

Spiegel On Sports

Spiegel Research Center

September 2026

How to Leverage Social Connection for Sports Fandom



The State of Sports Fandom Today

68% of Americans identify as fans of at least one sport. This figure has remained nearly unchanged since 2023.

52% of sports fans say family influence or growing up with a team is a primary reason they became fans.

84% of sports fans believe live sporting events are too expensive for the average person to attend.

75% of sports fans believe too many separate platforms are required to watch live sports.

Why study fandom now? Sports fandom remains widespread, but the ways fans participate are changing. Family traditions and social relationships continue to shape why people become fans, while rising ticket prices, fragmented streaming services, fantasy sports, social media, and gambling increasingly influence how they engage and spend. Understanding the emotional and communal foundations of fandom can help explain why fans remain loyal, how they make consumer decisions, and what teams, leagues, and media companies must preserve as sports become more commercialized and digitally fragmented.



Source: Sawyer, J., Newall, M., & Mendez, B. (2026, April 2). Americans show increased concerns about sports betting. Ipsos. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/americans-show-increased-concerns-about-sports-betting>

Executive Summary

Introduction

Sports fandom is often described as a relationship between an individual and a sport, team, or athlete. The six studies in this report broaden this traditional definition of fandom to suggest that the social aspect of fandom is more central to being a fan than is commonly understood. Specifically, a fan's connection to a team is often built, facilitated, and sustained through relationships with other people. Although every fan experiences fandom differently, common patterns emerge across fans that can help sports organizations build stronger and more inclusive communities. This report offers a qualitative account of how 50 sports fans build and maintain these social connections.

How Social Connection Builds Fandom

Previous research by Larry DeGaris (2025), the Executive Director of The Spiegel Research Center, found that social connection is a stronger predictor of fan behaviors like media consumption, event attendance, and sports betting than many traditional measures of fandom. Rather than becoming fans solely through attachment to a team, people become fans through shared experiences with others: watching games with family, attending events with friends, learning traditions, and participating in communities. These relationships transform initial interest into long-term fandom. Across the six Spiegel on Sports studies, participants described how fandom develops through diverse social experiences, entering American sports culture, navigating athletic identities, participating in digital communities, and experiencing competition.

Building More Inclusive Fan Communities

This understanding expands the responsibilities of sports organizations. Sports have unusual potential to create shared experiences among people who may otherwise have little reason to interact. Communities can be welcoming, but they can also be difficult to enter when their language, rituals, expectations, and unwritten rules remain inaccessible. The findings in this report identify several other ways to make fandom more inclusive. Organizations can reduce logistical and cultural barriers, explain traditions without assuming prior knowledge, create content that introduces the people and stories behind a sport, and support existing fans who act as willing transmitters. Fans themselves also have a role to play. They can invite others to games, explain rather than judge, share the history behind traditions, and make room for people who do not yet understand the sport.

This produces a broader question for sports fans and organizations alike: What are they doing to bring their communities together, and what are they doing to include those who remain outside them? If fandom is sustained through social relationships, then growing fandom requires creating the conditions in which people can enter, participate, connect, and eventually feel that the community belongs to them too.



Ed Hunt
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3 Takeaways for Sports Marketers

Build

Build a fan community by lowering the barriers to entry of sports fandom. A potential fan does not need to understand every rule before they can participate. Leveraging shared rituals, food, spectacle, and welcoming people through marketing campaigns can make sports feel accessible and give potential fans an initial sense of belonging.

Facilitate

Facilitate a fan community by creating opportunities for fans to connect with one another, not only with the team. Sports organizations and marketers can provide the setting, traditions, content, and shared experiences. The sense of belonging becomes real through interaction with friends, families, longtime fans, and newcomers.

Maintain

Maintain a fan community by helping fans develop something they can call their own. A player to follow, a ritual to adopt, a story that matters, or a relationship maintained through the sport. Initial exposure can bring someone into the community, and a personal anchor helps turn temporary or borrowed participation into sustained fandom.



The Architecture of Belonging: How Game Day Is Designed and Experienced

SECTION 1

Professional Facilitation of Fandom

How College Game-Day Event Facilitators Describe Success



By Bradley Dow

The most valuable fans to college game-day event facilitators may not be those who spend the most money, but those who connect the most people.

This report explores what keeps fans connected to sports and how the people behind the fan experience help build those connections. It brings together perspectives from fans and interviews with two athletics leaders, one at Northwestern University and one at The United States Military Academy at West Point.

Across these accounts, relationships stand out. Fans often find their way into sports through family, friends, or teammates. Students at Northwestern and cadets at West Point help create the atmosphere and carry on traditions that bring the wider fanbase together. These fans invite others, explain traditions, and help newcomers feel welcome. Their value extends beyond what they spend to the connections they build and the people they keep coming back.

The experience must succeed independently of the outcome of the game - Fans come to watch the game, but their connections with other people keep them coming back over time.

Athletics leaders work to make game day welcoming, exciting, and easy to navigate. Fans appreciate those efforts, but their most memorable experiences often center on time with friends, shared traditions, and feeling part of a community. Among highly engaged fans, these social and emotional connections—not the outcomes of individual games—formed the foundation of long-term loyalty, media engagement, attendance, and spending.



Professional Facilitation of Fandom

How College Game-Day Event Facilitators Describe Success

Introduction

Sports fandom has been studied extensively from the fan's perspective: how identity forms around teams, how belonging emerges through ritual, and how emotional attachment endures over time. Less attention has been paid to the professionals who design and sustain those conditions. This study refers to those practitioners as Sports Fandom Facilitators (SFFs): senior athletic-department leaders, often Associate Athletic Directors or equivalent roles, who are responsible for both revenue generation and the qualitative design of fan experience. Their work spans game day production, marketing, CRM and analytics, sponsorship, ticketing, live operations, and fan communications. Reporting directly to the Athletic Director, SFFs function as the primary architects of how fandom is experienced at institutional scale.

Despite this outsized influence, SFFs are not in a recognized place within academic literature on sports fandom. The demand side of fandom — fans' motivations, affiliations, identities, rituals, and social behaviors — has garnered the most attention of scholars across consumer behavior, sociology, cultural studies, and sport management. The supply-side, the professional infrastructure that designs, produces, and sustains the experiences through which that fandom is formed, has not. The result is a significant gap: studies on fandom originate almost entirely from the perspective of those who experience it, with little connective account of how that experience is engineered by those responsible for producing it. Without an understanding of the supply-side of fandom, this study would lose a holistic perspective by focusing on the demand side alone. The fan's account of why they attend, what they feel, and what they take away from live sport may be substantially shaped by decisions made weeks before they arrived; decisions made not by the fan, but by the facilitator.

Rationale

This research used semi-structured interviews with two Senior Fandom Facilitators at contrasting, yet competitive, collegiate institutions: a private Big Ten research university (Northwestern University) and a federal service academy (the United States Military Academy at West Point). The institutions were selected purposively for their structural contrast: one operating under a commercial revenue mandate, the other under an institutional awareness and mission-stewardship mandate, to compare how facilitation logic operates across different organizational goals and where those logics diverge along institutional lines.

The purpose of this study is to first: surface how SFFs define, operationalize, and measure fandom from the supply-side, including the strategies, mechanisms, and design philosophies they deploy to compel fan behavior toward desired outcomes. Second: to compare supply-side understandings against the accounts of fandom held by fans interviewed in parallel across this broader study. Third, to determine whether the outcomes facilitators deliberately engineer match the outcomes fans report actually taking away from live sport.



Research Question: How do college game-day event facilitators describe success?

Results

Defining success at the two institutions was essential for understanding how each organization operationalizes fandom, whether in pursuit of revenue, fan engagement, virality, or institutional reputation. Despite these different goals, both institutions emphasized a common set of priorities: seamless onboarding to the venue, an immersive fan experience, stewardship of inherited social capital, and more human-centered measures of fans' emotional experiences. These similarities form a common strategic narrative—a “road to fandom success”—in which tactics are sequenced to support holistic fan immersion, even when success is defined differently across institutions.

The Road to Fandom Success

Communication, Seamlessness, Immersion, then Word of Mouth

1 Targeting and Communications

Both institutions approach fan acquisition as a data engineering problem before it is a marketing problem. The goal of targeting is not simply to advertise to a broad audience, it is to reach the specific person who has not yet attended an event and remove informational and logistical frictions as reasons they may not attend.

At Northwestern, this takes the form of a segmented digital journey mapped out months before the season begins: *“For football, we have to map out what that digital journey looks like from before you leave your driveway to get you to the venue. We’re not sending one e-mail to everyone that has a football ticket. We’re segmenting out based on the type of football ticket you have or where you’re sitting in the venue. You’re getting one of four different emails.”* This segmentation is a type of “logistical-personalization” with precision: a fan seated on the north side of the stadium needs different parking, different gate routing, and different pre-game timing information than a fan seated on the south side. The email is not primarily a marketing message, it is a predictive friction-reduction communication tool. The desired outcome is a worry-free fan arrival: *“I know where I’m parking, I have my tickets, I know what time the game is, I know what I’m doing.”*

***“The desired outcome is a worry-free fan arrival:
‘I know where I’m parking, I have my tickets, I know
what time the game is, I know what I’m doing.’”***



At West Point, the targeting problem has an additional layer. The institution operates on first-party data exclusion modeling, identifying fans who attended in the last three years and deliberately removing them from paid advertising campaigns to concentrate spend on net-new audiences: *"Folks who are in our ticketing system the last three years, we use that as almost an exclusion point for some of our campaigns — we know this is targeted to new folks that have not been here before."* They then deploy lookalike modeling from that first-party base: *"We can basically plug in that same audience and find a lookalike of it."* The pre-arrival communications for first-time visitors at West Point carry an onboarding function that goes beyond logistics; they preempt the anxiety of approaching a military installation: *"We'll even include new e-mail communications if their information shows they've never been to a game before... we want to make them feel like they have the information they need to have a successfully ideal game day experience before they get here."*

2 Seamless Fan Onboarding

The transition from digital communications to physical arrival is where both facilitators invest disproportionate operational attention, because it is where the most high-risk fandom friction exists. Northwestern frames this as cognitive load management: *"We want it to be smooth and seamless because sports is so much of an escape from day-to-day life. We want it to be a very easy, turnkey experience to where you're almost turning off part of your brain and you're just here and you're enjoying the moment."* The onboarding architecture at Northwestern is mobile-first — tickets pre-loaded, parking pre-assigned, gate routing pre-communicated by segment — so that arrival feels like confirmation of a plan already emplaced, not a stressful navigation of the venue.

"We want it to be smooth and seamless because sports is so much of an escape from day-to-day life."

West Point's onboarding problem is structurally more demanding. West Point's location was not chosen, nor favorable to, any fan ingress: *"George Washington put West Point where it is to keep the British out. He didn't put it there to make it easy for fans to come watch a basketball game or football game."* Metal detector screening, steep terrain, historic facilities with limited ADA facilitation, and military base security protocols all function as deterrents that pre-arrival communications cannot fully address. As such, West Point over-communicates: dedicated gate recommendations, shuttle infrastructure maps, and expectation-setting that reframes unavoidable inconveniences as features of the institution's singular character rather than failures of hospitality. In both cases, the first human interaction at point-of-entry functions as an onboarding variable in its own right, with the physical venue itself a dynamic logistical problem. An example from West Point: *"we've lost a road due to construction,"* illustrating the requirement of constant recommunication to fans.

"George Washington put West Point where it is to keep the British out. He didn't put it there to make it easy for fans to come watch a basketball game or football game."

3 Immersive Escapism via Ritual Stewardship

Once a fan is seated, both facilitators shift from logistics to experience design; a point where art v. science tension is both acknowledged and most visible. Northwestern draws the distinction explicitly: *"I frequently say it's art, not science. Game production, the fan experience — there's a lot of art, there's a lot of feel, there's a lot of guessing and checking."* The production at Northwestern is extensive. Football game scripts run to fifteen pages, timed to the second: *"Everything from the minute the doors open until after the game's over is pretty intimately scripted out. My football scripts were like 15 pages, a 15-page Excel document line by line and intricately timed out like down to the second sometimes."* Northwestern spends six to eight hours per week developing a single football script. But the script is a scaffold, not the product; the product is the real-time read of the crowd and the live adjustment of elements in response to it. Northwestern describes their game day director as *"phenomenal at feeling the crowd out and kind of pulling those levers with people to where you're kind of engendering the behavior you want and encouraging the behavior you want. It's a little bit of a dance."*

"Game production, the fan experience — there's a lot of art, there's a lot of feel, there's a lot of guessing and checking."



When Northwestern went on a ten-point scoring run, the production team preloaded for the likely media timeout, swapped sponsor elements, queued the hype video, and had the DJ ready on Sandstorm, all before the next basket dropped: *"If we score a touchdown, people are excited, and then I shoot fireworks off the roof, and I affect the LED lights to start going into a berserk lighting sequence, and then I'm hitting a hype video on the video board — that's going to pull another 10 or 20% of noise and energy out of them."*



West Point's production vocabulary is different but the underlying logic is identical. The irreplaceable elements: the cadet parade *"done for 100 plus years,"* the helicopter flyovers, the cannon fire, the Benny Havens Band are not entertainment additions to the game; they're the primary experiential differentiators that make the West Point game day categorically distinct from any other collegiate venue. They describe the Benny Havens Band as a hinge on which the pre-game Fanfest experience turns: *"They are what makes or breaks that Fanfest experience right up there and how well they perform and create a lot of energy."* The cannons, the flyovers, and the cadet March-On are the production levers at West Point that are overt, irreplaceable, and owned by the institution.

Both facilitators also operate covert mechanisms: structural conditions that produce atmosphere without the fan's awareness of their design. At Northwestern, the student section is placed and managed as an atmospheric catalyst: *"Students add so much atmosphere to the game. They bring so much energy that other fans feed off of. When we survey fans, a lot of times they'll say they take their cue from the students in the student section. So if the students are getting loud, making noise, celebrating — the rest of the arena takes the cue off of that."* Those thousand students have, as Northwestern quantifies it, *"an outsized impact on the other 6,000 people in the arena."* At West Point, mandatory cadet attendance functions as the structural equivalent; the cadet corps provides a guaranteed crowd energy floor that civilian fans experience as authentic, passionate atmosphere, unaware of its institutional origin.



"Students add so much atmosphere to the game... When we survey fans, a lot of times they'll say they take their cue from the students in the student section. So if the students are getting loud, making noise, celebrating — the rest of the arena takes the cue off of that."

The ritual stewardship function deserves a separate note - both facilitators distinguish sharply between stewarding inherited traditions and manufacturing new ones, and both express *"instinctive skepticism"* toward the latter. Northwestern articulated this clearly: *"College sports are so old. Many rituals are decades and decades old. A lot of that is we're kind of taking and stewarding what came before... you always have to do that grounded in history or they don't land super well."* New traditions, in this framework, cannot be artificially produced; they are opportunity-based as they emerge organically from the fan base: *"If fans start doing something and it starts to grow on them, you can grab that and steer it in a direction you want it to go."* The facilitator is not a tradition creator, they're a tradition manager. The distinction is innate because manufactured traditions without historical grounding produce a sense of over-production that both facilitators identify as a failure point.

4 Social Currency → Word of Mouth

The final stage of the Road to Fandom Success is also the least controllable; and both facilitators are explicit that this is by design. The goal is not to force post-event advocacy. The goal is to ensure that every fan leaves carrying something worth saying. At Northwestern, this is an active content strategy: *"I tell my team everything we're doing should be either educating or entertaining people, and ideally both."* The in-venue education-entertainment axis is engineered to produce specific social artifacts. When fans learn that Michigan is from "Ann Arbor" rather than just "Michigan," they carry that vocabulary into their workday: *"You go back to your day job the next day and you can say, 'cats took it to the boys from Ann Arbor last night.' You sound like you know what you're talking about. You sound like an insider."* The insider identity is the social currency. It is what motivates the fan to return, not just for the game, but for more vocabulary, facts, and shareable moments that make them feel embedded in the culture: *"You feel good and you feel smart and you're talking about the event after the fact — you have a positive association."* Merchandise extends this social signal into daily life: *"I want you to get a t-shirt that looks cool, that you love at the marketing table, that you're going to wear at the game, and the next day when you're going to get your groceries — because you become a walking billboard for me that way."*

"The goal is that every fan leaves carrying something worth saying."



At West Point, the social currency mechanism is different in kind but identical in function. The experience is so categorically singular: the parade, the cannons, the helicopters, the historic grounds, the military setting; that the fan who attended carries a story that is simply unlike any other sports attendance story in their social network. West Point describes the Coach Krzyzewski game as the clearest evidence: *"For what was intended to be a non-competitive game, all those pieces together... all the Duke fans after that game, all the feedback was phenomenal in terms of they'll never have another experience like that."* The bucket-list positioning generates WOM not because it was engineered to be shareable, but because its uniqueness compels social-sharing. For both institutions, the fan who leaves having spent money on an afternoon that gave them nothing to say afterward is a failure. The fan who leaves with a story, a piece of vocabulary, or a memory they will use in conversation for years is the success case; and also, by intent, the acquisition channel for the next fan.



Observing Humanics of Success and Failures

Defining success was the first point of divergence between these two institutions, and also the first point of convergence. Both institutions acknowledged the existence of formal quantitative metrics — attendance figures, revenue totals, post-event survey scores — while simultaneously deferring to more humanistic, observational indicators as their truest performance signal. Northwestern was direct about the formal benchmarks it operates under: *"Attendance and revenue are the two things we're kind of judged off of at all times."* Yet in the same conversation, they described an entirely different personal practice for measuring success: *"One thing I love to do after games, I like to sit there and watch people leave... even if we lost, people are leaving smiling. Those are some of the moments I live for as a marketer."* The fan who leaves smiling regardless of the final score — the child wearing a t-shirt caught from a cheerleader, the parent satisfied because their kid got a high-five from the mascot — became the most reliable indicator that the experience design had worked.

West Point mirrors this orientation in institutional terms. The Athletic Director described, every Monday after a home game: *"That's kind of the number one thing he's looking for on later in the day on Monday to see. What is the (post-game fan survey) feedback."*

The post-game fan survey runs consistently enough that it can be compared to results year over year: *"We've actually quantified it to where we have pretty good measurement KPIs from 2021 through this past year and we can really measure them up against each other."* Even with that quantitative system in place, what the Athletic Director checks first on Monday morning is how fans say they felt, not the weekend's revenue numbers. Northwestern echoes this same means of measurement, tracking attendance and revenue as formal benchmarks, but also checking on whether a game worked by watching people leave the building.

Failure, by contrast, is sharply defined and consistent across both institutions. Neither facilitator defines failure as a loss on the scoreboard. Northwestern put it plainly: *"People can have a fun time even if you lose... when you win, the hot dogs are hotter, the soda's colder, the popcorn tastes better, and everything you did on the video board was flawless. When you lose, it all becomes way harder."* The experienced failure is operational: the fan who could not find parking, could not navigate security, sat in a disengaged section, and spent money on an afternoon that gave them nothing to carry into their social-circle conversations. For West Point, this materialized directly when a historic Army football championship game, the American Athletic Conference Championship in 2024, drew the program's lowest attendance on record due to weather and logistical friction: *"This was our lowest attended game ever in arguably a historic game."* The institutional win and the fan experience failure had occurred simultaneously, which illuminates the core professional tension both facilitators navigate: they control the experience, not the outcome, and the experience must succeed independently of the outcome of the game.

"Even if we lost, people are leaving smiling. Those are some of the moments I live for as a marketer."

From the Outside In

Navigating Entry into American Sports Culture



By Aksharaa Bhobe

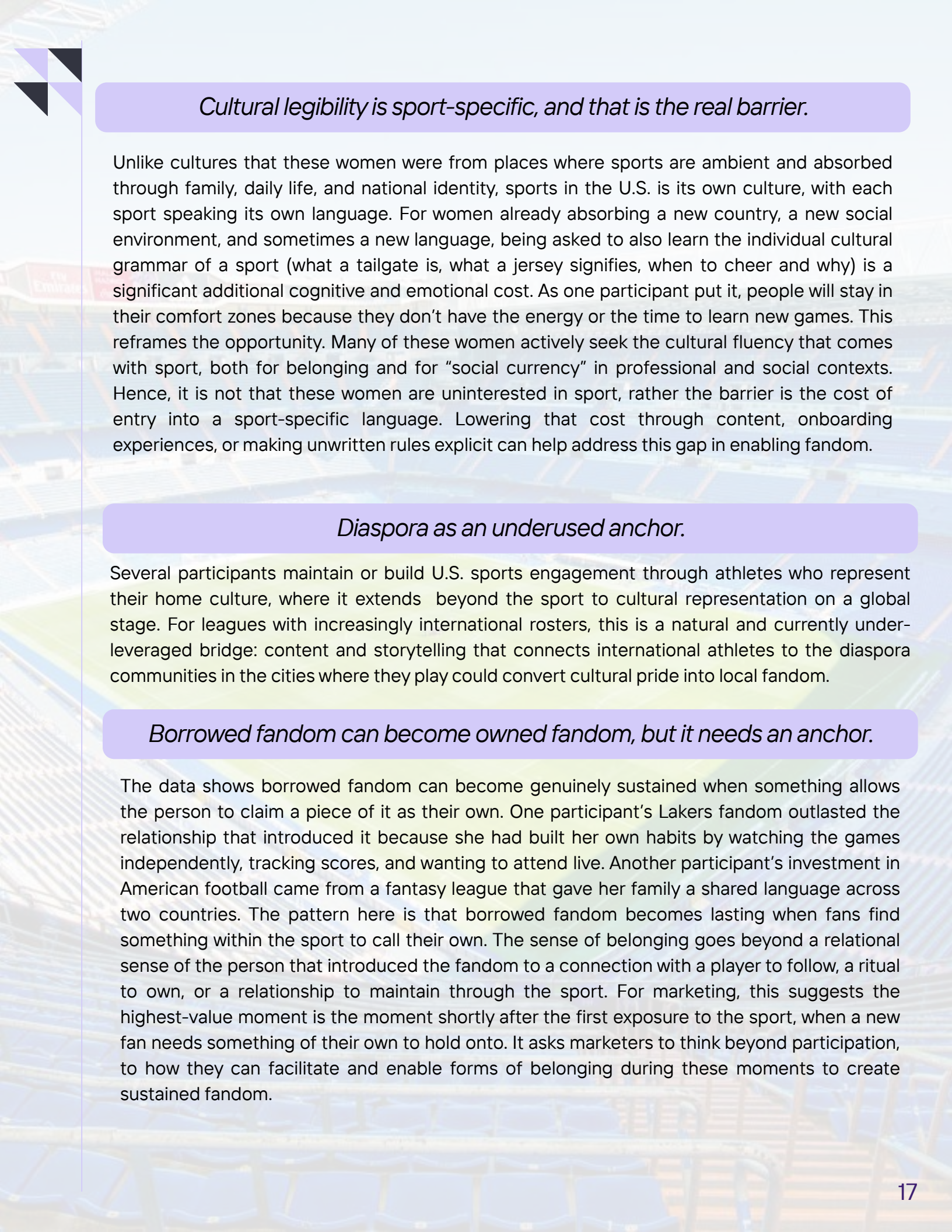
Key Takeaways

The willing transmitter as an interpersonal, scalable mechanism.

Throughout this research, the single factor that most reliably moved someone from occasion-participant toward genuine fan was a willing transmitter: someone patient enough to explain, without gatekeeping, in a way that feels like being “let into an inside joke” rather than being tested. Right now, this function is almost entirely left to chance: whether you happen to sit next to someone generous, whether your partner happens to enjoy explaining the game, whether a friend happens to invite you in. This report outlines an opportunity for media to perform this function at scale. Drive to Survive is the clearest evidence of this in the data. It worked because it made the audience care about the people within the sport first. The rules and technicalities of the sport came after, and were absorbed because the emotional investment was already there. The implication for leagues and teams here is that content strategies aimed at new and casual audiences should lead with narrative and personality, over statistics and tactics.

The holistic live experience is a window, but does not guarantee fandom.

When someone is connected outward to the crowd and inward to the people they came with, the sports experience is at its most immersive and most memorable. This is the moment when the conditions for fandom to deepen are most present. However, although the holistic live experience creates these conditions, it does not guarantee that deepening happens. Without something to act on that moment, it remains a peak experience where memory is formed but fandom may not be claimed. This offers a strategic window. The live event is the one place where vertical (crowd-facing) and horizontal (companion-facing) participation coexist, and it is fleeting. The opportunity here is for brands and teams to be intentional about what happens inside that window: a willing transmitter moment, a piece of content, a touchpoint that gives someone a reason to care about that moment beyond the occasion on the day itself.



Cultural legibility is sport-specific, and that is the real barrier.

Unlike cultures that these women were from places where sports are ambient and absorbed through family, daily life, and national identity, sports in the U.S. is its own culture, with each sport speaking its own language. For women already absorbing a new country, a new social environment, and sometimes a new language, being asked to also learn the individual cultural grammar of a sport (what a tailgate is, what a jersey signifies, when to cheer and why) is a significant additional cognitive and emotional cost. As one participant put it, people will stay in their comfort zones because they don't have the energy or the time to learn new games. This reframes the opportunity. Many of these women actively seek the cultural fluency that comes with sport, both for belonging and for "social currency" in professional and social contexts. Hence, it is not that these women are uninterested in sport, rather the barrier is the cost of entry into a sport-specific language. Lowering that cost through content, onboarding experiences, or making unwritten rules explicit can help address this gap in enabling fandom.

Diaspora as an underused anchor.

Several participants maintain or build U.S. sports engagement through athletes who represent their home culture, where it extends beyond the sport to cultural representation on a global stage. For leagues with increasingly international rosters, this is a natural and currently under-leveraged bridge: content and storytelling that connects international athletes to the diaspora communities in the cities where they play could convert cultural pride into local fandom.

Borrowed fandom can become owned fandom, but it needs an anchor.

The data shows borrowed fandom can become genuinely sustained when something allows the person to claim a piece of it as their own. One participant's Lakers fandom outlasted the relationship that introduced it because she had built her own habits by watching the games independently, tracking scores, and wanting to attend live. Another participant's investment in American football came from a fantasy league that gave her family a shared language across two countries. The pattern here is that borrowed fandom becomes lasting when fans find something within the sport to call their own. The sense of belonging goes beyond a relational sense of the person that introduced the fandom to a connection with a player to follow, a ritual to own, or a relationship to maintain through the sport. For marketing, this suggests the highest-value moment is the moment shortly after the first exposure to the sport, when a new fan needs something of their own to hold onto. It asks marketers to think beyond participation, to how they can facilitate and enable forms of belonging during these moments to create sustained fandom.



From the Outside In

Navigating Entry into American Sports Culture

Introduction

The United States is home to over 47 million foreign-born residents, representing 14.3% of the total population, making it one of the most diverse nations in the world by origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Yet despite that diversity, the U.S. is not united by a singular culture, a shared religion, or a common heritage. It is a country built on the premise of hope: the American Dream, the promise of a better life, of success, of winning.

Within the chasing of individual goals, there still lies the very human need for connection. Humans are driven by this need for a collective coming together, united by one goal and one purpose. That is the role sport plays in the United States. It creates the space for social connection that the country's diversity might otherwise make difficult to find.

With that diversity comes a question: how do teams and leagues genuinely build fandom across such different starting points? The sports industry has historically built its fan engagement strategies around a narrow assumed audience with one that is domestic, culturally fluent, and already invested. For those who arrive from elsewhere, the path into fandom is rarely designed with them in mind. For non-U.S.-born women specifically, this gap is compounded: as both women and immigrants or international residents, they navigate a sports culture that was not built for or around them. However, this very position, of them being on the outside looking in, allows for a uniquely revealing lens through which to understand how fandom actually forms, and what belonging in American sports culture really requires.

Rationale

Sports experiences in the U.S. are increasingly becoming "third spaces"—communal gathering points beyond home and work where identity and belonging are negotiated (Oldenburg, 1999). For non-U.S.-born women, these spaces hold particular significance. Unlike fans socialized into U.S. sports culture from childhood, these women navigate multiple cultural frameworks simultaneously. As these women negotiate their identities across cultures, sports may serve as a tool for maintaining heritage connections, building new community ties, or bridging cultural worlds. They adopt fandom at different life stages, through different social pathways like peer groups, romantic partners, campus exposure, and with varying levels of cultural familiarity. Their experiences with sports culture in other countries provide a natural comparison point for understanding what aspects of U.S. sports fandom are culturally specific versus universal.

This makes the role that sports play in identity construction visible in ways that might be taken for granted by U.S.-born fans. Thus, this study examines those experiences to understand not just how these women engage with American sports, but why, and what that reveals about the relationship between sport, belonging, and social connection more broadly.



Research Question: How do non-U.S.-born women navigate entry into and engage with American sports culture, and what drives the depth of fandom that forms?

Results

1 Sports as a Shared Cultural Language in the U.S.

1.1 Imagining American Sports Before Arrival

Non-U.S.-born women arrive with pre-existing symbolic understandings and impressions of U.S. sports culture through media, peers, and cultural osmosis that shaped how they would come to engage with U.S. sports. What makes U.S. sports unusual as a point of entry is its breadth because it cuts across the diversity of those backgrounds in a way few other cultural touchstones do (Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004; Xu et al., 2026). Its functionality goes beyond entertainment, to be a site of social life, and for many of these women, a recognizable one even before arrival.

Some perceive U.S. sporting events as cultural events or even as a rite of passage. Participant 3 describes the Super Bowl as *"one of the experiences that someone has to go through if they want to live in the U.S. Same way like the 4th of July is."* And Participant 10, even without having attended one, understood the Super Bowl as *"this quintessential American experience."* For Participant 2, collegiate football was legible as a natural entryway into American college culture before she arrived. With immersing herself in U.S. college culture as an explicit goal, football —*"such an integrated part of college culture, American culture, Northwestern culture"*—became her first vehicle for doing so. Participant 8 had grown up watching the NBA in a Chinese classroom when her PE teacher turned on the TV on rainy days. Participant 11 had heard about Division I swimming programs from older swimmers at her club in Istanbul. Participant 9 knew that going to a USC-UCLA football game was *"the experience to do if you go to either of these colleges."*

What these women recognized before arrival was the shape of sport in American life. What they discover after arrival is the capacity that participation in sports allows them to communicate and form connections with others. Participant 8 describes this directly: *"because my English is not my first language, sometimes I just feel like it's hard to communicate [with] other people. But when I'm actually in the [stadium], I feel like I'm being accepted. Even if you don't speak the same language, by the actions or the moves, your reactions, you just feel like we're in the same community. I feel like I get supported, I'm being accepted, and there's nothing wrong. Even if I'm supporting [another team], I finally have something I really love to do, and I'm being accepted by the people around me."*

"Because my English is not my first language, sometimes I just feel like it's hard to communicate [with] other people. But when I'm actually in the [stadium], I feel like I'm being accepted."

- 24 year-old from China

1.2 Ambient Sport vs. the Constructed Occasion

Back home, sports are ambient, absorbed passively through culture and integrated into the rhythm of everyday life without requiring a conscious decision to engage. Participant 7 explains her engagement with sports because they surrounded her: "I was kind of forced into it... I ended up engaging a lot back home because I wanted to be close with my family and they were doing it." Participant 3 makes the same observation from a different angle: "back home it could literally be like, I'm having dinner tonight, and I'm gonna turn on the TV and watch the soccer game. So it's something that's much more integrated into everyday life, and it's not like an occasion." Through that ambient exposure, sports fluency was accumulated without effort because you absorbed the language of the sport the same way you absorbed the language of the culture.

However, sports in the U.S. are fundamentally different from how sports function in the cultures these women come from. When these women engage with American sports in the U.S., they encounter sports as a culture that is a constructed occasion, layered with food, ritual, chant, sponsorship, and spectacle that exist alongside and often independent of the game itself. The sport provides the structure and the schedule, and the experience is assembled on top of it.



"Back home it could literally be like, I'm having dinner tonight, and I'm gonna turn on the TV and watch the soccer game. So it's something that's much more integrated into everyday life, and it's not like an occasion." In the U.S., however, these women encounter sports as a planned occasion, built around food, rituals, and a shared social experience.

- 21 year-old from Greece

Each sport has its own distinct cultural language, its own rules, rituals, and discourse. These languages are not integrated into American culture broadly, but sit alongside it, requiring active and individual engagement to access. For these women, already navigating the cognitive and emotional labor of cultural transition, learning a new country, a new social environment, sometimes a new language, being asked to also learn the individual cultural language of each American sport becomes an additional task. Speaking the language of a new sport in a new country, at a moment of displacement, becomes something that requires conscious effort and time investment, which many may not have the resources for. Participant 7 expands on this: "A lot of people will stay in their comfort zones and just watch whatever they are used to, because they know what it is about and they don't have the energy or the time to learn about other games."



2 The Range of Fandom Building Mechanisms within U.S. Sports

And yet U.S. sports as a curated occasion, lower the barriers to participation and presence significantly. There are layers to this occasion that shape accessibility and participation and guide investment.

2.1 The Inventory

A sports occasion offers multiple entry points to participation— like food, ritual, chant, sponsorship, and spectacle— that exist independent of game-specific knowledge itself. None of these require sports fluency to enjoy. Participant 1, attending a Northwestern basketball game for the first time, encountered two such moments, neither of which required an understanding of basketball. Between quarters, the crowd would release helium balloons into the air, with whichever team's balloon touched the ground first losing; and a scoreboard prompt asked the crowd to root for the opposing team to miss eight baskets. Both were immediately legible as novel and enjoyable: "I haven't had such an experience back in India. So [the experience was] really nice."

2.2 The Vertical Community

Beyond these entryways to participation, the occasion offers a way to connect upward, and achieve a sense of connection with the crowd, larger than just the group one comes with. Participant 2 describes this as *"almost like a validation of emotion. Like, when you're happy, everyone's happy around you... so that is kind of freeing, and especially feeling that sensation with strangers surrounding me is also the big part."* This vertical pull, toward collective ritual, shared chants, and the rhythm of a crowd reacting as one, is what gives the sports occasion its scale. However, fully accessing this sense of connection and belonging requires legibility like knowing when to cheer, what a chant means, and why a moment matters. This legibility is sports-specific, learned individually, and takes time.

"Like, when you're happy, everyone's happy around you... so that is kind of freeing, and especially feeling that sensation with strangers surrounding me is also the big part."

- 23 year-old from South Korea

2.3 The Horizontal Community

Alongside this, sports occasions offer a second, smaller-scale sense of social connection: sideways, to the person or people you came with that can be achieved through presence. This does not necessitate sports knowledge, cultural fluency, or prior fandom. For example, Participant 4's most memorable moment from a baseball game wasn't a specific moment of what happened on the field; rather, it was bonding with the woman seated next to her, a fellow European equally confused: "we just sort of found that funny that we were both trying to figure it out. It was something to talk about." For Participant 10, attending a hockey game she didn't understand remained enjoyable because "in a way that confusion brings you together, and then you kind of focus more on having a good time with your friend, and just being excited to be there, rather than the game itself." Here, for both participants, not understanding the sport becomes a bonding mechanism where shared ignorance operates as social glue.



2.4 Memory is Dependent on the Intensity of the Social Experience

What these women remember from these sports experiences confirms the centrality of the social occasion over the sporting event. Irrespective of whether a vertical or horizontal community was formed and accessed, the memory recall for live sports, across these participants, is crowd-dependent rather than sport-dependent. The emotional and cognitive imprint of an experience is indexed to the density and energy of the social environment they were in over what happened on the field. Participant 10 remembers one baseball game more distinctly than another not because of a great play or a pivotal moment, but simply because: *"it was just a bigger crowd, so I remember that a little bit more distinctly."* Participant 2 articulates why the crowd registers so deeply: the shared reaction from collective happiness or frustration functions as an emotional validation that makes the experience feel real and worth remembering. For these women, memory anchors to atmosphere and scale, which are proxies for how socially immersive the experience was.

3 How Sports Fandom is Transmitted

3.1 The Role of the Transmitter

What makes fandom deepen, or fail to, often comes down to the presence of a transmitter– the person or context through which fandom is first passed on. Someone patient enough to share knowledge without gatekeeping can help in building and deepening fandom that allows an individual to build towards participating through a Vertical Community. Participant 12 describes the difference between having one and not: *"I have people in my life who, if I made a comment that was wrong in soccer, they would tell me, that is so dumb, you need to stop commenting. And that is something that makes you not want to learn more. But then I have other people who are like, well, actually, this is the rule."* This shows how a dismissive transmitter can actively close the door on fandom formation. Conversely, Participant 10 captures what having someone to share this knowledge with you feels like from the inside: being given sports knowledge is *"almost like being let into an inside joke or a secret."*

However, it is not just people that act as transmitters, but identity itself as an entry point. Participant 2's fandom was borrowed from the institutional identity she had just begun to hold, which helped her feel more certain in her belonging: *"if you are a Northwestern student, you're a good student if you love your school. And if you love your school, you would love your sports team."*

"I would say the sole reason why I go to Northwestern game isn't necessarily to enjoy the sports itself, it's more like a social community, or the sense of belonging that I get from the experience. The actual gameplay or the actual results doesn't really matter to me that much..."



For many of these women who have migrated, their geographic or national identity is reactivated by distance. Participant 12 got into soccer "out of homesickness, maybe... I realized I never was into it because nobody sat me down and told me, like, this is what soccer is about, like, it was just a vibe thing." Familiarity for the team had been inherited through family and her city's identity, but it took displacement for that inheritance to become something she felt the need to invest in. For Participant 4, rugby was a sport that was so ubiquitous in the UK, she didn't need to claim it. But "since moving to the U.S., I do feel a sense of national pride, probably, that I didn't feel before, because when in Wales, everyone's watching rugby." Distance makes that claim conscious and deliberate.

However, this same national identity can anchor to a person just as easily. Participant 3, for example, follows Giannis Antetokounmpo primarily as a Greek person watching a Greek athlete succeed on the world's biggest stage. Her draw to him started through media: she actively follows him on social media, and gravitates toward interviews and personal content over game footage or stats, which is how she came to know his story of growing up in a poor family without a strong support system and using basketball to find community. That media-driven closeness to him as a person is what pulled her toward the sport and her allegiance follows him, to the point that she would root for the Bucks over the Celtics—her home team in Boston— "just because I really like Giannis and like the values he holds." Thus, her national identity drives her media consumption which shapes her engagement with the athlete, and this engagement is what fuels her interest in the sport itself.

Media can do this work even independently of a human transmitter. Participant 5 used Formula One's Drive to Survive as the clearest example: "they showed people the stories of who's driving the cars, at the same time as explaining the rules... it really makes people feel like they know the sport and they want to follow it." The documentary leads with the person rather than the sport, making emotional investment possible before technical understanding is required.

"[Formula One's Drive to Survive] showed people the stories of who's driving the cars, at the same time as explaining the rules... it really makes people feel like they know the sport and they want to follow it."

- 28 year-old from India

That investment, once formed, is what lowers the barrier to technical understanding, which motivates these women to learn the rules because they already care about the outcome. Media also enables staying tethered to a team they want to stay engaged with; Participant 8 explains how the team's Instagram account is a low-effort touchpoint that brings the information to her frictionlessly: "if I don't have this Instagram account, I think I wouldn't notice this [Golden State Warriors] team too much."





3.2 Relational Motivation as a Transmitter Mechanism

For many of these women, fandom begins and stays in the atmosphere, because the inventory makes it enjoyable and participatory, but not necessarily deepening without a willing transmitter to move them further in. Fandom can also build in entirely new directions through relational motivation. Participant 12 had never followed American football, but when her sister started a family fantasy league as a way for siblings spread across Mexico and the U.S. to stay connected and have something to chat about, she found herself tracking games, learning players, and caring about outcomes. Her family were already football fans, which made the league feel like a natural extension of something that already existed in her household. Her participation was driven by the need to bond with her siblings, which required genuine investment in the game: *"it's about connection, like, it's about that feeling that you belong to something"*, so the sport became worth following because the relationship made it worth following. Participant 9 articulates how *"if there's someone in my life that, like, really cares about [a sport], and I care about them, and they really want to enjoy it, then sure, why not?"* For her, the sport itself is secondary, and becomes worth engaging with because the investment is in the relationship.

"If there's someone in my life that, like, really cares about [a sport], and I care about them, and they really want to enjoy it, then sure, why not?"

- 29 year-old from India

3.3 How Fandom Holds or Fades Over Time

Fandom, once formed, does not stay fixed, and requires the right conditions to survive. How much these women invest in sport, and why, shifts with their life stage and context. For some of these women, being in the U.S. actively creates the conditions for fandom to build and sustain. The visibility and social ubiquity of sports culture here, alongside its media infrastructure, functions as a sustaining condition for women who might otherwise disengage. For Participant 1, what began as relational borrowed fandom became genuinely her own. She got into the Lakers through her ex-boyfriend, who was a willing transmitter and introduced her to the team, explained the players, and watched games with her. Although the relationship ended, her fandom carried on, with her actively watching 20-25 hours a week during NBA season, tracking scores on the app when she misses games, and actively looking for tickets to attend a live game. However, long-term fandom is dependent on life stage. Participant 12's relationship with Tigres exemplifies this arc most fully. When she first moved to the U.S., her fandom was triggered by displacement, the intensity of seeking out familiarity in an unfamiliar world, and it leaked into her actual life. She knew her roster's locker room dynamics, injury histories, and had varying degrees of personal investment in each player: *"If they lose, I get mad. If they win, I'm really happy... it really leaks into my actual life, even when I know that it's a game."* But as she got older, moved back home, and returned to the U.S. again, the intensity of her investment shifted: *"I think it's just my priorities shifted a little bit, I'm 10 years older than when I was there, and I have other things in my mind."* Her fandom didn't disappear, she still follows major games, still holds enough knowledge to participate in conversations about the team meaningfully, but the motivation to engage transformed. What once drove personal investment and played a role in identity formation now functions as relational currency, sustained through a family group chat where Tigres remains the shared language. The belonging that fandom once provided is now met elsewhere, through music, pop culture, other shared languages. *"I do miss being part of an active fandom"*, signalling that the need for belonging that a sports team facilitates itself never disappeared, but just found other vessels.

4 The Occasion as Entry Point, Not Destination

The layers of the U.S. sports occasion make belonging easy; perhaps too easy. For these women navigating transitional phases, the identity work of cultural assimilation creates an urgent need for belonging. The low-barrier layers of the occasion: the food, the spectacle, the social ritual, the companion-facing connection, all offer a way to meet that need without requiring fluency in the sport's language. You show up, you participate, you belong. The tension of being new, of not knowing, of not fitting in, is temporarily resolved.

However, sufficient is not the same as sustaining. Sports occasions in the U.S. facilitate entry into fandom through inventory to participate which enable social connection, but they do not structurally produce sustained fandom. The layers that make participation easy are also the layers that make deep investment unnecessary. You can consume the food, enjoy the crowd, laugh with the person next to you about not understanding the rules, and leave without ever caring who won. Back home, ambient exposure accumulated sports fluency over time. In the U.S., the occasion offers the ability to participate without needing the same level of investment, facilitating social connection and a sense of belonging without sports fluency.

Sustained fandom, over the long term, requires something the occasion alone cannot provide: investment in the sport itself — in a team, an outcome, in participating in and forming that vertical community. That shift happens through the same mechanisms as before: a willing transmitter who moves someone from the occasion into the sport, a relational motivator that makes the sport worth caring about, or a life stage that creates the conditions for deeper investment. The occasion welcomes these women in, however, what keeps them or doesn't is dependent on everything else.



"It's about connection, like, it's about that feeling that you belong to something."

- 31 year-old from Mexico

Media as a Catalyst

SECTION

2



The Highlight Reel

The Role of Social Media in the Sports Experience



By Katie Chen

Key Takeaways

Fans can connect with a team before they connect with the sport.

Content about nutrition, family programs, humor, or life behind the scenes gives people a reason to pay attention, even if they know little about the game. These interests can become an entry point into fandom.

Showing the people behind the team helps fans feel closer to it.

When players, coaches, and staff share their personalities and everyday experiences, fans have more ways to relate to them. Behind-the-scenes videos and “mic’d up” moments can make that connection feel more personal.

Turning online attention into participation can help teams build lasting interest.

Creative posts can attract attention, but what teams do to engender participation after that initial exposure matters. Responding to fans and building experiences around popular moments can give people a reason to stay involved, attend a game, or keep following the team.



The Highlight Reel

The Role of Social Media in the Sports Experience

Introduction and Purpose

An increasing share of our lives is being spent online. Reports have found that the average individual spends more than 25% (six hours and thirty-eight minutes) of their day online, a figure that has continued to grow in the last 10 years (Telefónica Communication Team, 2025). Digital spaces, or any virtual environment that allows for user interaction, have fundamentally changed the way we live. I can call and keep up with my parents who live 7,500 miles away with a touch of a button, access information in all languages, and interact with so many diverse individuals on social media platforms. Similarly, the digital sports fandom experience has evolved as well.

A 2025 Mintel report found that 39% of sports fans used social media to stay connected to the game, the third-largest channel only behind TV-at-home (64%) and streaming services (40%) (Sanchez, 2025). Of this 39%, younger audiences aged 18-34 were also the most likely to engage with digital platforms, with 52% of them reporting doing so. This trend has also stayed steady since 2021, even as percentages for TV and streaming have fluctuated. Major sporting events, such as the Super Bowl have also recorded massive followings online. The Olympics, another global event with massive viewership, reported that 37% of consumers followed the events through social media. This increasing trend of consumers choosing to follow sports on social media emphasizes the importance of understanding how they use these platforms to facilitate their experiences and their reasons for doing so.

As someone who frankly didn't care much about sports until college, so much of my interest has been cultivated in online spaces and digital platforms – memes, highlight reels, commentary, and more. The internet has introduced me to new sports like rugby, and reignited my love for preexisting sports like badminton and baseball. This paper ultimately aims to capture how individuals use digital spaces and platforms to act as conduits to the general sports experience, with further exploration on how teams and brands can use these platforms to their advantage.

Research Question: How do individuals use digital spaces and platforms to act as conduits to the general sports experience?

Results

Overall, interviewees all concluded that social media added to their sports experience, especially with enabling connections and choosing what aspects of the experience they wanted the most. However, most individuals also agreed that certain ways digital spaces work also have detrimental effects.

Each interview began by asking participants to describe their relationship with sports either on an individual or community basis. Most participants regularly engaged in sports (either through playing, employment, or viewing), and reported the experience playing major and positive roles in their lives, helping to facilitate social connection in a variety of ways.

Participants mostly reported sports providing them with a sort of social currency that allowed individuals to engage with those in their community, especially with strangers and coworkers. Michael, a current graduate student at Ohio State University, reported that sports was a way that individuals in the Midwestern United States interacted with each other, even down to local teams. "You typically know what's going on with even the local high school teams and can discuss it with a stranger walking down the street."



For Michael, sports give people in his Midwestern community something to talk about, even when they've never met: "You typically know what's going on with even the local high school teams and can discuss it with a stranger walking down the street."

Michael also reported sports as a conduit to connecting in the professional workplace. "When I meet with my boss, our first five minutes of every meeting is probably discussing sports and what happened over the weekend with our football teams because we support the same teams." Another participant reported similar sentiments about deciding to follow sports allowing them to foster a sense of community they hadn't experienced previously. "I think that navigating the world has gotten so much easier. Now that I can talk about that as a small talk conversation topic, it just makes the world so much more accessible."

Others reported similar reactions on a more personal level, even with those who admitted to not following sports as much as those around them. "I like having things to talk about with my friends," said Louis, a current Northwestern undergraduate student. "I'm able to talk to my dad about it too, which is nice...just having that social connection is good." With sports providing such an intense pathway of connection, conversation turned to specifically how digital spaces, such as social media, or fantasy sports allow sports communities to continue to develop and foster connection.



1 Digital spaces create connections that might not otherwise exist.

Participants reported that digital spaces helped to connect them with new individuals that provided social benefits, bolstered their individual relationships with their teams, or further allowed them to stay connected with people they otherwise might not have. Social media platforms discussed can be found in Table 1.

John is an alumnus of Northwestern University and currently works in the sports media space with ESPN. “I grew up kind of crazy big on Twitter and just using Twitter to connect with other fans my entire life. And then got really big on Florida Panthers Twitter,” he says. “I tweet a whole ton just about kind of what's going on in the games, kind of getting my opinions, just showing excitement when something good happens.”

As a fan of a small-market NHL team, Twitter allowed him to connect with fellow fans when he seemed to be the odd one out. “Nobody in Florida liked hockey to be honest. When I was growing up, I was one of the strange ones. Now it's grown a lot since the team has been awesome, which has been great. But when I was growing up, I was the only person in the world who liked the Panthers and was crazy about them.” For John, social media has also led to long-lasting friendships. “I met my two best friends from Twitter. The three of us were all season ticket holders. We're like, we should meet up at one of these games, and we actually got really close as a result. We go and play roller hockey now, like in South Florida together. And that's great.”

Finding others who support the same teams is an important part of building long-term fandom and loyalty to a team. Other participants reported similar experiences with finding community on social media sites strengthening their own individual allegiances towards a team. Anne, an Ohio State alumna and fan, says that seeing similar takes on social media helps her feel like she's on the same page as other fans. “You get usually some good discourse and I think it strengthens your own fandom and your own team spirit. Because you see these people who are coming after you and you're like, no, they don't even get it. It makes everybody feel more like united.”

Other platforms have also risen to prominence in recent years like the Real app, a platform that allows individuals to comment on specific plays in each game. “There's a chat thread under every play. They had 450,000 unique viewers on the World Series game,” says Lucas, a Northwestern student and Chicago sports fan. “You can kind of just chat s*** with opposing fans, it's a fun time.”

“I met my two best friends from Twitter. The three of us were all season ticket holders. We're like, we should meet up at one of these games, and we actually got really close as a result.”

For Anne and other participants, digital spaces also help them to find reasons to stay connected and strengthen communities in existing relationships. She and her husband's family participate in a fantasy football league each year, which creates another source of connection and conversation for them. “It's kind of a communal thing,” she says. “Like this year, the big topic of conversation at our Christmas dinner this year was that my mother-in-law somehow won our whole league.”



For Liam, fantasy sports help him stay connected with his friends from high school when he's away at college. He is a part of a group chat that is associated primarily with fantasy sports leagues, but also provides another avenue of engaging with sports. "It's not super active, but especially right now, like, with the Bears season going on, if something notable happens, like, we'll be texting in there. We're all apart, but we're all watching the game still." Without sports and digital spaces, conversations with his friends may have been infrequent and sparse. "To have something in common, even though a lot of us aren't super active with it, it's just something to keep a passive connection going. I think having the group chat is nice to just have people that I can talk to about sports."



2 Social media platforms allow for personalization and curation of the sports experience which helps individuals stay involved.

When interviewing participants, two trends emerged with regards to social media usage. Those who heavily curated their media following to only see those they cared about or respected, or those who let the algorithm decide for them.

Those who intensely curated their feeds primarily chose based on who they respected or trusted, or with fans of teams they identified with. "Watching sports has led to me muting words on Twitter when teams have been losing because I just can't deal with fans of other teams. So I've genuinely blocked, I think, 900 accounts on Twitter because they're all random fans of rival teams that are just really annoying. I've really curated it," says Lucas.

Other participants reported using their social media to follow people who they found to respect or agree with. Michael says he follows "a lot of people that I find to be intelligent, people who share a lot of good information or good opinions that I agree with." Anne reported a similar experience, especially with commentator Joel Klatt. "I trust him because I like the way that he talks about things because he used to be a quarterback. I also think like all of the guys on College GameDay, all of them either played professional football or they coached football. And like I trust them. Like I think that they have good insights usually."



“It’s not super active, but especially right now, like, with the Bears season going on, if something notable happens, we’ll be texting in there. We’re all apart, but we’re all watching the game still.”

On the other side of the spectrum, the algorithms of social media also help to interact with fans even if they aren’t intentionally seeking out sports content – “I don’t think I follow anyone on sports, really. It just kind of appears based on Instagram,” says Louis. Other participants provided a similar experience. “I don’t actually don’t follow anyone, necessarily, on Twitter and Instagram, but I just see what the algorithm gives me. It helps me to just to keep up with things,” says Liam. Sky, who only tangentially keeps up with sports to keep up with their community around them, agreed. “I only see YouTube highlights when they’re served to me. I kind of rarely seek it out.”

While this trend seems to be mostly prevalent in those who ranked themselves as being less involved in sports, certain social media apps like TikTok have played a role in making existing fans more involved by continually showing them content. While sports content only makes up a self-reported 40% of Anne’s social media consumption, her TikTok feed continually provides her content. “I found that, especially with TikTok now, I don’t have to follow people to get served that content. And so I get a lot more of it now because I’m interested,” she says.

With social media playing an increasingly important role in allowing existing fans to build and customize their own experience, newer or less involved fans use social media to assist in either fostering a growing interest or keeping loose ties on whichever sport they are interested in. Ellie, a Northwestern undergraduate who keeps up with sports purely due to her involvement in marching band, utilizes social media platforms like Reddit to keep herself informed and participating even when she may not have the existing knowledge to do so. “I like the live game threads for football games. That’s interesting because you can see what other people are saying during the very moment that something’s happening in a game, which is helpful if you don’t fully understand what’s happening, and it helps me to react,” she says.

Sky, another Northwestern undergraduate, also started keeping up with sports when they got to college. “I did not care for them growing up. But it slowly became a source of pride because it was something that we all rallied against or for. And it was a source of community and fun.” For them, social media has also been an important player in allowing their interest to expand out into different teams and areas of sport. “I’ve gotten really into the Patriots and the Rams recently, because those are the two football teams that have logistics videos. It’s like, here’s everything we have to do to do a cold weather day. Here’s everything the video room has to do for a day. And I’m not keeping up with the team explicitly, but it puts that team on my radar. And I like that it’s trying to reach out to a different sector of their audience.”

“I found that, especially with TikTok now, I don’t have to follow people to get served content. And so I get a lot more of it now because I’m interested.”

3 All participants agreed that social media had unintended effects or shortcomings that took away from the sports experience.

During initial pilot interviews, most participants reported that live experiences and live games were the ultimate goal. However, when individuals aren't able to do so, watching the game live from home is a suitable alternative – and social media or digital spaces have reportedly compromised the experience.

"I watched a couple games this year with my brother and he gets a CBS Sports notification every time Ohio State scores. But then if you're watching the game and he gets the notification and they haven't scored yet, I'll be sitting there, and I'm like, okay, well, I guess I should watch this next play because I think they're going to score," said Anne. "I think that that takes away from it because I think the one of the nice things about live sports is that it's live. I will seek out commentary afterwards or highlights after, but if I'm in the middle of watching a game it's really like I'm really trying to put my phone down."

Other participants agreed. "Sometimes it's just on your phone too much instead of actually watching it and you miss things," says Ethan, who currently works in baseball analytics. "But I guess it just depends on what you're trying to get out of an experience."



Some other participants reported that social media content could be overbearing, or over-amplify voices that ruin the experience for them. Lucas, who describes himself as just a casual fan who doesn't follow teams on social media, explains that some activity can be "a little overbearing." "If you look at the 49ers page, during a game day they'll post like 60 things, you know what I mean? I think that's the reason I wouldn't follow them either because they post so much stuff on game days, it would be kind of annoying."



"I think that while [social media] gives the fans a little bit more power, maybe the fans shouldn't have so much power."

Michael, who uses social media primarily for informational intent, explains that his usage has been marred by the over-amplification of fan voices that social media allows for. "Social media and fan reactions to news or breaking news has been instrumental in this kind of age of sports that we're in that is very reactionary and it demands quick results...you lose a game and everybody's calling through your head. You know, everybody wants you fired. And I think that while [social media] gives the fans a little bit more power, maybe the fans shouldn't have so much power."

Other participants went so far as to say that social media needs to be further disconnected from the fans – "At the end of the day, I feel like sports isn't necessarily meant to be, like something where, like, the fans are fully involved with everything, like, it could be something where the fans are looking a little bit more distant," says Liam.

While social media and digital spaces can be used for connection, promotion, and being accessible to new fans, sports teams and companies need to be aware and cognizant of how their actions can impact or drive individuals away from the game. While there is no appeasing everyone, social media comes with strong power that should be wielded carefully.

Success Stories in Sports and Social Media

Social media teams have already begun shifting towards diverse social media postings. Participants reported already seeing or being drawn in by untraditional aspects, like educational content. Sky, mentioned earlier, was drawn in by organizational content for certain teams – "It's like how do they do nutrition? How do they do PT? And it's fascinating...I think I love when they make an effort to connect with people that aren't stereotypically an enjoyer of that sport. I love when they do family programs and include the kids. I love when they're like making an effort to make their franchise more about the team overall than just the game they play, like doing the logistics is super cool. They have to look for other areas to expand their market reach."

Shifting content to emphasize more off-the-field moments can also help smaller-market teams or new leagues gain traction. The Savannah Bananas, for instance, a travelling exhibition baseball team who play with their own set of rules (dubbed "Bananaball"), have gained more 11.6 million followers – more than any team in the MLB. Their social media page often features players singing, dancing, or dressed up in costumes. Starting out initially as a summer collegiate league, they've leveraged social media trends, organized dances during a game, and an emphasis on fan engagement with their "Fans First" philosophy to build awareness and sell out MLB stadiums during yearly tours.



The Miami Marlins recently also utilized a similar strategy, when a video of a dog longingly staring at another dog getting a hot dog during their annual “Bark in the Park” event went viral on social media. Within 24 hours of being featured on the MLB X account, the Marlins social media team put out a wanted poster looking for the dog to give him his dream day at the ballpark – and subsequently followed up by welcoming him (and his owners) back during their July 12th game to throw out the first pitch and feed him hot dog treats. Each of these posts gained over 50,000 likes combined across social media platforms, and made major news outlets in many areas. The quick thinking of social media managers featuring off-the-field moments likely resulted in increased eyes on the Marlins and possibly in creating a reason or avenue for prospective fans to tune into future games.

Others reported marketing material that had striking graphics or unique content featuring players being a possible avenue of exploration. “Teams that have really good like graphic design and seeing things that will catch your eye are the things that I gravitate towards”, says Anne. Behind-the-scenes content, with players and coaches was also reported to be a popular form of media that increases engagement with viewers. “The players or the people or players, coaches, like staff, when you get to see the people side of them, I feel like you're able to connect with or feel part of it a little bit more versus like they're a player, you're a fan versus like, oh, we're both just people that are, you know, that have things outside of what we do,” says Ethan. Pieces of content like players being “mic'd up” during a match (having a microphone attached to their person during games) makes for interesting moments that break the barrier between fan and player.

Ultimately, social media is a great way to attract and keep fans in – and there are countless ways for that to happen. Social media managers and brand strategists need to be creative in finding ways to promote their players, connect with fans, and a way to do so is to find unconventional content types and strategies, as well as to be quick in keeping up with current events. John, who found his community with hockey and fostered his love for the sport through social media, summarizes it succinctly – “I think it's massive and that's a great way to hopefully bring more people to watch and build more hype. And I think that's arguably the best way that social media should be used is to get more people watching, get more people involved and invested.”





United by Sports

How Community Influences Sports Fandom



By Jacob Hare

Key Takeaways

Being a fan can shape everything from a person's weekly plans to their career.

Participants described arranging schedules, travel, and social plans around their teams. Wins and losses affected their moods, while following sports helped some cope with stress and loneliness. For one senior editor interviewed for this report, a lifelong connection to the Chicago Cubs helped inspire a move from corporate work into sports reporting. These accounts show how closely fandom can become tied to a person's relationships, ambitions, and everyday life.

The emotional ties that keep fans coming back also keep them spending.

Buying a ticket, wearing a jersey, or paying to watch a game can be a way of maintaining a connection that has mattered for years. Interviews with journalists and media professionals highlighted how sports organizations turn that attachment into revenue through merchandise, subscriptions, betting platforms, and other services. Understanding fan spending means understanding what the team represents to the person paying.

More ways to follow sports do not necessarily create stronger team loyalty.

Digital media, fantasy sports, and betting give fans more reasons to watch and more ways to participate. But several interviewees worried that attention is shifting toward individual players, short clips, and betting outcomes. These activities can keep people engaged with sports without building the lasting attachment to a team, city, or community that participants described elsewhere in the study.



United by Sports

How Community Influences Sports Fandom

Introduction

Sports are often discussed through the lens of wins and losses, but fandom functions as something much larger. In a society that continues to grow more politically divided and socially isolated, sports remain one of the few spaces where people from entirely different backgrounds willingly gather around a shared emotional experience.

A wealthy executive and a construction worker can sit next to each other at a Philadelphia Phillies game, high-five after a home run, argue over a coaching decision on the train ride home, or buy each other beers without ever discussing income, politics, religion, or status. Sports fandom creates temporary communities built around collective identity, ritual, emotion, and belonging.

As a journalism student at Northwestern University and someone who has covered nearly every corner of Northwestern athletics—from football and basketball to baseball and soccer—I have spent the past several years immersed in sports environments both professionally and personally. Through my education at Medill and my experiences reporting on games, interviewing athletes, traveling to stadiums, and interacting with fans, I have become increasingly interested in the social power of sports fandom and the ways it shapes human behavior beyond the field itself.

Purpose

As both a journalist and a participant in sports culture, I became interested in understanding how these social experiences influence consumer behaviors such as spending, loyalty, media engagement, merchandise purchases, attendance, and long-term attachment to teams. These questions emerged from the contrast between how sports are commonly measured and how fans actually experience them. Teams and leagues are often evaluated through wins, losses, attendance, television ratings, and revenue. For fans, however, sports are also connected to relationships, family traditions, identity, memory, and belonging. I wanted to understand how those social and emotional experiences allow people from different backgrounds to connect—and whether that connection helps explain why fans continue to invest their time, attention, and money in sports. This study was guided by two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do sports journalists and other sports professionals describe the role of family, identity, and community in building lasting connections to teams?

Research Question 2: How do participants connect their own experiences as fans to the time, attention, and money they devote to sports?

Results

Analysis of the interviews revealed five closely connected themes: community and belonging; tradition, memory, and identity; emotional attachment and consumer behavior; journalism and communal storytelling; and the changing nature of fandom in the digital and gambling era.

1 Fandom as Community and Belonging

Joe Levin, a University of Texas alumnus and passionate Texas Longhorns supporter, described his connection to sports as fundamentally communal. "It's about belonging to a tribe," Levin said. "It's about identity—I'm a Longhorn; I'm not an Aggie. It's about keeping up with people and being part of something." He also described sports as "one of the few shared monocultural experiences we have," emphasizing their ability to give large groups of people a common story and identity. For Levin, sporting events also carry traditions that resemble other forms of communal ritual.

"It's about belonging to a tribe," Levin said. "It's about identity—I'm a Longhorn; I'm not an Aggie. It's about keeping up with people and being part of something."

- Sports writer and producer



Levin experienced that connection firsthand while attending Game 5 of the Cubs' 2016 World Series run at Wrigley Field. "You're high-fiving strangers, asking if anyone needs a beer while you're waiting in line, buying someone you've never met a drink," he said. "You can feel the tension, then feel the relief, then celebrate—all together."

He described the shared experience beginning before fans even reached the stadium. "From the moment you step onto the L, everyone is doing the same thing, wanting the same thing, speaking the same language," Levin said. "You're talking to strangers about the same stuff.... I can't think of many things in society now that can create that."

Geoff Magliocchetti similarly described sports as a communal force capable of bringing people together across differences. "What I've always loved about sports is that it has been a great equalizer," he said. "It's always been able to bring people together."



For Magliocchetti, that connection comes partly from the shared environment surrounding competition. “We’ve been able to set aside differences in these arenas, kind of come together and really enjoy the fact that we’ve been able to foster a sense of competition on a healthy level,” he said. Sports have also allowed him to develop relationships on both professional and personal levels.

That communal quality shapes how Magliocchetti watches sports. When the New York Rangers reach the playoffs, he goes to bars near Madison Square Garden to watch with other fans. He also organizes watch parties when friends or family members have a connection to one of the teams. “I always try to make it a social event,” he said.

Melissa Isaacson, a longtime Chicago sports reporter and Northwestern University professor, also described sports as a source of communal identity. “It’s a sense of being part of a larger group,” she said. “You know that your whole family is rooting for the Bears, your whole city is rooting for the Bears, all your friends.”

For Isaacson, that shared allegiance creates connections among families, cities, friends, and neighbors. “It’s that sense of camaraderie with people and neighbors that really unites you,” she said. “That’s one of the last kind of unifiers we have.”

Levin’s, Magliocchetti’s, and Isaacson’s experiences show how fandom can create connection at several levels. It gives established groups a shared identity, provides strangers with an immediate language, and creates social environments in which personal differences can temporarily become less important. Those connections are not limited to individual games or championship celebrations; as the interviews also revealed, they are often sustained through family traditions and memories passed from one generation to the next.

2 Tradition, Memory, and Identity

The interviews also revealed that fandom often begins within families and develops through traditions passed from one generation to the next. Participants frequently traced their relationships with sports to parents, grandparents, hometowns, and childhood experiences. These connections made teams part of their personal histories.

Alan Scheidner traced his fandom to his family and his childhood in Green Bay, Wisconsin. On Packers game days, his family gathers at a house owned by his cousin near the stadium. “In Green Bay, a lot of people have a Packer house,” Scheidner said. “For us, we just go to that house on game days. It’s kind of a cool tradition since I’ve done it for as long as I can remember.”

“It’s a sense of being part of a larger group. You know that your whole family is rooting for the Bears, your whole city is rooting for the Bears, all your friends.”

- Journalism professor and longtime sports reporter



Those gatherings have become part of Scheidner's memories of growing up as a Packers fan. "Going back to the days of Aaron Rodgers and Brett Favre, I remember growing up talking about those guys while tailgating," he said. He continues to attend games with his father, brothers, cousin, friends, and Northwestern roommates.

Family relationships also shaped Scheidner's college allegiances. His father made him a Northwestern basketball fan, while his mother's connection to the University of Wisconsin influenced his support for the Badgers. His experience shows how fandom can be inherited through family relationships while also developing through the schools, cities, and communities a person joins over time.

Jay Hart similarly traced his fandom to his relationship with his grandfather. "My grandfather was a big sports fan—especially a big Chicago sports fan—and I spent a lot of time with him," Hart said. Growing up in Springfield, Illinois, Hart regularly attended Triple-A baseball games and developed what he described as "a love affair with sports early on."

That inherited connection became especially meaningful in 2016, when Hart attended the game at Wrigley Field in which the Cubs clinched a place in the World Series. Although his seat in the upper deck was obstructed by a pole, the location hardly mattered. "My grandfather was the reason I became a Cubs fan, and he never got to see them win the World Series," Hart said. The moment connected the team's achievement to the person who had first made the Cubs meaningful to him.

Fandom also helped redirect Hart's professional life. He began his career in finance from an office near Chicago's Merchandise Mart, where he could sometimes see the lights at Wrigley Field. "I'd just sit there staring and thinking I'd much rather be there," he said. Hart eventually left finance and began pursuing sports writing despite having no formal journalism background. He has now worked at Yahoo for nearly two decades and has covered events ranging from high school basketball to Super Bowls and the Olympics.

Mike D'Abate also traced his relationship with sports to his father, a talented catcher who was scouted by the Baltimore Orioles and Pittsburgh Pirates. Because of his father's influence, baseball and football were constants in D'Abate's childhood home and became part of his daily life.

"For me, sports are deeply tied to family," D'Abate said. "Watching games with my dad when I was young remains my strongest sports memory." Although football later became the primary focus of his professional work, baseball continues to carry a different emotional significance. "Watching baseball still connects me to those early memories and conversations," he said.

***"My grandfather was the reason I became a Cubs fan,
and he never got to see them win the World Series."***

- Senior sports editor



That early influence eventually shaped D'Abate's professional direction. After considering careers in law and politics and working in the private sector, he began writing about sports professionally in 2016. "For me, sports represent continuity," he said. "They connect my childhood to my present career. They connect me to my father, to colleagues, and to readers across the world."

These experiences show how fandom is built through accumulated memories and repeated rituals. Supporting a team can preserve connections to family members, hometowns, and earlier stages of life. Because those attachments are rooted in personal history, they can remain durable even as players, coaches, and team performance change over time. That durability also has behavioral and commercial consequences, influencing how fans devote their time, attention, and money to sports.

3 Emotional Attachment and Consumer Behavior

The emotional connections participants described were also reflected in how they spent their time, attention, and money. Interviewees organized schedules around games, attended live events, followed teams across multiple media platforms, and maintained loyalties that continued even after moving away from their hometowns. Their accounts suggest that sports consumption is often driven by identity and belonging rather than entertainment alone.

Christian Morales described sports fandom as an emotional "roller coaster" capable of affecting his everyday mood. "When the Bears suck, it genuinely affects my mood," Morales said. "When Northwestern struggles, I'm like, 'Why am I here?' But when we're good, I'm happy. It's emotional."

That attachment is intensified by Morales's work as a Northwestern football equipment manager. He spends approximately 30 hours per week working around sports, travels with the football team, and described Northwestern athletics as "basically my whole life during the season." His position has made college football part of both his daily routine and his personal identity.

Morales's White Sox fandom is similarly tied to where he comes from. "I'm a Southsider, so I grew up a Sox fan," he said. Because White Sox supporters are less common at Northwestern, maintaining that allegiance has taken on an additional meaning. "At Northwestern hardly anyone is, so I kind of feel like I'm representing," he said.

Despite that emotional investment, Morales is careful about how much he spends. He estimated spending approximately \$300 per year on sports, primarily by attending eight to 10 White Sox games with inexpensive upper-level tickets. He purchases jerseys only when they are discounted and relies partly on streaming accounts shared by relatives or friends. "I like sports, but I don't really feel the need to spend a ton to enjoy them," he said. His experience shows that emotional attachment can encourage recurring attendance and purchases without necessarily producing unlimited spending.

"For me, sports represent continuity. They connect my childhood to my present career. They connect me to my father, to colleagues, and to readers across the world."

- NFL writer and analyst



Lucas Kim described himself as a die-hard Boston sports fan whose loyalty continued after he moved to New Jersey. Growing up during a successful period for the Patriots, Celtics, and Red Sox helped establish attachments that remained strong even as the teams changed. “I’m still watching these same teams with completely different players, coaches, different rosters,” Kim said. “But I still have...that undying passion for these teams.”

That emotional attachment has shaped Kim’s media habits since childhood. As a young baseball fan, he would wake up at five or six in the morning before school or summer camp to watch the previous night’s highlights on MLB Network’s Quick Pitch. Today, he estimated that he spends two to three hours per day consuming sports through games, social media, articles, podcasts, and highlights. Kim estimated spending between \$500 and \$700 annually on live sporting events, although shared cable and streaming accounts reduce his direct media costs. Social settings also affect what he purchases. “Eating food while watching live sports is a must,” he said, describing fried chicken with friends during Monday Night Football and stadium food as essential parts of attending games. His experience shows how emotional loyalty produces recurring media engagement while the social rituals surrounding sports create additional spending.

Scheidner’s attendance at Northwestern basketball games and his family’s access to Packers season tickets provide another example of fandom becoming recurring behavior. “It also gives you more access and kind of a reason to keep cheering for the team since you’re invested,” he said of the season tickets available through his grandmother and father.

That investment extends beyond attendance. Scheidner estimated spending approximately \$150 during weeks when he attends an NFL game, and he owns between 10 and 15 Packers jerseys. Fantasy sports can also influence his decisions. After selecting Las Vegas Raiders running back Ashton Jeanty for his fantasy team, Scheidner purchased tickets to watch him play while visiting Las Vegas. “If I have a fantasy player I’m excited to see, it definitely makes me want to watch the game more or even go to it,” he said.

“I’m still watching these same teams with completely different players, coaches, different rosters. But I still have...that undying passion for these teams.”

– Sports media video producer

However, the interviews also suggested that loyalty is not automatic or permanent. Hart explained that fandom can “ebb and flow” with age, team performance, and changes within sports. He was particularly interested in the effects of professionalization and frequent roster turnover in college athletics. “It raises the question of how fans stay attached to teams when rosters change so frequently,” Hart said. His concern highlights an important challenge for sports organizations: consumer engagement depends on maintaining the emotional relationships that make fans feel connected. These accounts suggest that the business of sports is sustained by more than the quality of the product on the field. Ticket sales, media consumption, merchandise purchases, travel, and long-term loyalty grow from the emotional meaning fans attach to teams and to the people with whom they experience sports. For several participants, that attachment became powerful enough to shape not only their behavior as consumers but also their professional lives as sports journalists.



4 Journalism and Communal Storytelling

For several participants, fandom did more than shape personal identity or consumer behavior; it also influenced their professional lives. Their experiences suggest that sports journalism helps create, document, and sustain the communities that develop around teams and athletes.

Levin explained that he became interested in sports because they provide a stage for compelling human stories. “I fell in love with the idea that sports are the best stage possible for amazing stories,” he said, describing stories about underdogs, humor, and unexpected moments rather than simply “Team X beat Team Y.” For Levin, journalism helps audiences understand the human meaning of a game rather than only its result.

“There are humans behind these stories. And that’s what I try to convey in my writing.”

- Senior sports editor

Kim’s childhood attachment to Boston sports similarly helped lead him toward sports journalism. His interest created opportunities to write hundreds of articles, interview athletes and coaches, attend games, and learn about sports outside those he followed growing up. He also developed friendships and a professional community through writing and talking about sports. His experience demonstrates how journalism can turn fandom into both a career and a network of personal and professional relationships. Hart described the distinction between those roles directly. “As a fan, you’re rooting for your team,” he said. “As a journalist, you’re rooting for the best story.” One of his favorite reporting experiences came after the New Orleans Saints opened the second half of a Super Bowl with a surprise onside kick. Hart found kicker Thomas Morstead, who explained that he had spent halftime alone worrying about executing the play. By pursuing the person behind a defining moment, Hart uncovered a story no other reporter had.

Magliocchetti also described sports as something that allowed him to make a living while developing relationships on both professional and personal levels. His coverage of women’s basketball began when he was looking for stories during the football offseason, but it developed into an important area of his work. After covering an Unrivaled event in Philadelphia, he observed that the conversation and resulting storylines continued beyond the event itself. “There are humans behind these stories,” Magliocchetti said. “And that’s what I try to convey in my writing.”

D’Abate similarly emphasized the importance of covering the people behind sports. “The strongest connection comes from authenticity,” he said. “Fans want to feel like they are part of something real.” For D’Abate, that means emphasizing preparation, adversity, and personal stories rather than allowing commercial pressures to overshadow sports’ emotional core. He described sporting events as “stories that unfold in real time without a predetermined ending.”

Isaacson’s experiences covering Chicago championship teams demonstrate how journalists document collective moments for audiences who cannot experience them firsthand. While covering the Bulls’ first championship won at home, she briefly paused despite working under a tight deadline. “I let myself experience it so that I could really describe it for people who weren’t there and couldn’t see everything I could see,” she said.



After the celebration, Isaacson walked onto the court with her notepad and stood in the middle of the floor. She slowly turned in a circle, recording everything she could see and hear. The exercise allowed her to absorb the atmosphere before translating it into a story for readers. Her account illustrates how sensory reporting can preserve the emotion of a sporting moment for an entire community.

Isaacson also experienced moments when the boundary between journalist and fan became less clear. After the White Sox clinched the 2005 World Series in Houston, she found a champagne bottle Paul Konerko had left in the clubhouse and brought it home for her brothers, who were lifelong White Sox fans. She later called them in tears. The bottle mattered not because anyone else could verify its history, but because Isaacson and her family knew what it represented. The experience connected a professional assignment to family memory, hometown identity, and a championship her brothers had waited their lives to witness.

These accounts show that sports journalism does more than deliver information. It gives meaning to shared moments, introduces audiences to unfamiliar athletes and sports, and preserves the stories through which communities understand their teams. Journalists therefore do not simply observe fandom from the outside; through the stories they select and tell, they help shape and extend it. At the same time, the platforms and commercial forces surrounding those stories are changing how fans encounter and engage with sports.

“I know I don’t like sports gambling myself, but they’re really taking over, and even I myself am contributing to it too.”

- Sports media video producer

5 Digital Media, Gambling, and the Changing Nature of Fandom

The interviews also revealed that participation in sports fandom is changing alongside social media, streaming platforms, fantasy sports, and online gambling. These technologies allow fans to follow games, athletes, and conversations almost constantly. They can strengthen connections across distance, but they can also fragment the viewing experience and redirect attention away from teams and toward individual statistics or financial outcomes.

Kim said that most of his sports consumption now occurs through digital media. “The majority of my sports consumption is through social media or reading articles or listening to podcasts,” he said. Fantasy sports have also introduced him to players beyond his favorite teams and helped him feel “part of the action.” Unlike fantasy sports, however, Kim views online gambling more critically. “It does just take away the focus from the competition itself, to meaningless stats and whether they hit their moneyline or not,” he said.

That tension also appears in Kim’s professional work, which includes producing content connected to gambling-sponsored sports media. “I know I don’t like sports gambling myself, but they’re really taking over, and even I myself am contributing to it too,” he said. His experience illustrates how gambling has become integrated into the sports media business even when the people producing that content have concerns about its influence.



Other participants described different relationships with fantasy sports and betting. Scheidner said fantasy football can motivate him to watch unfamiliar players or attend games he otherwise might not choose. “If I have a fantasy player I’m excited to see, it definitely makes me want to watch the game more or even go to it,” he said. He also acknowledged that placing a bet gives him an additional incentive to pay attention. Morales offered the opposite perspective. “I already spend so much time around sports that I don’t feel the need to have money on a game to care about it,” he said. Together, their experiences demonstrate that fantasy sports and gambling can deepen engagement for some fans without being necessary for others.

Participants also described digital media as an important source of community. D’Abate has readers in Great Britain, South Africa, Canada, and Germany who closely follow American football. “Social media has amplified that global connection,” he said. Hart similarly uses text messages, workplace messaging, and group chats to maintain connections with Bears fans, coworkers, and Northwestern friends despite living in Florida. These examples show how technology can extend fan communities beyond local markets and allow shared experiences to continue across distance.

At the same time, the growing number of platforms required to follow sports can create financial and practical barriers. Levin estimated spending more than \$300 per month across television services, streaming platforms, and subscriptions to sports writers. Kim and Morales relied partly on accounts shared by relatives or friends, while other participants described switching among cable, streaming services, applications, and social media to locate games and information. Digital access has expanded the amount of sports available, but it has also made consumption more fragmented.

“I already spend so much time around sports that I don’t feel the need to have money on a game to care about it.”

- University student; football equipment manager

Levin also expressed concern about betting’s growing presence in sports media. “It feels like [ESPN has] decided it doesn’t matter why people watch as long as they’re betting,” he said. Magliocchetti similarly argued that gambling has “brought out an ugly side of people,” particularly when fans forget that athletes are human beings rather than components of wagers or fantasy lineups. The interviews therefore presented technology as both an opportunity and a challenge. Digital media can expand access, maintain relationships, and create global fan communities. Fantasy sports and gambling can make audiences feel more invested, but they can also shift attention toward individual statistics, betting outcomes, and constant consumption. The effect depends on whether these tools reinforce the emotional and communal meaning of fandom or begin to replace it.

Across all five themes, one finding remained consistent: the strongest forms of fandom were rooted in emotional and social connection. Whether that connection began through family tradition, hometown identity, friendship, media storytelling, or an experience shared with strangers, it gave sports meaning beyond the outcome of a game. It also provided the foundation for the loyalty, attention, and spending that sustain the sports industry.

Fandom Through Lived Experiences

SECTION 3

From the Spotlight to the Stands

Exploring How Competitive Experiences Shape Sports Fandom



By Pragnya Kumar

Key Takeaways

Former athletes connect with sports through the deeper knowledge they gained as players and should be targeted as a distinct segment of fans.

Given that these athletes have much deeper knowledge of sports and almost an “insider” perspective when they watch, they need to be targeted differently than non-athlete fans. Based on the interviews conducted, it was evident that the way former athletes engaged when watching was through analyzing the tactical elements and thinking strategically. Rather than a choice, it came instinctively, as if they were on autopilot mode. Marketers can use this opportunity to tap into this niche audience by developing campaigns that resonate with this “insider identity.” They could develop content and messaging that rewards that deeper knowledge, such as tactical breakdowns, coach/player perspective content, or insider-framed campaigns.

Former athletes may need time away before they are ready to reconnect with sports as fans.

For former athletes who disengage from sport entirely after competing, the transition period is a critical re-entry window. Brands and leagues could develop re-engagement strategies that reconnect them to the sport on their own terms to convert inactive athlete identity back into active fandom. This type of campaign should be at a point in the customer journey when these athletes are ready to re-engage rather than being a disruptive push to watch or support sports. For example, this could be done through the alumni community. This tactic is especially useful for college athletes, where these institutional ties might be more enticing to re-engage rather than sports as a whole. The campaigns could be tied to schools, teams, and/or conferences.

Meaningful moments in former athletes’ lives can naturally draw them back to sports as fans.

Former athletes may be more willing to re-engage with sports if it means supporting an occasion or being part of a moment rather than forced re-entry. For example, when a former teammate turns professional, or their kids/family start playing sports, etc. It would be valuable for brands and marketers to tap into moments like these that play on the human and emotional components using pull rather than push marketing tactics.



From the Spotlight to the Stands

Exploring How Competitive Experiences Shape Sports Fandom

Introduction

This report examines how former athletes engage with sports as young adults after transitioning out of a competitive environment. The findings reveal how initial exposure to sports, varied motivations, relatability, and personal athletic identity shape the ways these individuals interact with sports as fans. Notably, former athletes varied in their level of involvement and fandom. The report concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for marketers seeking to engage former athletes as a distinct, but varied, sports fan audience.

First and foremost, it is important to understand the distinction between former athletes as fans and non-athlete fans. Former athletes differ from non-athlete fans because they view the sport from an insider perspective, meaning they bring a history of lived athletic experience to the way they watch sports. Practices, training, wins, losses, injuries, and teammates all shape how they see the game. This memory is embodied: former athletes watch with a physical and emotional understanding of what competition feels like. Non-athlete fans bring their own memories and attachments to sports, but they usually do not bring the same firsthand experience of having played at a competitive level. Although previous research has shown meaningful differences among sport fans in their depth of engagement (Doyle et al., 2025), understanding how a prior athletic background shapes that engagement remains underexplored. Unlike casual sports spectators, former athletes carry a pre-existing emotional and psychological attachment to sport that positions them closer to what Funk and James (2001) describe as allegiance — the deepest stage of psychological connection to a sport or team. This study seeks to address that gap by positioning former athletes as a distinct fan population whose competitive experiences meaningfully shape their social and consumption-related engagement with sport.

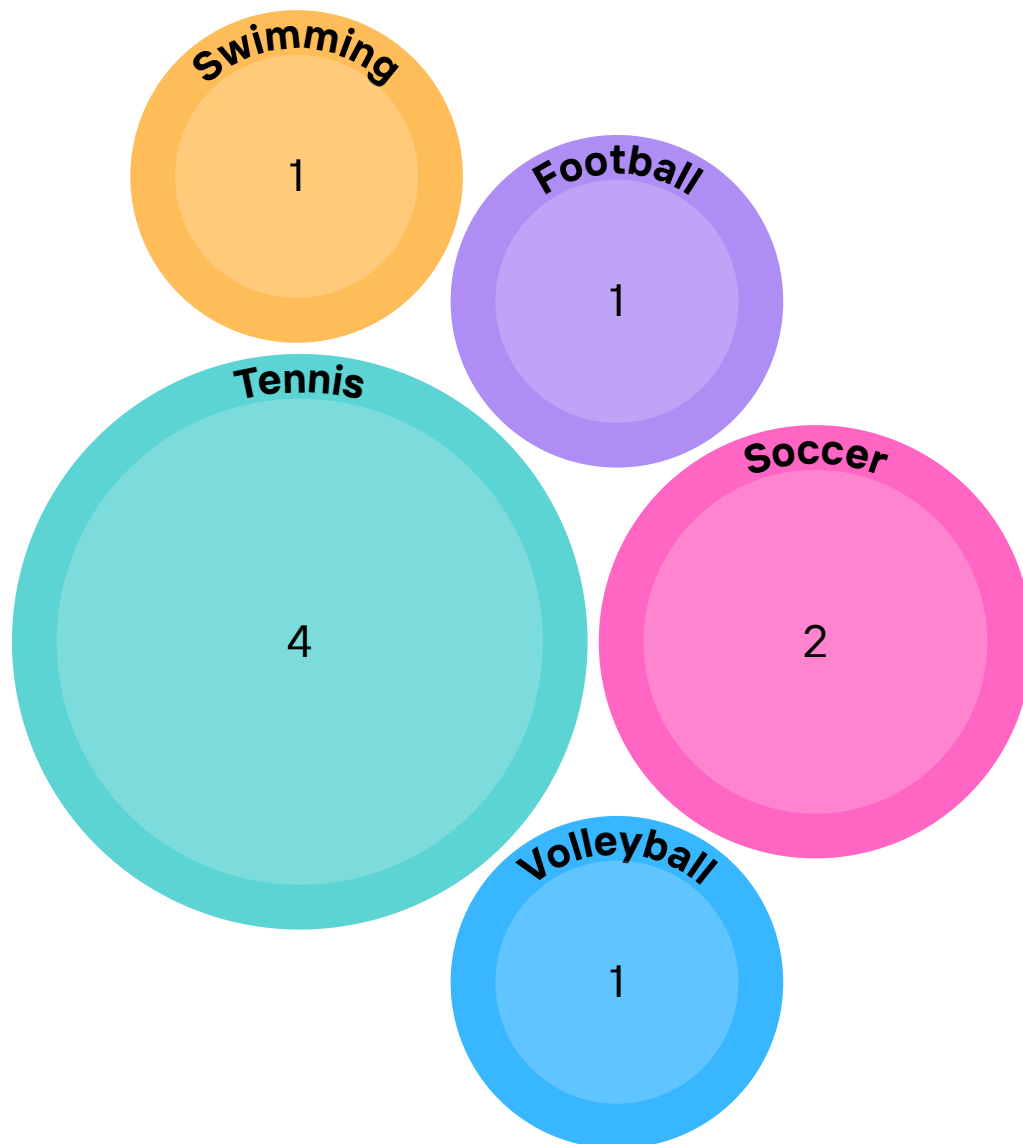
Rationale and Literature Review

Socialization Theory offers a way to understand how people move between roles in sports, including the transition from athlete to fan. Trail (2019) describes socialization as the process through which individuals learn and adopt social roles, such as becoming a fan of a team. Although research has examined fan socialization, identity, and behavior (Parry et al., 2014; Trail, 2019), alongside athletic identity and athlete transitions (Brewer et al., 1993; Park et al., 2013), former athletes remain underexamined as a distinct group of fans. Much of the socialization literature focuses on childhood influences such as parents, peers, and community, with less attention to how competitive athletic experience shapes later fandom. This study addresses that gap by examining how former athletes' experiences influence their transition to fandom, their social connections through sport, and their sports consumption, while also considering generational differences.

Research Question: How do former athletes' competitive experiences shape their transition from participation to fandom, and influence their social and consumption-related engagement with sports?

Which Sports Informed this Study?

A breakdown of what sports the interviewees competed in





Results

1 Identity

How sports relates to a participant's sense of self or belonging — their athletic background, national pride, team loyalty, and the role sports plays in defining who they are or who they aspire to be. For former athletes, many perceive their identity to be tied to who they were as an athlete or how well they performed. In this context, we explore how athletes are transitioning out of a competitive mindset into more casual viewers, or from competitive athletes to diehard fans. The main sub-themes that emerged here were Athletic Identity and Identity Transition, because many struggle to define what their identity is outside of a sports context in their daily lives.

1.1 Athletic Identity

The main sub-theme that emerged in this section was Athletic Identity, where these athletes associated who they are with what sport they played and how they performed using overall results. From first glance, it may seem that this is separate from one's actual identity in the broader sense, but we found that many athletes gave too much importance to their athletic identity where it overshadowed their core selves. It became apparent that it was a challenge to distinguish the two across athletes.

As participant eight mentioned, *"I would say that a lot of my identity for most of my life was wrapped up in sports."* As he expanded on this thought, he went on to explain that it was the overarching theme of sports that he associated with his identity, meaning any aspect that related to sports in his daily routine. He said, *"what I wrapped my identity in was sports, and whether that be soccer or, you know, lifting weights and trying to stay in shape, or whatnot, it was my life. Every day of the week was training, or the way I ate, and the way that I slept, or the way that I did anything was kind of influenced by sports. So I would say every aspect of my life really was sports, and it was also what I identified as."* He further explained that this mentality caused him to work hard to break this after he finished playing competitively when he graduated college. He knew he enjoyed competing and staying active, so he began involving himself in other activities where he could channel that energy into something he enjoyed, like running and biking, and has continued to play soccer in a supplementary capacity that doesn't solely define who he is anymore. Participant seven also echoed similar sentiments, stating that, *"Sports is what you do, it's not who you are."* He also explained the struggle of having his identity wrapped up in sports, but realizing that *"my identity is not in winning... wins and losses."* He said, *"I feel like that was a shift for me, like, when I got to college, I realized that football was something that I did, it wasn't who I was."* It is important to note that he had this shift once he got to college, because many mentioned struggling with it after college athletics when they finished playing competitively. Although the aspect of Athletic Identity has been tough for many to work through, some view it positively. As participant nine mentioned, *"Even after swimming, I've always kind of identified as a swimmer. I've always loved sports as a result and been an advocate for athletics."* In his case, his Athletic Identity has allowed him to stay close to swimming and sports despite being far removed as an athlete.

"Sports is what you do, it's not who you are."

- Former college football player, 20 years since graduating



Another lens athletes spoke about Athletic Identity was its ability to serve as a common denominator and connect people who might not have had other aspects in common. As participant four said, *“when you meet someone who did it, you're like, oh my gosh, like, that is so cool! You have so much to talk about.”* She emphasized this especially in situations where you are around people you don't know well, but the aspect of being an athlete becomes an immediate ice breaker and connector. From a fan perspective, having that identity has helped some athletes relate to others when watching. As participant five said, *“I relate more to the people who are playing. I think I relate more to the college athlete and the college sports, since I'm so near removed from it.”*

1.2 Identity Transition

The second sub-theme that was prevalent when discussing athletes' identities was Identity Transition. As we discussed earlier, many athletes struggle with differentiating their athletic identities from their personal ones. This section explores the actual process of that transition and what challenges athletes face during it. All athletes interviewed in this context played at the highly competitive collegiate level, which has both positive and negative effects. As participant five mentioned, *“I'm burnt out and broken, and it's definitely been a positive / negative relationship at points during and now, after graduation.”* This was echoed by several athletes during the interview process, and how there are ups and downs at this level in sports, and it is important to embrace both sides. A main challenge that surfaced across athletes was how to introduce or describe themselves without the aspect of athletics. As participant eight put it, *“I try to think about a way to describe myself when I'm talking to people without using, you know, what I like, sports in general, because it's no longer a main part of my life.”* This started to touch on the true transition of identities, its complexities, and that it is a process that takes work and time from these athletes to successfully accept this new stage they are now in. Participant nine, a former swimmer, explained this further and his words articulated what many athletes were feeling:

“[I've] always identified as a swimmer. People kind of knew me as the swimmer. And now what am I? And what can I be great at?”

- Former college swimmer, 11 years since graduating

“I think there was sort of an identity crisis afterward where I've always been trying to fill that with something else. I always identified as a swimmer. People kind of knew me as the swimmer. And now what am I? And what can I be great at? and do I have to get as great at my career or whatever else it is as I was with swimming because that brought me so much excitement and it just feels like I'm trying to plug a gap.” Similarly, participant seven dove into the concept of life after being a competitive athlete, and that we still have our base values to rely on. He mentioned *“just realizing that we're all human and all on a journey of trying to figure out.”* Many athletes have the perspective of losing something when they stop playing sports, but as one said, it is about finding something to fill that gap initially until they find something else they are passionate about. There are also other changes that happen during this time that can compound this feeling, like transitioning through life stages and finding a career path after college. Participant seven also described that being a football player was one aspect of his life and identity, but did not solely define who he was as a human being. He described being more than just his sport when he said, *“I'm [me] outside of this, like, I have these morals, these thoughts, I have these beliefs, and, you know, sports is something that I'm good at, but it's not the only thing, because sports is gonna end. And then you become a fan, right?”*

2 Experiences

These can be defined as an event that is actually lived through as opposed to one that is imagined or thought about. In the context of this research, this refers to former athletes' experiences from both the player and fan perspective. The memory of the participants' lived experience seemed to affect their ability to relate to and empathize with other athletes. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned the long-lasting impact their experiences as an athlete will have on their lives because of the connection they formed with people and the community they built.

2.1 Relatability

The main sub-theme that emerged in this section was Relatability. Participant nine explained this well: *"I relate to the players. I understand the grind and frustration of putting in a year's worth of work and not getting the result you wanted — or the feeling when you do get the result you want."* The way these athletes defined relatability varied, as well as what aspects made them feel closer to the players as a fan. For example, participant one, a former Division I tennis player, connected deeply with college sports because the athletes felt "relatable," unlike professionals who feel like "celebrities." Although there might be potential biases from being a college athlete herself, it highlighted the different perceptions that exist between even the college and professional level. On the other hand, participant eight mentioned that he would watch a professional game or match over college any day, although he played Division I soccer in college. These were his thoughts when asked why he liked watching professional sports more:

"I will always enjoy and appreciate watching a professional sport, just because me, as somebody who dedicated my life to a sport, up until now, I've seen what it takes to really make it to that level. So, no matter what sport it is, I can almost sit there and appreciate it for the people that are there, and the work that they've put in"

- Former college soccer player, 1 year since graduating





Although both of these people were college athletes, their attachment to their schools and college athletics varied. One became more immersed in college athletics and was passionate about supporting her friends and fellow athletes in other sports. The other still enjoyed those aspects, but he preferred professional sports because the quality was another level up from college athletics. A few athletes shared these views and preferred to watch professional sports because of the same reason, while others enjoyed the unique elements that the college atmosphere offered like participant one did.

2.2 Empathy

In some cases, interviewees described empathy as an extension of relatability. Former athletes expressed how they felt empathetic toward players because their own personal experiences as an athlete helped them understand what others face on a daily basis and the pressures that come with that.

Participant three pointed out that watching from the outside put into perspective what she “didn’t, couldn’t or wouldn’t do”, and it “let me into their world, and it gave me a more empathetic lens.” Many also described that watching made them view other athletes as more normal and accessible because they have been through similar experiences.

This participant also mentioned that “it’s no longer romanticized, it’s like, okay, this is a job, they’re doing their job, they’re doing it really well.” As we dove more into the fan perspective, another participant mentioned the relatability of watching other athletes play when things were not going favorably. She said, “sometimes when I see an athlete or something messed up, especially in a big moment, I’m able to put myself there and be like, that would suck, like, I would hate to do that.” By relating to her personal experiences, she was able to understand what the athlete must have been going through in the moment and empathize with them rather than be critical of their mistakes.

2.3 Connection

Another sub-theme that interviewees touched on was Connection. A common sentiment across athletes was the positive impact they felt their athletic experiences would have on their lives, as well as how it shaped them into who they are today. For many, the memories that stuck were not related to specific moments during matches or games, but the connection they formed with people and the community they built. Participant five explained this well, saying “when I think about tennis and reflect on my favorite experiences, not one... maybe a few come to mind where I’m actually on court. But a lot of it is the bus rides, or the hotel stays, or the connections that you make with girls, go to their weddings, or, you know...be part of their life afterward. That’s to me what really matters.” She emphasizes the deeper, symbolic meaning of what her experiences meant to her. In her case, making these connections and memories might be more meaningful to her because she grew up playing an individual sport, which she mentioned was so isolating at times.

“But a lot of it is the bus rides, or the hotel stays, or the connections that you make with girls, go to their weddings, or, you know...be part of their life afterward. That’s to me what really matters.”

- Former college tennis player, 1 year since graduating



Another way athletes view connection is by watching other sports, which she also brought up when she said, "I feel accomplished when I get to see sport in person, I don't know, I just think that's the connection." On the other hand, participant seven had a different perspective on Connection — he was almost reminiscing on his experiences, not viewing how they would shape his future like participant five did. He mentioned that "Sports is entertainment, but also sports for me is, like, that connection back to the purity of just playing the game because of having fun." In this context, he viewed connection as a way to take him back to the simpler moments, where he was having fun with his people. He added that community is important in building that connection, by saying that "There is that communal aspect of watching something together, like, when a great play happens."

3 Motivation

Motivation can be defined as the underlying reasons or drivers behind why people engage with sports at all. In the context of former athletes, this refers to how their motivations might differ from those of the typical sports fan. Former athletes may watch a game both for enjoyment and through the lens of their firsthand experience, analyzing plays and strategies with a deep understanding of the sport.

"Sports is entertainment, but also sports for me is, like, that connection back to the purity of just playing the game because of having fun."

- Former college football player, 20 years since graduating



3.1 Exposure

In this research, we found Exposure to be a critical sub-theme of motivation when discussing future opportunities with participant seven specifically. He mentioned that he was able to attend the University of North Carolina on a full scholarship due to athletics; he explained that he would not have gotten accepted based on academics alone, and that football changed that for him. He explained that his parents were in the poor to middle class growing up, and that any type of scholarship was the only way he would've been able to go to a four-year college. These few quotes stuck out from our conversation:

"Sports was my way out, in a way. Not a way out of, like, a bad situation, but a way out of... Daytona Beach, going to community college. So, not that there's anything wrong with community college, but I wanted to launch into a four-year school. "

- Former college football player, 20 years since graduating

"Going someplace different, so sports allowed me to go to a completely different, you know, state, and meet different people, and get to know some great people, that are in sports and out of sports" In this case, his motivation for pursuing sports was exposure and opportunity. As he was reflecting back on his days on the team, he said "I always said I wanted to get in this business because of what sports did for me." This is an example of the power that sports can have on an individual's life, and how motivations differed across the former athletes in this research.



3.2 Community

Another motivation we found was the aspect of community. The college athletes mentioned that by competing at a high level of sports in a team, they formed a community that they know will stay with them for many years to come. As participant nine reflected on his time as a swimmer in college, he also mentioned that he still loves to swim now, and he mentioned the communal aspect influencing that in a major way — *"I still exercise all the time because I love that piece and I love the community."* He also viewed it from a fan perspective and mentioned that the communal aspect is what makes watching sports enjoyable, whether that community comes from having people to watch with or supporting the same team. He said: *"As a fan, I think there's a community aspect to it. I love watching greatness. I love watching people strive to be the best."*

3.3 Learning

As we explored more of these athletes' motivations from the fandom perspective, a few indicated that the ability to learn motivated them to watch more sports in their free time. Participant six mentioned that despite playing soccer at the college and professional level currently, she still loves watching soccer games whenever she gets the chance to continue to learn and see where she can improve personally. Here is what she had to say: *"I really want to watch this team because they play this formation, and I want to learn about this formation, or I want to learn my position within a different system, because I also want to be a coach."* On the same topic of learning, participant nine had a different take on it, saying that his initial motivation to swim stemmed from learning: *"My mom put me in when I was six years old. I did it for a couple of years just to learn how to swim, mostly for safety reasons."*

"I'll watch much more for, like, the tactical, or I'll watch, you know, my position, and try and not only enjoy the game, but also learn from it."

- Former college soccer player, 6 years since graduating



4 Engagement Behaviors

Former athletes have specific ways of interacting with sports content, events, and experiences rooted in their firsthand experience of competing, shaping a relationship with sport that is not as ritual- or experience-based as typical fandom. Across those interviewed, fandom varied widely; a competitive athletic background does not produce a single, uniform type of fan, but rather a spectrum of engagement styles and relationships with sport. Within that variation, a distinct analytical and identity-driven layer emerges that captures the nuance of what it means to be a former athlete and a fan simultaneously. Four sub-themes emerged here: Fandom, Fan Identity, Analytical Mindset, and Immersion.

"I feel like my fandom when it comes to sports, always shocks people. I am not as into it as you would think."

- Former college tennis player, 2 years since graduating

The broader theme of Fandom refers to the range of engagement behaviors across former athletes. The extent of these athletes' fandom varied; some watched with the same passion and commitment they played with, while others took a more casual approach. One interviewee mentioned her potential reason for not being a "super fan" and watching many sports stems from the time her own sport took up as a junior, so she wouldn't be interested in devoting more time to sports once she was done with her own. A few other athletes shared this sentiment: One said that *"I feel like my fandom when it comes to sports, always shocks people. I am not as into it as you would think"*, and another said *"I would say I don't keep up with sports outside of a professional setting."* These quotes emphasize that there is not always a correlation between elite athletes and fandom. In other words, being an athlete and competing at a high level doesn't automatically equate to one being a sports fan, and this tension came up in multiple interviews. On the other hand, there were also many athletes who enjoyed watching sports and chose to do so willingly. A former soccer athlete mentioned that he was a die-hard fan growing up and loved watching soccer games, especially when Manchester United was playing. He said, *"I was obsessed, so I watched it all the time, and I was a fan of it, and I was also a fan of other teams that weren't my team, just because I enjoyed the game itself."* However, he explained how his fandom has changed over the years; once he got to college, he became a more casual fan and he *"watched it as a way to study the game."* This part in particular stood out: *"I miss games all the time. I'm not gonna go back and record them. I'll watch the highlights or something like that. But I just got to the point where, if you want to be completely honest, I started seeing how other people treated, you know, a Georgia game on Saturday, or a Phillies game on Sunday, and I was just like, I don't want that to be me. I don't want to be so entrenched in my mood to be wrapped around a group of 30- to 20-year-olds that don't know me, won't ever know me. I don't want that to be able to affect me, or my day, or anything like that. So, I would say in a big way, I took a huge step away during college."*





4.1 Fan Identity

For former athletes, many of them explained that they were not die-hard fans. Since they were already so involved in sports on a daily basis, their Fan Identity was more focused than social because they were following every play from a tactical perspective as they were used to doing in their personal experiences. They would watch to enjoy the game and witness talent, but did not crave the social aspect of fandom. As participant seven said, *"I'm interested in watching the game when I'm at the game. It's really hard for me to multitask."* He is focused on watching because he is interested in the outcome. Like he said, *"even last night, we had a basketball game, and there are donors there, and there are people that want to talk, and I get super distracted, because I want to watch the game."*

4.2 Analytical Mindset

Another theme that emerged was the Analytical component in former athletes' fandom. Given that they were so close to the game, their natural instinct becomes analyzing the plays and thinking tactically, especially if they are watching their own sport. Participant four touched on how it feels like second nature when she watches sports, saying:

"You're literally trained to dissect every single play. So it's like, how do you turn that off"? In my head, I'm literally analyzing the entire thing, and I think sometimes when I do watch, it's hard to calm my brain down, where I'm not dissecting everything. So I definitely think as a former athlete, your brain just automatically goes to the detail aspect. I just think sometimes it's overwhelming, because I'm looking at so many different things, and I can't even control it." Similarly, another echoed similar feelings when she said:

"I think it's hard to enjoy it, being removed from the sport. I feel like I watch it, and then I just analyze, so it's hard for me to sit back as a casual observer."

- Former college tennis player, 1 year since graduating

Participant seven, a former college football player who now works in athletics, said the following: *"If I'm watching a Georgia State football game, I'm analyzing certain plays throughout the game, or I'm making note of it. You know, we'll talk as a staff, essentially, about it, whatever might happen."* This shows that despite it being roughly twenty years since he has played football competitively, his default is still watching from an athlete's perspective.

Similarly, participant eight said that *"when it comes to soccer, I can sit there and appreciate every little thing that happens, so I can look at the way somebody moves off the ball, when they're 30 yards away from the play, and be like, that guy just created the goal by doing this, and my brain is constantly thinking like I'm watching film."* These aspects were discussed with various athletes to understand how they were able to relate to their own personal experiences from watching. For example, the quote above shows the comparison between the athletes' engagement behaviors when watching a soccer game to watching film as an athlete. These types of comparisons and references show what naturally comes to mind when these athletes are fans, and how intertwined their athletic and fan identities can be. Another example of this was from participant five, when she said *"I like to analyze, especially if I'm watching tennis, what's going on, and I'm a little more invested in that way."*

4.3 Immersion

The final component of engagement behaviors that was Immersion, defined as the level of engagement these former athletes had with sports. The way athletes immersed themselves in sports experiences differed — some mentioned it in the context of wanting to watch with company rather than alone, while others mentioned watching alone and being extremely focused on everything happening during the game or match. Participant six, a professional soccer player and former collegiate athlete, mentioned her love for watching soccer. She explained that although most of her days were already spent around soccer, she loved to watch it during her free time. She watched for pleasure, but also viewed it as a learning opportunity to see what other players were doing in their respective positions and if she could translate anything into her personal game. She said that *"Especially when it comes to tournament time or end of season, like when different games can impact my team, I'm definitely watching my team and I'm keeping up with the other games."* Her love for the game was evident, because she also said *"If I had, like, all the free time in the world, I'd probably just watch more games, watch more leagues"*, indicating her level of fandom and immersion are quite high. Additionally, we heard more athletes discuss the social aspect of fandom more in the context of Immersion than elsewhere.

Participant two, who played tennis up to the collegiate level but has a love for soccer, took us through her routine as a fan. As a native of Spain, soccer is an integral part of their country's culture. Her level of immersion was also high, but in two contexts — she loves to watch alone and with friends. When watching alone, she explained being highly attentive and wanting to analyze the plays and tactical elements of the game. However, when watching with friends or company, she explained that it is common to go out to bars and people who are supporting the same team often watch together. She said, *"If we're going with friends to a bar, or if we're seeing the game outdoors, or in the stadium, then of course, that's like a whole-day activity."*

"If I had, like, all the free time in the world, I'd probably just watch more games, watch more leagues."

- Former college soccer player, 4 years since graduating



The Student-Athlete Experience in the NIL Era

How Student-Athletes Balance Sponsorship and Academics



By Sofia Vallejo

Key Takeaways

The recognition student-athletes receive can hide the strain of daily life.

Scholarships, school pride, and public attention are the visible parts of college athletics. Participants also described injuries, sacrifice, emotional exhaustion, and pressure to perform in both sports and academics. Managing those demands meant balancing responsibilities as students, athletes, teammates, and public figures, often while feeling expected to handle it all without complaint.

Sports shape who student-athletes are and who they hope to become.

Athletics shaped participants' friendships, routines, sense of self, and plans for the future. Knowing that people showed up to support them made their effort feel worthwhile, even when they were focused on the game. These relationships remained important as athletes considered what their lives might look like after competition.

NIL opportunities can provide recognition beyond financial support.

For many participants, name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities meant more than financial support. Sponsorship acknowledged their personality and influence beyond their sport, offering recognition after years of demanding work. Participants described choosing partnerships carefully, placing importance on whether a brand reflected who they were.

The Student-Athlete Experience in the NIL Era

How Student-Athletes Balance Sponsorship and Academics

Introduction

Student-athletes occupy a unique position in university life, balancing the demands of academic life with the responsibilities of competitive sports. Their experiences extend beyond practices and competitions to include managing schedules, maintaining academic performance, representing their institutions, and navigating relationships with teammates, coaches, fans, and sponsors. Success in sports often requires more than physical talent, demanding discipline, resilience, effective time management, and strong support systems. As the role of student-athletes continues to evolve, particularly with the emergence of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) opportunities, understanding their experiences has become increasingly important. NIL refers to the ability of college athletes to earn compensation through the use of their name, image, and likeness, including through brand partnerships, endorsements, and social media opportunities.

Research Question 1: What is the experience of being sponsored as a student-athlete?

Research Question 2: How do student-athletes balance the academic demands of university life with the pressures of being objects of sports fandom?



Results

1 The Early Formation of the Student-Athlete Identity

For many participants, the experience of becoming a student-athlete started long before college. Sports were introduced as part of family routines, traditions, and identities. Several athletes described growing up in families where sports were always present and played an important role in bringing family members together. Practices, watching games, and supporting athletes at competitions were a regular part of their childhood, often becoming shared experiences and common topics of conversation at home. Many participants also said their parents played an important role in encouraging their involvement in sports from an early age. In many cases, parents themselves had athletic backgrounds, which influenced the way sports were valued within the household.

"My mom played college volleyball, and so right out of the womb, she kind of just taught it to me. She also was a coach herself, so I've always grown up in the gym. I would say my love and relationship with the sport definitely comes from my mom in the first place."

- College volleyball player



For many athletes, sports were deeply connected to the way they grew up, the relationships they built with their families, and the routines that shaped their everyday lives from a young age.

This early immersion in sports also influenced how they saw themselves and their relationship with the sport. For some participants, athletics was not something separate from everyday life, but something that had been part of their routines, relationships, and identity for as long as they could remember. Athletics became associated with discipline, belonging, and emotional connection long before collegiate competition entered the picture. These early experiences shaped how participants understood what it meant to be a student-athlete long before they competed at the collegiate level. Similarly, other participants described sports as something that emotionally united entire families over time.

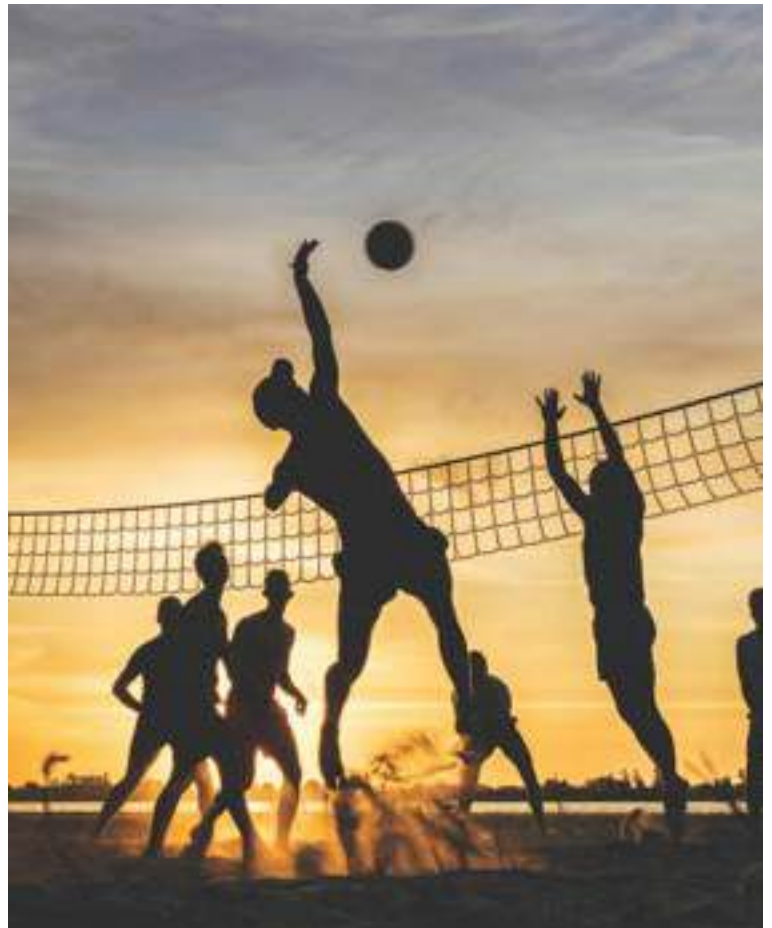
"It kind of brought us really close... for us, it was just kind of like a family thing. Everyone loved it."

- College tennis player

2 Always Community: Team Culture, and Emotional Support

In addition to family influence, another recurring theme across interviews was the strong sense of community created through athletics. While sports are often viewed primarily through competition and performance, athletes repeatedly described the social and emotional relationships surrounding sports as equally important parts of their experiences.

This sense of community appeared even among athletes participating in traditionally individual sports such as tennis or swimming. Although individual performance determined wins and losses, athletes described relying heavily on teammates for emotional support, encouragement, and motivation throughout their college experiences. For many, the opportunity to be part of a team was an important factor in their decision to compete at the collegiate level, providing a sense of community. Being surrounded by people who were going through the same experience made the demands of the sport feel more manageable and enjoyable. This shared experience also created a form of continuous engagement, helping athletes stay motivated and committed even when their results were not always favorable.





"Even though singles are individuals... we would still travel all together just to watch, support, and cheer each other up."

Although tennis matches were ultimately played individually, the college environment transformed the sport into something much more collective. Teammates traveled together, practiced together, supported one another emotionally, and shared the pressures of competition. Athletics therefore became about much more than individual performance alone.

Athletes in team sports described these emotional connections even more strongly. Many participants explained that teammates became part of nearly every aspect of their daily lives due to the amount of time they spent together. Their time together contributed to relationships that often extended far beyond sports themselves.

"My teammates are my friends too, and that's also a very important piece of being a student-athlete. We get so many friends that we could call more than teammates. I interact with them during practice and lift, but also in class, at home, and during hangouts."

- College volleyball player

For many athletes, teammates became people they relied on emotionally during stressful academic periods, injuries, burnout, and moments of self-doubt. Spending so much time together created relationships that often felt closer to family than friendship.

3 What People Don't See.

A major theme across interviews was the tension between visibility and misunderstanding. While student-athletes are often highly visible representatives of their universities, many participants explained that they frequently felt misunderstood by the broader campus community. Several athletes expressed frustration with stereotypes suggesting that student-athletes receive easier academic treatment or live privileged lifestyles compared to other students.

"People think we got it easy... but we also have to physically work, go to tournaments, do homework, and do it all the time for four years."

Although athletes were highly visible through competitions, social media, and campus culture, many described feeling that the amount of work behind their performance remained largely unseen by others. Participants repeatedly described dealing with physical exhaustion, injuries, strict schedules, constant travel, and academic stress simultaneously. Student-athletes can be highly visible as public figures while remaining largely invisible in terms of the work, pressure, and unequal resources behind that visibility.

Athletes in individual sports appeared more likely to describe feelings of repetition, emotional isolation, and responsibility falling entirely on themselves during both victories and losses.



In addition, many participants agreed that certain sports receive preferential treatment and significantly greater institutional support than others. Regardless of the sport they played, participants consistently felt that all student-athletes should receive equal visibility, comparable institutional support, and the same opportunities to grow and succeed. These differences were also reflected in the media environment surrounding collegiate sports. Sports that receive more attention also seemed to have greater access to resources and opportunities to be seen, while athletes in less prominent sports described having a harder time getting the same level of recognition outside their own athletic communities.

"The football team had... a lot more resources than us all the time." "It always comes down to... budget... tennis... doesn't get much money... We didn't have... a nutritionist... I certainly think... there is a need for a sports psychologist..."

"Balance" depends on institutional support, and not all sports get it equally.

In contrast, athletes in team sports often emphasized collective motivation and emotional support as important parts of their experience. Team environments appeared to create stronger feelings of shared responsibility and emotional connection, especially during difficult periods of competition or stress. These differences revealed how emotional experiences within athletics can vary significantly depending on the structure of the sport itself. While some athletes found empowerment in independence and self-responsibility, others experienced that same independence as emotionally exhausting over time.

4 Balancing Identity: Athlete, Student, and Public Figure

Balancing sports and academics involved much more than simple time management. Many participants described constantly moving between multiple identities: athlete, student, teammate, representative, and public figure. This created pressure not only to perform athletically, but also to continuously prove their seriousness as students.

"I would want the university to know that we all still care about school. I really wanted to focus on my future outside of volleyball, and I knew that one day volleyball was going to end. I'm not taking academics for granted, and I'm really using it to my best ability."

Many athletes seemed aware that their sports careers were temporary. While athletics occupied much of their time and identity, many participants also expressed strong commitments toward academics and future professional goals outside sports.

What stands out is that many participants described athletics as something temporary, or at least something they expected to end after graduating from college. Because of this, maintaining a healthy balance across different areas of life becomes especially important, including academics, professional development, and social and personal life.

5 When the Athlete Becomes a Brand: NIL, Branding, and Visibility.

5.1 Fandom

Now let's talk about the second research question: How do student-athletes balance the academic demands of university life with the pressures of being objects of sports fandom? What does this mean and what implications does it have?

At first, balancing these roles may seem straightforward, but the interviews showed that it involves much more than managing time. Athletes carry the responsibility of representing their teams, schools, and, in some cases, even their countries.

At the same time, maximizing their professional potential through NIL has become increasingly important. Building on the idea that an athletic career can be temporary, many athletes see relationships with different brands and sponsors as an opportunity to grow their personal brand and turn their athletic career into a medium- and long-term commitment, something they can continue building even after graduation.

As part of this responsibility, decisions must be made with caution, thinking carefully about the brands they work with, since these affect more than just their personal brand.

Beyond providing financial and sponsorship opportunities, NIL can also increase student-athletes' visibility on social media and make them more accessible to brands.

Many athletes state that being approachable to brands represents a source of pride, and more than that, a form of identification and an extension beyond the sport they play. They are interested in connecting and aligning with the mission, vision, and values of brands, and they seek to feel identified with them.



"It feels really cool that other people are noticing and want me to help them promote their brand."

"I apply to brand collaborations through a platform for student-athletes, and it's exciting because it gives me opportunities I wouldn't have had before."

- College volleyball player



For some athletes, sponsorships symbolized confidence, visibility, and personal growth rather than just financial gain. Collaborations felt exciting because athletes felt recognized not only as competitors, but also as individuals with influence and personality outside their teams and universities. This includes, of course, being part of a community. Some agree that a big part of what makes them feel good about being athletes is connecting with and influencing new generations, sharing a bit of what they have lived through. Being able to set an example and share what it means to be an athlete fills them with pride and motivates them to keep going every day.

"I want something that I love and that I'm gonna use... to be true to my own brand and personality."

- College golfer

As these opportunities became more common, participants also described becoming more intentional about the way they presented themselves. Sponsorships were not only about gaining visibility, but also about representing who they were beyond their sport.

Many explained that these partnerships allowed them to connect with different communities, share what they stood for, and build relationships that extended beyond competition. Because of this, the brands they partnered with became an extension of their own identity, making authenticity an important part of the decision-making process. Athletes were also evaluating the brands they wanted to work with and whether they felt like a good fit for them. A partnership felt more meaningful when they actually connected with the brand and could see themselves using or supporting it.

At the same time, athletes were also highly aware of the image they projected online and publicly. Several participants explained that they carefully considered the brands they associated themselves with and the type of content they shared online. Many explained that partnerships felt more meaningful when there was a genuine connection between themselves, the brand, and their audiences. They believed that when athletes genuinely connected with a brand's values, collaborations felt more natural and created stronger engagement. Being sponsored by a brand is seen as an emerging opportunity for self-branding and financial support, but it comes with responsibility, selectivity, and identity management.

For the athletes, authenticity became an important part of deciding which partnerships felt right for them. They were aware that the brands they worked with could also shape how others saw them, so choosing a partnership was not only about the opportunity itself, but also about whether it felt consistent with who they were. In that way, athletes were building their own personal brands while also deciding which other brands they wanted to be associated with.

The role of the student-athlete, then, seems to be growing into something bigger than just performance on the field. On top of juggling academics and competition, athletes now find themselves managing personal brands, online visibility, and how audiences see them. Social media stopped being just entertainment or a way to express themselves; it turned into a tool for handling opportunities, partnerships, and public identity.



But this added visibility wasn't always a good thing. For all the recognition NIL and social media could bring, many athletes also talked about how the day-to-day grind of their sport felt emotionally repetitive and draining after years of rigid schedules, pressure, and the constant expectation to perform.

Fans experienced sports through celebration and community, while athletes experienced the very same moments through pressure, responsibility, and performance.

For some, the same discipline and structure that opened doors at the start eventually wore them out. Sports gave them recognition, confidence, visibility, and chances they wouldn't have had otherwise, but left them tired and burned out too. This back and forth between the perks of being seen and the cost of always having to perform came up again and again in the interviews.

5.2 Audience & The Games/Competitions

Fans experienced sports through celebration and community, while athletes experienced the very same moments through pressure, responsibility, and performance. Some participants talked about the pressure of performing in front of a crowd, especially knowing that scouts, sponsors, or other important people could be watching. Being a public figure representing a team already comes with a lot of weight, and that kind of audience made it even more real.



But at the same time, the energy from the crowd genuinely helped. A loud, excited audience could change the whole feel of a game and push athletes to give more. That sense of people being there, being invested, created a kind of community energy that actually motivated them, even if they weren't consciously thinking about it in the middle of competing. Former athletes in the audience could also relate to what current athletes were experiencing.

Because they had been through competitive sports themselves, they understood the pressure and emotions that come with competing in front of others. This shared experience could make it easier for them to connect with current athletes, even from the stands.

For some former athletes, their athletic background also created opportunities that extended beyond their time competing. Being an athlete gave them access to experiences and opportunities that may not have been available to them otherwise. These experiences could continue to shape what they were able to do after their athletic careers ended.



CONCLUSION

What is Most Important to Fans?

Three themes consistently appeared across the broader project.

Belonging. Participants repeatedly framed fandom as membership in a community rather than support for a team. Whether through school identity, family traditions, national pride, or shared experiences, sports provided the means to feel socially connected to something larger than themselves.

Shared Experience. Fans remembered moments centered on social interaction rather than athletic outcomes. Tailgates, watch parties, traditions, student sections, and collective emotional reactions appeared more frequently than recollections of specific plays or final scores. This finding aligns with observations by facilitators on positive experiences becoming visible simply by watching fans leave an event smiling regardless of the result.

Identity. Across all interview groups, sports functioned as a means of expressing identity. Fans used teams, traditions, rituals, and merchandise to communicate who they were and where they belonged. This appeared among alumni, former athletes, international participants, and lifelong supporters alike. Merchandise and traditions were valuable not because of functional utility, but because they signaled membership within a larger community. This finding aligns with facilitator observations that merchandise, traditions, and game-day rituals function less as commercial products and more as visible markers of community membership.

Facilitator Goal	Fan Perception
Reduce friction	Accessibility increases participation
Create atmosphere	Atmosphere becomes memory
Preserve rituals	Rituals create belonging
Sell merchandise	Merchandise signals identity
Encourage attendance	Attendance provides connection
Create social currency	Shared experiences become social currency

Across facilitators, fans, digital platforms, former athletes, and student-athletes, this research points to a single throughline: fandom is fundamentally about human connection. Institutions succeed only when they recognize this. Facilitators design for atmosphere and acquisition, but fans consistently describe the real payoff as belonging, identity, and social connection.

Organizations create the conditions; communities create the meaning. Sport functions as the language through which that connection happens. The U.S. sports occasion is extraordinarily good at offering connection without requiring fandom, so the opportunity lies in the handoff: identifying the live, digital, and relational moments where that connection can be given something to grow into. This is especially visible for groups often overlooked in this space, such as non-U.S.-born women. For them, American sports settings function as "third spaces" where multiple cultural identities are negotiated, heritage is maintained, and new community ties are built. Their experiences offer a distinct lens on which aspects of U.S. sports fandom are culturally specific versus universal.



Social media accelerates this broader process, deepening engagement and enabling both digital and real-life relationships. It also introduces friction, through disruptive notifications and amplified fan voices. This connection extends beyond the games themselves; it is rooted in emotion, memory, and family tradition, bringing people across backgrounds together. It also drives the loyalty and spending that sustain the sports economy, even as affordability and access shape how far that spending goes.

Former athletes bring a distinct dimension to this landscape, engaging through a tactical, experience-informed lens rather than typical ritual fandom. Student-athletes reveal the other side of this equation, navigating a gap between public perception and lived pressure. For them, NIL sponsorship represents not just income but validation and recognition. Taken together, these findings suggest that the future of sports fandom depends less on the games themselves and more on the identities, relationships, and shared stories institutions can help cultivate around them.



APPENDIX A

Meet the Team

Bradley Dow

What do sports mean to me?

To me, sports mean having community, lessons and life-long learning. Sports have been part of my life since I was a kid, baseball filled my summers and gave me friendships that have lasted decades. By high school, I was playing multiple sports and balancing overlapping training schedules. During the summer, a typical day might start with swim practice at 6 a.m., followed by strength & conditioning from 9 to 11. Some afternoons included football practice before heading straight to baseball in the evening.



At the time, it just felt normal. Looking back, it taught me discipline, time management, and how to push through fatigue.

The lessons about grit, resilience, teamwork, humility, and accountability followed me into the next chapters of my life - my enlistment and later commissioning as a U.S. Army Infantry Officer. The foundation my coaches built early on enabled my success years later. Sports taught me how to perform under pressure, trust those around me, and lead by example—lessons that proved just as valuable in uniform as they were on the field.

Throughout my life and career, physical competition has been constant, but it's not just about the competition. More than anything, sports means having a life-long coach through competition, continuing lessons about how to be resilient, to always be humble and coachable, and become a dependable teammate far beyond any playing field. These are the foundational traits to belong to a productive community greater than yourself.

What do I hope readers will take away from my work?

I want readers to see that sports are more than wins, losses, or money. They create friendships, traditions, memories, and a sense of belonging. They bring emotion and ritual into people's lives whether they notice it or not. Participation is voluntary, teams have to earn fan loyalty, and there is always room for someone to be part of the experience. There will always be a bigger fan, a better athlete, or a stronger commercial influence in professional sports. That has always been true. What has remained constant is sport's ability to bring people together through competition and shared experiences. From the ancient Olympic Games to today's stadiums, gyms, pools, pickleball courts and community fields, sports have connected people across generations and backgrounds. At their best, they remind us that competition is about more than winning. It's about commitment, growth, community, and striving to be better than you were yesterday.

"So I love to watch people leave. I love to look for the smiles and the laughs and things like that and kind of tell, hey, we did a good job today. Even if we lost, we did a good job today and we're probably going to get these people back." Associate Athletic Director of Revenue Generation & Marketing Strategy, Northwestern University

Aksharaa Bhobe

What do sports mean to me?

I've never really been just a spectator when it comes to sports. A gymnast, an equestrian, a powerlifter, and a distance runner — my relationship with sports has always been embodied and participatory rather than something I watch from the outside. I know what a 24-hour weight cut feels like, what it's like to lose a competition and have to get back up and try harder the next day. That's the lens I brought into this research, and it's an unusual one because although I'm not an outsider to sports, I am an outsider to American fan culture and team sports.

Why did I talk to immigrant women?

I didn't grow up with tailgates or deep inherited team loyalties or the kind of cultural fluency that lets you drop into a conversation about "the game." Interviewing my participants, I saw them work through varying degrees of unfamiliarity, from different starting points than mine, and is what made me want to push into these truths with my research.



What do I hope readers will take away from my work?

I want readers to walk away with a wider definition of who counts as a sports fan. And to develop a new lens with which they can think about fandom that truly sustains. The women I interviewed built fandom, on purpose, often as a way to find their footing in a new country and a new social world. For people in sports marketing and media specifically, the takeaway is that ensuring your fans feel a sense of belonging is key to sustaining fandom, and is something teams and brands can actively create, or just as easily leave people out of.

"Because my English is not my first language, sometimes I just feel like it's hard to communicate [with] other people. But when I'm actually in the [stadium], I feel like I'm being accepted... I finally have something I really love to do, and I'm being accepted by the people around me."

-24-year-old, Chinese Female, Graduate Student

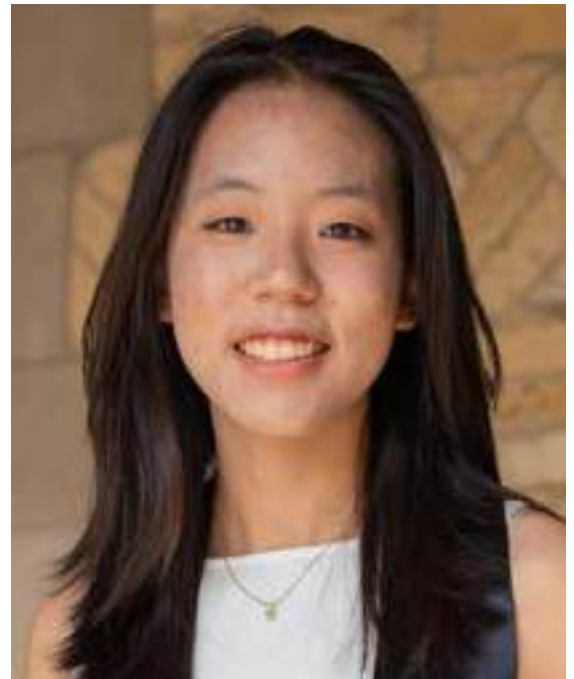
Katie Chen

What do sports mean to me?

I've been surrounded by sports my whole life. My family loved baseball, and I grew up going to games starting from a young age. While I wasn't too interested in the nuances of the sport back then, you could always find baseball gloves, magazines, and trading cards in our house, and I threw a ball around with my brother sometimes. As I grew older, my parents put me in multiple sports, allegedly to try to curb my worsening myopia. I swam, rollerbladed, took table tennis lessons, and somehow ended up playing badminton. I was on the school team all throughout high school, and followed it closely on the international circuit. In college, I joined the marching band, where I first experienced American football. The camaraderie and spirit that came along with being in the band as well as getting to watch a game almost every weekend in the fall really sparked my interest in becoming more invested in sports. At the same time, I also joined the club rugby team at Northwestern, and finally being in a team sport where you had to rely on your teammates to be successful was a really rewarding experience.

Why social media?

Despite all these experiences, social media was ultimately my way in. As I followed more athletes and teams online, my algorithm fed me content that allowed me to engage in sports in a unique way, such as when teams would do challenges and pranks on their players, or would do in-depth breakdowns of what went into a player's gear when preparing for a big game. And now, I watch baseball almost every night during the season, pay close attention to college NCAA rule changes, and am actively looking for new ways and opportunities to continue playing sports even as I near graduation.



What do I hope readers will take away from my work?

What I want people to take away from this report is that social media is such an important part of keeping different sports alive, and as someone who's becoming a sports fan primarily because of social media, using these platforms responsibly and correctly is more important than ever. The digital platforms that we have and are able to use now have so much power in being able to connect the unconnected and reach the unreachable. When you create opportunities for more individuals to interact with sports content or even just have a higher chance of coming across it in their feed, we are able to bring the community and joy that sports brings us to more and more individuals.

"It's so fun. It's so fun to be engaged in sports. It just brings you so much joy."

- Northwestern student

Jacob Hare

What do sports mean to me?

Sports have always been a lifeline for me. During the COVID-19 pandemic, my cousin and I started a sports podcast that gave us the opportunity to interview legends like Mike Ditka, Scott Hanson, Rick Barry, Stewart Cink, Kevin Harlan, and Sidney Moncrief. Long before that, Sundays in my living room revolved around watching the Philadelphia Eagles, and every March I convinced myself my bracket would finally survive the first weekend. Those experiences made me realize that sports aren't just something I watch—they've shaped how I connect with people and how I see the world.

More than anything, sports have given me a sense of community. My childhood friends and I started a fantasy football league in fifth grade, and years later we still gather every season to draft our teams. It's become less about who wins the league and more about having a reason to stay connected as our lives have changed.

Sports have also changed the direction of my career. Covering Big Ten football from the sidelines showed me the game from a completely different perspective and inspired me to study journalism at Northwestern University. Learning from professors like J.A. Adande and Melissa Isaacson reinforced my passion for telling sports stories, and today I'm continuing that journey by working with the Northwestern football program.

What do I hope readers will take away from my work?

I don't want readers to walk away thinking only about championships or the business of sports. I want them to understand why people care so deeply in the first place. Throughout my reporting, I realized that sports become woven into people's lives in ways that often go unnoticed. They create traditions that are passed from one generation to the next and give people a lasting sense of belonging. My friend Alan's family's Packer House showed me that firsthand—a place that exists almost entirely to bring people together on Packers weekends. I saw that same feeling while covering Northwestern at Kinnick Stadium, where thousands of strangers became one community for a few hours. My hope is that readers see sports not simply as entertainment, but as something that strengthens relationships and connects people in ways that last long after the final whistle.



"As a fan, you're rooting for your team. As a journalist, you're rooting for the best story."

- Longtime Sports Journalist at Yahoo

Pragnya Kumar

What do sports mean to me?

My relationship with sports started early — once I picked up a tennis racket at five years old, there was no looking back. Before committing to tennis, I tried everything, from rock climbing to figure skating, but tennis was eventually the sport I fell in love with. I went on to compete at the state, national, and international levels before playing NCAA Division I at Georgia State University, where I competed as a top singles player and at the #1 doubles line. Doubles was always my favorite because it gave me the chance to have fun on the court while expressing my creativity in a way that singles did not always allow. Beyond tennis, I am an avid sports fan who loves watching basketball, soccer, and football in addition to tennis, plus events like the Olympics and World Cup.



Why Former Athletes?

This group felt like a natural fit, and as one myself, this was something close to my heart and I felt I could speak to this group authentically because of my firsthand experience. This project also came at a unique time in my life; I had just graduated college and stepped away from competitive tennis for the first time, so staying connected to sport through this research allowed me to feed my passion, just in a different way.

What do I hope readers will take away from my work?

I hope there are a few "aha" moments where something familiar is seen in a new light. I hope readers find something relatable, and leave with a deeper appreciation for the layers and complexity that exist within sports. I hope this makes readers slightly more empathetic toward the athletes they watch. Above all else, I hope you know that sports is an experience like no other, because it is one filled with learning, growth, and gratitude, all in one.

My favorite quote from the interviews is: "Sports is what you do, it's not who you are." In just one sentence, it captures something that so many former athletes wrestle with — the challenge of defining themselves beyond the sport that shaped them. It speaks directly to the identity transition aspect explored in this report, and is something I personally relate to as well.

"Sports is what you do, it's not who you are."

-Former UNC Male Football Athlete, Class of 2005

Sofia Vallejo

What do sports mean to me?

Sports have always been part of my life. Growing up, having a sport as an extracurricular activity was never a choice. It was simply part of my routine. At the time, I thought it was mostly about staying active, but looking back, I understand that it was also about learning discipline from an early age and realizing that growth often comes from consistency and commitment.



Over the years, I practiced many different sports. I spent several years swimming before eventually getting tired of it. After that came tennis, horseback riding, figure skating, and different styles of dance. Sometimes I look back and wonder what would have happened if I had dedicated myself to just one sport. However, I have never regretted exploring so many different disciplines. Each one taught me something different and allowed me to appreciate that every sport has its own culture, challenges, and way of bringing people together.

Today, my relationship with sports is different. Rather than seeing them only as competition, I see them as a way to find balance, connect my mind and body, and continue learning while having fun. That perspective naturally led me to this research topic.

What do I hope readers will take away from my work?

Beyond my personal connection to sports, I became interested in understanding why athletes have such a powerful influence on people. As a marketing student, I have learned that brands, communities, and consumers are all built around relationships and identity. Sports represent one of the strongest examples of this. Whether people follow a team, a sport, or a single athlete, they develop emotional connections that often become part of who they are. I wanted to better understand how athletes become much more than competitors. How they become public figures, build communities, represent brands, and create connections that extend far beyond the game itself.

Throughout the interviews, I realized that many of these connections begin much earlier than I expected. Family traditions, shared experiences, and participation in sports shape not only athletic careers, but also identities, relationships, and values. At the same time, today's digital world has expanded the role of the student-athlete even further, creating opportunities to build communities and connect with audiences in ways that were not possible before.



APPENDIX B

Codes and Participants

Figure 1. Codes Developed During Analysis

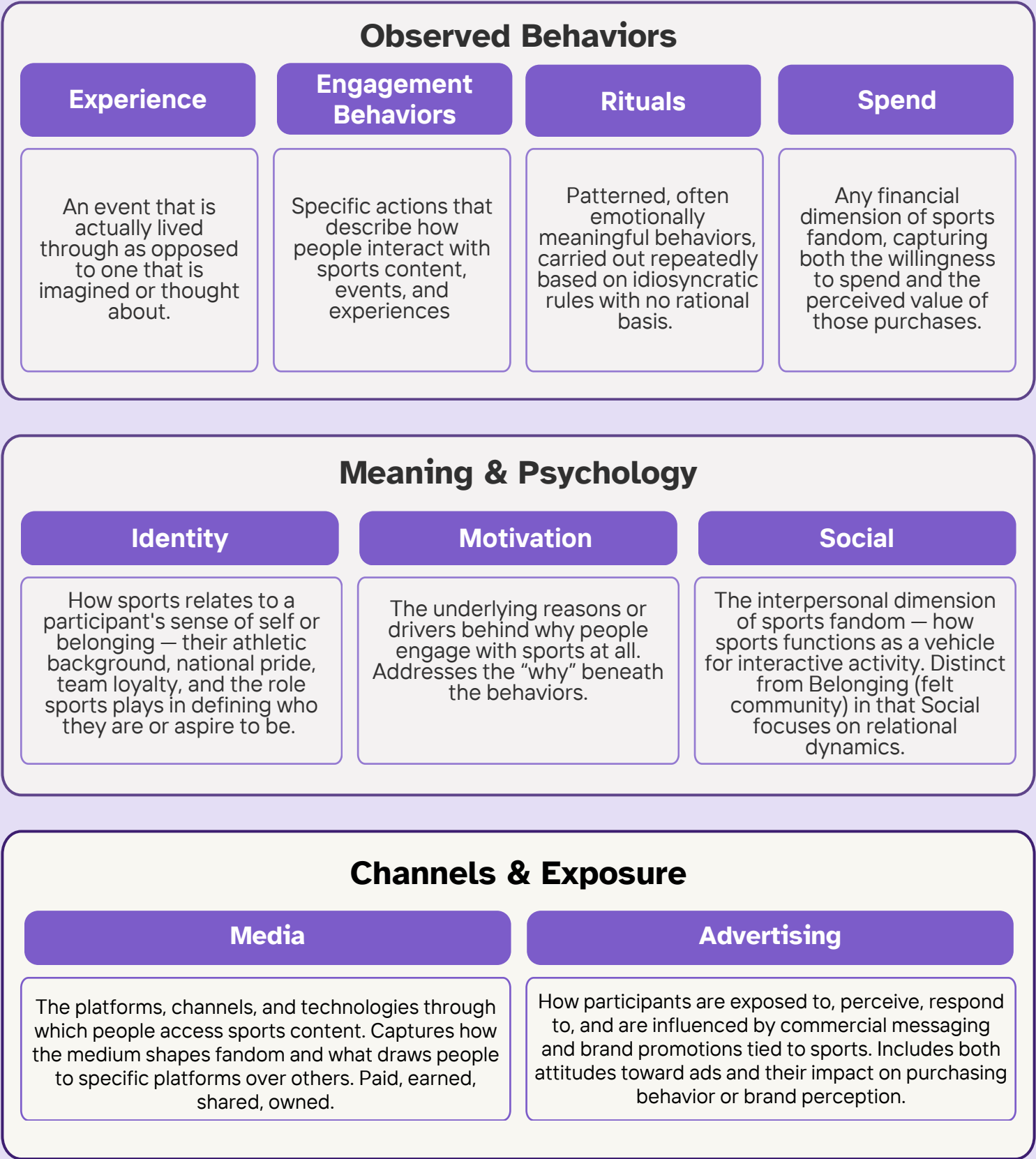


Table 1. Aksharaa's Participants

Participant	Age	Education	Employment Status	Country of Origin
Participant 1	26	Bachelor's degree	Student	India
Participant 2	23	High school or equivalent	Part-time	South Korea
Participant 3	21	High school or equivalent	Student	Greece
Participant 4	31	Bachelor's degree	Full-time	UK (Wales)
Participant 5	28	Graduate degree	Full-time	India
Participant 6	29	Graduate degree	Full-time	India
Participant 7	23	Graduate degree	Student	Brazil
Participant 8	24	Graduate degree	Student	China
Participant 9	29	Graduate degree	Full-time	India (Mumbai)
Participant 10	26	Graduate degree	Student	India (Calcutta)
Participant 11	21	Bachelor's degree	Full-time	Turkey (Istanbul)
Participant 12	31	Graduate degree	Student	Mexico (Monterrey)

Note. The first section of the report, written by Bradley Dow, was a case study involving two participants, and did not need a full participant table.

Table 2. Jacob's Participants

Name	Occupation / Role	Sports Followed	Main Team Affiliations
Alan Scheidner	University senior; summer tennis coach	Football, basketball, baseball, tennis, golf	Packers; Northwestern; Brewers; Cubs; Wisconsin
Lucas Kim	Sports media video producer	Basketball, football, baseball; soccer casually	Celtics; Patriots; Red Sox; U.S. and South Korean national soccer teams
Christian Morales	University student; football equipment manager	Football, baseball, basketball; hockey occasionally	Bears; White Sox; Northwestern
Joe Levin	Sports writer and producer	Football, baseball, soccer	Bears; Cubs; Texas Longhorns; Tottenham Hotspur
Jay Hart	Senior sports editor	Football, golf, baseball, basketball	Bears; Cubs; Illinois; Eagles through his wife
Geoff Magliocchetti	Sports journalist	Football, basketball, baseball, hockey, NASCAR	Rangers; Cowboys; Yankees; Knicks; Liberty; Marist; Villanova
Mike D'Abate	NFL writer and analyst	Football, baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer	Patriots; Red Sox; Celtics; Bruins; New England Revolution
Melissa Isaacson	Journalism professor; longtime sports reporter	Football, basketball, baseball, hockey; golf and tennis occasionally	Bears; White Sox; Blackhawks; Iowa; Indiana Fever

Table 3. Katie's Participants

Name	Affiliation	Level of fandom with sports	Social media usage	Social media platform
Michael	NU alum / OSU student	HIGH	HIGH	Instagram, Twitter
Liam	NU student	HIGH	MID	Instagram, Twitter
Lucas	NU student	HIGH	HIGH	Twitter, Reddit, Real App**
Olivia	NU student	MID	MID	Instagram, RedNote***
Anne	OSU alum	HIGH	HIGH	TikTok, Instagram, Facebook
Sky	NU student	LOW to MID	LOW	Instagram
Ethan	White Sox employee	HIGH	MID	Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit
Louis	NU student	MID	HIGH	Instagram
John	NU alum & ESPN employee	HIGH	MID	Twitter, Instagram, TikTok
Ellie	NU student	LOW	HIGH	Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Twitter, RedNote

*All names are pseudonyms and were selected randomly.

**App launched in 2020, described as a “social sports data platform”, with live stats and comment sections available for each play.

***Chinese social media platform also known as Xiaohongshu, similar to Instagram.

Table 4. Pragnya's Participants

Interviewee	Sport	Graduating College	College Size	Gender (M/F)	Years Since Graduation
1	Tennis	Augusta University	Medium	Female	2
2	Tennis	Florida Gulf Coast University	Medium	Female	3
3	Tennis	Rutgers	Very Large	Female	2
4	Volleyball	GSU	Very Large	Female	1
5	Tennis	Samford	Medium	Female	1
6	Soccer	Seattle University	Medium	Female	4
7	Football	UNC	Large	Male	20
8	Soccer	GSU	Very Large	Male	1
9	Swimming	Harvard	Large	Male	11

The table above provides an overview of the interviewees who were part of this research. Some students transferred and went to multiple colleges during their four-year eligibility period, so the college they graduated from is listed in the table. Scholarship status is not included in the table because there was a range of scholarship allocation that differed across interviewees. The college size was determined based on the number of students that attend each college (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education).

<https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/carnegie-classification/classification-methodology/2025-institutional-classification/>

Table 5. Sofia's Participants

Interviewee	Sport	Grad. College	Gender
1	Football	Notre Dame	Male
2	Swimming	Northwestern	Male
3	Swimming	Northwestern	Male
4	Tennis	UCLA	Male
5	Volleyball	Northwestern	Female
6	Tennis	Georgia State University	Female
7	Tennis	Alabama	Male
8	Soccer	Berkeley	Female
9	Golf	Notre Dame	Male



APPENDIX C

Methodology

Methodology

This report brings together six qualitative studies examining how social connection shapes sports fandom, professional practices, and athletic experiences. Semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom, by phone, and in person allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words and provided opportunities for detailed follow-up. The studies combined a comparative case study design with approaches focused on participants' lived experiences.

Bradley Dow's study examined two institutional cases: Northwestern University and the United States Military Academy at West Point. One senior athletics professional responsible for facilitating fandom was interviewed at each institution. These interviews explored how the organizations define success, design live events, maintain traditions, and connect fan experiences to institutional goals. Comparing Northwestern's commercial revenue priorities with West Point's institutional mission provided insight into how different organizational settings shape the facilitation of fandom.

The remaining five studies examined sports experiences from individual perspectives. **Aksharaa Bhobe** interviewed 12 non-U.S.-born women living in the United States to understand how they navigate American sports culture and develop connections to teams and communities. **Katie Chen** conducted 11 interviews with 10 participants, primarily Northwestern students and alumni, exploring how digital platforms influence sports engagement and social connection. **Jacob Hare** interviewed eight sports journalists, media professionals, athletics staff members, and highly engaged fans about family traditions, identity, community, and the time and money they devote to sports.

Pragnya Kumar interviewed nine former college athletes to explore how competitive athletic experiences shape their later relationships with sports as fans and consumers. **Sofia Vallejo** interviewed nine current or former student-athletes across different sports and universities about balancing academic and athletic demands, relationships with teammates and coaches, and experiences with visibility and sponsorship opportunities.

Interviews were transcribed and reviewed for readability and accuracy before analysis. Across the report, thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Codes were developed inductively from participants' accounts and organized into themes and subthemes. Analysis involved repeated review and refinement to capture both shared patterns and differences across the six studies while keeping interpretations grounded in participants' experiences.



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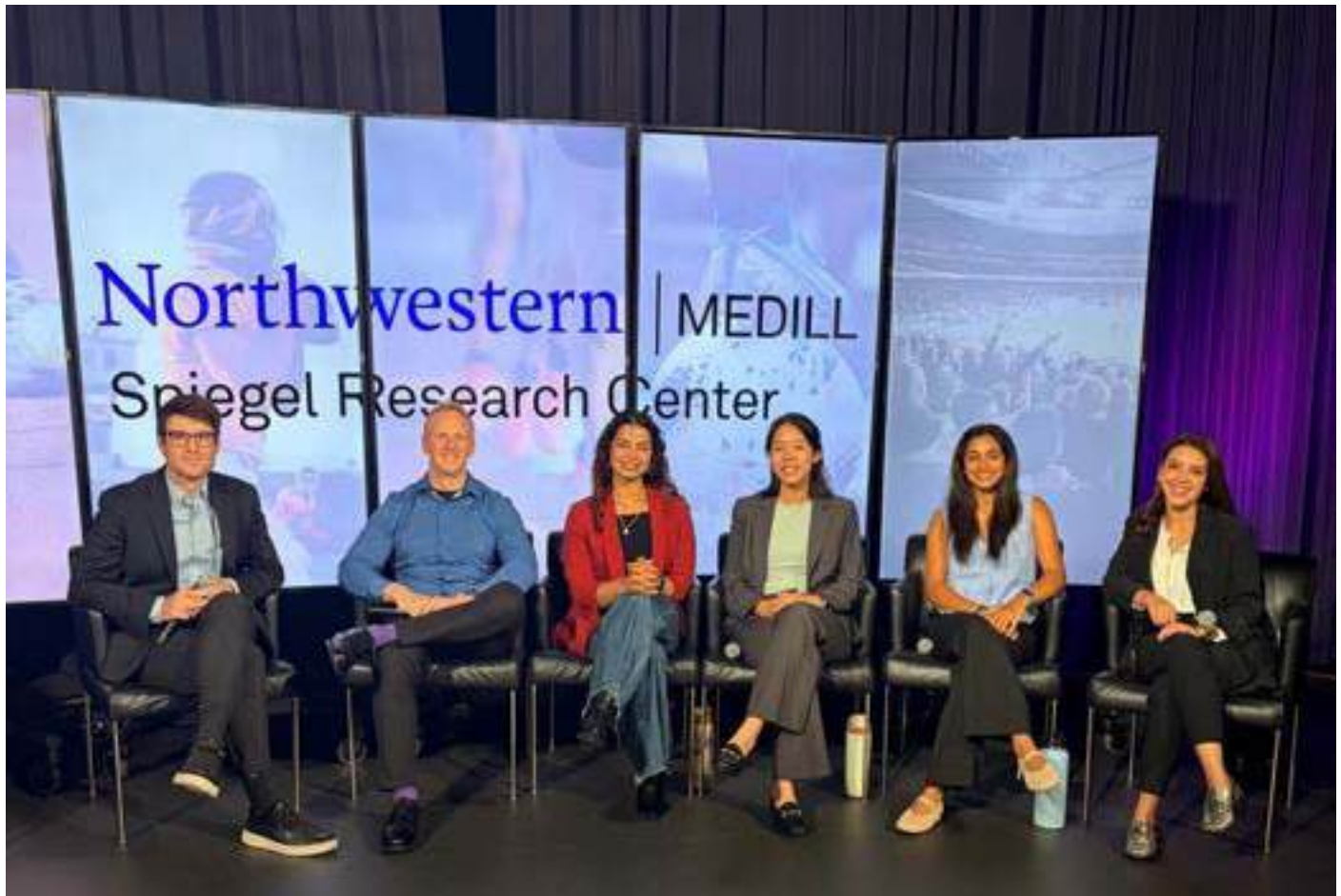
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