applications of sports biomechanics is injury prevention, specifically for female athletes. Research shows that women are disproportionately affected by sports injuries; for example, anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries occur up to eight times more in females compared to males. Factors such as anatomical, developmental, neuromuscular, and hormonal differences contribute to this increased risk, yet scientific research on this topic is limited. (Mancino et al., 2024). This is where sports biomechanical science can transform sports and serve as a crucial tool for optimizing performance and preventing injuries in female anatomical research. ■

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**Chinelo Ogogor** is a graduate student majoring in digital media at USC Annenberg, with a background in biomedical engineering and biomaterials engineering. She was a Division I volleyball player at Wichita State University. She has conducted research in women’s healthcare and is currently working on a sports technology project. She is especially passionate about exploring the connections between different fields of study, believing that true innovation happens at the intersection of diverse ideas from music, engineering, and creativity.

# THE SUPER BOWL'S NEXT PLAYBOOK

BY / ChatGPT, prompted by Ron Antonette



***The Super Bowl is the last commercial everyone still watches.***

For decades, it's been the crown jewel of advertising: 30 seconds, 100 million viewers, and now a price tag close to \$8 million. The ads have become cultural events in their own right — Monday morning conversations revolve around them as much as the game.

That won't change anytime soon. Brands will keep paying because the Super Bowl delivers something almost extinct in media: collective attention. For one night, tens of millions of people experience the same thing at the same time. That's priceless.

But the way Super Bowl commercials \*work\* is changing. The future won't be decided by who has the funniest spot, but by who designs the smartest system around it. Here's what's next.

## 1. The Run-Up Is the Real Show

Teasers, celebrity “trailers,” and sneak previews are already standard. In the future, the spot itself will function as the finale of a

multi-week story arc. Campaigns that win won't just surprise viewers on Sunday — they'll build anticipation for weeks.

**Prediction:** By 2030, most Super Bowl campaigns will be planned as 60-day content ecosystems. The :30 ad will be just one chapter in a bigger story.

## 2. Participation Beats Punchlines

Funny ads will never disappear, but audiences now expect something more: an action. QR codes, alternate endings, and limited-time drops are just the beginning. Soon, fans will influence outcomes in real time or unlock rewards for their watch parties.

**Prediction:** Within a few years, at least half of Super Bowl ads will feature interactive elements. The measure won't be laughs alone — it will be how many people \*played along\*.

## 3. Creators Replace Celebrities

The old playbook called for a single celebrity cameo. But cultural influence now flows through networks of creators. The next generation of campaigns will draft dozens of voices to remix, interpret, and spread the story.

**Prediction:** Future Super Bowl spots won't live in one broadcast cut. They'll exist in hundreds of creator versions, launched simultaneously.

**4. Proof Replaces Purpose**

Audiences no longer reward lofty statements without evidence. Campaigns tied to equity, sustainability, or community impact must show receipts. Purpose isn't disappearing — but performative gestures will.

**Prediction:** Brands unable to back their claims with proof will avoid social issues on the Super Bowl stage. Those who can prove impact will set the standard.

**What This Means for Communicators**

The Super Bowl commercial is not going away. But its power will come less from the thirty seconds on air and more from the system that surrounds it:

- Before the game: Build anticipation with stories worth covering.
- During the game: Turn the ad into a platform for participation, not just a punchline.
- After the game: Equip creators and journalists to carry the story forward.
- Always: Tie campaigns to actions that can be proven.

**Conclusion**

The Super Bowl ad will survive because collective attention is too rare to abandon. But its future belongs to communicators who understand that the ad is not the finish line — it's the kickoff.

The winners won't be the brands with the funniest jokes or the biggest stars. They'll be the ones who build anticipation before, participation during, and credibility after.

Because in the end, the scoreboard that matters most isn't views or laughs. It's relevance. ■

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This essay was written by **ChatGPT** in collaboration with editor Ron Antonette. Using the contents of the 2026 Relevance Report as context, ChatGPT 5.0 was prompted with a series of questions about the future of Super Bowl advertising and produced multiple drafts — evolving from general commentary to specific predictions — culminating in this final version, “The Super Bowl’s Next Playbook.”





**LOS ANGELES:  
THE WORLD'S SPORTS STAGE**

# CHANGING THE GAME

BY / Hilary Smith



In 2026, California will become the global epicenter of sports. The FIFA World Cup, Super Bowl, NBA All-Star Game, and the countdown to the 2028 Olympic Games will draw the world's attention to the Golden State — and Comcast NBCUniversal will be at the heart of it all.

With that visibility comes both responsibility and opportunity.

At Comcast NBCUniversal, we believe sports are more than entertainment—they're a force for connection, growth, and transformation. As these major events unfold across NBC, Telemundo, Peacock, and Xfinity, we're using the power of sports to expand access, uplift communities, and create lasting impact beyond the game.

## **Expanding Access to Youth Sports**

Early access to sports can change a child's life. According to the Aspen Institute's Project Play, it leads to better health, stronger academics, and lifelong habits of teamwork and resilience. That's why we're deepening our investment in youth sports — especially in communities that have been left on the sidelines.

As part of that investment, we're building on our partnership with Laureus Sport for Good, once again supporting a flag football clinic for Woodcraft Rangers students in Los Angeles. Students play alongside NFL Rams players and NBCU volunteers who provide coaching and mentorship. These moments offer more than play; they provide confidence and a sense of belonging.

## **Partnering for Scaled Impact**

We know that lasting change happens through collaboration. Our work with the U.S. Soccer Foundation is a cornerstone of this approach. Ahead of the World Cup, Telemundo is supporting Just Ball Unity Cups — bilingual, vibrant community celebrations of soccer and culture across New York City, Los Angeles, and Miami designed to inspire youth and families. We're also supporting the "Yes, Coach!" initiative — helping to train 100,000 coach-mentors in Spanish and English by 2030 — because every child deserves a trusted adult that supports them on and off the field.

During NBA All-Star Weekend, we'll join the NBA in supporting LA wildfire relief and schoolyard renovations, creating volunteer

efforts that help bring the game of basketball to communities across the city.

**Elevating Voices Through Sports Storytelling**

It's not just about who plays — it's also about who gets to tell the story. Through NBCU's Creative Impact Lab, we help nonprofits with their marketing efforts while training the next generation of creative professionals.

For example, the Lab commissioned apprentices from the nonprofit creative agency Venice Arts to produce a PSA for the Challenged Athletes Foundation that aired during the Paris Olympics. Now, The Lab is working with the nonprofit creative agency Wide Angle Youth Media, whose apprentices are creating a bilingual PSA for "Yes, Coach!" to run ahead of the World Cup. These young creatives will also be invited to apply to go behind the scenes at LA's biggest sporting events, such as NBA All-Star Weekend, gaining hands-on reporting experience and building career pathways.

**Spotlighting Local Champions**

As we look ahead to the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Los Angeles, our partnership with the LA84 Foundation and the Play Equity Fund continues to grow. We're proud to support their Play Equity Summit, focused on expanding access to sports and play for all kids, and using our media platforms to spotlight their "26 for 26" Community Champions — nonprofits using soccer to empower Los Angeles County residents. We're also looking forward to deepening our collaboration by highlighting the impact of soccer-driven organizations in the lead-up to the World Cup. These stories reflect the heart of our mission: to amplify local voices and invest in the communities we serve.

**Why It Matters**

This work is personal to me. Being a high school lacrosse player taught me teamwork, resilience, and empathy — and as I watched my own kids carry the ball down the field, I witnessed the confidence and connection they gained through sports. That's what I want for every young person: the chance to feel seen, supported, and part of something bigger.

As California prepares to welcome the world, we're planning to meet the moment — not just with cameras and coverage, but with a commitment to expand access, strengthen community, and help every child build purpose through sports.

Because when we change the game, we change lives. ■

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**Hilary Smith** is the executive vice president of corporate social responsibility for NBCUniversal. She is responsible for leading NBCUniversal's global social impact strategy, philanthropic investments, and employee volunteer programs. Additionally, Smith oversees NBCUniversal's award-winning public service announcement campaign, The More You Know. Smith is a director on the board of the Comcast NBCUniversal Foundation, and is also a member of the national boards of The Center for Communications and BuildOn. She is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# FROM SPECTATORS TO CO-CREATORS: THE NEW PLAYBOOK FOR SPORTS PR

BY / Ray Day & Shane Arman



In just a few years, sports fandom will be almost unrecognizable. Fans won't just watch — they'll direct the action, remix the highlights and share their own angles in real time. The Olympics will unfold in living rooms, on city streets and in augmented reality headsets, while the 'main event' plays out as much on social feeds as it does in the stadium.

For PR pros, this isn't a distant dream — it's the playbook you'll need by 2028.

## **Participation is the New Fandom**

We've moved far beyond the days when fans were content to watch from the stands or their living rooms. Today's sports fans, especially young fans, demand to be active participants in the experience, a shift most visible in sports betting and the technological innovations reshaping live events.

Take Stagwell's AROUND platform, which revolutionizes live stadium experiences by blending physical and digital engagement. At Minnesota United matches, thousands of fans simultaneously interact with augmented reality content through their mobile devices, creating shared moments that extend far beyond what happens on the pitch. This

isn't just a gimmick — it's a fundamental reimagining of live sports.

The LA28 Olympics will take this participatory ethos to the global stage. Through tech-forward partnerships, the organizing committee is building a tech stack that will deliver hyper-personalized fan experiences at scale. Imagine opening an Olympic app that knows your favorite athletes, suggests events based on your personal interests, and connects you with like-minded fans across the world to enjoy a collective, shared experience — all while preserving the singular magic of the Games, the feeling that, for a few brief weeks, the whole world is in the same place, cheering together.

## **Emotional Intelligence: The New MVP of Sports PR**

As the line between spectator and participant blurs, successful communication requires more than just polished messaging — it demands genuine emotional intelligence. Modern fans can spot inauthenticity from a mile away, and they're quick to call it out on social media.

This presents both a challenge and opportunity for communicators. Athletes themselves

lead this charge, using social platforms to share unfiltered glimpses of their lives beyond competition. Consider how Simone Biles’ Gold Over America Tour — a self-produced gymnastics show — drew sellout crowds by blending sports with raw conversations about mental health. LeBron James’ Mind the Game and Naomi Osaka’s Hana Kuma are two more athlete-led ventures that entirely bypass traditional PR channels. Fans don’t just want to cheer for jerseys — they want to connect with the people wearing them.

Going forward, the most effective sports PR teams will act less like message police and more like collaborators in the story. At LA28, that could mean building frameworks where athletes share their journeys in real time — authentically, passionately — while the brand becomes part of the conversation rather than the script.

**The Media Landscape:  
The Play is Everywhere**

Perhaps the most dizzying challenge for sports communicators is media fragmentation. The traditional model of beginning with a press release or a pitch that trickles down through established media outlets has been upended. Today, narratives can explode from anywhere: a viral TikTok, a niche podcast or even a single well-timed tweet from an everyday fan.

Consider these eye-opening statistics from Stagwell’s National Research Group:

- YouTube (33%), Facebook (20%), TikTok (18%) and Instagram (16%) make up four of the top six sources sports fans go most often for sports-related content.
- 57% of sports fans under 35 say they prefer to engage with sports through social media/highlights rather than live games.

For LA28 organizers and their partners, this means crafting strategies that can gain traction across countless micro-platforms, while still paying attention to how cross-channel opportunities can amplify the story.

The solution lies in embracing this complexity rather than fighting it. Smart communicators monitor emerging narratives using AI tools, identify influencers who can authentically amplify their messages, and create content designed to be remixed and shared across platforms. It’s about planting seeds in dozens of digital gardens rather than relying on a single megaphone.

**Winning the Future of Sports PR**

As we count down to LA28, the most successful communicators will be those who recognize these fundamental shifts:

1. Technology should enhance human connection, not replace it.
2. Emotional authenticity trumps polished messaging — real people and real stories resonate most.
3. Influence flows unpredictably — agility is critical to capitalize on organic moments.

In 2028, the togetherness of the Olympics will look different — more interactive, more personal and more decentralized — but no less powerful. For PR pros ready to lean in, this is a chance to help billions of people feel part of something bigger than themselves, to turn technology into a bridge and to make authenticity the currency of connection.

The future of sports engagement isn’t coming — it’s here, unfolding in real time. The only question is: will you be bold enough to step onto the field? ■



**Ray Day**, APR, is the vice chair of Stagwell and executive chair of Allison Worldwide, Stagwell’s largest communications agency. Day oversees the integration, innovation and growth of Stagwell’s more than 70 global agencies. Day has more than 30 years of experience as a chief communications officer for leading communications teams, brands and agencies, including IBM and the Ford Motor Co. He is the 2025 chair of PRSA and is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

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# THE INNOVATION OF SPORTS STADIUMS AND HOW THE INTUIT DOME LEADS THE WAY

BY / Joe Carreon



Walk into the Intuit Dome and the first thing you notice is what you don't notice. No lines. No waiting. Concessions bill you automatically, so you can grab nachos and head straight to your seat. The friction of old stadiums disappears before the game even begins.

Then you look up. A sea of Clippers fans fills The Wall, a vertical section of 4,700 people roaring in unison. Above it hangs the Halo Board, the largest scoreboard in the league, wrapping replays and stats around the arena like an IMAX ceiling. Visiting players hear the chaos, feel the buzz, and miss more free throws here than anywhere else. For the Clippers, architecture itself has become defense.

Steve Ballmer saw this coming. His passion, sometimes comedic and sometimes prophetic, is stamped into the Dome's DNA. When he raved about building 1,160 toilets,

it wasn't just a punchline. It was a promise: fans won't miss a moment. The Dome is built to keep people in their seats, cheering, not standing in line.

As a Warriors fan, I still remember Oracle Arena shaking under my feet, even from the nosebleeds. That energy is hard to replicate, but the Intuit Dome comes close while fixing the flaws of older arenas. Every seat has a clean view. Every line is gone. Every decibel is amplified. Other owners are already studying the blueprint, sketching their own Walls and Halo Boards. The Dome has raised the bar for what stadiums must deliver.

The experience inside feels less like a venue and more like a theme park for basketball. The Wall creates a college-style mania. The Halo Board pulls fans deeper into the story with every replay. Concessions are grab-and-go, keeping energy focused on the game. Personalized touches, from AR overlays to real-time fan cams, make every fan feel part of the show.

The Dome’s message also extends outside its walls. It is carbon-neutral from day one, LEED Platinum certified, powered by solar and designed to waste nothing. For Gen Z and Millennial fans, that is more than an engineering feat. It is a reason to trust the brand. For Inglewood, it is an economic engine: 7,000 jobs created, \$260 million flowing into the city each year, and small business contracts that give local entrepreneurs a stake in the arena’s success. On game nights, the Plaza hums with energy, restaurants fill, and the Dome feels less like a stadium and more like the center of the city.

For the Clippers, it is also independence. At Crypto.com Arena, they once played under curtains that hid the Lakers’ championship banners. Now they play under their own roof, one that declares a new identity: innovative, loud, unapologetic. The Dome is more than a home. It is a brand reset, built to attract younger fans with immersive tech and to anchor community loyalty for the long run.

The future of sports is not just played on the court. It is built into the arenas that host the game. The Intuit Dome is a cathedral of innovation, a billboard of community pride, and a playbook for every franchise that follows. Years from now, when people talk about the shift to immersive, sustainable, fan-first stadiums, they will point to Inglewood and say: this is where it began. ■

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**Joe Carreon** is a graduate student at USC Annenberg, pursuing a Master in Public Relations and Advertising degree. He produces The Future of PR podcast for the USC Center for PR and recently completed a summer internship with IW Group. His work focuses on audience insight gathering and creative brand strategy, especially across different generations. He has also supported projects with Deloitte and PRSSA’s USC Warner Brothers Pictures client.

**ON GAME NIGHTS, THE PLAZA HUMS WITH ENERGY, RESTAURANTS FILL, AND THE DOME FEELS LESS LIKE A STADIUM AND MORE LIKE THE CENTER OF THE CITY.**

# FROM GLOBAL EVENTS TO LOCAL IMPACT: HOW SPORTS SHAPE CULTURE, COMMERCE, AND COMMUNITY

BY / Michelle Russo



In an era marked by deep societal divisions — political, cultural, and generational — sports remain one of the few arenas where unity can still be found. Whether it is a packed stadium roaring in unison, a global audience tuning in to the Olympic Games, or a local youth team bringing neighbors together, sports transcend boundaries and offer a shared experience that is unmatched.

During my career, I have had the privilege of witnessing firsthand how sports can connect brands to communities, and people to each other. In today's fragmented media landscape, where echo chambers dominate and polarization threatens civil discourse, sports offer a rare common ground.

Los Angeles is now poised to become the center of the sports universe. With the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games on the horizon, the city is not just hosting events — it is hosting a movement. Sports today are more than

games; they are cultural catalysts, economic engines, and platforms for purpose and pride. And at the heart of this transformation is communication.

My time at Discovery reinforced this belief. I helped create and lead the company's inaugural Olympic Games broadcast and streaming offering across 40 markets in Europe. At the time, the company was the number one nonfiction media company in the world, and sports provides the ultimate real-life stories of human endeavor and high stakes — transcending geographic borders and fostering global connection. We were telling stories that resonated across languages, cultures, and generations. From a ski jumper in Poland to an alpine skier in Italy, we localized narratives to reflect the pride and passion of each nation. The Olympic Games are a masterclass in unity — where athletes from over 200 nations compete not just for medals, but for mutual respect and shared dreams.

At the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, I have seen the other side of the equation: the economic and civic potential of sports. When a city like Los Angeles prepares to host global events, the ripple effects are profound. Infrastructure investments, job creation, tourism, and small business growth all follow. But these benefits don't happen automatically — they require intentional storytelling. PR professionals have a responsibility to ensure that the narrative includes local communities, a range of voices and perspectives, and long-term impact.

At the same time, the very nature of sports communication is evolving. Athletes are no longer just spokespeople — they are storytellers and entrepreneurs. Name, image and likeness (NIL) deals have empowered college athletes to build personal brands and advocate for causes they care about. Social media has given fans a direct line to their heroes — and a platform to shape the conversation themselves. The traditional PR playbook has been rewritten. Today, authenticity beats polish. Transparency beats spin.

**IN TODAY'S FRAGMENTED  
MEDIA LANDSCAPE,  
WHERE ECHO CHAMBERS  
DOMINATE AND POLARIZATION  
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COMMON GROUND.**

This shift presents both a challenge and an opportunity for our profession. We must embrace a model of communication that is collaborative, not controlling. That means

helping athletes navigate the public arena and manage public pressure. It means listening to fans as much as we speak to them. And it means recognizing that the most powerful sports stories are often the most personal — stories of achievement, sacrifice, and human endeavor.

Looking ahead, the convergence of sports, technology, and culture only will accelerate. From immersive fan experiences powered by AI to real-time activism on digital platforms, the future of sports communication will be fast, fluid, and fiercely human. PR professionals and students must be ready to navigate this landscape with agility, empathy, and ethics.

But amid all this change, one thing remains constant: the power of sports to inspire. Whether it is a child watching their first game, a city rallying behind a team, or a nation coming together during the Olympic Games, sports remind us of what we share. As communicators, we have the privilege — and the responsibility — to bring people together and shape how those moments are remembered. ■

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**Michelle Russo** is the chief communications officer at State Farm. She previously led communications and marketing at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, communications at Discovery, Inc. (now Warner Bros. Discovery), and has served as a media consultant on two Presidential campaigns. She is a USC Annenberg alumnae, and is a member of the USC Center for PR board of advisers.

# POWERING DREAMS IN THE CITY THAT WELCOMED US WITH LA28

BY / Ed Beadle



When our Honda team first visited the headquarters of the LA28 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we didn't quite know what to expect. The visit was part of our early exploration into what a potential partnership might look like and with the uncertainty in the market it felt like something of a long shot.

That visit reminded me of something deeper — both the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movement and Honda share the vision of The Power of Dreams. This isn't about marketing reach. It's about honoring the home team: Team USA, and the city where our American story began. A place that welcomed us, and now, decades later, a stage that allows us to show the world what the power of dreams can build.

## ***The City We've Always Belonged To***

Over 65 years ago, Honda came to Los Angeles. As the makers of small

motorcycles, our founders would have had an easier time establishing their first overseas sales operations in another market, but chose America because they believed success here would lead to success worldwide.

So, this new relationship supporting the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movement isn't just about brand alignment, or even the nationwide marketing engagement that will bring fans closer to the athletes' journeys. Our commitment to LA28 and Team USA is really a humble "thank you."

## ***The Power of Dreams***

Of course, this is also a rare opportunity to show the world the meaning behind The Power of Dreams.

Many companies shift their values over time but at Honda, we continue to chase the same dream. That's why our team remains so focused on building products that move people not just physically, but emotionally.

And it's not just our products. That first meeting at LA28 sparked ideas that spoke to the many areas across our business where innovation is underway. Could our electrified products serve as pace vehicles for LA28 distance races? I imagined our Motocompacto e-scooter providing transportation around the Athletes Village. Or what if our marine engines ferried fans across Santa Monica Bay? While plans are still in development, all of it felt like the stars were aligning.

**Dreams with a Purpose**

Ultimately, our partnership with LA28 and Team USA isn't just marketing, but about supporting the community where we live and work. When Honda invests in something, we believe in showing up fully and personally. I've had the privilege of witnessing just how Honda is made up of people who give their time, talent, and energy — not because they must, but because they care.

That mindset — engineering not just with precision, but with purpose lives throughout Honda.

Our engineers have applied their passion to adaptive racing, using our history with robotics and motorsports to design racing wheelchairs to be at the pinnacle of competitiveness. That work came full circle when U.S. Paralympic gold medalist and LA28 Hopeful Susannah Scaroni, who races in that Honda-engineered wheelchair, joined us at our partnership announcement. Her story reminds us that belief just needs a little support to take flight.

That same spirit now lives in our automotive sponsorship with the Acura brand and technical support of USA Bobsled/Skeleton, where Honda engineers at our HALO wind tunnel in Ohio are helping U.S. competitors gain an aerodynamic advantage — because even milliseconds make the difference.

This is what it means to support the home team. Not with slogans, but with personal passion. With expertise. With people giving their best to help others pursue something extraordinary.

We became a partner of LA28 and Team USA because we saw ourselves in it. In the stories, the dreams, and the quiet conviction that something extraordinary is possible. ■

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**Ed Beadle** is the vice president of the Digital Services and Marketing Division business unit within the Auto Business Center at American Honda Motor Co., Inc., leading marketing and CX operations for the Honda and Acura automobile brands as well as the company's digital functions. He is a frequent guest lecturer at USC.

# FROM JIM MURRAY TO TACO TUESDAY: WHO SHAPES THE STORY NOW?

BY / Ron Antonette



My first L.A. sports heroes weren't just featured in the morning paper. They were the actual stars of the newspaper themselves:

The morning sports columnist.

Jim Murray. Doug Krikorian. Allan Mallamud. Their words told me everything I needed to know about whether Magic and the Lakers could finally beat Boston, why Fernandomania was important to my city, and whether the Triple Crown line of Dionne, Simmer and Taylor could capture a Stanley Cup. (No, they couldn't.)

While their highlights were voiced by local anchors, and their games described by local sportscasting legends, it was the columnists who shaped perceptions of our favorite athletes for an entire city.

Murray used his flair for storytelling and ability to weave history analogies together with sports stories to paint vivid images

of athletes. Krikorian built one-on-one relationships with many of the players to be able to tell their stories from a first-person perspective. (And he also would famously antagonize them, as he did with the Rams' Isiah Robertson). Mallamud's "Notes on a Scorecard" gave us regular snapshots of actions mixed with opinions about every major team in town.

There was no bombast, no pre-defined hot takes, no slander. And we would learn later that they often protected the athletes as much as they revealed glimpses of their flaws. Above all, these storytellers gave us historical perspective — putting a player's big night into context with decades of sports memory. For a young fan, that meant learning not just about the 1980s, but about the eras that came before.

Today, the sports columnist's role is being handled by... the athletes themselves. They are sharing their own stories, announcing their own transactions,

owning their own brands. They don't need to wait for a reporter on deadline. They can post a message they know fans will see — and sports media will simply repeat.

LeBron doesn't need the LA Times to let the world know how he's doing — he hits record, smiles, and sends the message himself. We know he loves Taco Tuesday because he told us, straight into the camera.

There's something powerful about that. The connection feels personal. Fans hear from their heroes in real time, without a filter.

But when the subject is also the narrator, we can lose perspective.

We've heard about the NBA star trolling fans on a burner account. We've read ghostwritten apologies that appear under an athlete's own name. We've seen curated posts that feel more like advertising than authenticity. So the question lingers: When athletes tell their own stories, are they showing the real competitor, or a polished version designed for engagement and brand growth?

For PR professionals working in sports, this is the new balancing act. Some engagements are contractual — league-mandated interviews, appearances with broadcast partners. Those remain valuable storytelling moments, especially if they come with softball questions.

But day to day, the work is different. It's helping athletes tell their stories in a way that feels authentic, connects with fans, and holds up under scrutiny. Sometimes it's helping them or partners building business. Sometimes it's telling stories of adversity and comebacks. Sometimes it's correcting the record. Sometimes it's even auditions for future jobs.

In this new landscape, the PR pro has to take on the roles the old columnists once

filled — storyteller, historian, occasional referee. They need to understand the sports landscape in their city and league, bring perspective on how past stars shape the present, and act as brand protectors — alert to pitfalls and aware of how a single comment can be interpreted. They also need to monitor their athletes the way brands monitor themselves: tracking conversations, spotting trends, and deciding when and how to engage.

The upside is reach. Many athletes now command bigger audiences on their own than traditional sports outlets ever did. With the right guidance, they can use that reach to make a real impact. They can do more than shape headlines — they can shape culture.

For PR professionals working alongside them, that's both the challenge and the opportunity. That's the new game. ■

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**Ron Antonette** is chief program officer at the USC Center for PR, overseeing events, projects, reports, and graduate student contributors. He is also founder of R. Antonette Communications, a consultancy he launched in 2009 to lead campaigns for brands and civic initiatives, including projects for Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Claremont. He previously held leadership roles at Golin, FleishmanHillard, Conagra Brands, and Mattel. Ron is a USC Annenberg alumnus and was a USC Trustee Scholar.

# TOO HOT TO PLAY IT COOL: AS THE WORLD GETS HOTTER, CAN LA28 OLYMPICS REWRITE THE PLAYBOOK FOR CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS IN SPORTS?

BY / Allison Agsten & Anahita Mehra



**A**n the words of famous philosopher Charles Barkley, “College athletics is so f—d up right now. I don’t know what they’re gonna do to fix this thing. It’s out of control. I don’t know how you’re gonna put toothpaste back in the tube.”

Spectators at Paris 2024 huddled under misting sprayers near the Eiffel Tower as a 36°C (97°F) heatwave engulfed the city. Volunteers hosed down fans and signs pointed to water refill stations, all part of emergency cooling measures to keep people safe. Athletes, too, grappled with the heat: on sun-baked courts and fields, they took extra breaks, draping themselves with ice bags and cold towels. This was the scene at what some called the hottest Olympics on record, a stark reminder that climate change has introduced a formidable new opponent.

Sebastian Coe, a gold medal-winning former Olympic middle-distance runner and the president of World Athletics, wrote:

“While global temperatures continue to rise, climate change should increasingly be viewed as an existential threat to sport,” in a paper titled *Rings of Fire, Heat Risks* at the 2024 Paris Olympics released ahead of the Paris games.

In Tokyo’s 2021 Games, previously the hottest Olympics, more than 100 athletes suffered heat-related illnesses, and a U.S. discus thrower openly questioned whether Summer Games in the hottest months will even “be a thing” by 2028 unless events are held at midnight. Extreme heat is no longer an anomaly; it’s an expectation and it’s forcing the Olympics to adapt or risk athlete health and performance on a large scale.

Paris 2024 offered a glimpse of how to confront this challenge. Organizers had clear heat contingency plans: they pledged to adjust event schedules if temperatures became unsafe, and they communicated these protocols publicly so athletes and spectators knew what to expect. Météo

France, the national weather agency, was on alert to advise Olympic officials, and venues across Paris were equipped with cooling stations and misting tents for relief. Such transparency and preparedness paid off despite record heat, competition continued with minimal disruption. The International Olympic Committee noted that Tokyo's own heat countermeasures (like moving the marathon to a cooler region) "worked well," sharing those lessons with Paris. Key sporting bodies are also establishing concrete thresholds: for example, Olympic tennis matches now trigger an "extreme heat" protocol when the wet-bulb globe temperature exceeds 30°C (86°F), pausing play for cooling breaks and even suspending matches if conditions worsen. All these steps underscore an important principle: clear communication of risk and response is just as vital as the physical measures themselves.

Los Angeles has the chance to build on these lessons and even raise the bar. The 2028 LA Games will unfold in a region known for summer heat waves and the urban heat island effect (concrete and asphalt can make the city significantly hotter than its surroundings). It's also a region grappling with climate-amplified threats like wildfires and air-quality alerts. These conditions, while potentially hazards for residents, visitors, and states alike, also offer a sizable opportunity for LA28. By proactively publishing its heat-response playbook — well before the Opening Ceremony — LA28 can become a model of transparent climate risk communication. This means clearly defining protocols and thresholds: for instance, announcing that if the heat index or wet-bulb temperature hits a certain limit, marathon and endurance events will start at dawn, or that extra water stations and cooling buses will be deployed if ambient temperatures exceed X degrees. It means detailing contingency actions, like shifting outdoor event times, providing

cooling centers for spectators, or even rescheduling events in extreme scenarios. Crucially, it also means engaging the public and athletes in these plans: when people know ahead of time that misting tents, free water, shade and schedule tweaks are on standby, they can protect their health and have greater confidence in the organizers' preparedness.

Encouragingly, LA28 has signaled awareness that a hotter climate demands new thinking. The organizing committee has partnered with local universities and agencies on ShadeLA, a campaign to expand tree canopy and shade structures citywide in time for the Games.

**EXTREME HEAT IS NO LONGER AN ANOMALY; IT'S AN EXPECTATION AND IT'S FORCING THE OLYMPICS TO ADAPT OR RISK ATHLETE HEALTH AND PERFORMANCE ON A LARGE SCALE.**

"LA28 is committed to incorporating sustainable solutions throughout the Games footprint," said Becky Dale, VP of Sustainability at LA28. "ShadeLA supports not only keeping spectators cool during the Games, but also leaving a legacy of a cooler, greener Los Angeles for all Angelenos."

Heat is already the deadliest weather risk in L.A., but boosting shade can drop the "feels-like" temperature by an astounding 20-40° F. Those are long-term investments in resilience and public health. Now, the

next step is coupling infrastructure with information — openly sharing how LA28 will protect athletes and fans if a brutal heatwave strikes during the Games.

“Los Angeles is hosting an unprecedented series of major sporting events, creating

**ENCOURAGINGLY, LA28 HAS SINGALED AWARENESS THAT A HOTTER CLIMATE DEMANDS NEW THINKING. THE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE HAS PARTNERED WITH LOCAL UNIVERSITIES AND AGENCIES ON SHADELA, A CAMPAIGN TO EXPAND TREE CANOPY AND SHADE STRUCTURES CITY-WIDE IN TIME FOR THE GAMES.**

a rare window to rethink how we design for heat. ShadeLA is using this momentum to deliver shade infrastructure that protects athletes, fans, and workers during the Games — and keeps communities cooler, healthier, and more comfortable for decades to come,” said Monica Dean, climate and sustainability practice director at USC Dornsife Public Exchange.

For journalists and communicators, LA28 can offer an effective pre-crisis communication model. Transparent updates on climate adaptations and contingencies can set a new standard for major events. Instead of waiting for criticism, Los Angeles can model safe hosting in a warming world — protecting LA28 and inspiring future hosts to put

resilience and honest communication first. The clock is ticking toward the next Olympic flame in Los Angeles, but with the right preparations and messaging, LA28 can ensure that flame burns brightly, not blisteringly, for everyone watching. ■

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**Allison Agsten** is the inaugural director of USC Annenberg’s Center for Climate Journalism and Communication where she develops initiatives to bolster public understanding of climate change. She is also executive producer of the energy transition podcast series, *Electric Futures*, and the author of a range of reports addressing climate change and the media, corporate sustainability practices, and policy-related issues. In addition, Agsten serves as the USC Wrigley Institute for Environment and Sustainability’s first curator and as the university’s eco-chaplain.

**Anahita Mehra** is a strategic communicator and storyteller at the crossroads of sustainability, gender justice, and digital advocacy. She is pursuing a Master of digital communications at USC Annenberg while working as a research associate with Dean Willow Bay’s office, the Center for Climate Communication, and the USC Center for PR. Anahita has led global campaigns with the UNGA, WEF Davos, and COP, and in India drove survivor advocacy and youth entrepreneurship projects to advance sustainable development.

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