

FUTURE OF WOMEN'S SPORTS

# Leveling the Playing Field

Are fans finally ready to embrace women's sports?

In September 2022, Serena Williams stepped onto the court at the US Open for the last time, bringing to a close one of the most remarkable careers in modern sporting history.

In many ways, that moment felt like a punctuation mark on an era in which women's sports were finally starting to get the attention they deserved. Stars like Simone Biles, Naomi Osaka, and Megan Rapinoe have all been the subject of intense media coverage over the past few years. And it's impossible to be a sports fan on social media these days without seeing athletes and commentators talking about the issues affecting women in sports.

It's not clear, however, what this increased attention means for women's sports. Are we at a turning point? The moment when funding, viewership, and fan interest starts to rise to the level of men's sports? Or are the structural inequalities too great to overcome?

This report sets out to answer these questions by examining what fans really think about women's sports—and what that means for their long-term growth potential.

at a glance

## THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Fans are paying more attention to women's sports than they used to.** Almost a third are watching more games than they once did, and as a result the broadcast rights market for women's sports has enjoyed double-digit growth in most territories.
- 2 Despite this momentum, there's still a huge discrepancy in how fans approach men's and women's sports.** Fans tend to see men's events as more exciting and more competitive, and are willing to spend considerably more money on watching men's games and buying merchandise from men's teams.
- 3 Women's events can find an audience—when they're given comparable airtime, funding, and media attention. This wave of momentum could result in a true breakthrough for women's sports into the mainstream, but only if broadcasters, sponsors, and policy-makers are prepared to make the necessary investment.**

# So far, 2022 has been a year of growing momentum around women's sports

Back in June, Sports Business Journal declared that women's sports were "the story" of 2022<sup>1</sup>—and there's a great deal of evidence to suggest that this has indeed been a pivotal year for women's sports, both in the US and elsewhere. Across the globe, fans and industry insiders alike have been paying more attention to women's leagues and the successes of top-flight female athletes.

**In the US, 3 out of 10 sports fans say that they're watching more women's sports now than they were 5 years ago**—more than twice the number who say they're watching less. And almost as many (25%) say that their viewership of women's competitions has increased in the past year. All of this suggests that women's sports, while they remain a minority interest among fans, has been carving out an increasingly large niche for themselves among audiences. Moreover, a sizeable portion of that growth has occurred just in the last 12 months.

It's younger generations whose appetite for women's sports content appears to be increasing the fastest—which certainly bodes well for long-term growth. **39% of Gen Z sports fans say they're watching more women's sports now than they were a year ago, compared to 29% of Millennials, 23% of Gen X, and 19% of Baby Boomers.** Black fans are also among the most likely to be paying more attention to women's sports; 40% are watching more now than they were 12 months ago.

**Q:** Why do you watch more women's sports now than you used to?

*There are more women's sports being broadcast*  
41%

*I have learned more about a specific female athlete(s)* 37%

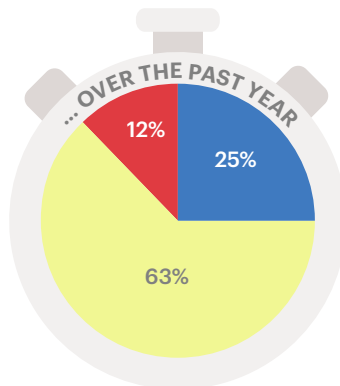
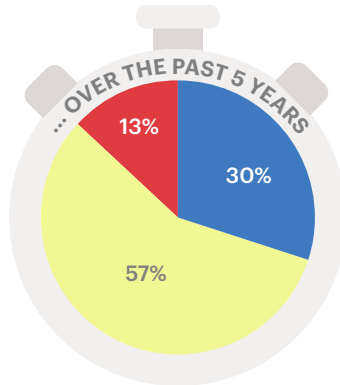
*Women's sports are becoming more entertaining or competitive* 38%

*There is more press and attention around women's sports than there used to be* 32%

*Women's sports are being talked about more on social media*  
25%

**Q:** How has the amount of women's sports you watched changed...

- I WATCH MORE THAN I USED TO
- I WATCH THE SAME AMOUNT
- I WATCH LESS THAN I USED TO



So, what's changed? According to fans, it isn't their own tastes that have evolved; it's the landscape of sports and sports broadcasting itself. Among viewers who are watching more women's sports than they used to, the most common explanation they cited for this trend was that it's simply easier now to find games broadcast on TV.

Broadcasters are carrying more women's games than they used to—and events that were already being aired are now being promoted more heavily and moved to better time-slots. This year, for example, will mark the first time that the championship game of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) has been broadcast in a primetime slot on a national network<sup>2</sup>. The NWSL has also partnered with Twitch to make the game available outside the US; a clear sign of the role that new media partners can play in helping to expand the audience for key women's events.

1. Abraham Madkour, "Women's sports is the story in 2022—and here's why", Sports Business Journal, June 6, 2022  
 2. Ed Dixon, "NWSL championship game lands CBS primetime slot thanks to Ally outlay", SportsPro Media, August 24, 2022

This was also the year in which ESPN—for the first time since 2016—moved the NCAA women's basketball championship back to primetime<sup>3</sup>. Scheduling changes like this can have a dramatic impact on fan behavior—especially since **fewer than half (47%) of viewers who regularly watch women's sports say they typically discover games to watch by actively researching them in advance**. By contrast, 27% of fans say they find most of their games by channel-surfing, while 22% tune in because of buzz from their friends or on social media. By scheduling games in better time slots, and investing more in their promotion, broadcasters can create more opportunities for viewers to stumble upon games they wouldn't otherwise have come across, potentially planting the seeds of long-term fandom.

**US sports fans who have seen media coverage of major stories about women's sports**

**Serena Williams retiring from tennis** 68%



68%

**Sexual assault scandal by USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar** 57%

57%

**Naomi Osaka taking time off from tennis for mental health reasons** 38%



38%

**England wins UEFA European Women's Soccer Championship** 8%



8%

**Brittney Griner facing 9 years in Russian prison** 66%



66%

**US Women's National Soccer Team fight for equal pay** 39%



39%

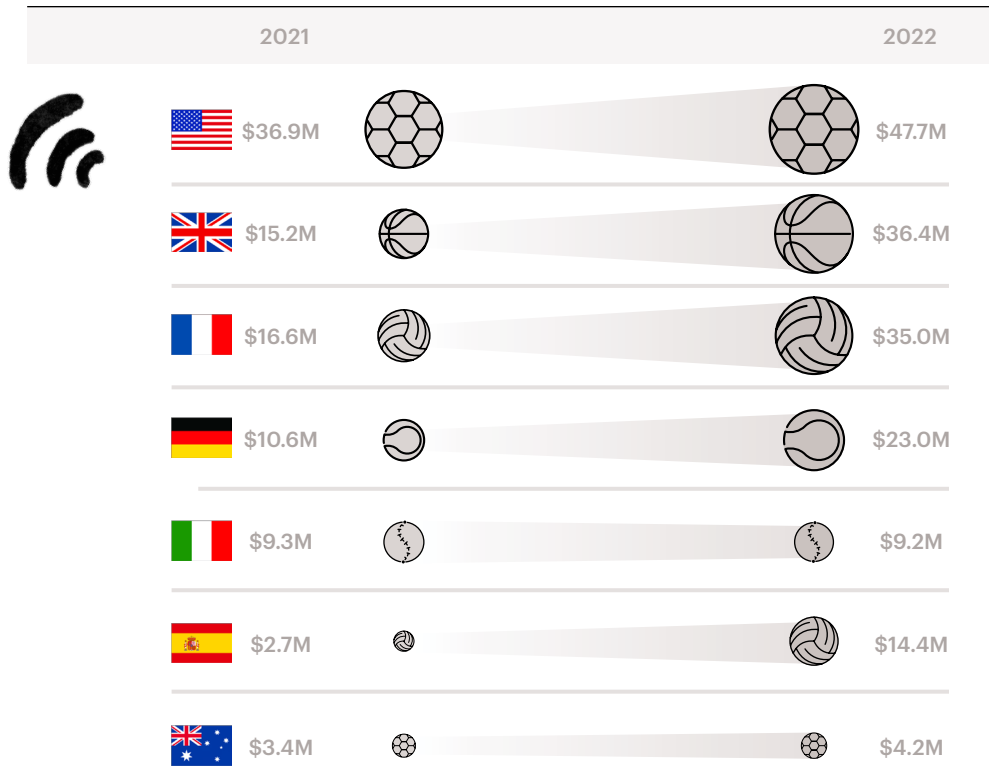
**Differences in amenities for men's and women's teams during the NCAA Tournament** 18%



18%



**GROWTH IN VALUE FOR WOMEN'S SPORTS BROADCAST RIGHTS<sup>4</sup>**



The increased prominence of women's sports on TV and streaming schedules has also had a significant impact on the value of broadcast rights for women's games. Nowhere was this change more dramatic than in Spain, where the size of the media market for women's sports increased by more than fivefold—due, in large part, to a landmark deal to bring Liga F games to streaming service DAZN<sup>5</sup>.

Globally, some of the year-on-year growth in the broadcast market for women's sports can be attributed to the number of high-profile international tournaments that took place in 2022—including the UEFA European Women's Championship and the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup. **But even in the US, which didn't compete in these tournaments, the broadcast market for women's events still grew by 29% compared to 2021.** Broadcasters are willing to pay more for the rights to women's games than they once were, and that means more money flowing into women's leagues and being invested into the growth of these sports.

3. Paulsen, "Women's tourney gets primetime finale thanks to MLB lockout", Sports Media Watch, March 2022  
 4. Excludes broadcast packages where men's and women's events are broadcast together, such as major Tennis tournaments and the Olympics  
 5. Rory Jones, "Spanish women's Primera División soccer rights snapped up by DAZN in '€35m' global deal", SportsPro Media, September 6, 2022

While broadcasters have undoubtedly played a major role in the growing interest around women's sports, so too have individual athletes and the media storylines surrounding them. Over the past few years in the US in particular, the sports press has started to shine an increasing spotlight on issues of abuse, discrimination, and inequality within professional women's sports—and the majority of sports fans have seen at least some of this coverage.

But when it comes to individuals who've helped to popularize women's sports in the US, no one in recent years has done as much as Serena Williams. She isn't just the highest paid female athlete of all time; for 46% of American sports fans, she's the first person they think of when it comes to women in sports. (Her sister, Venus, comes in second at just over 7%).



**Q:** What's the **most recent** film or TV show about women's sports that you've watched?

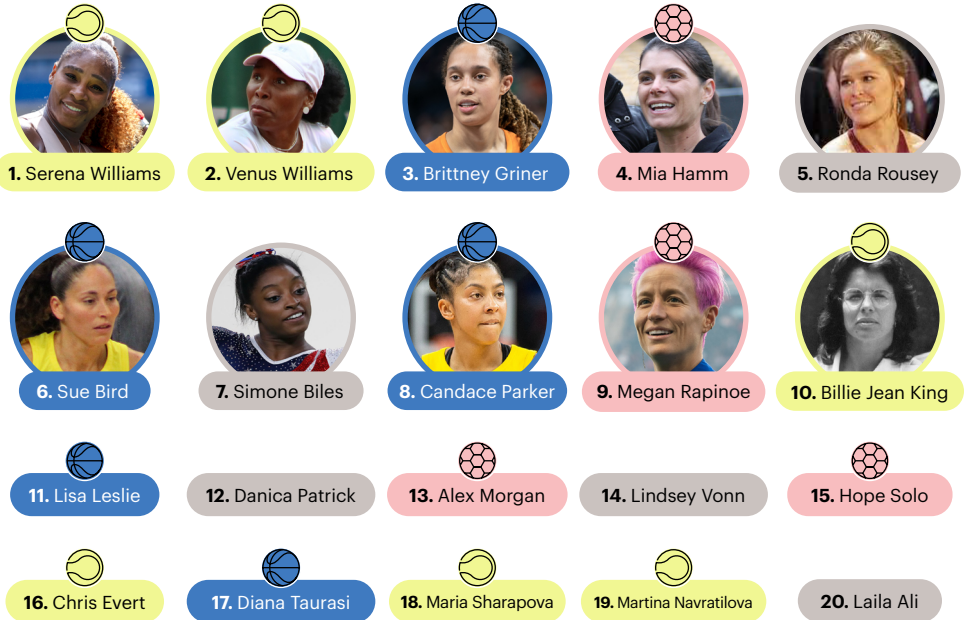


6. Includes both the 1992 film and the 2022 Amazon Prime Video adaptation

## THE TOP 20 MOST RECOGNIZABLE WOMEN IN SPORTS

**Q:** Who's the **first person** that comes to mind when you think about female athletes?

● TENNIS ● BASKETBALL ● SOCCER ● OTHER



40% of US sports fans have watched at least one film or TV show about women's sports, while 26% have seen a documentary or behind-the-scenes feature on the topic.

The Williams sisters are far from the only athletes to have had an impact on public perceptions of women's sports. In the list of most recognizable female athletes in the US, over half are athletes who either have recently retired or have been inactive for many years—a fact which speaks to the extraordinary level of achievement required to break into the consciousness of fans as a woman in sports.

Notably, **15 of the 20 most recognizable female athletes in the US come from just three sports: tennis, soccer and basketball.** This trio could be considered the "Big Three" of professional women's sports in the country—the equivalent of the traditional men's "Big Four" of football, baseball, basketball, and hockey.

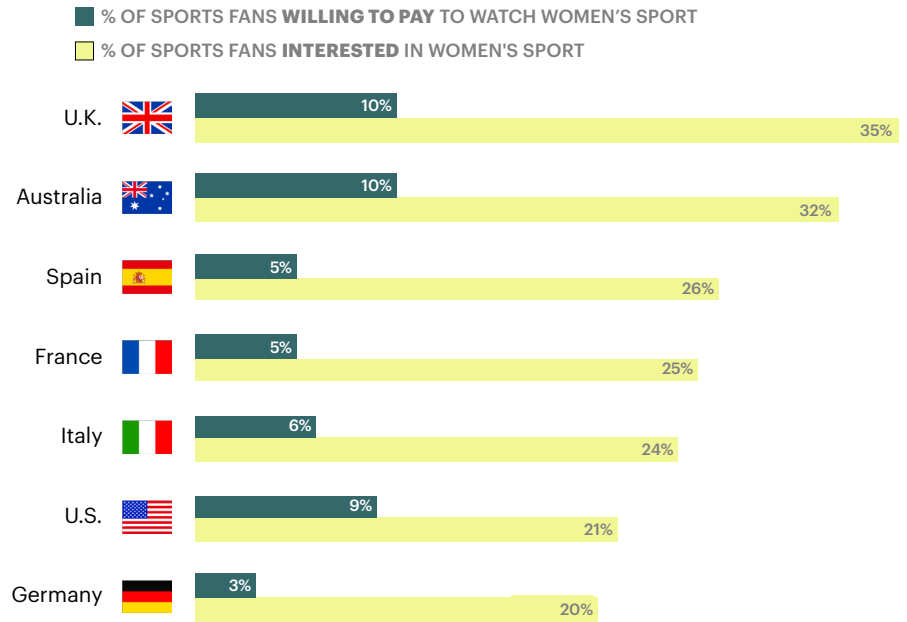
The growing public interest in women's sports has also resulted in a small boom of film and TV content on the subject—from Oscar winners like *King Richard* and *I, Tonya* to streaming favorites such as *GLOW*. It seems that media companies are increasingly coming to appreciate the immense storytelling potential within the world of women's sports—providing yet more ways for fans to discover new athletes and leagues to follow.

# But despite the momentum, awareness and viewership of women's sports still lag behind men's events

While interest in women's sports may be growing, it's important to put that growth in context. Women's leagues have a long way to go before they approach anything even close to parity with their male counterparts in terms of audience numbers.

**In the US, for example, the average sports fan estimates that just 15.4% of their time watching sports on TV is spent watching women's events.** And in a given season, a typical fan is substantially more likely to catch a game from one of the so-called "Big Four" men's leagues than they are from any of the country's major women's leagues.

## INTEREST IN WOMEN'S SPORT BY MARKET



**% of US sports fans who watch at least one game per month during seasons**

○ MEN'S LEAGUE  
○ WOMEN'S LEAGUE



Fans aren't just watching less women's sports; they're also less willing to pay for the experience. Only 2 in 10 US consumers who consider themselves sports fans actively follow any women's leagues; and just 9% are open to the idea of spending money to watch women's games. For context, that compares to 66% who are willing to spend money on watching men's games.

This hesitancy to spend money on women's sports also extends to merchandise and memorabilia. There simply is no women's equivalent to the high-end market that exists for men's sporting memorabilia; and the average fan is willing to spend almost twice as much on merchandise branded with the logo of a men's team compared to an equivalent piece of merch from a women's team. In fact, **more than 4 in 10 sports fans say they would never consider buying a piece of women's sports merchandise—regardless of price.**

**The maximum that the average US sports fan would be willing to spend on a branded piece of merchandise**



**\$56.67**  
MEN'S SPORTS



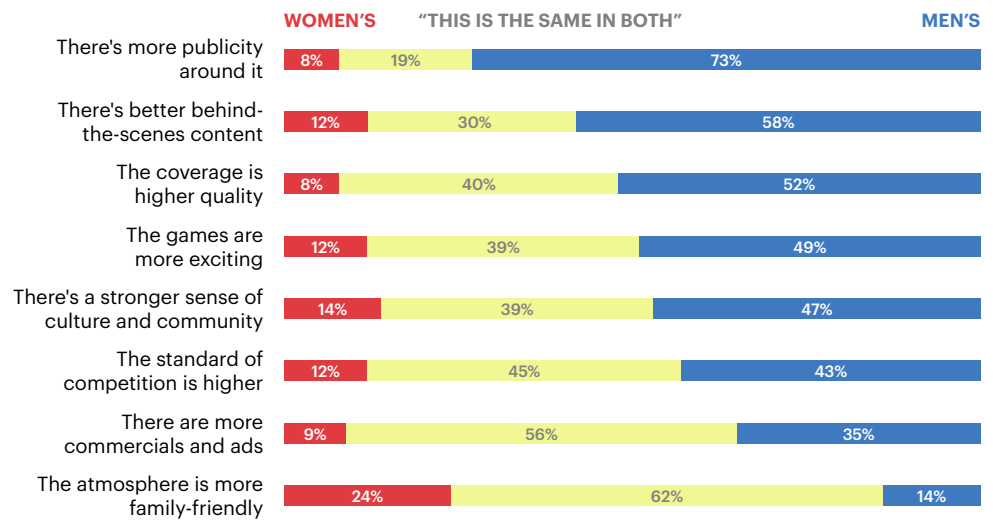
**\$28.40**  
WOMEN'S SPORTS

Underlying this difference in viewing and spending behavior is a wide perceptual gap in how the average consumer thinks about men's and women's sports. Sports fans tend to report that they see men's sports as more exciting; they think the coverage and promotion of men's games is better; and they think the quality of competition is higher in men's leagues.

Many of these perceptions, it could be argued, are a product of the ways in which women's and men's events are presented and framed. Part of the reason that fans see men's games as more exciting is that broadcasters go out of their way to *make them more exciting*. Even though networks have started to air more major women's games during primetime, these broadcasts rarely get the kind of extensive pregame shows or post-game breakdowns that are commonplace in men's sports.

And there hasn't been the same kind of investment in building narratives and branding around women's leagues. Up until this year, for example, the NCAA didn't even allow the women's basketball championship to use the iconic "March Madness" name<sup>7</sup>. This all acts as something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: because networks invest more in promoting men's games, there's more fan excitement around these events. And because fans are more excited, broadcasters are willing to invest more to take advantage of that hype.

### THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN'S AND WOMEN'S SPORTS—ACCORDING TO US SPORTS FANS



While men's sports are seen as more exciting and more competitive, women's sports are generally seen by fans as less commercialized and as having a more family-friendly atmosphere. It's possible, therefore, that growing public interest in women's sports could lead to an expansion of the overall demographic of sports fans, as it opens a doorway to fandom for consumers who may previously have been put off by the perceived culture around men's sports.

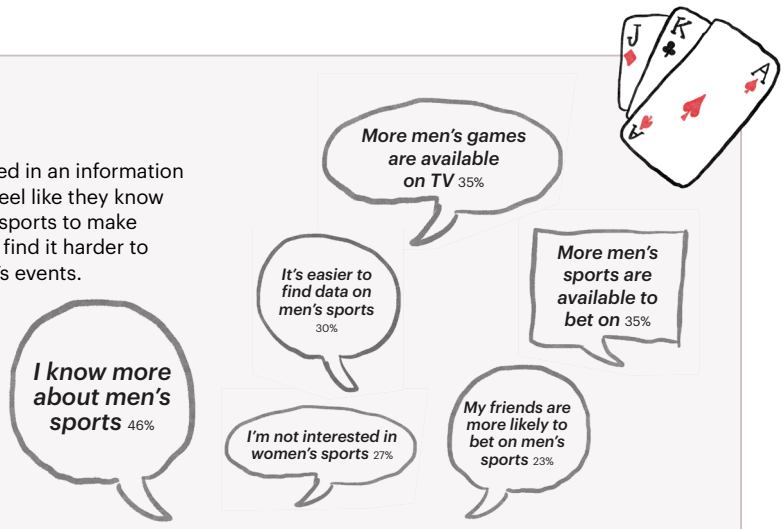
#### WOMEN'S SPORTS: A SAFE BET?

In the US, one of the biggest recent shifts in the world of sports fandom has been the rapid growth of sports gambling, following a landmark Supreme Court decision in 2018 that allowed states to begin legalizing and regulating the practice.

Among fans who regularly bet on sports, fewer than half (44%) have ever bet on a women's event. And 69% of regular gamblers say they prefer to bet on men's events—compared to only 4% who are more interested in betting on women's sports.

This discrepancy is rooted in an information deficit; gamblers don't feel like they know enough about women's sports to make informed bets, and they find it harder to find markets for women's events.

**Q:** Why are you more likely to bet on men's sports than women's sports?

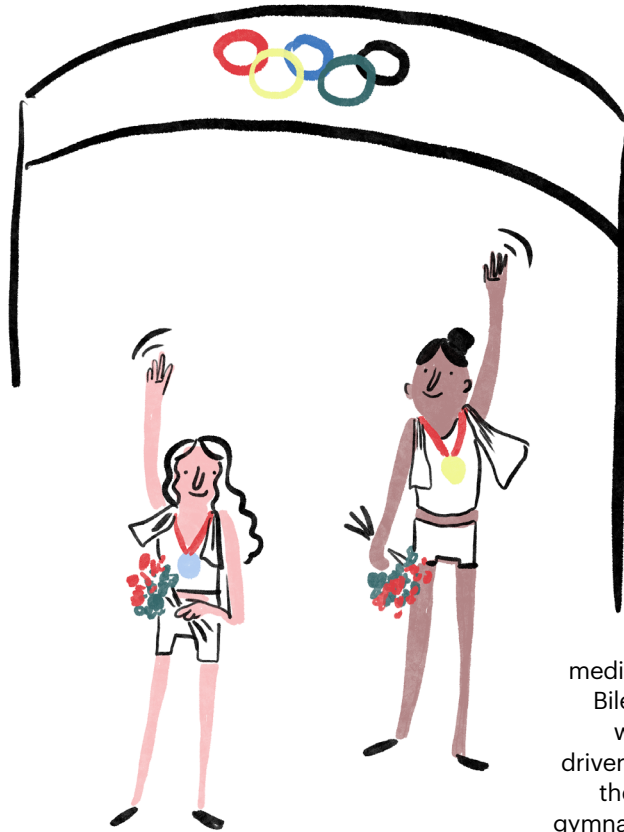


<sup>7</sup> Tristan Balagtas, "NCAA Will Allow Women's Basketball to Use the Term 'March Madness' in 2022", People, September 29, 2021

# Events like the Olympics prove that fans are willing to engage with women's sports under the right circumstances

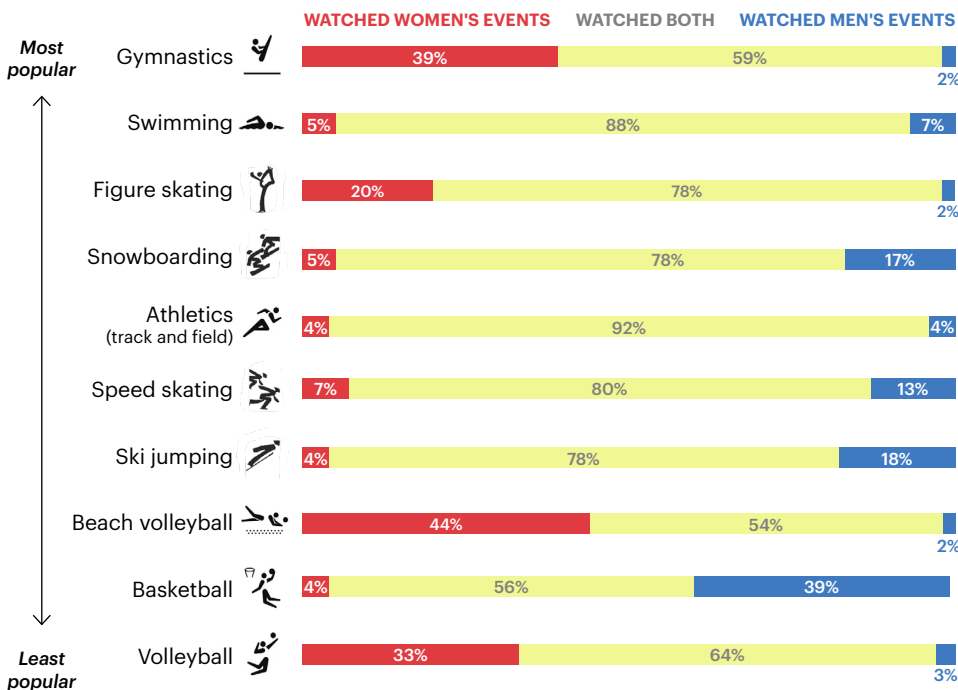
The gulf between viewership for men's and women's sports may feel like an intractable problem. But we know it isn't, because there is a context in which fans are willing to engage with the two on a comparable level: the Olympics.

In many of the most popular sports at the most recent Summer and Winter Olympics, US sports fans were actually *more* likely to have seen coverage of the women's events than the men's. **Of the 10 most widely viewed sports at the games, the viewership for women's events was higher than the men's in half of them.**



Notably, the intense media coverage of Simone Biles and her teammates was one of the biggest drivers for fans to tune in to the Olympics. In the US, gymnastics turned out to be the single most watched sport at the Tokyo games; 37% of sports fans saw coverage of the sport. And of these viewers, 98% tuned in to at least some coverage of the women's events, while only 61% saw any of the men's events.

## HOW AMERICAN SPORTS FANS WATCHED THE 10 MOST POPULAR OLYMPIC SPORTS



Based on fans who watched at least one event in each category during either the 2020 Summer Olympics or the 2022 Winter Olympics

**Over a third (36%) of US sports fans say that they pay more attention to women's sports during the Olympics than they usually do.** For female athletes, the Olympics and Paralympics provide unparalleled opportunities for brand-building and media exposure; it's one of the only times in the sporting calendar in which male and female events are presented side-by-side and given comparable levels of airtime and media attention. NBC, for example, devoted 58% of its Tokyo programming to women's events<sup>8</sup>.

The high levels of engagement with women's sports during the Olympics demonstrates that the attention gap isn't a problem without a solution. Fans can become as emotionally invested in women's sports as they are in men's sports—provided that the two get to compete on a level playing field.

8. Stephanie Liu, "Women set new viewership record at Tokyo Olympics", Yahoo! Sports, August 11, 2021

# We know women's sports can find an audience. So, what's holding them back?

It's an unfortunate truth that women's sports have to contend with a long legacy of systemic bias. Fortunately, openly prejudiced views are now in the minority among fans. **Only 34% of US sports fans believe that men are naturally better at sports than women, while just 19% think that top male athletes deserve to be paid more than their female counterparts.**

In fact, most fans like to think of themselves as active supporters of women in sports. Eighty-five percent—including 79% of men—think that it's important for women's sports to continue to grow in popularity; 63% would like to see more female referees in the sports they follow, and 64% think there should be more high-level female coaches.

While it's possible that some fans may be overstating the extent of their feminist beliefs, the fact that they would feel pressured to do so is itself a small victory for women's sports; it suggests that the culture of sports fandom is more broadly progressive and inclusive than it once was.

But regardless of the personal views of fans, longstanding systemic bias against women's sports—in terms of funding, coverage, and publicity—has led to deeply ingrained structural challenges that limit the ability for women's sports to find an audience.

**We can point to three major hurdles limiting the continued growth of women's sports:**



### Inertia

Fans have much more deeply-rooted ties to men's teams and male athletes.



### Investment

Women's sports don't receive the same level of commercial support.



### Inaccessibility

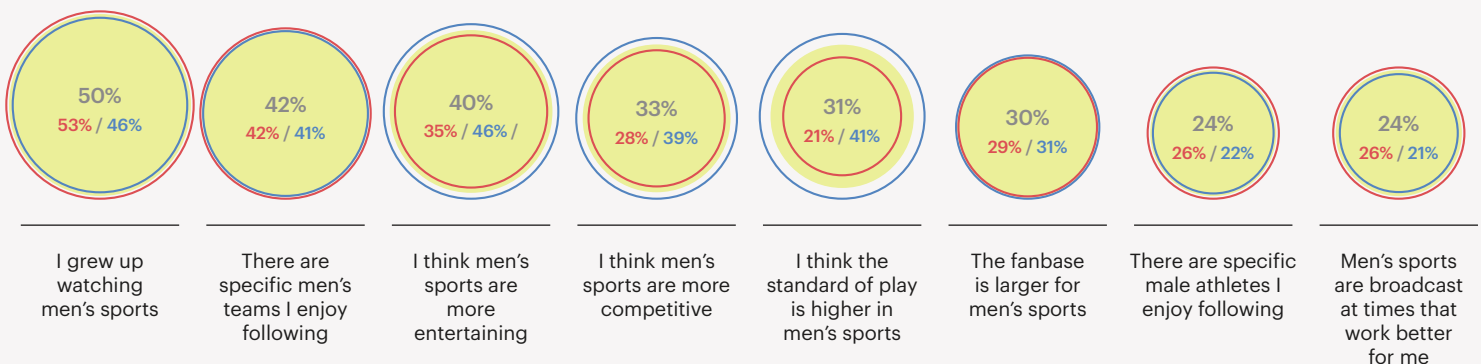
Fans with an interest in women's sports are often unable to watch all the games they'd like to see.

Fans have only a finite amount of time they can devote to watching games and following sports. And for many of them, the teams and leagues they choose to follow will be driven as much by inertia and nostalgia as by any more tangible factors. Half of sports fans say that they watch more men's sports than women's simply because those are the sports they've been following since childhood.

Understandably, people have an emotional attachment to the teams and players they grew up with. So, it's crucial for younger fans to be exposed to women's sports, if they are to continue growing in mainstream popularity.

**Q: Why do you watch more men's sports than women's sports?**

● ALL SPORTS FANS ● FEMALE FANS ● MALE FANS





At the same time, the continued growth of women's sports will also require much greater levels of commercial investment from sponsors, colleges, broadcasters, and other key stakeholders. **In the US, 74% of sports fans are unable to name a single corporate sponsor of any of the country's major women's leagues.** And 60% believe that brands should be spending more money on women's events.

This funding deficit means that, after accounting for sponsorship opportunities, female athletes typically make only a small fraction of the salaries of their male counterparts. This in turn means that there's less incentive for talented female athletes to pursue a professional career, reducing the overall standard of competition and making games less exciting than they otherwise could be.

**68% of US sports fans believe that pay discrepancies between male and female athletes are a problem for the sports community.** But while fans are aware of the issue, they tend to severely underestimate the scale of it. Basketball viewers, for example, assume that WNBA players make just over a third of the salaries available in the NBA. In reality, NBA stars earn over 100 times more than their female counterparts (which is the primary reason so many WNBA players compete in overseas leagues during the off-season<sup>9</sup>).

**Q:** Why are you sometimes unable to view all the women's sports content you would like to watch?

**Women's sports content isn't promoted and advertised as heavily as men's content** 54%

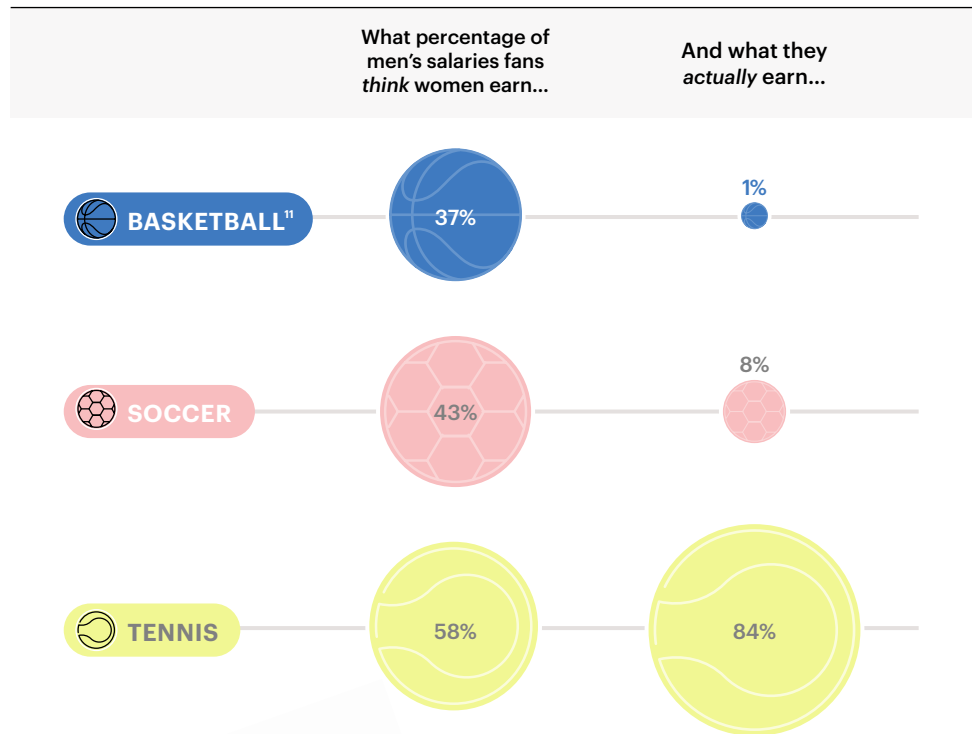
**Not enough games are broadcast** 42%

**Women's games air during inconvenient times** 31%

**Broadcasters make it hard to find schedules and air times for women's games** 38%

**It's hard to navigate all the different channels and streaming services that carry games** 34%

PAY DISCREPANCIES IN SPORTS: PERCEPTIONS VS. REALITY<sup>10</sup>



But there's another reason that growing public interest in women's sports has yet to translate into a true breakthrough moment. Many of the fans who would like to watch more women's games find themselves unable to do so because of the limited variety in broadcast schedules and the lack of adequate promotion for those events. In total, 60% of US fans with an interest in women's sports say that they are either "often" or "sometimes" unable to watch the women's sports content they'd like to see.

9. "Why WNBA players go overseas to play during off-season", SportsNet, March 6, 2022

10. Pay gap data based on research by Adelphi University

11. Includes only fans who follow each of these sports

This paucity of viewing options is a consequence of just how little TV channels and streaming services have invested in broadcast rights for women's events. In the UK and mainland Europe, women's sports make up only about 1% of the total market for broadcasting rights—despite the rapid rate of year-on-year growth in the value of those rights.

**In the US, the disparity is even bigger, with broadcasters spending just 0.2% of their rights budgets on women's competitions.**

While one would expect the rights for men's events to be more valuable, given the larger potential audience for these broadcasts, the difference in value is grossly disproportionate to the difference in potential viewership. And because broadcasters are spending less money on rights for women's sports, they don't have the same incentives to promote those events and schedule them in high-value timeslots. In the US, for example, there were only 2 hours of primetime broadcast and cable television dedicated to live women's events across the entirety of 2021.



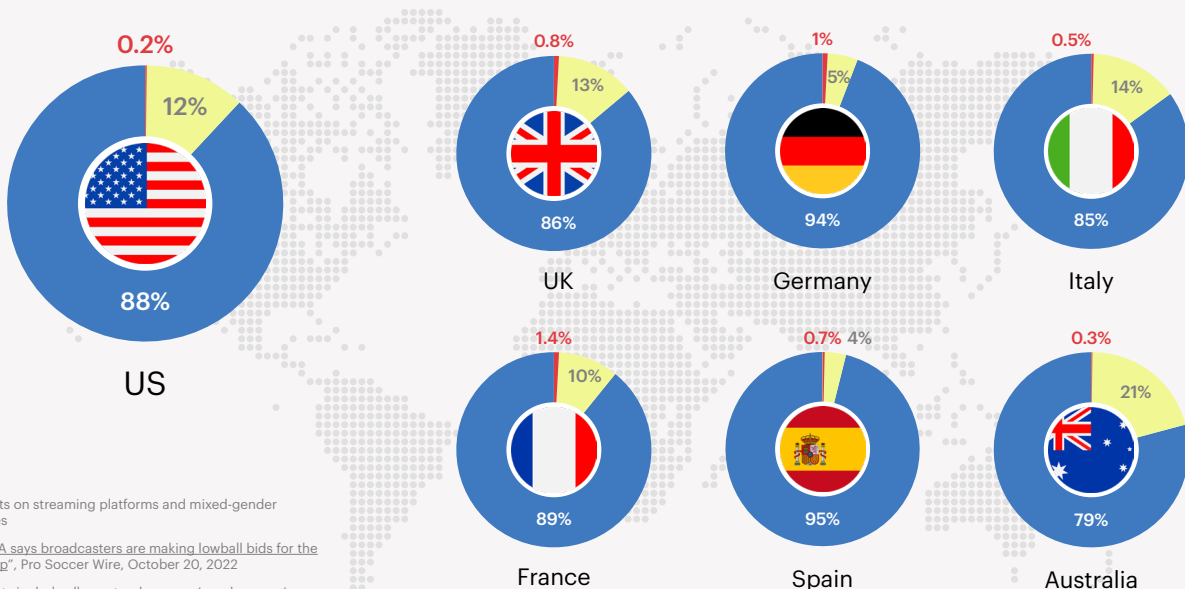
Total amount of national broadcast and cable TV hours dedicated to live women's sport in the US <sup>12</sup>		
	2021 (Full year)	2022 (Q1-3)
ALL HOURS	77:00	141:00
PRIMETIME HOURS	2:00	15:00

Yes, there have been some positive developments over the last 12 months, with more channels starting to schedule women's games in primetime slots and spending more money to advertise those games—but even so, it's clear that the size of the audience for women's sports is being limited by the viewing options currently available.

Organizations such as FIFA have argued that this is symptomatic of a widespread undervaluing of women's sports rights<sup>13</sup>; but rectifying that problem is not something that broadcasters on their own can solve. Leagues and teams will need to work with them to ensure not only that rights are being valued fairly, but also that contracts are set-up to encourage—and reward—long-term investment in audience growth.

**VALUE OF SPORTS BROADCAST RIGHTS BY MARKET<sup>14</sup>**

■ WOMEN'S EVENTS ■ MIXED GENDER ■ MEN'S EVENTS



12. Excludes broadcasts on streaming platforms and mixed-gender broadcast packages

13. Seth Vetelney, "FIFA says broadcasters are making lowball bids for the Women's World Cup", Pro Soccer Wire, October 20, 2022

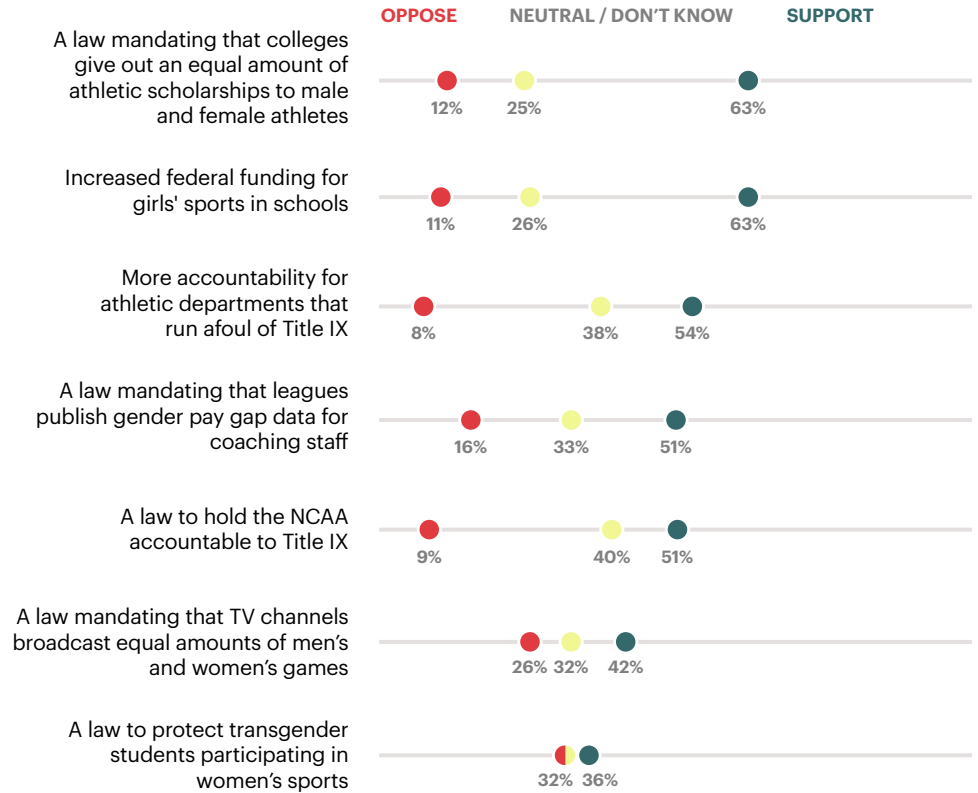
14. Mixed gender events include all events where men's and women's games are part of the same broadcast package—e.g. Tennis majors or the Olympics

# While these challenges are substantial, there's never been a better time to tackle them

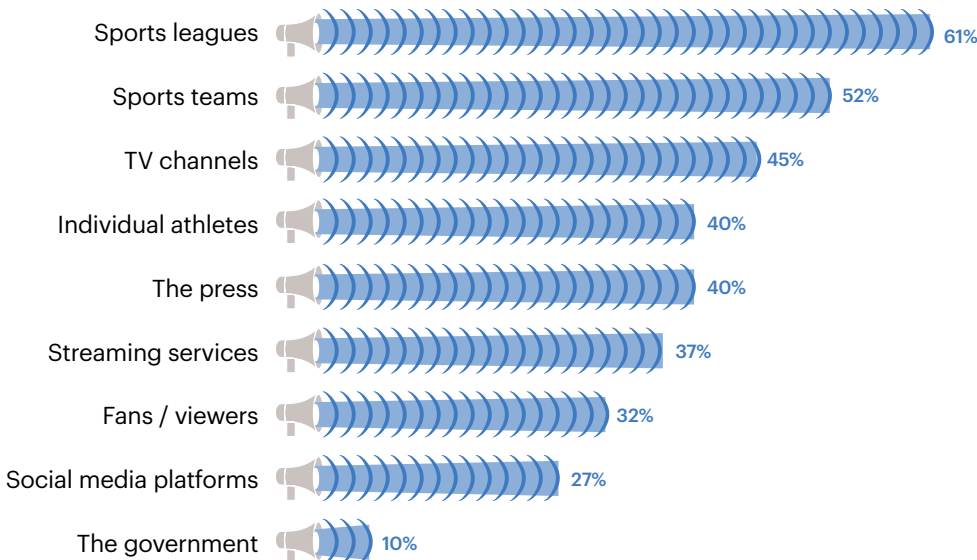
There are certainly some deep-rooted issues holding back the growth of women's sports. Fortunately, this current wave of media attention and fan interest has created a unique opportunity to tackle these issues head-on.

The growing value of broadcast rights for women's events suggests that the market has already started to correct for the historic undervaluing of women's sports. The acceleration of this correction, however, may require the government to step in. Indeed, sports fans are broadly supportive of proposed public policy initiatives that would help expand audiences for and participation in women's sports. In particular, they believe that the federal government should work to grow the earlier stages of the funnel for professional female athletes—allocating more funding to girls' sports in schools and forcing colleges to increase the number of athletic scholarships they give out to women.

## How US sports fans feel about potential public policy changes related to women's sports



## Who do fans think should be doing more to help grow the popularity of women's sports in the US?



Understandably, parents of young girls are particularly keen to see the government invest more in this space: 70% think that girls' sports in schools should be better funded. This is a clear example of the way in which fans' relationship to women's sports can evolve as their life circumstances change. **Almost 4 in 10 parents of young girls (38%) say that they have started to follow professional women's sports more closely since having children.**

But while fans may be broadly supportive of these potential policy changes, they don't believe that it's primarily the government's responsibility to grow the audience for women's sports. In fact, they see politicians as, overall, some of the least important actors. Instead, they think it should be leagues, teams, and broadcasters leading the charge.

So, how can these groups go about making the commercial investment in women's sports that would be required to place them on a more equal footing with men's events, without putting their bottom line at risk?

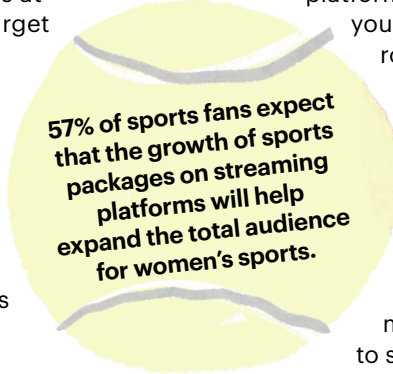
While women's sports remains a niche interest among fans, broadcasters will likely have the most success at finding an audience for their games if they target their offerings towards the demographics already predisposed to take an interest in women's sports. Among these "early adopters," three groups in particular stand out: younger fans with progressive social values; parents looking for family-friendly sports to watch with their children; and highly invested "superfans" who follow a large number of different teams in both men's and women's leagues.

Fortunately, there are a number of major cultural and policy shifts underway within the sporting community that may make it easier for consumers in these demographics to find women's sports content. For example, streaming providers like Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+ have been bidding for and winning the rights to air major sporting events; they're now competing directly against the cable channels that have been the traditional home of these broadcasts<sup>15</sup>. In the long-run, this could create

more opportunities for younger fans—many of whom are cord-cutters or cord-nevers who have given up cable for streaming services—to watch women's games.

Historically, leagues have often cited free-to-view broadcasts as an essential part of driving growth; but with streaming platforms now having near universal coverage among younger viewers, they may start to take over this role (albeit at the cost of potentially making it harder for older non-streamers to find games).

At the same time, the Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) policy rolled out in 2021 by the NCAA has turned the world of college athletics on its head. For the first time, players have the opportunity to monetize their personal brands through sponsorships, licensing, and merchandise deals. And there's already evidence to suggest that this change has had a positive impact on female athletes in particular. Women's basketball, softball, and volleyball are all among the sports where athletes have had the most success at striking NIL deals with sponsors—which may, in the long-run, help to make up for the historic underinvestment in women's sports at the collegiate level<sup>16</sup>. And for superfans, these new rules mean it's now easier than ever for them to support their favorite athletes by buying merch and memorabilia.



## CONSUMER SEGMENTS WITH THE MOST APPETITE FOR WOMEN'S SPORTS



### THE YOUNG PROGRESSIVE

Liberal Millennial or Gen Z, likely living in an urban center.

*"I want to follow teams and athletes that inspire me and share my values."*



### THE FAMILY VIEWER

In their 30s or 40s with a young family. Looking to share their love of sports with their children.

*"I want to watch games with my family and get my kids—especially my daughter—interested in sports."*



### THE SUPERFAN

Deeply invested fan who follows a wide variety of sports. Owns merchandise or memorabilia and frequently bets on matches.

*"I want to follow as many different leagues as I can—including both men's and women's sports."*

<sup>15</sup>. "The streaming wars' next frontier?", National Research Group, April 25, 2022

<sup>16</sup>. Kaitlin Balasaygun, "In the college sports pay era, female athletes are emerging as big winners", CNBC, October 15, 2022

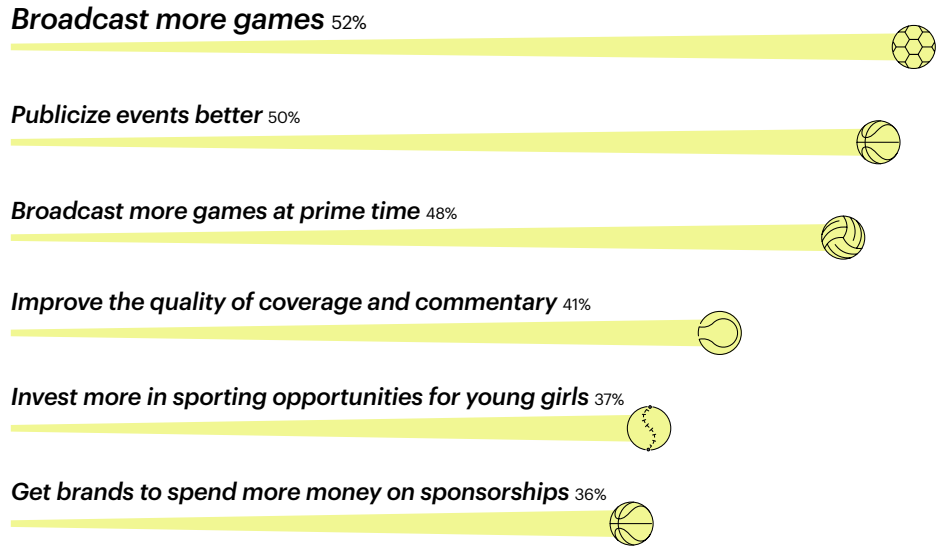
# Women's sports are at a turning point—and that's good news for fans and athletes alike

2022 will almost certainly be looked back on as a pivotal moment in the trajectory of women's sports. Fans have started to pay more attention to the phenomenal successes of top female athletes, and broadcasters are finally starting—albeit slowly—to invest more into women's sports and to give their games a fighting chance of finding an audience.

However, we shouldn't delude ourselves about the rate of progress. Despite all the momentum, we're still a long way from a world in which fans pay equal attention to men's and women's sports and hold the two in the same level of respect. True parity will be a generation-spanning project—and is unlikely to be achieved until there's a new cohort of fans who grew up with a deep emotional connection to women's sports.

The priority, therefore, needs to be finding ways to keep up and build on this new sense of momentum. Partly, that's a question of policy: there needs to be more investment in the school-to-college-to-pro pipeline for female athletes, and leagues should be compelled to make their pay structures more transparent and more equitable. But it's also a matter of storytelling.

**Q: What do you think could be done to increase the popularity of women's sports in the US?**

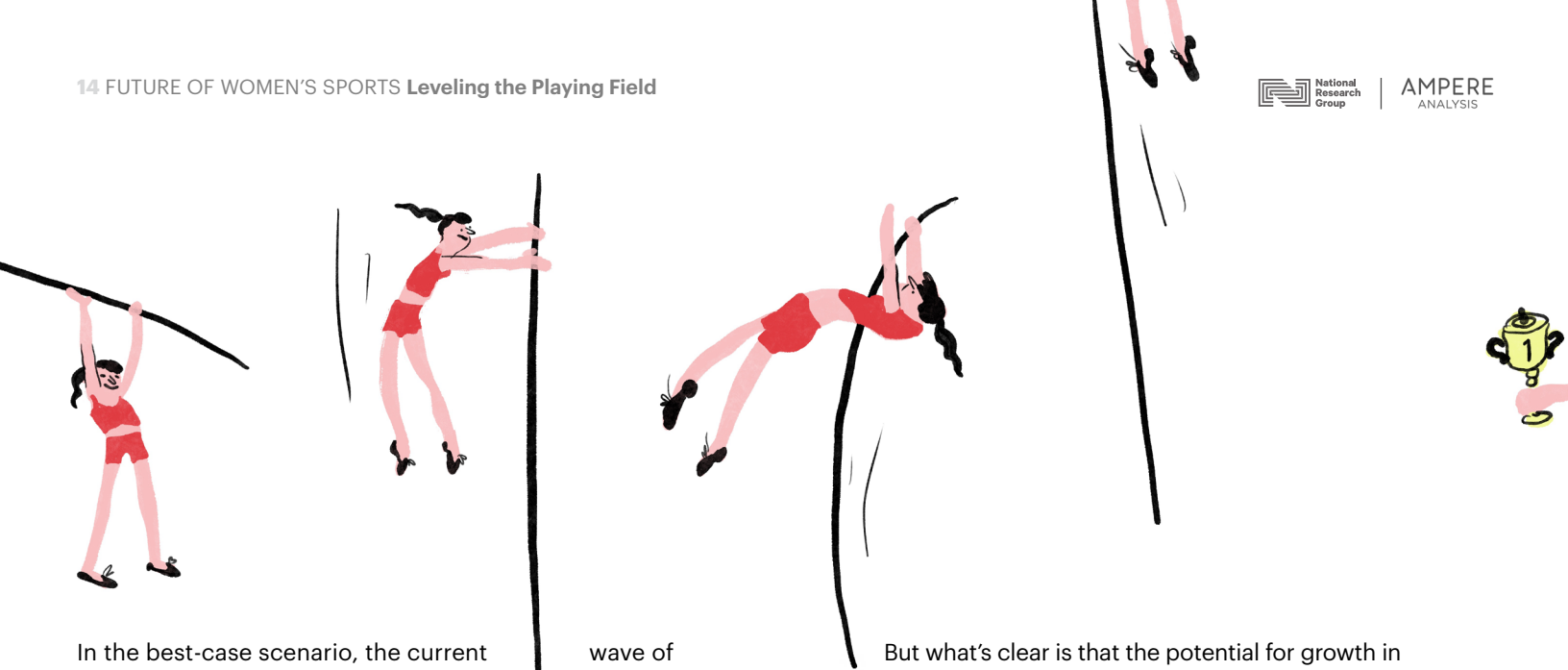


**39%**  
of sports fans say they have more respect for brands if they see them actively promoting women's sports.

Fans today may be more willing than previous generations to take an interest in women's sports, but there have to be compelling narratives that they can attach to and invest in. Those narratives aren't written solely on the pitch or the court; they're a product of the way that games are promoted, how they're written about by journalists, and how athletes are portrayed in films, TV shows, and documentary features.

While it's true that most fans don't currently seek out or spend money on women's sports, that isn't an immutable fact of nature; it's because, due to decades of underinvestment—from salaries to brand sponsorships to media spend—women's sports don't have the same kind of fan culture and community around them. And as a result, female athletes simply aren't given the same opportunities as men to build their narratives and tell their stories.





In the best-case scenario, the current interest in women's sports will lead to a snowball effect. As women's events start to get more airtime, coverage, and promotion, this will chip away at the long-standing myth that there's no audience for these games—in turn encouraging more investment into this space. Potentially, we may even start to see outside investors like private equity firms take an interest in women's sports, mirroring their recent surge of interest in men's events.

But what's clear is that the potential for growth in women's sports fandom far exceeds its current size. We may eventually be able to get there—but only if leagues, broadcasters, and policy-makers are willing to seize the opportunity in front of them. If the current momentum is any indication, the payoff will be well worth it.



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**METHODOLOGY**

Data on attitudes and behaviors of US sports fans is based on a study of 2,500 fans, conducted by NRG in October 2022, analyzing their engagement with and opinions towards women's leagues and female athletes.

Sports rights market valuations are based on a bottom-up research and modeling process for each event, in each major sports market worldwide. The Ampere team collects rights values, deal terms and other key details for each event as they are announced by rights sellers and buyers, and maintains a sophisticated rights valuation model to cross-check deal metrics against rights owner financials, rights buyer income streams and costs, and consumer demand for the events.

Global sports fandom data is derived from an in-depth sports-fan-specific study, in which 15,000 sports fans are polled on their favorite events and teams, their engagement with televised sport and related content, and their viewing preferences and willingness to spend to access sport content, across 12 major sports markets.

**AMPERE**  
ANALYSIS

A market-leading data and analytics firm specializing in the media sector. Ampere's research meshes in-depth financial and KPI analysis of company performance, detailed consumer profiling and polling, and in-depth coverage of rights licensing and content commissioning, to provide clients with a detailed, comprehensive and accurate view of the world's media markets.

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