

# SPORTS IN AMERICA:

What we play, what we watch, what we agree on—and what we don't

An Ipsos Point of View

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GAME CHANGERS



## KEY FINDINGS:

1. Cornhole and bowling are the sports most Americans played last year—pickleball less so.
2. Football, not baseball, is America's pastime.
3. Live TV is the runaway favorite for games, even as a plurality of younger Americans are streaming sports.
4. Americans are concerned about players' safety.
5. Americans—particularly Black Americans—support allowing college athletes to profit off their name, image, and likeness (known widely as NIL).
6. Partisan differences exist, even in the “great equalizer” of sports.

Sports make up an enormous part of the American psyche. Watching and playing sports bonds us with family and friends and helps our health and bodies. Outside of just being important for communities and our health, the sports industry is both a lucrative business and cultural flashpoint.

From how Americans are staying active to how they watch and cheer for their favorite sports teams to the hot topics in the sports and political worlds, new Ipsos research explores what sports and sports fandom looks like in America today and how controversies in sports can reflect a broader political and social divide in American society.

Policymakers invested in getting more Americans active and executives interested in advertising, communicating, or building business in any sector touching the world of sports need to understand that while these are fun and games, many critical differences exist in the public that may be the difference between success and failure.

## Cornhole and bowling are the sports most Americans played last year—pickleball less so

Policymakers and business leaders trying to get [more Americans active](#) may need to consider what Americans already do, and how education and income impacts Americans' access to sports.

The two most-played sports among Americans in 2022 were leisurely games, like cornhole and bowling, followed by individual sports people use to stay active, like swimming or cycling.

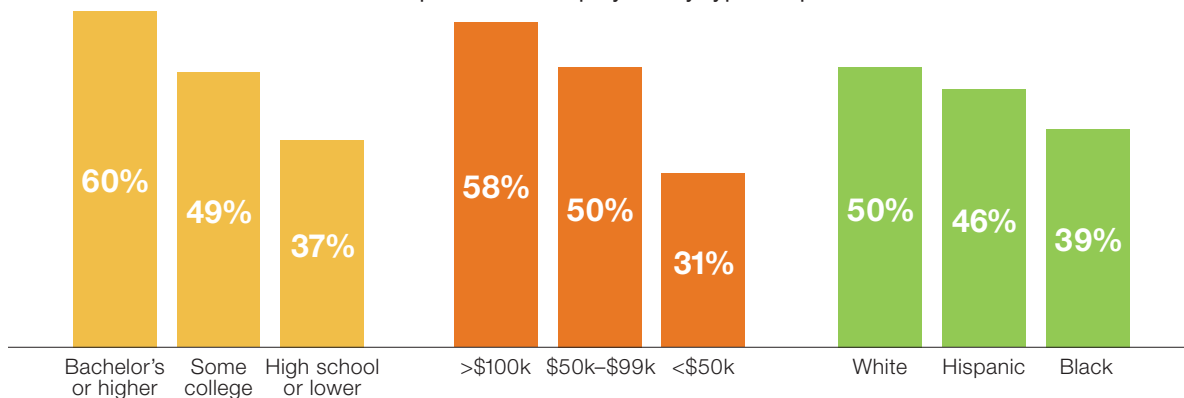
That so-called pickleball craze? It may not have been so crazy after all, with only 4% of Americans reporting that they played the sport last year. But the [reported tensions between tennis players and pickleball players](#) may not have been so exaggerated—pickleball nearly overtook tennis (which was played by 5% of Americans in 2022) in terms of popularity over the last year. Pickleball, much like cornhole and bowling, is a group game that is active, but not as strenuous as other sports—perhaps a key to [the game's early success](#).

Overall, around half of all Americans played some form of sport in 2022, but income and education factor heavily into whether someone has played a sport in the past year.

But, importantly, Americans with more education and higher income are more likely to have played sports in the past year compared to Americans with lower education or income. Black Americans are also less likely than other demographics to have played any sports in the last year.

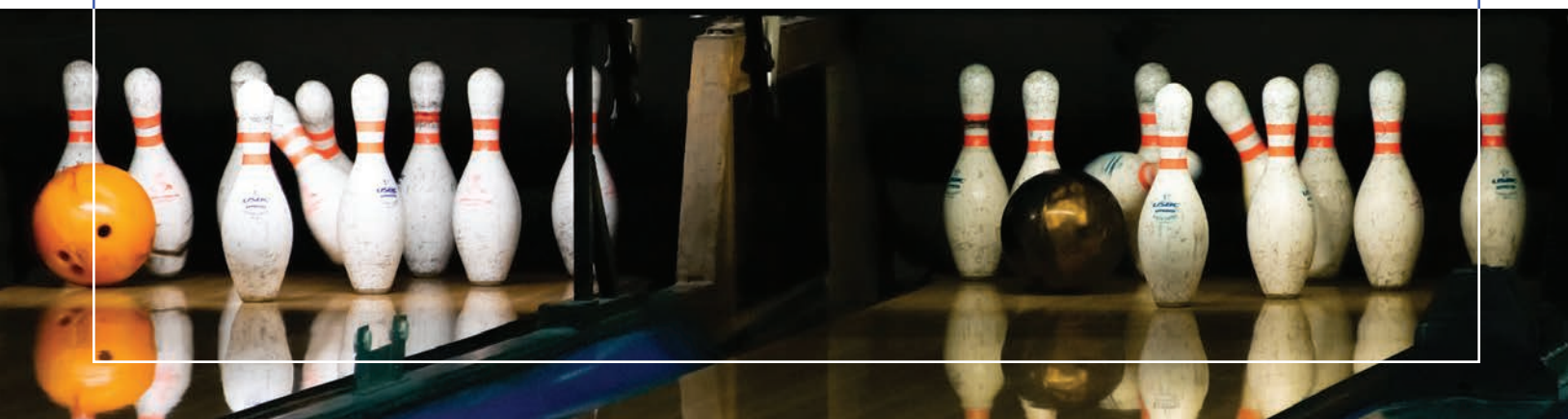
### Americans with lower education and lower income less likely to have played sports in 2022

Percent of respondents that played any type of sport in 2022



Source: Ipsos January 13–15, 2023, among 1,035 U.S. adults

Executives and policymakers looking to bridge this gap in activity can look no further than youth leagues to understand why these disparities exist and where they come from. There are similar accessibility problems with [youth sports](#). The issues at play there, namely cost and access to safe spaces, may also be at work here too, though more research needs to be done to understand how and why these differences exist.



## Football, not baseball, is America's pastime

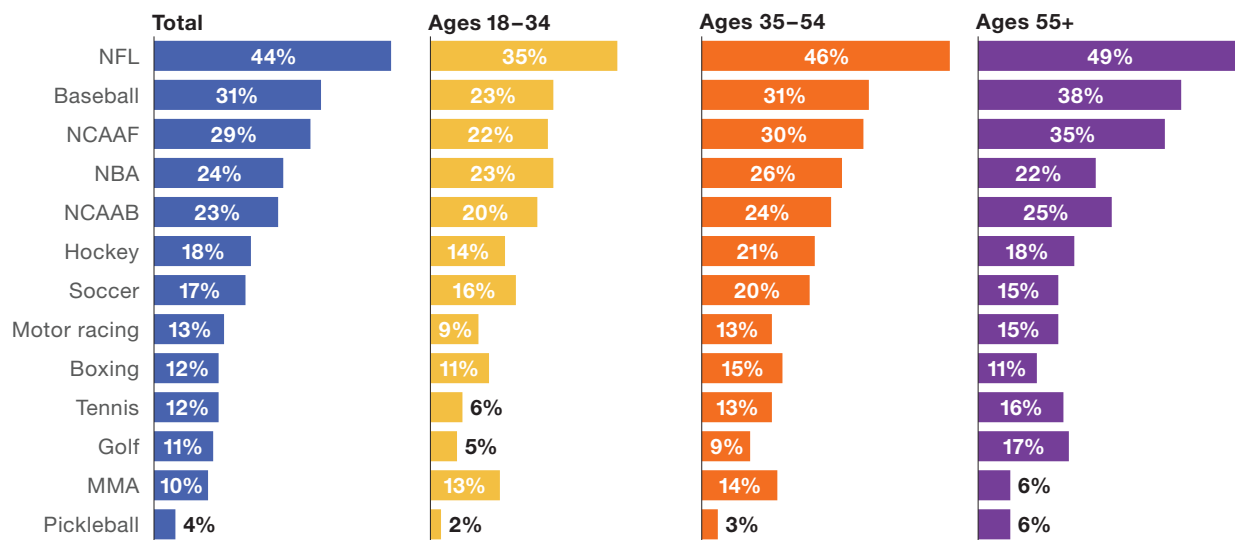
Who is a fan and how engaged they are hold huge implications for businesses advertising and selling the love of the game.

The good news is that most Americans—two in three—are fans of at least one sport, but age plays an important role in what sports they root for and follow. A 25-year-old and 65-year-old sports fan express their fandom in different ways and tend to have different preferences in the sports they follow.

One thing is true—football, by far, has a strong foothold with Americans of all ages. Specifically, just under half of Americans describe themselves as fans of the NFL—13 percentage points ahead of the second-most-popular sport—while just under a third consider themselves fans of college football.

### Football is sports fans' favorite, even as younger Americans are interested in soccer and pro basketball

Percent that describes themselves as the fans of the following sports, by age group



Source: Ipsos January 13–15, 2023, among 1,035 U.S. adults

While people of all ages watch the NFL, disparate viewership trends by age show a potentially troubling future for some sports and promising futures for others, important trends for executives to watch. Younger Americans, under age 35, tend to be more divided in the sports they are fans of, with interest spread primarily between basketball and soccer, while older Americans are more interested in sports like golf and tennis. America's pastime, baseball, may be seeing its grasp over Americans loosen, as its fan base is older.



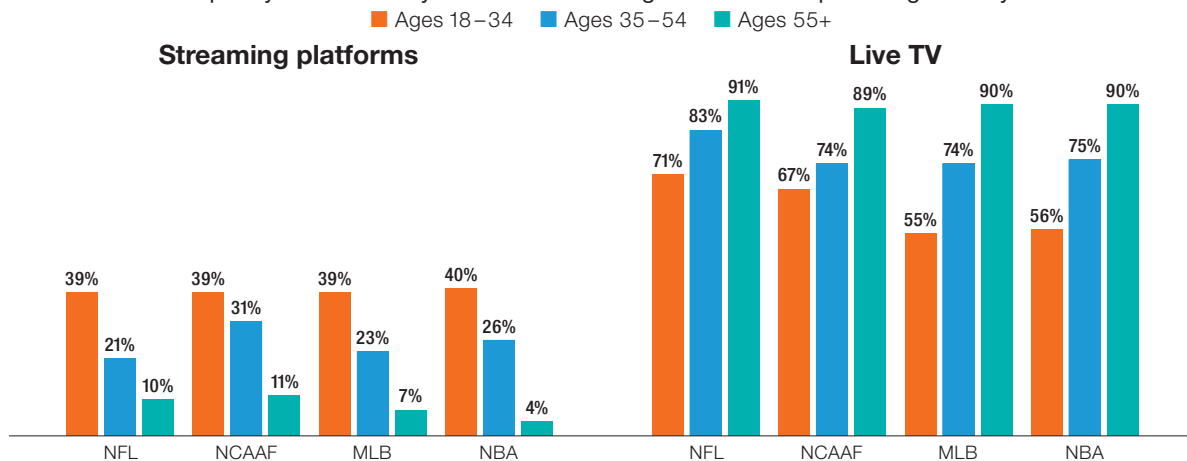
## Live TV is the runaway favorite for games, even as a plurality of younger Americans are streaming sports

Sports channels are buoying cable from a wave of cord-cutting that presents real challenges to portions of the media world. Ipsos data shows that some of those cord-cutting worries can be put to rest when it comes to sports viewership—but not all of them.

Most Americans watch sports and major sporting events on live television. Fewer watch sports and major sporting events via streaming. While watching live TV is nearly ubiquitous among older respondents, pluralities of Americans under 35 are more likely to have streamed sports and major sporting events like the Super Bowl or the World Cup, pointing to a worrying sign for cable networks. Reaching the next generation of fans means understanding that not everyone will be on live TV.

### Most Americans watch sports on TV, but younger Americans are more likely to turn to streaming services

You previously indicated that you watched an entire game/match for the following sports/leagues in the past year. How did you watch an entire game for each sport/league last year?



Source: Ipsos January 13–15. Base sizes: NFL n=486, NCAAF n=339, MLB n=300, NBA n=189



## Americans are concerned about players' safety

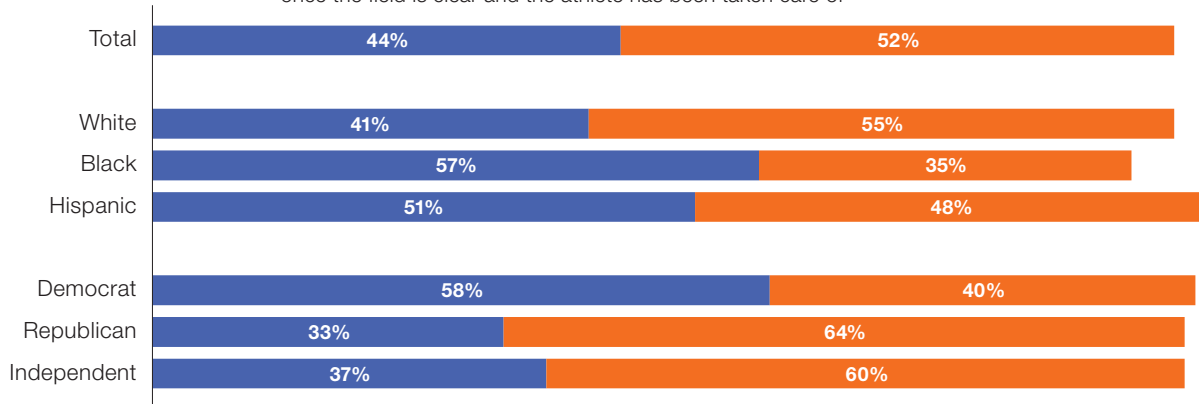
Coming off of a football season filled with concerns about player safety, how do executives manage communication risks and costs associated with medical emergencies and respectfully participate in the conversation? By understanding that the data shows that most Americans—including sports fans and [sports bettors](#)—don't want to see professional athletes' wellbeing come at the expense of entertainment, though how to handle medical emergencies divides Americans by race and political affiliation.

Player safety is overwhelmingly the most pressing issue in the world of sports for Americans. But, even after the cancellation of an NFL game following the in-game collapse of Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin, a bare majority of Americans still think games should go on after an emergency. Fewer Americans think a game should be completely stopped when a medical emergency occurs rather than think games should resume once the field is cleared, though significant differences by race and partisanship exist.

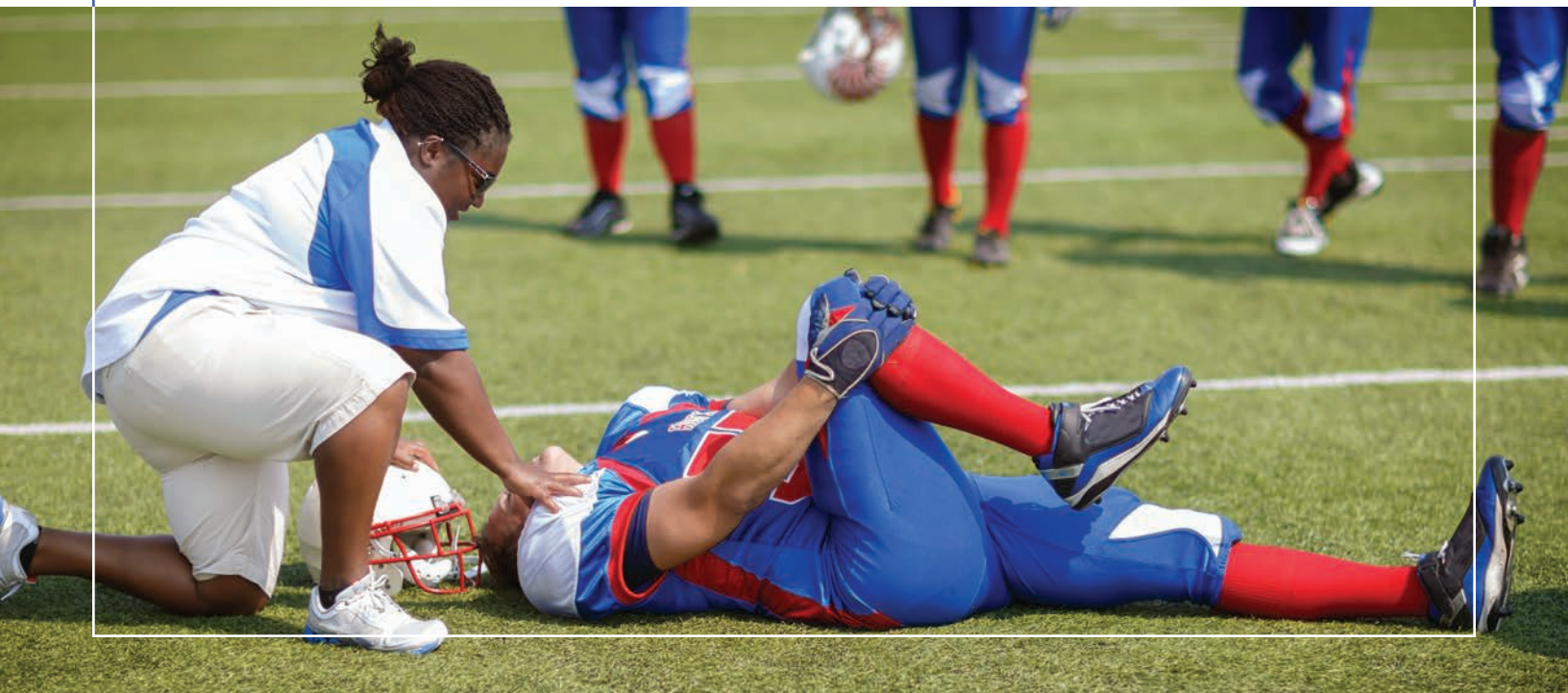
### Americans divided on how to handle in-game medical emergencies

For each of the following pairs of statements, please select the one that comes closest to your view, even if neither statement is exactly right.

- Live sports games should be canceled when medical emergencies occur
- Live sports games should continue when medical emergencies occur, once the field is clear and the athlete has been taken care of



Source: Ipsos January 13–15, 2023, among 1,035 U.S. adults



## Americans—particularly Black Americans—support allowing college athletes to profit off their name, image, and likeness (NIL)

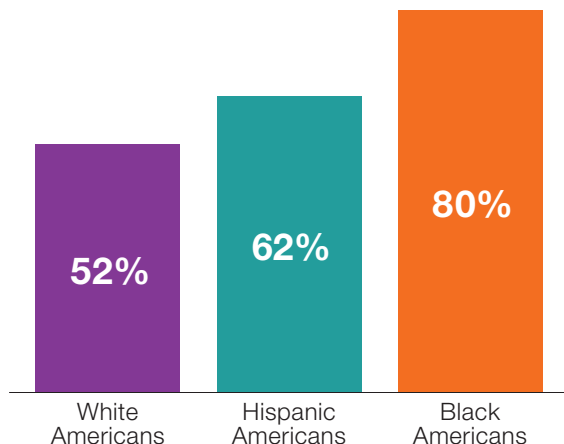
As executives interact and potentially promote student-athletes in their newfound stake in business, it's important to understand how Americans feel about this changing landscape. College athletes were traditionally forbidden from accepting any form of payment if they wanted to retain NCAA eligibility—until 2021, when college athletes gained the right to profit off their name, image, and likeness (NIL) in a reversal of longstanding tradition.

Nearly two years after these rule changes were made, over half of all Americans support NIL rights for college student-athletes and believe it has a positive impact on college sports by allowing student athletes to be fairly compensated.

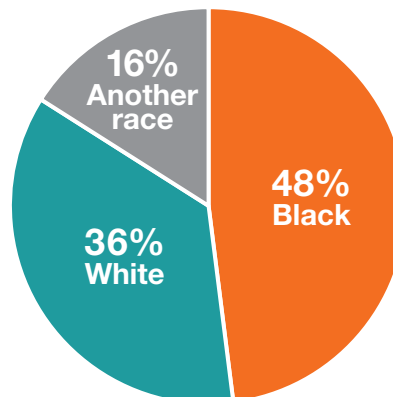
Out of all demographic groups, however, Black Americans are the most likely to support college athletes profiting off their NIL. This is particularly notable because Black Americans make up a disproportionately large share of student athletes at [major Division I football and basketball programs](#), setting them up to potentially be the demographic that benefits the most from these rule changes.

### Black Americans, highly represented in major college football and basketball programs, overwhelmingly support NIL rights

Percent that thinks NIL rights have a positive impact on college athletics by ensuring student athletes are fairly compensated



Percent of student athletes in Division I football programs, by race (2022)



Source: (Left) Ipsos January 13–15, 2023, among 1,035 U.S. adults (Right) NCAA

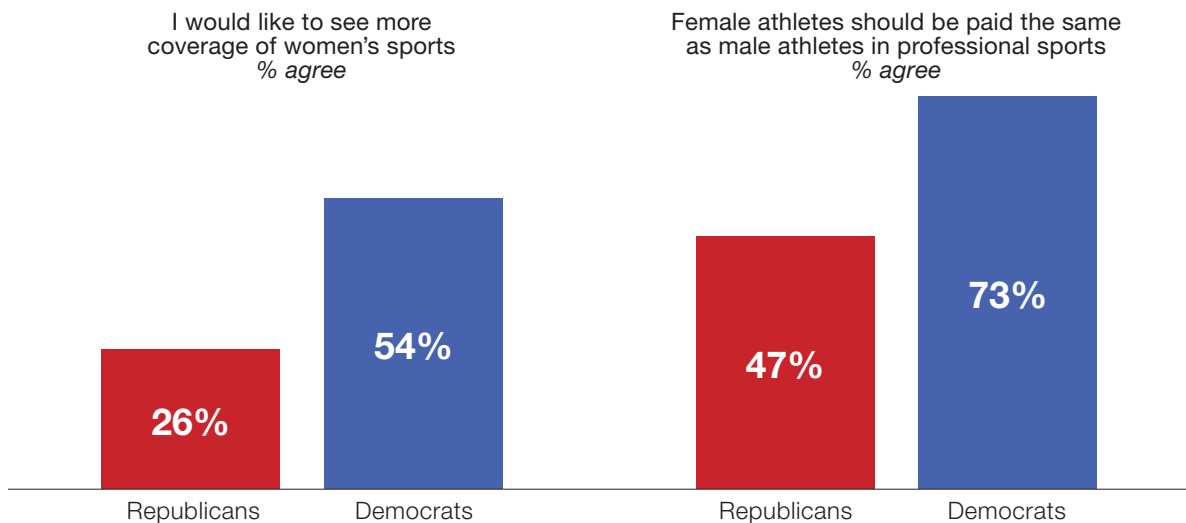


## Partisan differences exist, even in the “great equalizer” of sports

Gender in sports has become a firebrand issue in the world of sports, from [state-level bans](#) on transgender kids playing youth sports to questions around gender pay equity and coverage. As business leaders navigate the polarized and fraught political landscape embedded in these issues, know that some of the most salient partisan issues of the day get fought out in the cultural arena of sports. Notably, gender in sports acts as this fault line between Republicans and Democrats.

For example, while four in ten Americans want to see more coverage of women’s sports, Democrats are nearly two times more likely to want more coverage of women’s sports than Republicans. Likewise, while a decisive majority of Democrats think female athletes should be paid as much as male athletes, only a plurality of Republicans thinks the same.

### Desire to see more women’s sports coverage and opinions on gender pay equity in sports divided along party lines



Source: Ipsos January 13–15, 2023, among 1,035 U.S. adults

[Other Ipsos polling with NPR](#) found that very few Republicans (4%) support allowing transgender women and girls to compete on women’s and girls’ youth sports teams, while 46% of Democrats agree.

But, some sports still have the ability to act as a unifying force. Nearly equal shares of Republicans and Democrats are fans of the NFL, baseball, hockey, soccer, and college basketball, promising the opportunity to share cultural moments and memories together during a time when Americans are increasingly sorted into political bubbles.



## TAKEAWAYS FOR HOW AMERICANS PLAY AND FOLLOW SPORT:

1. Policymakers and business leaders aiming to get Americans more active should consider the sports Americans are most willing to play, and how education and income influence Americans' ability to access these sports.
2. Business leaders plugged into the world of sports need to pay attention to the way fandom in the U.S. differs by generation. Older Americans have different preferences from younger generations both in terms of favorite sports and viewing habits.
3. It is essential for executives to understand that live TV is still the way most Americans watch their favorite games and teams. But the under-35 crowd is splitting their attention between streaming and live TV far more than older sports fans.
4. Decision makers managing communication risks and costs associated with on field and live medical emergencies should understand that player safety is very important to the public. But Americans are split on how exactly to handle gametime medical emergencies, dividing Americans by race and political affiliation.
5. As executives start to incorporate student-athletes and their newfound stake in business into their campaigns, it's important to understand that majorities of Americans are willing to let go of tradition to let college athletes profit off their brand, and Black Americans are the most likely to support this.
6. Business leaders tasked with maneuvering the polarized political landscape should know that issues around gender pay and equity in sports are very politically polarizing for the public.

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