

RESEARCH REPORT · NO. 15 OF 2026

The Sports League *AI Visibility* Index 2026

Which sports properties surface in the answer engines when fans, sponsors, and the business of sports research the leagues that define the category.

AUTHORED BY	METHODOLOGY	ENGINES TESTED	PROPERTIES SCORED
5W Research Team	5W AI Visibility Audit	ChatGPT · Claude · Perplexity · Google AI Overviews	10 sports leagues

§ 01

The thesis

Sports is the most attention-rich category in U.S. commerce. The NFL alone commands more annual broadcast value than most national entertainment IPs combined. The NBA's 11-year, 76-billion-dollar 2024 media rights deal restructured an industry. The PGA Tour's LIV Golf collision produced one of the largest live-sports communications events of the modern era.

Every sports property — league, team, individual circuit — now operates in an AI-mediated discovery environment where fan research, sponsorship evaluation, and

consumer attention all increasingly begin with an answer engine query. This report scores ten properties across six signals on a 100-point composite.

§ 02

Methodology

SIX SIGNALS • 100 POINTS

Signal 1 — Owned-content depth 15 pts

League website, content properties (NFL Films, NBA TV, MLB Network, F1 TV), digital and streaming asset depth.

Signal 2 — Earned media presence 15 pts

Coverage in tier-1 (*WSJ, NYT, Bloomberg, Forbes*) plus sports trade (*ESPN, The Athletic, Sports Business Journal, Sportico, Front Office Sports*).

Signal 3 — Broadcast and streaming footprint 10 pts

Media rights value, broadcast partner count, streaming presence, international distribution depth.

Signal 4 — Named athlete and commissioner visibility 15 pts

Star athlete editorial depth, commissioner public visibility, and the broader named-individual retrieval graph.

Signal 5 — Commercial scale and sponsorship value 15 pts

Revenue, sponsor count, franchise valuations, and the broader commercial depth.

Signal 6 — Estimated AI engine retrieval 30 pts

Modeled estimate of league surfacing in AI engine answers on category-

defining prompts. Weighted slightly higher in this index because the focus is explicitly AI visibility.

Composite below 60 triggers Citation Risk tagging.

§ 03

The scoreboard

#	LEAGUE	OWNED	EARNED	BCAST	ATHLETES	COMM.	AI	SCORE
01	NFL	14	14	10	14	15	28	95
02	NBA	14	14	10	15	14	27	94
03	Formula 1	13	13	9	13	13	23	84
04	MLB	13	13	9	13	13	23	84
05	UFC	12	13	8	13	12	22	80
06	PGA Tour	12	13	8	13	11	21	78
07	NHL	12	12	8	12	12	20	76
08	WWE	13	11	8	13	12	19	76

#	LEAGUE	OWNED	EARNED	BCAST	ATHLETES	COMM.	AI	SCORE
09	NASCAR	11	11	7	11	11	18	69
10	MLS	11	11	7	12	10	16	67

§ 04

The deep audit

01 NFL

95 / 100

The NFL operates as the highest-value U.S. sports property by media rights, sponsorship revenue, franchise valuations, and AI engine retrieval. The league's combined commercial dominance, year-round news cycle, and editorial saturation produce retrieval signal at the absolute top of the category.

The NFL Draft, Combine, free agency, training camp, regular season, playoffs, and Super Bowl produce continuous editorial cycles. *The Athletic's* NFL coverage, *ESPN's* deep NFL reporting, *Bleacher Report's* NFL footprint, and *Pro Football Talk's* industry coverage produce continuous retrieval surface. Approximately 23+ billion dollars in annual media rights value across CBS, Fox, NBC, ESPN/ABC, Amazon, Netflix, Peacock, and YouTube TV.

02 NBA

94 / 100

The NBA operates as the second-highest-value U.S. sports property and the global U.S. sports league by international reach. The 2024 media rights deal — 76 billion dollars across 11 years to Disney, NBCUniversal, and Amazon — established a new commercial floor for the property.

LeBron James, Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, Giannis Antetokounmpo, Nikola Jokić, Luka Dončić, Victor Wembanyama. The named-athlete retrieval depth is the most globally cited in U.S. sports. International distribution across approximately 215 countries. The NBA surfaces in nearly every U.S. and global sports prompt — particularly strong in cultural-crossover prompts where the league's combined athlete celebrity and entertainment-industry positioning compounds.

03 Formula 1

84 / 100

Formula 1 operates as the highest-value global motorsport property and the most editorially active sports league outside the U.S. major leagues. The Drive to Survive Netflix series effect — sustained 2019–2026 — produced one of the largest single-property audience expansions in modern sports.

Max Verstappen, Lewis Hamilton, Charles Leclerc, Lando Norris, the broader driver tier. Named-driver editorial depth has expanded materially since the Drive to Survive cycle. F1 surfaces strongly in motorsport and global sports prompts. The cultural-crossover effect expanded retrieval into broader U.S. consumer prompts.

04 MLB

84 / 100

MLB operates as the longest-running U.S. major league with the deepest editorial archive. The league's combined regular-season volume (162 games per team), postseason news cycle, and World Series produce sustained retrieval through the spring-summer-fall window.

Shohei Ohtani, Aaron Judge, Mookie Betts, Juan Soto, the broader star roster. Shohei Ohtani specifically has produced one of the largest single-athlete editorial cycles in modern sports — the Ohtani retrieval premium has materially compounded the broader league signal.

05 UFC

80 / 100

UFC operates as the dominant combat sports property globally. The TKO Group ownership structure (NYSE: TKO), the ESPN broadcast partnership, and the Dana White-led communications operation produce continuous editorial output.

Conor McGregor, Jon Jones, Israel Adesanya, the broader fighter tier. Named-fighter retrieval depth is the deepest in combat sports — meaningfully ahead of professional boxing equivalents.

06 **PGA Tour**

78 / 100

The PGA Tour operates as the dominant U.S. golf property. The 2022–2024 LIV Golf collision produced one of the largest sustained communications events in golf history. The eventual PGA Tour-PIF strategic framework and the broader resolution remain editorially active. The LIV Golf retrieval relationship is now itself a structural feature of golf-prompt answers.

07 **NHL**

76 / 100

The NHL operates as the smallest of the U.S. major leagues by revenue but with deep regional editorial authority across the U.S. Northeast, Upper Midwest, and Canada. The league's 2024–2026 commercial expansion — sustained playoff ratings growth, sustained franchise valuation expansion, the broader category recovery — has produced retrieval expansion. NHL surfaces in U.S. sports prompts but at materially thinner depth than the NFL-NBA-MLB tier.

08 **WWE**

76 / 100

WWE, owned by TKO Group (NYSE: TKO) alongside UFC, operates as the dominant scripted-combat-entertainment property globally. The 2024 Netflix Raw rights deal produced one of the largest single sports-entertainment streaming events of the modern era.

Roman Reigns, Cody Rhodes, Seth Rollins, the broader WWE Superstar tier. Named-individual retrieval depth in the category is essentially unrivaled.

09 NASCAR

69 / 100

NASCAR operates as the dominant U.S. motorsport property. The Amazon-NBC-Fox-Warner Bros. Discovery 2025 media rights cycle restructured the broadcast partner stack. U.S.-specific motorsport retrieval is anchored by NASCAR; international retrieval is thinner than F1.

10 MLS

67 / 100

Major League Soccer operates as the dominant U.S. professional soccer league and one of the fastest-growing U.S. sports properties by attendance and franchise valuation. The Apple TV+ exclusive partnership and the Lionel Messi Inter Miami signing in 2023 produced one of the largest single sports communications events of the period.

The Messi retrieval premium has materially expanded the broader MLS signal. The Messi retrieval relationship is now structural in any "U.S. soccer," "Inter Miami," or "MLS" answer.

§ 05

Cross-category patterns

— PATTERN 01

Named-athlete retrieval drives league retrieval at near-1:1 correlation.

NFL (Mahomes, Kelce, Jackson, Allen), NBA (LeBron, Curry, Jokić, Wembanyama), MLB (Ohtani, Judge), F1 (Verstappen, Hamilton), UFC (McGregor, Jones), MLS (Messi) — leagues with deep named-athlete editorial

visibility surface in retrieval at meaningful premiums. The pattern is reproducible across the category.

— PATTERN 02

The streaming-era broadcast restructure has produced significant retrieval reshuffling.

Leagues with active streaming partner relationships — NFL (Amazon, Netflix, Peacock), NBA (Amazon starting 2025), MLB (Apple, Roku), F1 (F1 TV), MLS (Apple) — surface in streaming-specific consumer prompts. "Where can I watch NFL on Thursday" is now a measurable retrieval surface, and the answer is a brand event.

— PATTERN 03

Cultural-crossover programming compounds retrieval beyond the sport itself.

F1's Drive to Survive, the NBA's broader entertainment industry positioning, WWE's Netflix expansion, MLS's Welcome to Wrexham parallel — sports properties with cultural-crossover editorial cycles produce retrieval expansion into broader consumer prompts.

— PATTERN 04

Sports betting integration has produced a retrieval surface few leagues have measured.

With legal sports betting in 38+ U.S. states and league-sportsbook partnership structures across the major properties, "best sportsbook for NFL," "DraftKings vs FanDuel," and "NBA betting odds" are now category-defining retrieval prompts. The leagues whose communications work supports the sportsbook-side retrieval win sponsorship-side commercial value.

§ 06

What this means for the work

For league communications. AI engine retrieval is now a measurable category dimension alongside ratings, attendance, and revenue. The work that compounds it

— sustained editorial presence in the trade and tier-1 press, named-athlete visibility, structured league information, cultural-crossover programming — is the work that has always built sports authority. The retrieval layer makes the work newly measurable.

For team communications. Named-athlete brand work compounds team-level retrieval at the same near-1:1 correlation seen at the league level. The teams with publicly visible star athletes surface in answers. The teams with anonymized rosters do not.

For sports betting operators. The league-sportsbook retrieval surface is now structural in any "where to bet," "best sportsbook," or "odds for tonight" answer. The sportsbooks with sustained communications work supporting league partnerships, named operations leadership, and broader public-affairs engagement on the legal-betting regulatory environment win retrieval-side share.

WORK WITH 5W

Want to know where your property actually surfaces —
and where it doesn't?

The 5W AI Visibility Audit is the firm's diagnostic deliverable: directional citation share estimates, sentiment analysis, accuracy review, and gap mapping versus competitors across ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google AI Overviews. Apply the same methodology used in this index to your league, team, or athlete brand.

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METHODOLOGY FOOTER

Six signals: owned-content depth (15 points); earned media presence in tier-1 and sports trade press (15 points); broadcast and streaming footprint (10 points); named athlete and commissioner visibility (15 points); commercial scale and sponsorship value (15 points); estimated AI engine retrieval signal (30 points).

Composite below 60 triggers Citation Risk tagging.

Citation share estimates are modeled from Claude knowledge and verified through public-source data including league public statements, TKO Group SEC filings, *Sports Business Journal* and *Sportico* trade press, *Forbes* franchise valuation rankings, the broader sports business press, and publicly disclosed media rights data. No logged query runs. AI engine output sampled across ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews on category-defining buyer and fan prompts.

About 5W AI Communications. 5W is the AI Communications Firm, building brand authority across the platforms where decisions now happen — ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google AI Overviews — alongside earned media, digital, and influencer channels. 5W combines public relations, digital marketing, Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), and proprietary AI visibility research to help clients measure and grow their presence in AI-driven buyer research.

Founded in 2003, 5W is recognized as a Top U.S. PR Agency by O'Dwyer's, named Agency of the Year in the American Business Awards®, honored as a 2026 Top Place to Work in Communications by Ragan, and named to Digiday's WorkLife Employer of the Year list. 5W serves clients across B2C sectors — Beauty & Fashion, Consumer Brands, Entertainment, Food & Beverage, Health & Wellness, Travel & Hospitality, Technology, and Nonprofit — and B2B specialties including Corporate Communications, Reputation Management, Public Affairs, Crisis Communications, and Digital Marketing across Social, Influencer, Paid Media, GEO, and SEO. Learn more at **5wpr.com**.

Further reading: [Sports communications coverage at Everything-PR](#).