

Coca-Cola, Morgan Stanley join coalition of brands backing women's sports

Article

The news: Market research company **Sports Innovation Lab**, owned by former Olympian **Angela Ruggiero**, has formed a coalition of brands and sports leagues called the **Women's**

Sports Club to reduce barriers to buying women's sports ad inventory and sponsorships.

- Major partners include **Coca-Cola, Nike, and Morgan Stanley**, as well as leagues like the **Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA)** and **Ladies Professional Golf Association**.

The gambit: Broadcasters and brands are at a standstill when it comes to women's sports. Brands say there isn't enough primetime coverage to justify advertising spending, and broadcasters say there isn't enough brand interest to justify primetime coverage.

- The Women's Sports Club is looking to address that broadcaster complaint by enabling brands and sports leagues to use their combined influence to pressure networks into giving women's sports more favorable slots.
- Progress has already been made: The **National Women's Soccer League Championship (NWSL)** was given a primetime slot for the first time ever in 2022 on **CBS**, and brands like **Ally Bank** have carved out an early reputation as a prominent sponsor of women's sports.
- Ally signed a single-year, multimillion-dollar advertising deal with **ESPN** in 2022, 90% of which will be spent on women's sports broadcasts. For Coca-Cola and others, the Women's Sports Club represents a chance to get in on the ground floor of a growing market and become known as a supporter of women's sports leagues.

Sports-Related Activities Conducted in 2022 by US Adults

% of respondents

Go to a live sporting event in-person	29%
Watch an esports event, either through streaming or in-person	13%
Make a casual bet on a live sporting event with friends/family	11%
Participate in a free fantasy sports league	10%
Placed an official bet on a live sporting event, online or on an app	8%
Participate in a paid fantasy sports league	6%
Make a casual bet on an esports event with friends/family	5%
Placed an official bet on a live sporting event, in-person	4%
Placed an official bet on an esports event (online or in-person)	3%

Note: n=1,035 ages 18+

Source: Ipsos Sports Poll, Feb 1, 2023

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The opportunity: Sports are a bastion for live TV viewership as the medium begins a long decline, but that's the case even more so for women's sports.

- A November 2022 study from Samba TV found that women's March Madness viewership grew 81% year over year, versus 18% for men's. The WNBA finals similarly grew 171% compared with 25% for men's, and the NWSL championship grew a staggering **453%**—the power of a primetime slot.
- As the leagues grow, they, too, could become the object of desire for big-budget streaming contracts. Advertiser attention could get streamers on board to strike deals at lower costs than the billions being spent on male sports leagues.

Our take: Sometimes it's worth it for brands to take a chance on an “unproven” market, especially during a time when the norms of the advertising industry are being upended. But despite the perception that women's sports are under-viewed and not worth spending on, the numbers show that the truth is anything but, and brands are beginning to pay attention.