

A man and a woman are sitting outdoors, looking at a smartphone held by the woman. The man has a beard and sunglasses, and the woman has glasses and a red and white striped shirt. Both have visible tattoos. The phone screen shows a soccer game. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

# Generation STREAM

SPORTS EDITION

*Presented by Disney Advertising*

COMPLETE ATHLETE

Disney Advertising



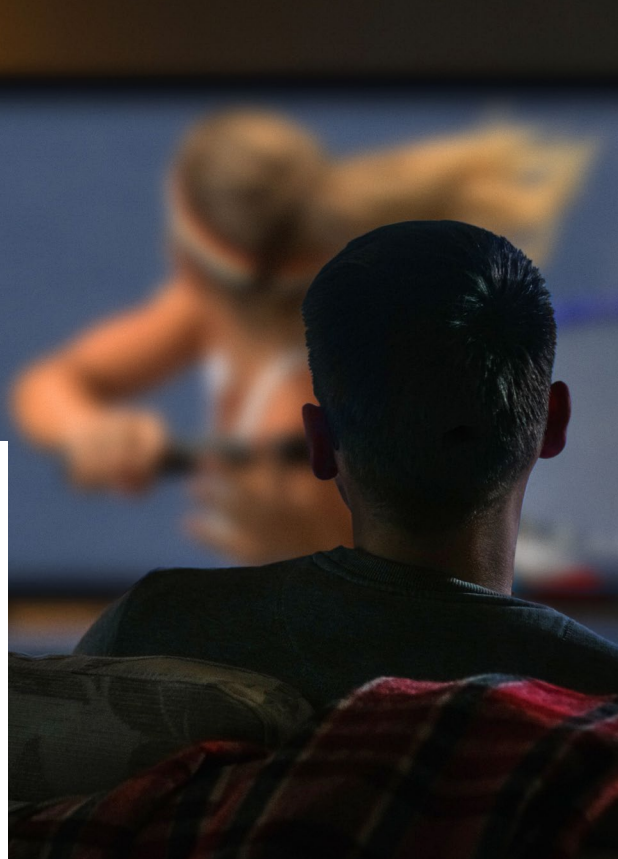
# COMPLETE ATHLETE

The image of athletes as superheroes is giving way to a more complete picture of who they are: complex human beings who are emotional, social and multidimensional. This humanization of athletes marks a shift in sports from scorekeeping to storytelling, ushering in a new generation of more diverse sports fans and a deeper narrative into America's quintessential pastime. Meet the "Complete Athlete," who is stepping off of the sidelines to create a more culture-defining game.

“The storytelling and the personalization - the humanizing of players - is what fans want.”

- Kati Fernandez,  
Director, Content Development & Integration,  
ESPN+ / ESPN

When Naomi Osaka dropped out of the French Open in the spring of 2021 citing mental health concerns, it was a watershed moment in sports: Osaka opened up arguably the largest and most public dialogue about the mental health of athletes. As a Japanese-Haitian woman who grew up in America in a predominantly white sport, Osaka represented the intersectionality of mental health, gender dynamics and racism—key social issues changing the sports industry and athletes’ role in it. Brand sponsors hailed her honesty (Nike, sweetgreen) and stepped in to pay her fines (The Calm App), while fellow athletes tweeted their support. Within days, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, *NPR*, *Forbes*—the list goes on—published stories about her positive impact on the mental health movement. Michael Phelps, who has been vocal about his depression, went as far as to say, “This will 100% save somebody’s life.” And it just may have. When fan favorite Simone Biles shocked the sports world by withdrawing from several events at the Tokyo Olympic Games saying her mental health was impacting her physical safety, it’s hard not to wonder whether Osaka’s bravery in addressing her own mental health concerns paved the way for Biles to do the same.



▶ 69%

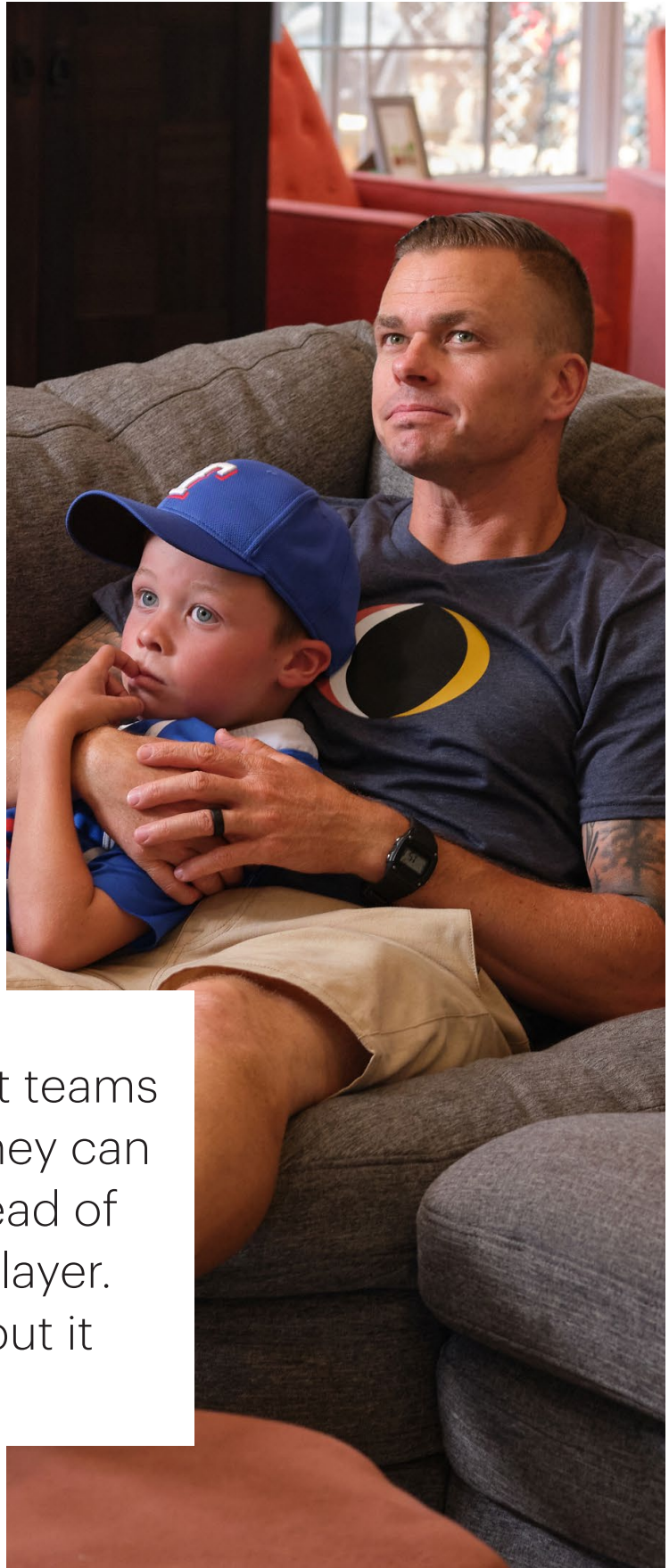
of sports fans agree with Fernandez, saying:

“I wish there was more storytelling in sports—there’s too much focus on the game and not enough focus on the stories surrounding athletes, teams, and sports culture.”



Beyond challenging the taboo of mental health in sports, Osaka's and Biles's openness about their mental wellness gave a nod to how they and other athletes, like the rest of us, struggle—physically, emotionally and socially. And while the fact that athletes are “human, too” should be a no-brainer, historically speaking this hasn't always been the case. Take, for instance, Evel Knievel, who in an interview with *Vanity Fair*, once reflected, “All my life, people have been waiting around to watch me die.” More recently, Colin Kaepernick became an icon for social justice, calling attention to racial inequality in 2016 by taking a knee during the national anthem. Since opting out of his contract at the end of that season, he hasn't had a job offer from the NFL. And when LeBron James spoke up in a 2018 interview about racism and the Trump administration, news host Laura Ingraham commented that he should “shut up and dribble.” The point is that athletes, more so than other public figures, have traditionally been expected to play one role only: *player*.

But a sea of change in sports is underway. **Fans are no longer satisfied with only knowing players on the field—they also want to understand who they are off the field.** This shift isn't just marking a more holistic appreciation for athletes; it's opening up the world of sports to new formats, narratives and, ultimately, audiences.



“Sometimes I think that teams are looking for what they can get from a player instead of how they can help a player. It's a shift of mindset but it would be rad to see.”

- Neal, 41, Ventura, CA



## Athletes to Activists

This new, 360 view of athletes can be credited in part to a time defined by recognizing difference and embracing empathy. The pandemic, racial reckonings and social issues of 2020 and 2021 had a democratizing effect on culture, with “We’re all in this together” becoming the catchphrase of the times. Athletes were stopped in their tracks and training as the world shut down. Just like us, they processed the fear, isolation, and grief of the pandemic and came together to push for justice. With games canceled and seasons postponed, fans followed their favorite athletes as people rather than players.

The pandemic brought about a perception-changing moment for Ava, 19, of New York, NY. “While I’ve always followed my favorite athletes and enjoyed watching interviews just as much as the competitions themselves, I admit to thinking of them more as athletes than as people,” she told us. “When the pandemic hit, most of these athletes couldn’t train normally, and I watched their journeys on social media with more empathy and interest than I ever had before.” In keeping with this sentiment, **71% of sports fans say the pandemic and protests of the past year have made athletes more relatable to them.** For Ava, this relatability was as humanizing as it was healing. “As an aerialist who also couldn’t train with the intensity and structure that I was used to, it was extremely beneficial to my mental health to watch many of my role models go through similar struggles.”

▶ **74%**

of sports fans agree:

“The past year has made me more thoughtful about how sports, race and politics intersect.”

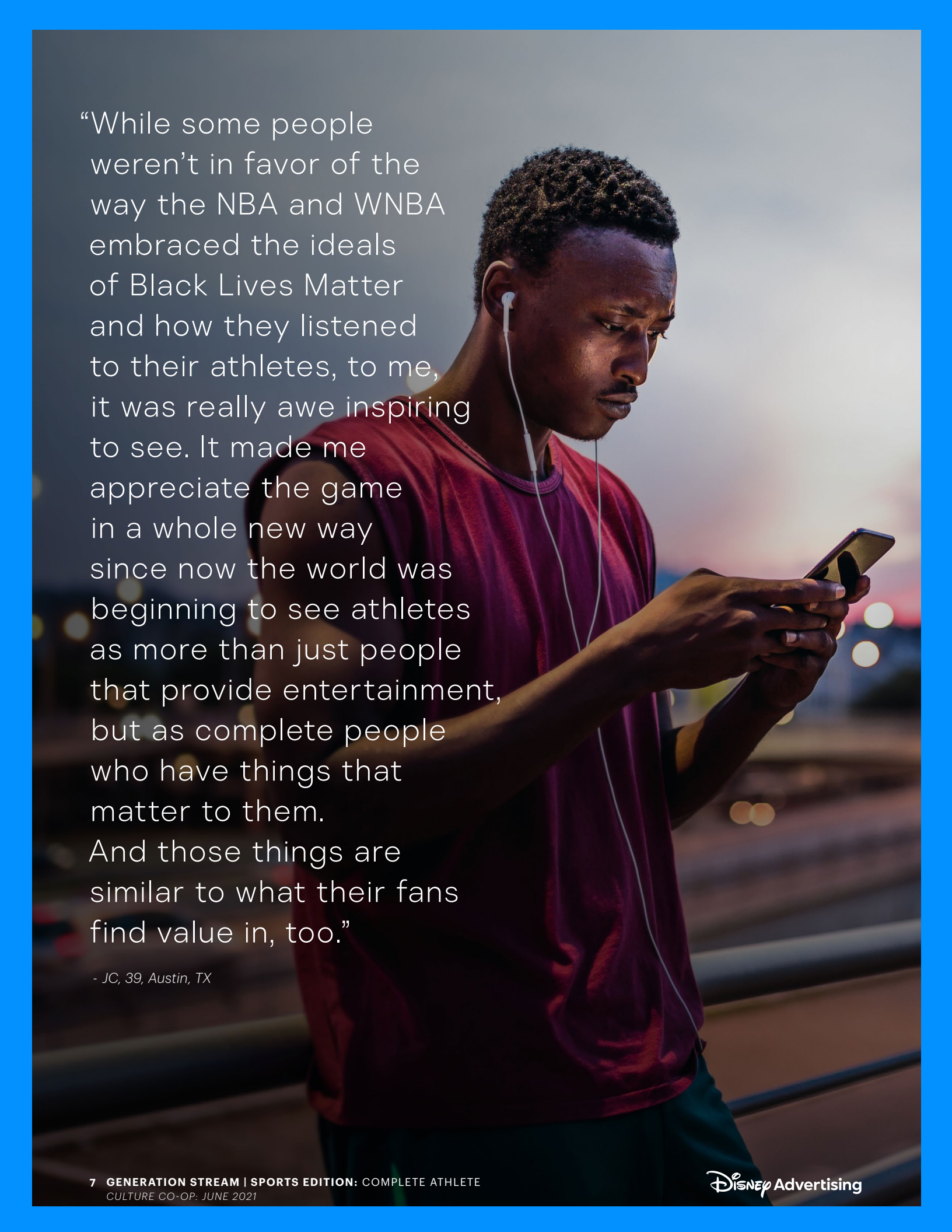


These struggles, of course, extend beyond the pandemic. In 2018, the #MeToo movement opened up dialogue about gender inequities in sports—Why was Serena Williams reprimanded for her “outburst” on the court while scores of men (cue John McEnroe) have been applauded for doing the same?—and, in 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests galvanized players to speak out about racial injustice. Seemingly overnight, athletes and athletic organizations stepped off the political sidelines en masse and into the activism spotlight. The MLB relocated the All-Star Game over the controversial Georgia election law; the Cleveland Indians and Washington Redskins changed their names; the NBA and WNBA boycotted games and made Black Lives Matter visible on courts, jerseys and pins; and Kevin Love and Hayden Hurst, among many others, spoke up about mental health. It was a year where fans had no choice but to see athletes anew.

“Younger fans want to marry their sports fandom to match their real life. Now, more than ever, people are invested in cultural moments.”

- Kati Fernandez,  
Director, Content Development & Integration,  
ESPN+ / ESPN





“While some people weren’t in favor of the way the NBA and WNBA embraced the ideals of Black Lives Matter and how they listened to their athletes, to me, it was really awe inspiring to see. It made me appreciate the game in a whole new way since now the world was beginning to see athletes as more than just people that provide entertainment, but as complete people who have things that matter to them. And those things are similar to what their fans find value in, too.”

- JC, 39, Austin, TX





While some have voiced frustration over players advocating for social causes outside of sports, for most, the change has been a welcomed one. Erica, 47, of New York, NY, saw the past year of sports as a teaching moment for her kids. “Last year, we streamed more sports as a family, which offered us the chance to talk about the issues happening in current events like the protests, which were showing up in sports,” she explained. “It was interesting and helpful from a parenting perspective. Those are hard topics to address and the fact that they surfaced during shared experiences of sports viewing made them timely and situational. Therefore, they were easier to talk about.” Drayson, 40, of the Bronx, NY, also sees players’ political turn as a positive one. “Some may say that the sports industry and players should stray away from controversial political issues, but I disagree. I believe what they are doing is long overdue and it will bring about a positive change.”

The events of the 2020 and 2021 were certainly catalysts for athlete activism, but it’s unlikely players will step back into the position of “just dribbling” anytime soon. As *The Atlantic* noted, “The atmosphere in sports has changed. Athletes have shown that they feel a purpose beyond just providing entertainment for legions of fans.”



## Entertainers to Entrepreneurs

**In addition to ‘activist’, athletes are adding ‘entrepreneur’ to their personality repertoire.**

Athletes have long parlayed their sports career into business endeavors: Tom Brady recently announced the launch of his non-fungible token (NFT) company, “Autograph”, and who can forget the George Foreman Grill of mid-nineties fame? But one of the more talked about entrepreneurial turned athletes that people are eyeing is that of the team owner. Players know that the best way to change the gender and race inequalities they are fighting for in culture and in sports is by becoming team and league decision makers. However, this is a role that people of color have historically not held. “When do we become team owners? When do we become the commissioners?” is something the late David Williams II, the SEC’s first Black athletic director, was asked in 2018 during “Dear Black Athlete,” a series of conversations about race and sports aired on ESPN. Unfortunately, his question is as relevant now as it was then. To date, there is only one principal Black owner in the NFL, NBA and MLB (none other than the legendary Michael Jordan), and across the big four (adding the NHL to the mix) there are only nine female owners out of one-hundred-and-thirty-three. “We are told we can only entertain,” Chris Archer of the Tampa Bay Rays noted during the same series Williams spoke at. “But every team has doctors, lawyers, economists,” roles Archer advocated young sports fans of color should aspire to, as well.



**This gap between who is on the field and who’s calling the shots off of it is a particularly glaring one for Gen Z, the most racially and culturally diverse generation to date.**

As Jamael, 19, of Atlanta, GA, noted, “In sports, people of color are often the majority of the player base but little to none are owners. This has been the case over every decade of modern sports.” However, the past few years may just change that. The recent advocacy for Black-owned brands, banks and economies as a way to fight racial injustice from the top down has had an impact across industries, including sports. Notably, LeBron James recently championed Renee Montgomery to pursue ownership of the Atlanta Dream as a way to further the Black Lives Matter movement; and Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka have both signed on as owners of the National Women’s Soccer League in a move to influence pay equity in women’s soccer. As more athletes likely follow suit, the sports narrative will inevitably change. As the *New York Times* pointed out, “Would the NFL have blackballed Colin Kaepernick if a significant number of former Black players were at the owners’ table? Unlikely.”



Beyond the impact that athletes-turned-owners are having on gender and race dynamics in sports, athletes-turned-media moguls is another way that players are beginning to insert their personalities and POVs into the game. Podcasting is leading the way. In the article, *"The Rise of the Athlete Podcaster,"* the *New Yorker* points out that, in the past, if athletes wanted to speak candidly about their experience or points of view, they'd have to write a tell-all book, do a sit-down interview, or land a network job. Today, athletes have found their voice on podcasts such as wrestler Chris Jericho's *"Talk Is Jericho,"* boxing legend Mike Tyson's *"Hotboxin',"* and Ringer, a network of sports podcasts that elevated athletes' voices—and was acquired by Spotify for a cool two-hundred million last year. As Jamael sees it, "My ideal reporter is one who played the game they comment on. A network for players by players would add key aspects of the game that most people don't currently see." For Jamael, podcasting is a step in the right direction. "I enjoy podcasts like *ALL THE SMOKE* and *I AM AN ATHLETE* because they show the side of the player that often gets misconstrued and misjudged by the media." Backing this up, 60% of sports fans listen to sports podcasts weekly during the season of their favorite sport, with one-quarter reporting that they tune into them daily.

Finally, and notably, the NCAA ruled this year that college athletes can now profit off of their "NIL," or name, image and likeness, giving young players the ability to monetize their talents without giving up their university scholarships, stipends or status. This opens up a floodgate of new, entrepreneurial opportunities for athletes, from sponsoring videos on social media to upstarting summer camps. The benefits for college football and college basketball players are a no-brainer, but the new legislation will also give a major boost to athletes in lesser-followed college sports who, nonetheless, have garnered national attention. Take, for instance, gymnast Katelyn Ohashi, who raked up nearly 200 million views and the nickname "Perfect 10" for her Tina Turner-and-Beyoncé-jamming floor routine, but who had to turn down endorsement deals because of her UCLA team status. This law could have changed her career trajectory entirely, like it has for volleyball sensations Haley and Hanna Cavinder of Fresno State. With this new ruling, the sister duo leveraged their 3+ million TikTok followers and 250+ million Instagram followers to score endorsement deals with Boost Mobile and Six Star Nutrition.



## Players to Protagonists

The rise of multidimensional athletes is also being driven by fans who want to know players simply as people, regardless of whether they are championing a cause, running a team or hosting a podcast. **69% of sports fans—particularly Millennial sports fans (74%)—wish there was more storytelling in sports, saying there's too much focus on the game and not enough focus on the stories surrounding athletes, teams, and sports culture.** “I personally enjoy the human stories of the players and the storylines of rivalries and adversity almost as much as the actual game playing itself,” Danielle, 37, of Brooklyn, NY, told us. “My husband and I have a joke that if he wants me to get into a game or a match to watch with him, he has to first tell me about the players' personal lives.” It's this context Danielle says that often persuades her to root for or against certain players and teams. “Learning about Knicks player Reggie Bullock's sister's murder and his subsequent activism in the LGBTQIA+ world has been a huge point of interest for me,” she explained. “My emotional connection to him as a player is stronger when I watch games.”



“Sports can be an amazing window into larger cultural challenges and shifts. *30 for 30* does a wonderful job of dropping you into what may seem like a small sports moment and expanding outward to discuss the cultural and social issues of the time. Race and class struggles, mental health issues, justice system failings, crime, violence, drug and addiction problems, even war and elections and complicated international affairs—all can be shown through the lens of sports storytelling.”

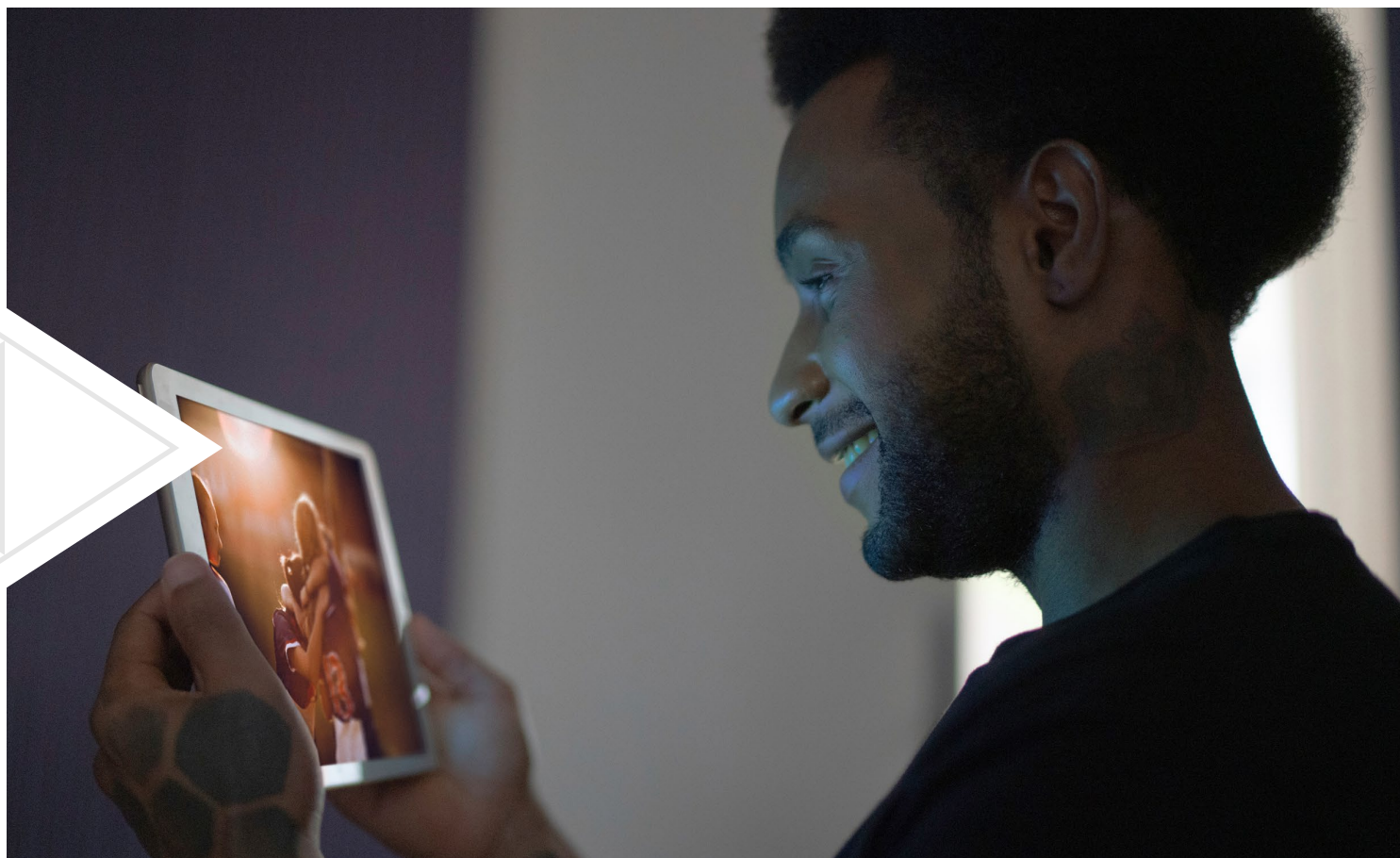
- Danielle, 37, Brooklyn, NY



This desire for a narrative where players are protagonists of a story that extends well beyond the game is an expectation among Gen Z, who have grown up watching content with complicated characters and storylines that push boundaries and challenge traditional formats. Furthermore, Zs are accustomed to diving deeper into celebrities' personal lives through social media; so for them, what happens to athletes on the field is really only half the story. For Maya, 15, of Chico, CA, the back-story is a must. "I, personally, cannot sit through sports where I have no idea who the players are behind the scenes. I need there to be a story to everything, and a good one at that, to feel any kind of emotion." Sports fans are looking for more. "I think that once you're used to something, you're used to it. And I think that for so long, we didn't even notice that we were seeing the same formats in sports," Olivia Stomski, Director of Newhouse Sports Media Center at Syracuse University, explained. But she feels

the sports industry is beginning to wake up. "We're starting to see executives at sports networks saying, "Hey, we need to do something. We need to look at our viewers and our fans holistically. It's important for us to serve those fans and our viewers in a way that includes them."

One way to do this is by showcasing more diverse voices and more "complete athlete" stories, something that women, POC and the LGBTQIA+ community, in particular, are clamoring for. "I love seeing Black anglers, women anglers, and females sharing their passion for sports," Rose a 37-year old Mexican-American from San Antonio, TX, who identifies as queer, told us. "I've been told fishing isn't a real sport, and I've had to do my own research to discover alternative sports. In my opinion the sports industry hasn't done a great job of catering to diverse interests or demographics. These marginalized communities exist and need to be represented." Ava agrees. "Growing up with many of my friends watching major sports







“I think sports programs could be more culturally inclusive. The most important purpose of sports is to bring communities together and to teach individuals acceptance and overcome differences.”

- Rose, 37, San Antonio, TX

networks, as well as my parents, it was intimidating and confusing to me that women’s sports seemed less desirable in the media,” she reflected. But Ava also pointed out that streaming services are in the “perfect position to change this narrative” by swapping out traditional protagonists and flipping the sports script. This move could be a lucrative one according to research from the Sports Innovation Lab, which analyzed billions of social media and

TV data points from more than three million households to track what fans bought, bet, created and streamed. They found that fans of women’s sports are the most likely to be part of a cohort that consumes sports digitally and socially with an emphasis on storytelling and athlete-driven stories. While this group makes up just 10% of sports fans, they account for more than half of total sports revenue.

Furthermore, athletes are flipping the script for the industry. Recently, Japanese soccer star Kumi Yokoyama came out as transgender, becoming the most high-profile Japanese athlete to ever do so. Yokoyama cited OL

Reign midfielder Quinn’s decision to come out as transgender in 2020 as inspiration. “Lately the word ‘LGBTQ’ has become more commonly known in Japan and been covered by the media, but people in my position aren’t able to raise our voices and talk about it,” she explained. “But if all of us speak up together then we can help raise awareness.” Yokoyama and Quinn join the ranks of a burgeoning LGBTQIA+ community in sports, including Megan Rapinoe, Ryan Russell, Patricio Manuel, Jason Paul Collins, Fallon Fox and Danell Leyva, among many others.

With more star players representing these marginalized groups, narratives are organically changing. Fans, particularly those of the next generation, are all for more diversity in sports: 63% of sports fans are a fan of an athlete because they represent a race, gender, or sexuality they identify with and 65% agree that transgender girls and women should be able to compete in women's sports.

More than just evening out the gender divide, or representing marginalized communities, changing the narrative in sports means showcasing athletes—all athletes—for who they are alongside how they play. This is perhaps why Coco Gauff was deemed “the next generation’s sports star” by New Balance. The brand isn’t concerned with whether or not Gauff wins or loses but, instead, focused on her as a leader—on and off of the court. “She’s not just here to climb the rankings,” New Balance stated. “She’s here to lead the next generation.”

Ultimately, the payoff of humanizing players and featuring more “complete athletes” is not only a more interesting narrative, but also a broader and more diverse fanbase. “We all love stories,” Stomski pointed out. “As human beings, we’re told stories as kids, we’re told stories as old people, we grow up and tell our own stories. Sports fans love the stories attached to sports. Streaming companies can uniquely dive into the storytelling aspect of sports and create an entirely new audience, if just given the chance.”



“I think the Drew Robinson story is a great example of what I feel like viewers want. It’s a story that shows somebody for who they are outside of the accolades. **So many times, we glorify athletes, but the truth is, they are human.**”

- Kati Fernandez, Director,  
Content Development & Integration,  
ESPN+ / ESPN



# COMPLETE ATHLETE BRAND TAKEAWAYS



For sports fans today, who a player is off of the field is as important, *if not more important*, than how they perform on the field.

Align your brands with athletes who are multidimensional, meaningful and relatable.



Storytelling is weaving its way into sports.

Documentaries, podcasts and TV series that provide an in-depth look at an athlete or sporting event will resonate with a generation who is looking for a more complete picture of sports and how it intersects with culture.



Activism in athletics is here to stay.

Brands have the power to amplify players' voices and the causes they care about.