




Athlete-Driven Revolution:

Redefining the Future of Sports Fandom





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Fan since	Favourite Team
2021	LA Blaze
Top Athlete	Platform Behavior
Ruby Chilvers	Mobile-first

Recommended for you

COURT READY



RUBY CHILVERS

31 PTS 18 AST 15 REB

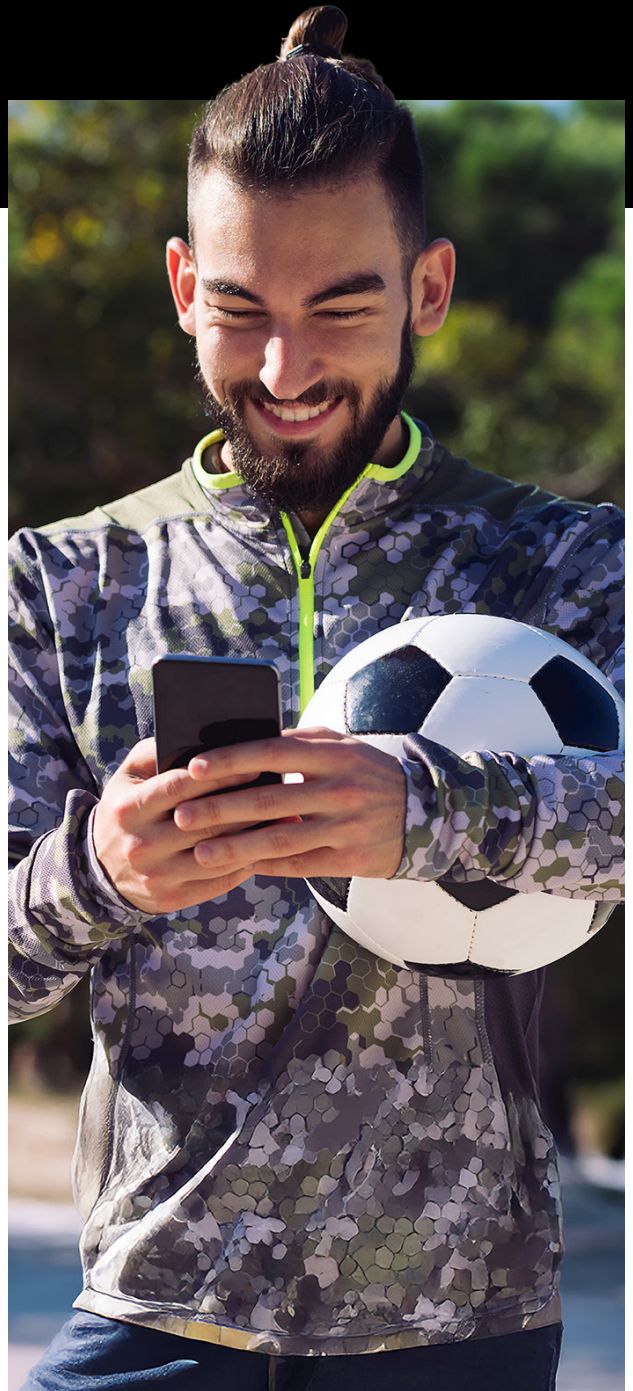


MVP Energy right here! 💪

The future of fandom isn't just about the top stars anymore – it's about **everyone.**

Executive Summary

Athlete driven content is reshaping the future of sports fandom. As fan expectations evolve and traditional media models fracture, leagues and teams must leverage more star power and build deeper connections through authentic, athlete led storytelling. Learn why now is the time to invest in content strategies that span the full roster, how this shift benefits leagues, teams, athletes, sponsors, media platforms and fans alike, and the role Adobe's AI-powered solutions play in enabling scalable, personalized content that drives lasting engagement globally.





Fans Want More: The Athlete Content Revolution in Sports

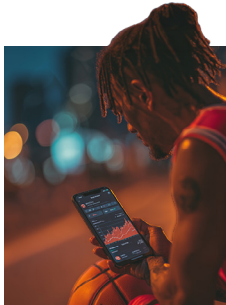
Sports fandom is evolving dramatically. Historically, the excitement of the game itself and the draw of superstar athletes were enough to capture and retain fan attention. However, today's reality demands a shift from passive attraction to proactive engagement. Athlete-driven content, from superstar to underdog, is now the critical ingredient to deeper, broader, and more sustainable fan engagement.

Fans crave **authenticity**,
behind-the-scenes insights,
and **personal connections**
with the athletes they follow.

Fans want more than just thrilling performances; they crave authenticity, behind-the-scenes insights, and personal connections with the athletes they follow. While docuseries like "Drive to Survive" have sparked a surge in interest, there's an even greater opportunity to engage fans sustainably through personalized, athlete-centric content beyond big-budget documentaries. As fans increasingly consume content across multiple channels, AI driven tools can help identify which content, formats and moments resonate most, allowing marketers to fine-tune what's shared, when and with whom.

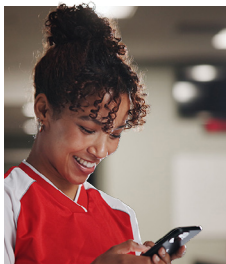
The Fan Demand Shift

It's no longer sufficient to perform well; sports organizations must leverage athlete-driven content to actively engage and communicate authentically with fans to sustain their relevance.



72% of fans engage more when their favorite athlete is featured.

Statista, 2023



Athletes on social media platforms have an average engagement rate of **5.6%**, significantly higher than influencers' **2.4%**.

OpenSponsorship, 2023



Around **80%** of Gen Z fans follow a professional athlete online, which leads them to watch and attend sporting events the athlete participates in...

Deloitte - Sports Fan Insights report, 2023



The WNBA fanbase grew by over **31%** in two years – a rise supported by increased visibility, league investment, and the athletes' growing role as storytellers and advocates.

Nielsen's Global Sports Report, 2025

And with the latest advancements with conversational AI and agentic capabilities, sports organizations now have the ability to support zero-party data capture at scale. This has the potential to truly capture constantly changing fan preferences around all things, including athletes, then serve them up hyper-personalized content in real time. So in addition to athlete-owned socials, there is an opportunity and need for leagues and teams to be able to extend personalized athlete-focused content at scale to fans across the globe via owned digital channels (web, email, mobile app) and creatively charged programmatic advertising.

The Disruption Across Sports

The sports landscape faces significant disruption, especially in leagues beyond the traditional Big Four (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL). Legal challenges, shifting player earnings, lifestyle demands, and increased sovereign investments are creating pressure for fundamental change. This evolving environment calls for a symbiotically beneficial evolution—benefiting leagues, teams, athletes, sponsors, media platforms and fans alike.

As media rights fragment across platforms, engaging at home fans globally has become more challenging. With distributed media rights complicating access for fans, athlete-driven content can play a crucial role in gaining fan attention to drive tune-in. For instance, as a big tennis fan, it would be great to receive a daily personalized email highlighting when favorite players are scheduled to play and on what channel to watch live matches and replays on (including if there is a need for a subscription). Real-time push notifications or text reminders could significantly drive tune in for the major tournaments. Not to mention, AI-generated highlights based on favorite players could be a highly engaging value-add for certain fans that don't have the time or willingness to watch live (be careful of spoiler alerts, and ask for opt-in). This kind of proactive communication is not only possible with today's tech, but a much needed execution to make it easier to be a fan.



Why Fandom Can't Rely on a Few Stars

Star-centric fanbases pose significant risks. Caitlin Clark's injuries in the WNBA clearly illustrated this vulnerability, causing a 48% drop in ticket prices when she was sidelined in 2025 (Source: NBA Central). Likewise, Lionel Messi's eventual departure from MLS highlights the risks of over-dependence on superstar athletes. To maintain economic vitality and fan interest, leagues must look beyond marquee athletes.

Building Fandom Across the Entire Roster

Instead of fixating solely on top players, leagues and teams have immense opportunities by showcasing stories across their full rosters. The Olympics exemplifies how compelling personal stories drive connection and engagement. We've all experienced the power of that storytelling, learning about a never heard of before athlete then feeling the tug on our heartstrings as we watch them compete. Athletes at every level, through personalized storytelling, social media engagement, and authentic content, can similarly forge strong fan connections.

Integrating Athlete Marketing into Collective Bargaining Agreements

Historically, athlete participation in marketing has been minimal and sometimes optional. As sports marketing evolves, leagues should formalize marketing responsibilities within Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) developments in college sports show the value of personal branding from the outset. Brands spent \$338 million on NIL deals with student athletes last year, primarily college students, up from \$171 million in 2023, according to Opendorse data.

Athletes aren't just sports performers; they're influencers, and marketing participation must be integral, not optional.



**Ticket drop:
48% without
Clark**



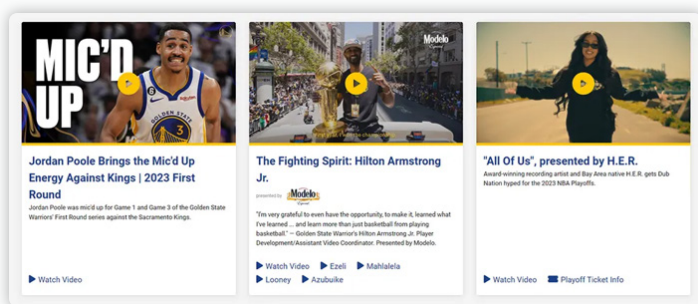
**Messi's
looming
MLS exit**



**Spread
fandom across
the roster**

Streamline the Content Supply Chain for Scale

We know small leagues and teams are stretched thin, and this kind of athlete-driven personalization at scale seems daunting. But with today's tech and a streamlined content supply chain, content creation through to distribution can happen at lightning speed with AI-tagged assets, smart cropping tools and orchestrated activation channels.



Find out more



Courtside to Cloud

As seen in Adobe's collaboration with the Golden State Warriors, implementing a camera-to-cloud workflow can turn live athlete content into branded, fan-engaging posts in under three minutes.

- 3 minutes from shoot to edit for Twitter video posts
- 3 million views across social channels for a single post
- 100% of video content available in the cloud

Sponsorships Are Key for Lower-Ranked Athletes

Let's talk a little about the benefit to athletes here. After all, as sports orgs ask for more participation and leverage the name, image and likeness of these athletes, there needs to be financial motivation. The recent changes to the NWSL CBA, providing a rev-share model for players is a great example.

Sponsorships Provide Financial Stability: For athletes in less-popular sports or those ranked outside the top 10, sponsorships can be a crucial way to make money.

For instance, lower-ranked tennis players often struggle with travel and training expenses, but sponsorship deals, can help supplement their income.

The winners of Wimbledon this year will walk away with £3mn each. But down the pecking order, for players outside the top 100, just breaking even each week can be a challenge.

"My credit card statement, it's at least \$20,000 a month on just operational expenses of hotel, food, flights and not including the salaries I pay to my team... As a tennis player you're like a small company, but having all your employees travelling all the time." Says Japanese tennis player, Taro Daniel.

Source: Financial Times



The Influencer Model: From Field to Feed

Platforms like TikTok have democratized fame, allowing individuals to build lucrative careers through personal content creation. If social media influencers can achieve financial success, athletes, regardless of rank, can and should leverage these platforms profitably and partner with their respective leagues and teams on more targeted, hyper personalized fan distribution of content. Athletes themselves can now use AI assisted tools on platforms like Adobe Express to generate and repurpose content rapidly – from game day clips to personalized highlight reels – giving them more control over how they build their brand and engage fans.

According to Statista (2023), 72% of fans are more likely to engage with content featuring their favorite athletes, underscoring the value of athlete driven engagement. “Video killed the radio star” is not merely a nostalgic tune but a stark reminder that constant innovation is necessary to stay relevant. Traditional media’s decline in favor of digital platforms highlights why athletes must cultivate their personal brands beyond the field.



Rising Women's Sports Still Need Support

As of 2025, no female athletes are among the top 100 highest-paid athletes globally. The highest-earning female athlete, Coco Gauff, earned an estimated \$30.4 million in 2024, which was below the \$37.5 million required to be included in the top 100 list .

Source: Reuters

This absence highlights the significant gender disparity in athlete earnings, primarily due to differences in salary structures and endorsement opportunities between men's and women's sports.

The situation underscores the ongoing need for increased investment and visibility in women's sports to bridge the earnings gap and provide female athletes with opportunities to achieve financial parity with their male peers.

Women's sports are experiencing a remarkable surge in both viewership and sponsorship. According to a new report from Deloitte, women's sports are projected to earn \$2.35 billion globally in 2025, a 25% increase over a record \$1.88 billion produced last year. This growth is not only attracting traditional sponsors but also opening new avenues in sectors like health and beauty. The intersection of sports and beauty is reshaping industry dynamics, offering brands a platform to promote empowerment, authenticity, and inclusivity.

According to SponsorUnited, Women's social posts engage followers at nearly 8x the rate of men's posts.

Female athletes often exhibit a unique authenticity that resonates deeply with fans. Their genuine personalities and stories of perseverance create a sense of relatability that attracts a loyal following. Female athletes are often seen as approachable, real, and connected to their communities. This authenticity enables them to forge stronger emotional bonds with fans, making them not just role models but also figures that fans can see themselves in, leading to deeper, more personalized fan engagement. The rise of social media has only amplified this connection, with female athletes using platforms to speak directly to their audience, showcasing their personalities, and driving conversations beyond the game. This powerful connection is why brands are increasingly drawn to female athletes, seeing them as authentic ambassadors for their products and values.



Adobe's Role in Empowering Athlete-Driven Content

Adobe's content creation and AI-powered capabilities sit at the heart of these athlete driven strategies – turning insights into action and helping creators go from raw footage to personalized, fan ready content in moments. The goal isn't to script athlete voices but to enable their stories to shine with consistency, brand alignment, and scale. Adobe helps deliver that balance.

In 2023, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) and Adobe announced a multi year partnership dedicated to uplifting the stories, voices and passions of players and sports enthusiasts alike. "The remarkable athletes who play in the NWSL are some of the most accomplished soccer players in the world, but the players of the NWSL are more than just athletes," said NWSL Commissioner Jessica Berman. "They're business owners, parents, partners, social activists, community leaders—the list goes on. Adobe will help our athletes tell their stories in creative ways and truly showcase the diverse and dynamic individuals who take the pitch each week in our league."

Adobe's Creative Cloud and Experience Platform are powerful tools designed specifically for leagues and teams to support athlete driven engagement strategies. With AI embedded throughout to improve ease of execution, capabilities include:

1. Insight

Capture fan preferences naturally while providing value using Adobe Agentic Fan Concierge and real-time CDP.

2. Creation

Leverage Adobe Creative Cloud to create and edit dynamic, real-time content along with Workfront to streamline approval processes.

3. Activation

Quickly package and adapt content for multiple formats and platforms, using Adobe Express, Firefly, and automated templates.

4. Engagement

Utilize Adobe Experience Platform to distribute hyper personalized athlete-focused content across digital channels based on fan preferences, timing and engagement metrics.

5. Global Expansion:

As leagues go global, content needs to travel just as fast—and just as locally. Adobe Firefly and Experience Cloud allow teams to tailor athlete stories with translated captions, regionally relevant visuals, and personalized formats at scale.

By empowering sports organizations and athletes to effectively capture, create and distribute content, Adobe tools enable organizations to build meaningful fan relationships, increase sponsorship opportunities and sustainably grow their audiences.



From Tee to Timeline

To keep up with technology and fans' growing appetite for instant, high-quality content, the PGA TOUR is leveraging Adobe Express and Adobe Firefly to streamline content production. The TOUR's content team now uses one-click Quick Actions in Express—like background removal for headshots—to create polished graphics in seconds.

"The TOUR is trying new things. We're being innovative and having conversations around the AI opportunities Adobe is rolling out," says Laura Detlefsen, VP of Content. "There are some great opportunities for us that just would not have been possible a couple years ago."

This shift has opened the door to faster turnaround, broader creative experimentation, and more efficient scaling of content for tournaments, athlete stories, and sponsor activations.

[Find out more](#)



How do we measure success from athlete-driven content?

As leagues and teams invest in athlete-led storytelling, it's important to understand what success looks like. When done right, these strategies deliver tangible results across fan engagement, revenue, and retention.

Key indicators include:

- Increase in fan engagement time across web and mobile platforms
- Growth in merchandise sales linked to featured athletes
- Ticket conversion lift after athlete-led content campaigns
- Increase in new subscriptions and reduced churn
- Sponsorship lift and improved ROI through broader roster exposure

These outcomes reinforce the value of scalable, authentic content built around athletes—not just as performers, but as trusted voices in the fan experience.





The future of sports fandom lies firmly in athlete-driven content

Conclusion

Authentic storytelling, proactive personal branding, and leveraging digital platforms are now crucial for athlete-forward content. By embracing these strategies and integrating supportive tools and policies, leagues, teams, athletes, sponsors, and media outlets can all achieve a vibrant, sustainable future.

Sports fandom is evolving, and those who adapt will lead the way. As the ecosystem evolves, the combination of athlete creativity and AI-powered delivery will be a defining factor in how sports grow, differentiate, and connect with modern fans.



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