

WSC Sports 2025/26

Fans' Pre-Season Viewing Habits & Trends

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Executive Summary

From off-season to always-on season: how fans engage before the first whistle.

The 2025/26 Fans' Pre-Season Viewing Habits & Trends survey and report reveals that for today's sports fans, **the weeks leading up to the new season are a period of peak engagement**. Fans aren't waiting for kickoff, they're actively seeking stories, forming new loyalties, and setting the tone for the months ahead. Content is the spark that drives fan engagement, before, during, and beyond the season. This report highlights the key patterns shaping fan behavior ahead of kickoff, and how rights holders, leagues, broadcasters and content teams can meet, and exceed, rising expectations.

Why This Survey Matters

Understanding what fans want before a single point is scored is a competitive advantage. This report gives rights holders a clearer picture of fan behavior during a critical, emotionally charged and commercially significant part of the sports calendar. It reveals what formats, platforms, and stories drive connection and shows where traditional strategies are falling behind. These insights are important for building deeper engagement, smarter monetization, and lasting loyalty.

Three Key Findings:

- **Content before kickoff drives action:** Nearly 60% of fans say they're more likely to follow a team if they see great content at the start of the season, proving that pre-season storytelling is a powerful fan acquisition tool.
- **Short-form content powers discovery:** 55% of fans report discovering new players, teams, or leagues through short-form video like TikTok and YouTube Shorts showing that these formats are no longer supplementary, but essential.
- **Fans are ready to spend early:** 75% of fans say they're as likely, or more likely, to buy tickets, merch, or subscriptions at the start of the season than later, highlighting the commercial importance of strong early-season engagement.

Methodology

This report is based on a July 2025 online survey of 350 self-identified sports fans in the United States, aged 18 and older. All respondents consume digital sports content. The survey explored fan behaviors and attitudes related to pre-season engagement, content formats, preferred platforms, personalization, commercial intent, and views on AI-generated media. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest tenth for clarity.

Top 10 Insights and What They Mean

1. Fans Are All In Before the First Game.

Insight: 67% of fans consume pre-season sports content at least weekly, with 16% watching daily.

Why it matters: The off-season isn't a lull, it's a launchpad. Fans are emotionally invested *before* kickoff, making this a prime time for content, marketing, and storytelling that shapes the narrative for the year ahead.

2. Short-Form Content Is Driving Fan Discovery

Insight: 55% of fans have discovered a new team, player, or league through short-form video (e.g. TikTok, YouTube Shorts).

Why it matters: Discovery is now algorithm-driven. Rights holders and leagues not publishing short-form, platform-native content are missing out on growth.

3. Pre-Season Content Converts Viewers into Fans

Insight: Nearly 60% say great content at the start of the season makes them more likely to follow a team.

Why it matters: The window before the season begins is a golden moment for fan acquisition. Well-timed content can directly shape fandom.

4. TV and YouTube Still Dominate, But Instagram and TikTok Are Rising

Insight: 47% of fans rely on TV for content at season start, tied with YouTube. Instagram (31%) and TikTok (23%) are close behind.

Why it matters: Multichannel is mandatory. Rights holders must bridge traditional and emerging platforms to meet fans where they are.

5. Fans Are Primed to Spend Early

Insight: 75% of fans are just as or more likely to buy merch, subscriptions, or tickets at the start of the season.

Why it matters: Emotional momentum creates financial opportunity. Content that drives hype can also drive sales, especially when paired with timely offers.

6. Fans Want Access to Their Heroes

Insight: 37% want behind-the-scenes content.

Why it matters: Behind-the-scenes content deepens emotional connection. When fans see authentic moments, it transforms athletes into relatable heroes and builds lasting loyalty.

7. AI Is Accepted, If It Adds Value

Insight: 41% of fans are fine with AI-generated content if it's relevant and high quality; 39% are skeptical.

Why it matters: The door is open, but not wide. Rights holders can embrace automation, but must keep storytelling sharp and authentic to maintain trust.

8. Fans Tune Out Generic Content

Insight: 68% say they scroll past sports content unless it features their favorite team or player.

Why it matters: Personalization is table stakes. Content must be targeted and emotionally relevant, generic highlight reels won't cut it.

9. Real-Time Is Non-Negotiable

Insight: 87% of fans say real-time content (e.g., highlights, reactions) is at least somewhat important at the start of the season.

Why it matters: Fast beats perfect. Delayed content risks irrelevance, highlighting automation and rapid delivery are critical capabilities.

10. The Content Consumption Shift Is Underway

Insight: While 40% reported no real change in their habits, nearly a quarter of fans are moving away from TV and official sites; 23% now prefer more short-form content.

Why it matters: The fan journey is decentralizing. Younger audiences in particular are shifting habits, forcing rights holders to rethink what platforms, and formats, really matter.

10 Strategic Recommendations for Rights Holders

1. Treat pre-season as a Prime Window for Engagement

Why: The majority of fans say they consume sports content regularly in the weeks leading up to the season, 67% do so at least weekly, with 1 in 6 tuning in daily.

Action: Use this period to build emotional momentum through high-frequency storytelling. Instead of waiting for kickoff, build engagement habits early with consistent, relevant content drops.

2. Prioritize Short-Form Video for Reach and Discovery

Why: 55% of fans discover new teams, players, or leagues through short-form video.

Action: Focus on TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels with snackable, emotional, and shareable moments tailored to platform behavior.

3. Go All-In on Personalization

Why: 68% of fans skip generic content unless it's about their team or favorite player.

Action: Use automated workflows to produce content segmented by team, player, region, or fan demographic. Customization drives relevance and engagement.

4. Fuel Fandom with Real-Time Content

Why: 87% of fans expect real-time highlights and reactions at the season's start.

Action: Deploy AI tools to automate clips and push moments to platforms within minutes. Speed matters more than polish.

5. Make Content a Conversion Engine

Why: 75% of fans are just as or more likely to spend at the start of the season.

Action: Pair high-interest moments with strategic CTAs for merch, subscriptions, or tickets. Bundle exclusives and promotions with emotional triggers. Use short form discovery to bring fans to your owned and operated assets.

6. Balance Broadcast with Mobile-First Formats

Why: TV and YouTube still lead but Instagram and TikTok are rising fast.

Action: Plan content for both big-screen and scroll-screen consumption. Don't just repurpose, optimize for each platform's format and audience habits.

7. Double Down on Behind-the-Scenes Access

Why: 37% of fans want more exclusive, inside-the-locker-room style content.

Action: Develop a content cadence that includes access-based storytelling training clips, team travel, pre-game rituals, etc. to humanize athletes and build connection.

8. Frame Sponsored Content as Added Value

Why: While only 34% are more open to sponsored content at season start, 37% don't mind it.

Action: Integrate sponsors through storytelling, not logos. Let branded content ride the wave of emotional engagement, not interrupt it.

9. Use AI Thoughtfully, But Transparently

Why: 41% are open to AI content if quality is high, but 39% are wary.

Action: Lean on AI for automation and speed, but keep the editorial voice authentic. Fans want relevance first, but still value the human touch.

10. Embrace Serial Formats to Sustain Engagement

Why: 27% want more original content series, especially in the pre-season.

Action: Create recurring content formats, weekly player features, countdowns, or prediction shows, that help fans build anticipation and return for more.

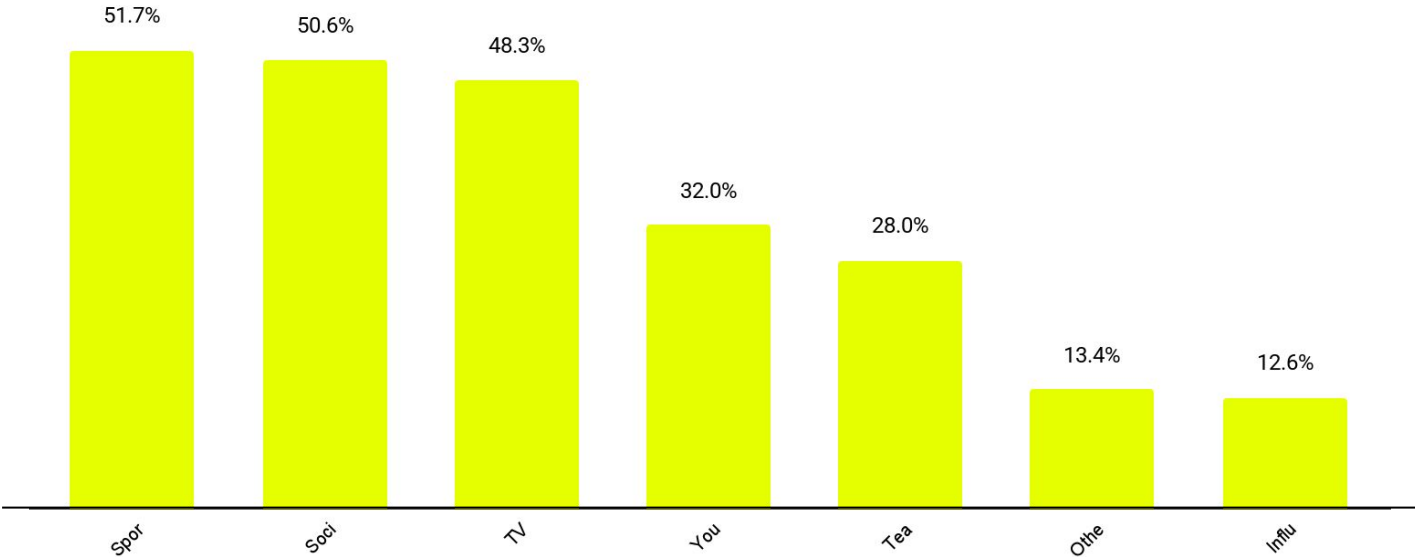
Appendix: Full Survey Questions and Response Breakdown

Question 1

Where do you usually look for sports content in the weeks leading up to a new sports season?

In the lead-up to a new sports season, fans rely most heavily on sports apps (52%), social media (51%), and TV broadcasters (48%), forming a clear “Big Three” of trusted content sources. YouTube (32%) and team websites (28%) play supporting roles, while influencers (13%) remain niche.

This distribution highlights a need for multi-platform strategies that balance speed, professionalism, and social engagement. To reach fans effectively, rights holders must show up where fans already are with content that’s timely, relevant, and optimized for each channel.

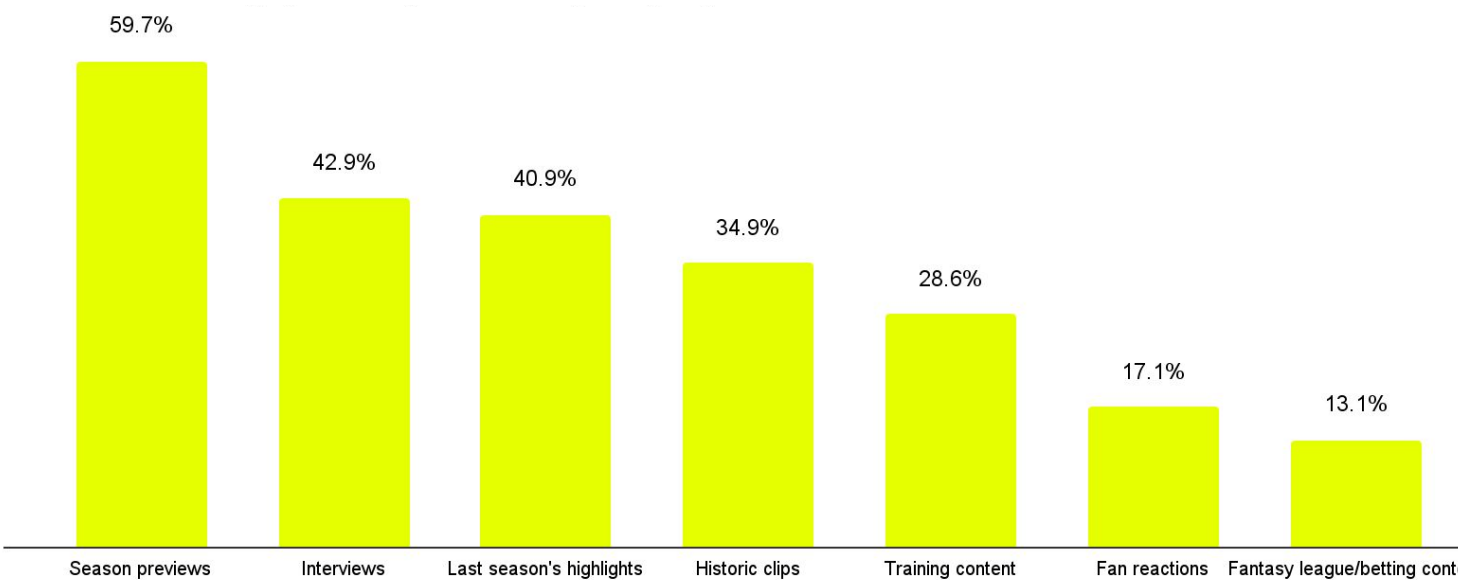


Question 2

In the week before a new season begins, what would you like to watch?

In the final week before a new season begins, fans gravitate toward content that sets the stage and builds emotional momentum. **Season previews (60%), interviews with players or coaches (43%), and last season's highlights (41%)** top the list, together representing fans' need for both context and connection.

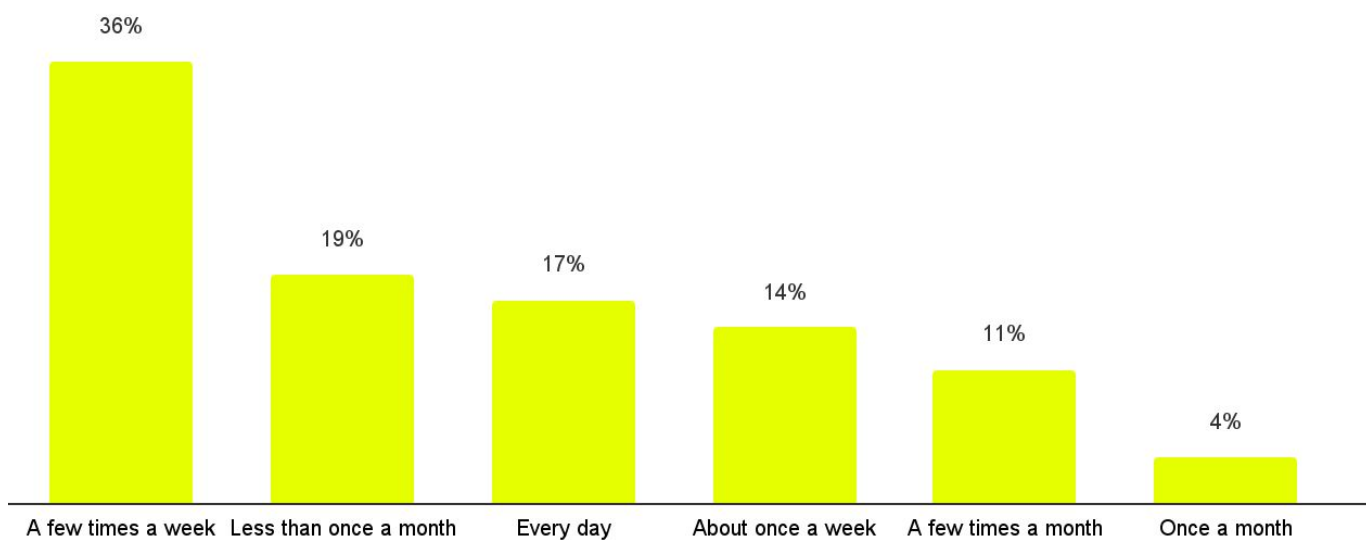
Historic clips (35%) and training content (29%) also show solid interest, suggesting fans value both nostalgia and behind-the-scenes access. Rights holders should double down on **anticipatory storytelling**, fusing fresh perspectives with archival gems to fuel fan excitement and deepen engagement in the days before kickoff.



Question 3

Compared to the season itself, do you expect more, less or the same volume of content in the run-up to a new season?

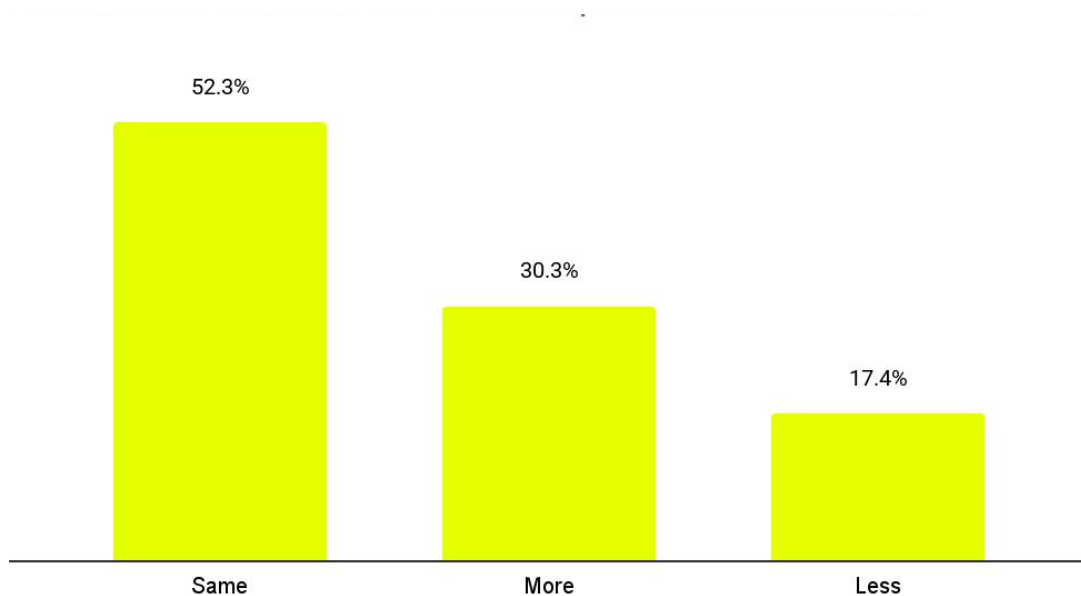
Fan appetite is high before the season starts, over two-thirds (67%) of fans consume pre-season sports content **at least once a week**, with **1 in 6 tuning in daily**. This consistent engagement pattern signals a powerful window for sustained storytelling. For rights holders, this isn't just a moment to tease the season, it's an opportunity to build emotional momentum and habitual viewing behaviors with fresh, high-frequency content.



Question 4

Compared to the season itself, do you expect more, less or the same volume of content in the run-up to a new season?

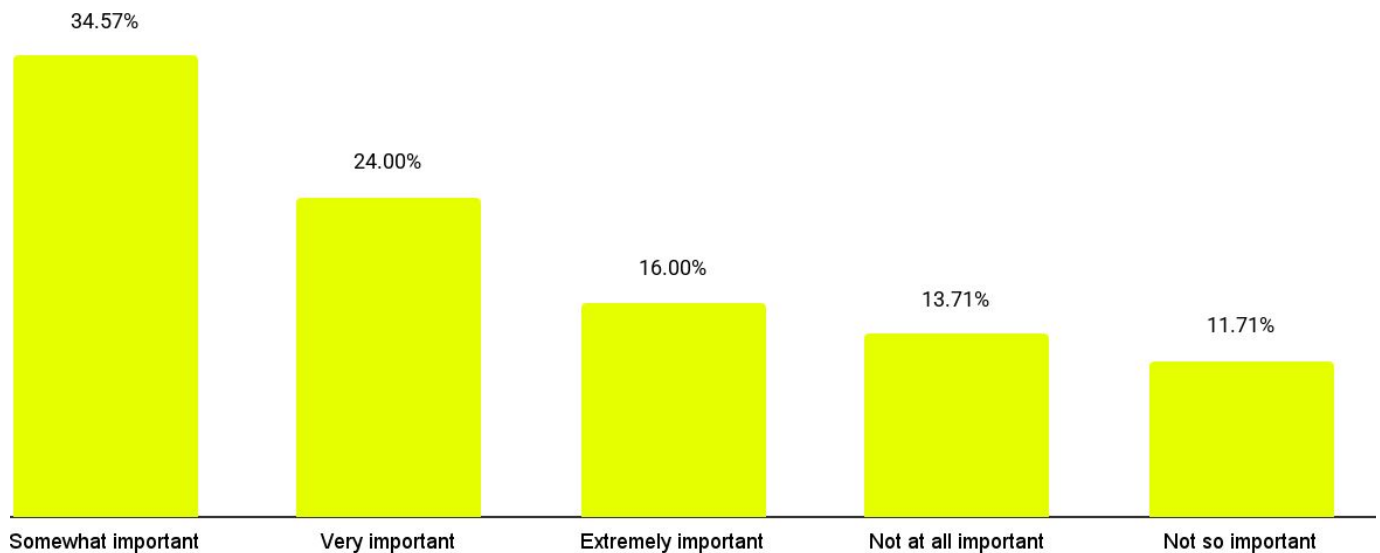
More than 80% of fans expect just as much or even **more content** in the pre-season compared to during the season itself, with **30% expecting more** and **52% expecting the same**. This signals clear fan demand for consistent, high-volume storytelling *before* the first game is played. It's a wake-up call for rights holders: the season doesn't start at kickoff, it starts when anticipation builds.



Question 5

How important is season preview content (e.g., predictions, power rankings, team storylines) to your excitement for the new season?

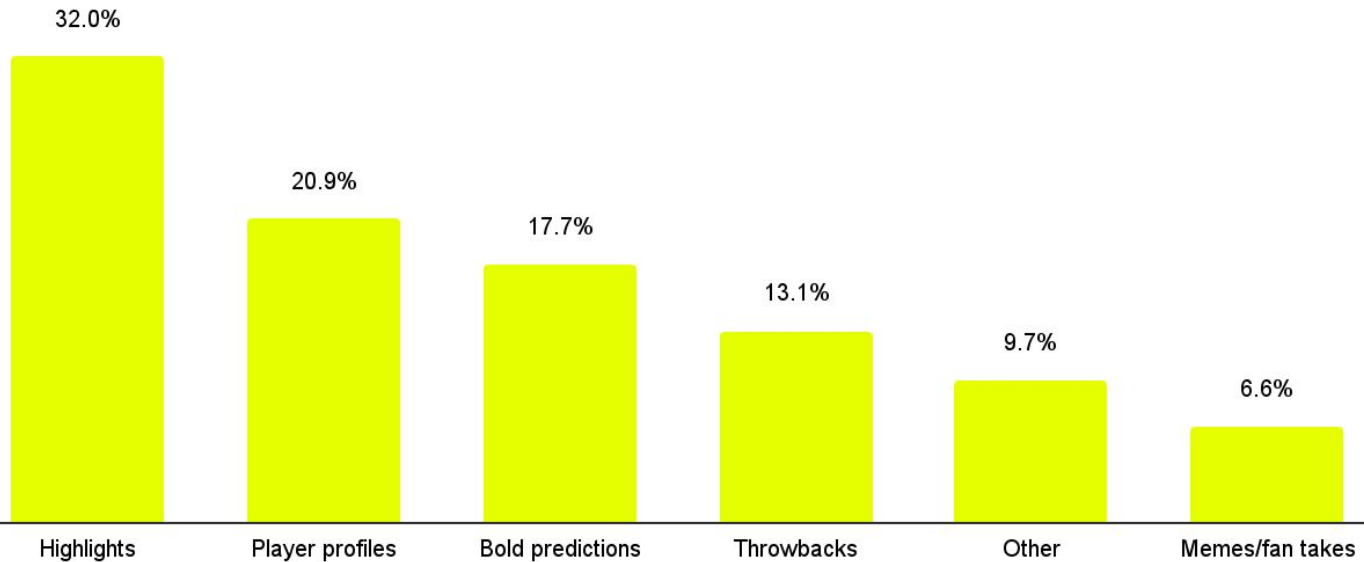
Nearly **75% of fans** say that season preview content, like predictions, power rankings, and team storylines, is at least somewhat important to their excitement for the season. This signals that storytelling before kickoff isn't just filler, it's fuel. Rights holders have a major opportunity to build narrative tension and emotional investment through well-timed, relevant preview content.



Question 6

Which type of content gets you most excited for the new season?

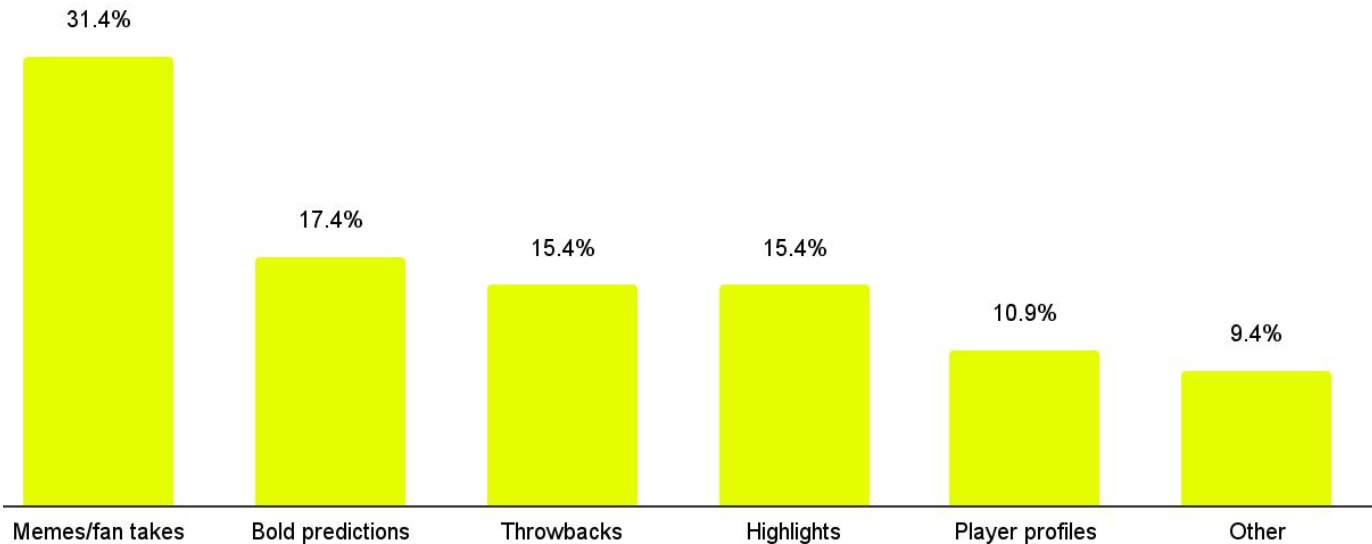
When it comes to building excitement for a new season, fans are clear about what works: **Highlights lead the way (32%)**, followed by **player profiles (21%)** and **bold predictions (18%)**. This underscores the power of dynamic storytelling and visual recaps in fueling anticipation. While memes and fan takes have niche appeal (6.6%), emotionally charged, high-impact content continues to be what drives the hype.



Question 7

Which type of content gets you least excited for the new season?

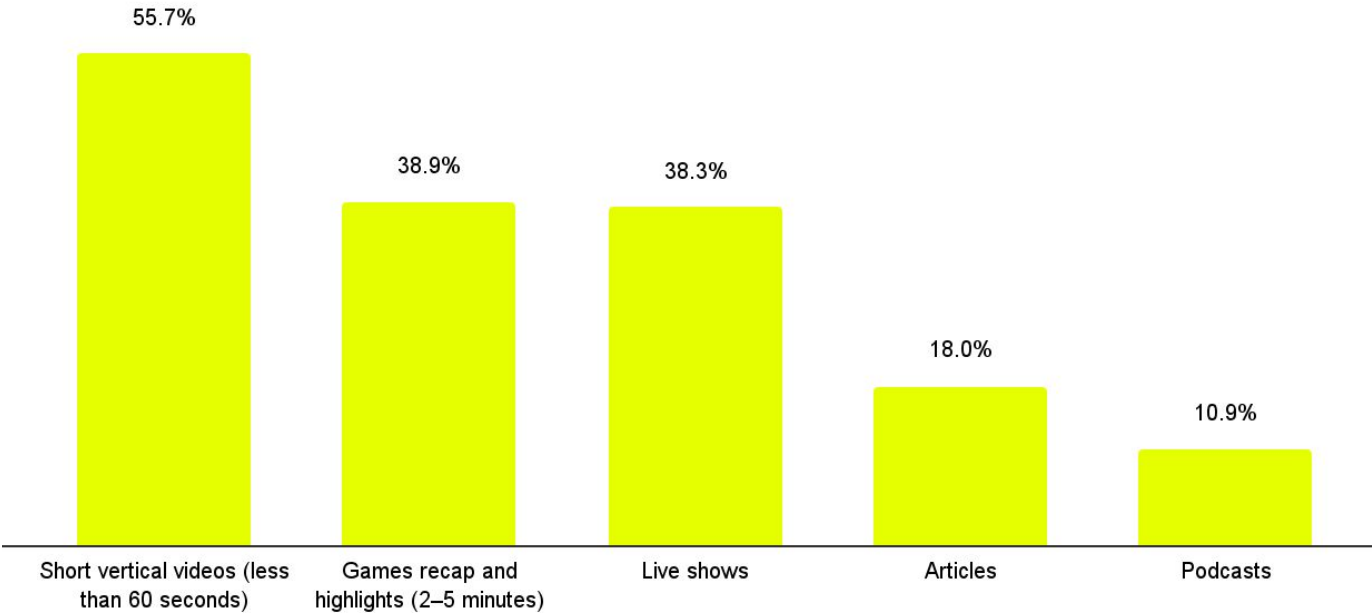
Despite the popularity of quick, humorous content online, **memes and fan takes were the least exciting content type** for nearly a third of fans (31.4%) heading into the new season. More traditional formats like **throwbacks (15.4%), bold predictions (17.4%),** and even **highlights (15.4%)** followed. The takeaway: while bite-sized entertainment has its place, fans still gravitate toward more substantive and structured content to build real anticipation.



Question 8

When a season starts, what content format do you prefer most?

As the season kicks off, **fans are most drawn to concise, high-impact content**. Over half of respondents (55.7%) selected **game recaps and highlights (2–5 minutes)** as their top format, reaffirming the ongoing demand for easily digestible yet informative content. **Short vertical videos (38.8%)** and **live shows (38.2%)** followed closely, signaling that fans still want fast, snackable experiences, but also value real-time or immersive formats. In contrast, **articles (18%)** and **podcasts (10.8%)** trail significantly, indicating that static or long-form formats may be less effective in the high-energy window around game days.

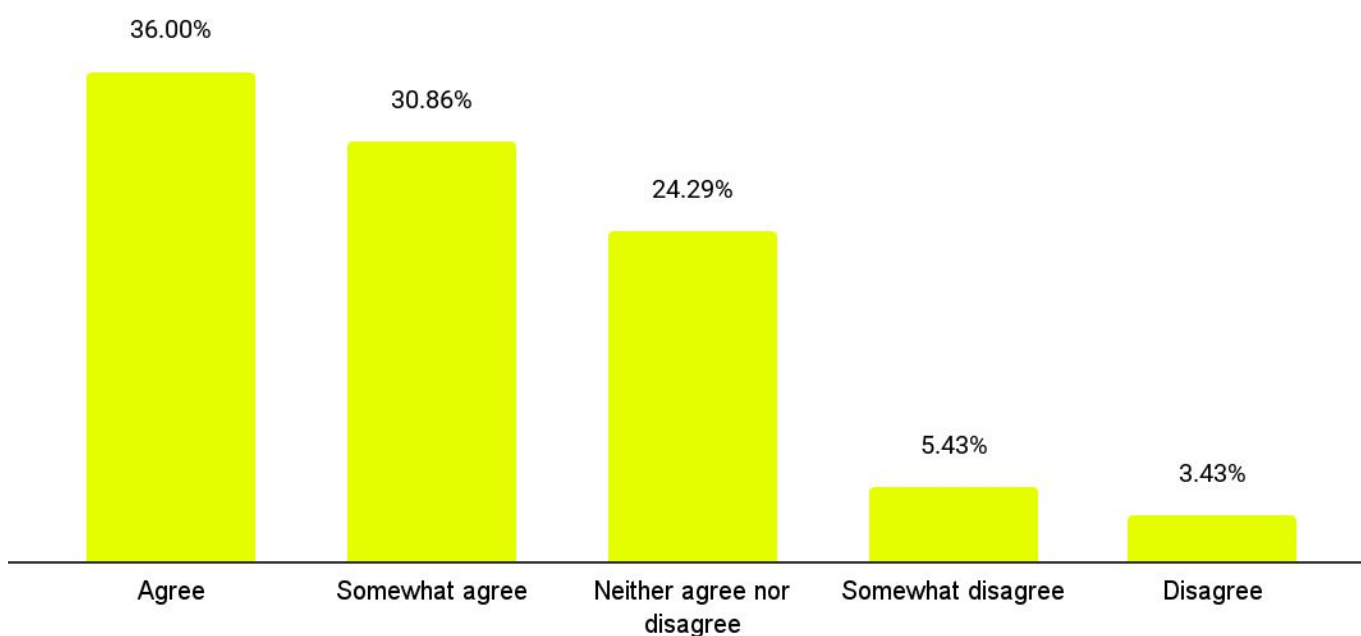


Question 9

Do you agree or disagree with this statement: I prefer short, fast-paced content to keep up with the season's start.

67% of fans (Agree + Somewhat agree) say they prefer *short, fast-paced content* to keep up with the start of the season. This strong majority reflects a clear demand for content that is easy to consume and quick to deliver value, especially during a period when information is dense and excitement is high. Only a small minority (less than 9%) actively disagrees.

Speed and simplicity win. Fans aren't looking for long-form deep dives when the season kicks off they want quick, dynamic updates that match the pace of the action. Rights holders should prioritize short-form formats (like Reels, Shorts, and TikToks) to meet fans' expectations in real time.

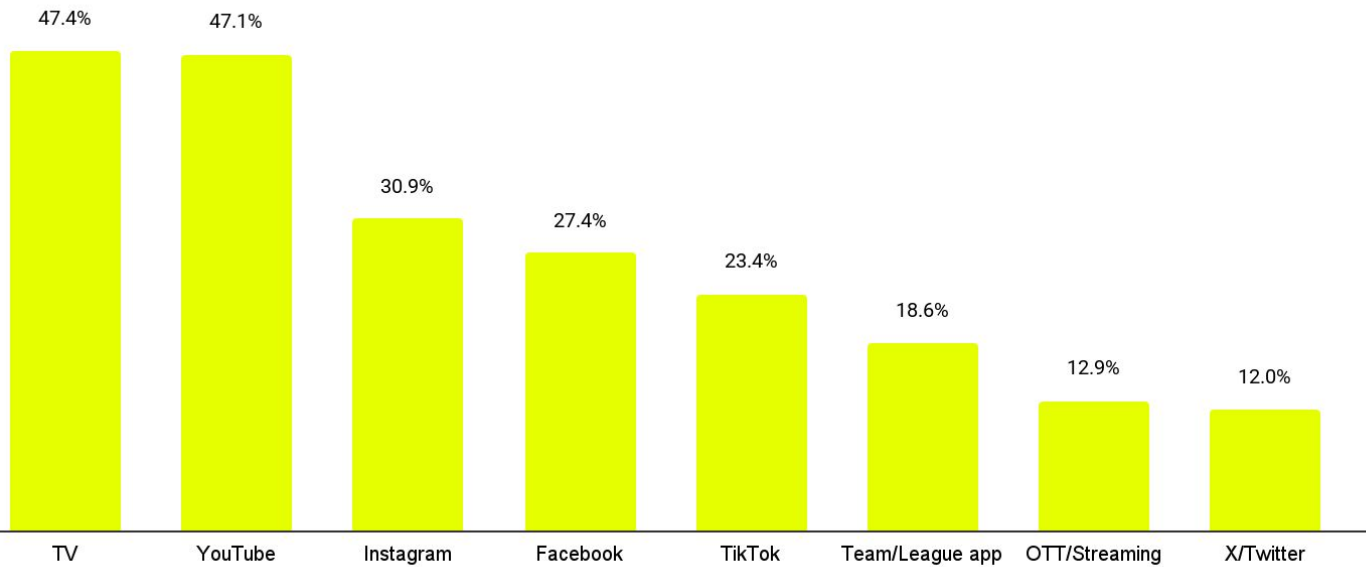


Question 10

Which platforms do you rely on most for sports content at season start?

When asked where they rely most for sports content at the start of a new season, fans gravitate toward a *dual dominance* of traditional and digital platforms. **TV (47.4%)** and **YouTube (47.1%)** lead the pack, underscoring that long-standing broadcasters and open digital platforms are still key for reach and impact. Meanwhile, **Instagram (30.9%)** and **TikTok (23.4%)** show strong traction, especially with younger, mobile-first audiences.

Multi-platform is a must. To win attention at season kickoff, rights holders and creators need to straddle both legacy and emerging platforms. YouTube’s scale and TV’s trust remain crucial, but social platforms like Instagram and TikTok are where fan engagement is growing fastest. A truly effective content strategy isn’t either/or, it’s all of the above.

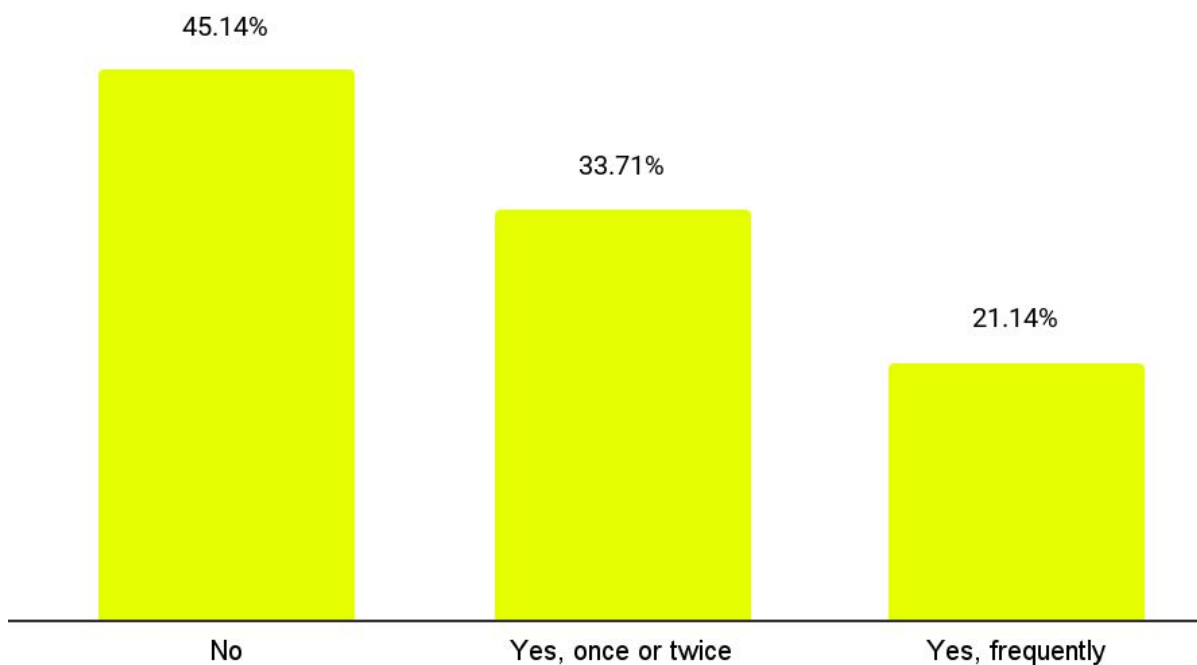


Question 11

Have you ever discovered a new team, player, or league through short-form content (e.g. TikTok, YouTube Shorts)?

Over half of respondents (54.8%) say they've discovered a new team, player, or league through short-form content, such as TikTok or YouTube Shorts. While only 21.1% do so *frequently*, a notable 33.7% have made such discoveries *once or twice*.

Short-form discovery is real. While not yet the dominant path for all fans, platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts are already playing a meaningful role in expanding fandom. For teams, leagues, and broadcasters, this is a powerful signal: snackable, algorithm-friendly content can serve as a gateway to new audiences and potentially, lifelong supporters.

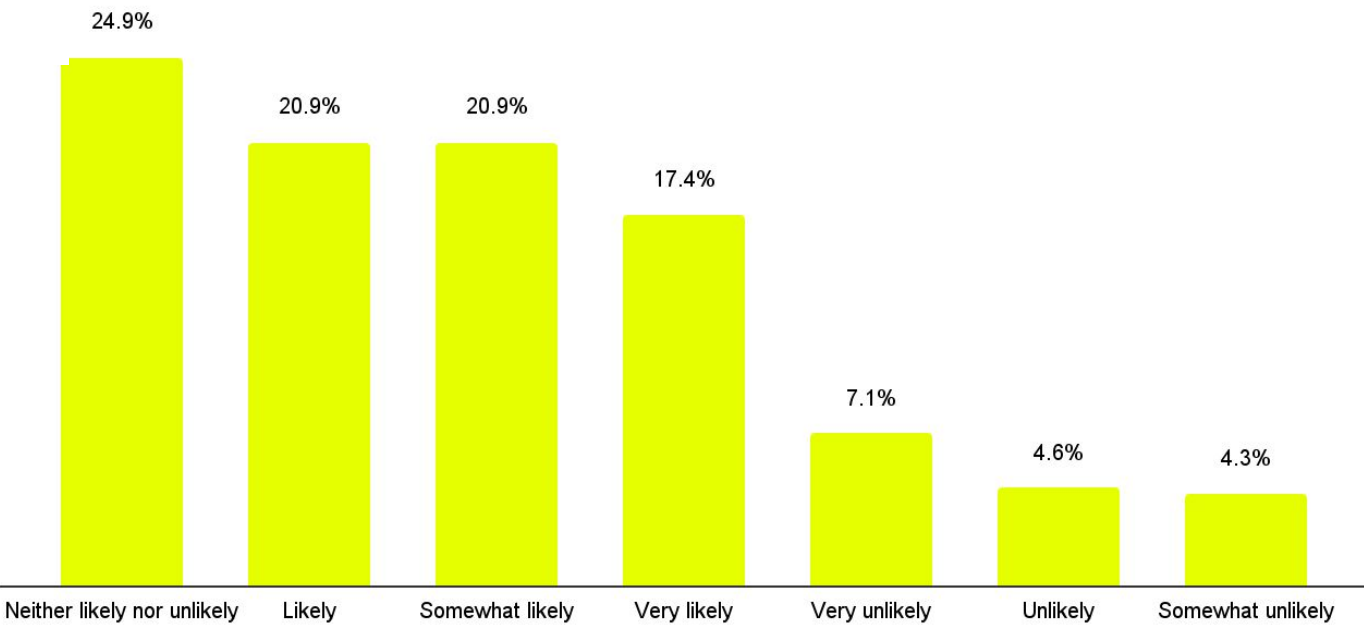


Question 12

How likely are you to follow a team after seeing great content at the start of the season?

Nearly 60% of fans (59.1%) say they are *at least somewhat likely* to follow a team after seeing great content at the start of the season. This includes 17.4% who are *very likely*, and over 41% who say they are either *likely* or *somewhat likely* to do so.

Early content drives fandom. The start of the season presents a golden opportunity to convert casual viewers into loyal followers. Strong storytelling, engaging highlights, and standout digital content can directly influence fans' team affiliations and long-term interest.

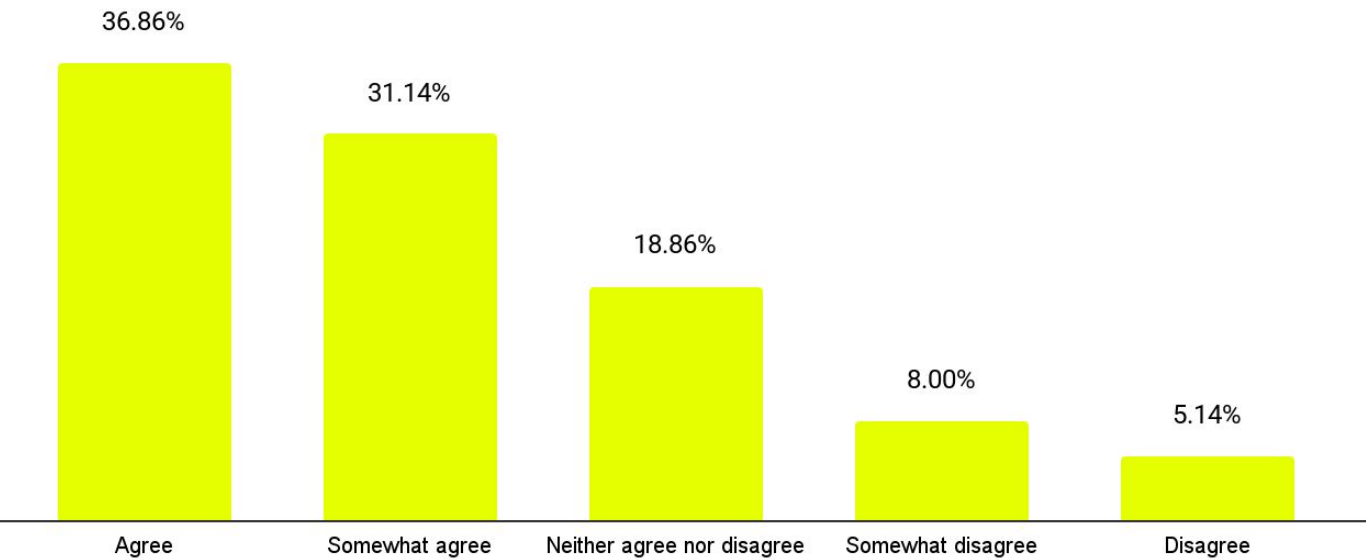


Question 13

Do you agree or disagree with this statement: I often scroll past generic sports content unless it’s about my team or favorite players.

68% of fans say they *often scroll past generic sports content* unless it features their favorite team or player, showing a strong preference for personalized, relevant content.

Personalization is key. Fans want content that speaks directly to their allegiances and interests. To drive deeper engagement, content strategies should prioritize tailoring highlights, stories, and narratives around specific teams, players, and fan communities. Relevance beats generality.

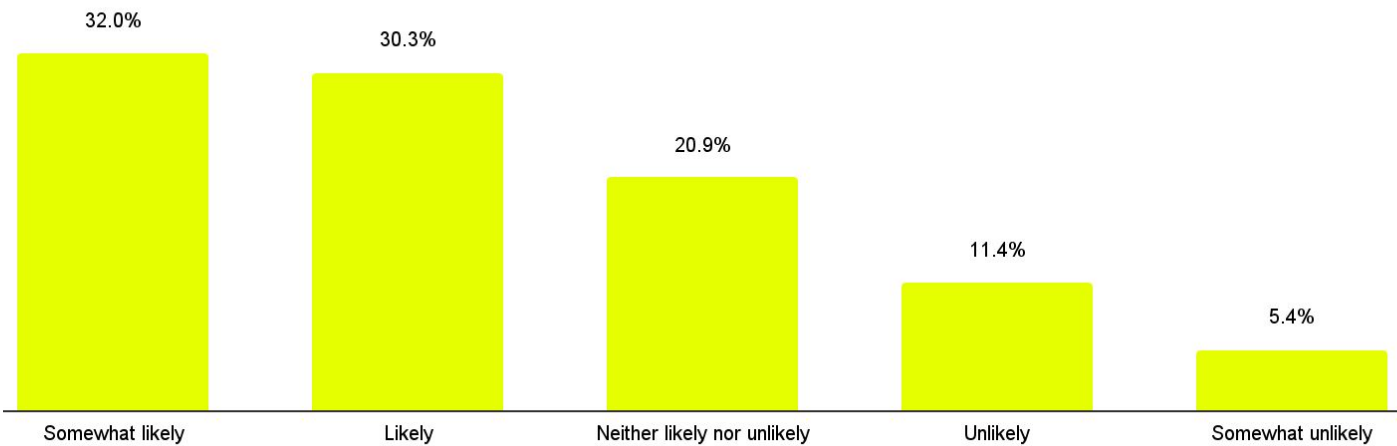


Question 14

Which sport do you feel delivers better digital content at the start of the season?

When it comes to setting the gold standard for season-start digital content, Pro Football clearly leads the pack with 63% of fans choosing it as a top performer, more than any other sport by far. Pro Basketball comes in second (35%), followed by College Sports (29%) and Pro Baseball (29%).

Pro Football dominates digital content expectations. It's not just a sports leader on the field, it's also shaping what "great" looks like off it. For leagues in other sports, there's a clear opportunity (and perhaps pressure) to close the gap by borrowing tactics from football's winning content playbook.

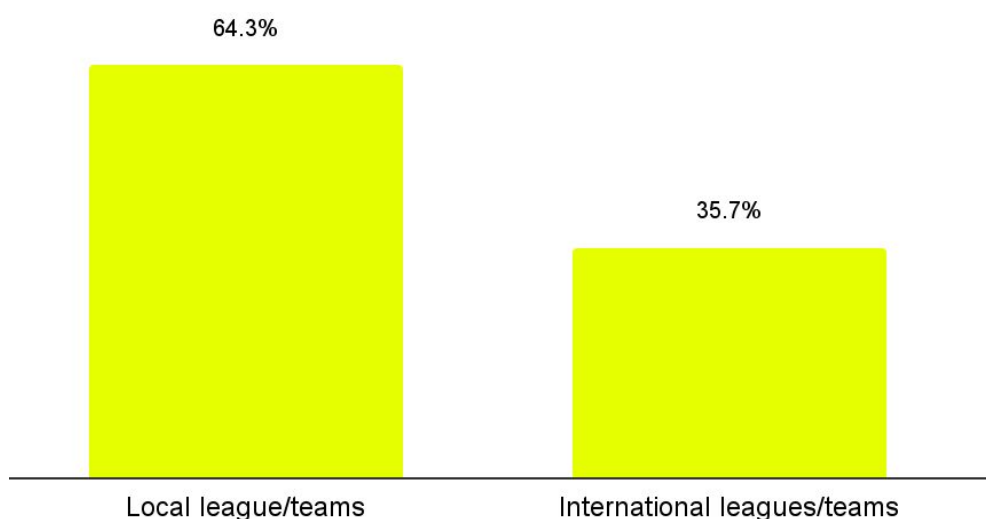


Question 15

What do you wish teams or leagues in your favorite sport did more of at the start of the season?

Fans are craving more than just the action on the field, what they really want is access. The most popular wish for teams and leagues at the start of the season is exclusive behind-the-scenes content, chosen by 37% of respondents. Close behind is the desire for original serial content (e.g. web series), with 27% of fans opting for deeper storytelling formats. Interest in influencer collaborations, sponsored content, or more ads trails significantly.

Forget flashy ads, fans want real, raw, and regular content that builds a connection. Teams and leagues have a major opportunity to drive engagement by opening the doors and letting fans inside. Whether it's locker room moments, travel diaries, or mini-docuseries, access and authenticity are the new currency in sports content.

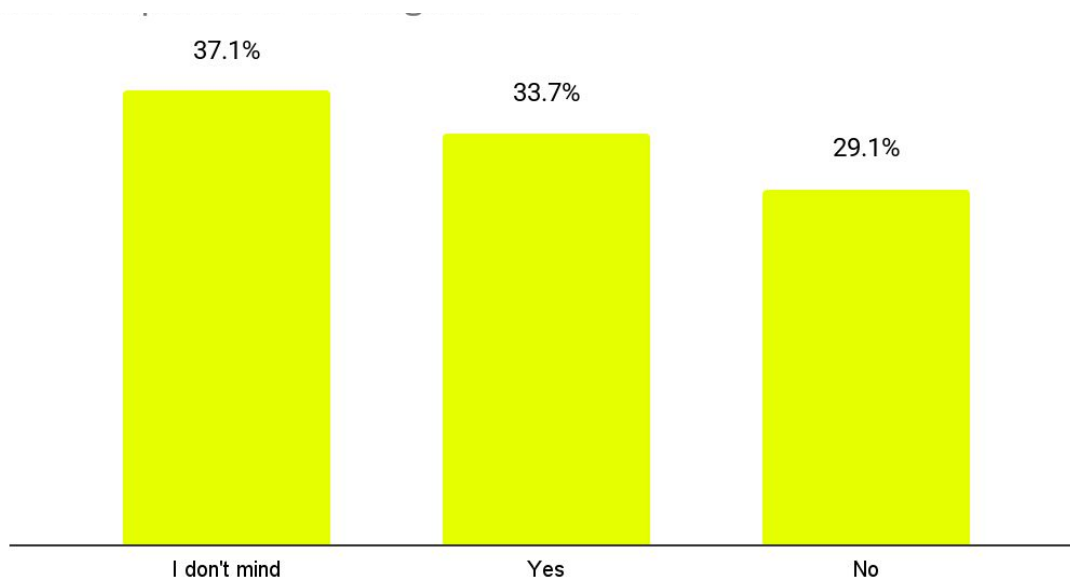


Question 16

Are you more open to sponsored content at the start of the season compared to the regular season?

Sponsored content isn't necessarily a turnoff, especially early in the season. While only a third of fans explicitly say they're more open to it at the start (34%), a larger portion (37%) say they don't mind it, suggesting there's flexibility. Just under 30% are opposed, which is a relatively modest resistance level.

There's a seasonal window of tolerance for sponsored content. Early-season excitement may make fans more receptive, as long as the sponsorship feels natural and value-driven. This is a green light for brands and leagues to launch strategic, story-led integrations when anticipation is at its peak.

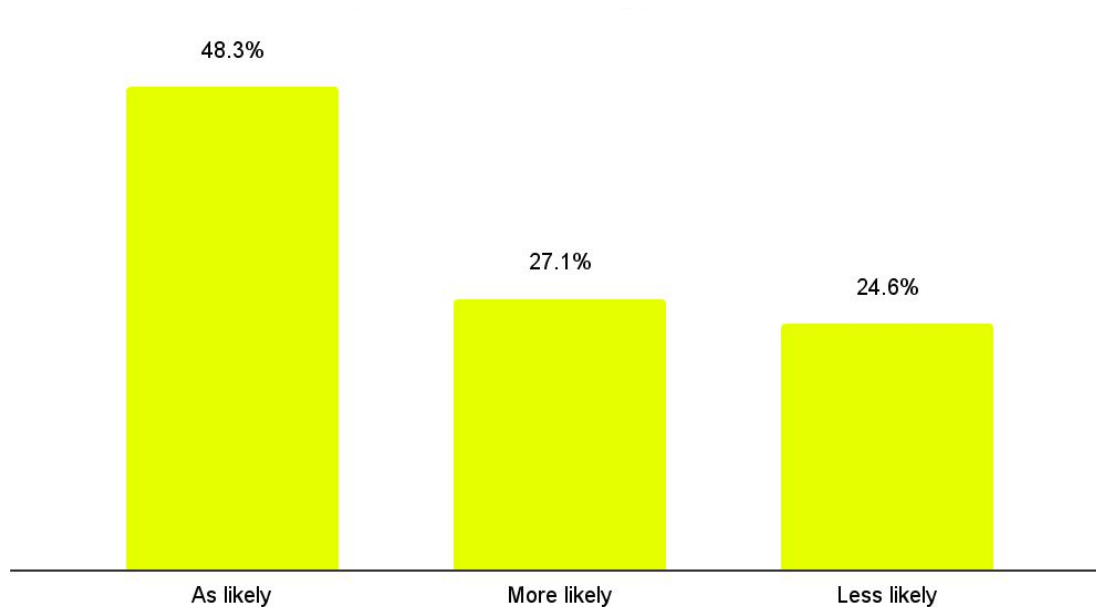


Question 17

How likely are you to buy merch, tickets, or subscriptions at the start of the season compared to the regular season?

Fans aren't necessarily holding out for midseason, nearly 3 in 4 respondents (75%) say they're just as or more likely to buy merch, tickets, or subscriptions at the start of the season. Specifically, 27% say they're *more likely* to spend early on, while 48% are *equally as likely* as later in the season. Only a quarter (25%) say they're less likely.

The season kickoff is a prime moment to activate fan spending. Emotional investment is high, anticipation is fresh, and wallets are open. Brands and teams would be smart to front-load offers and exclusives, this is when fans are most eager to buy in, literally.

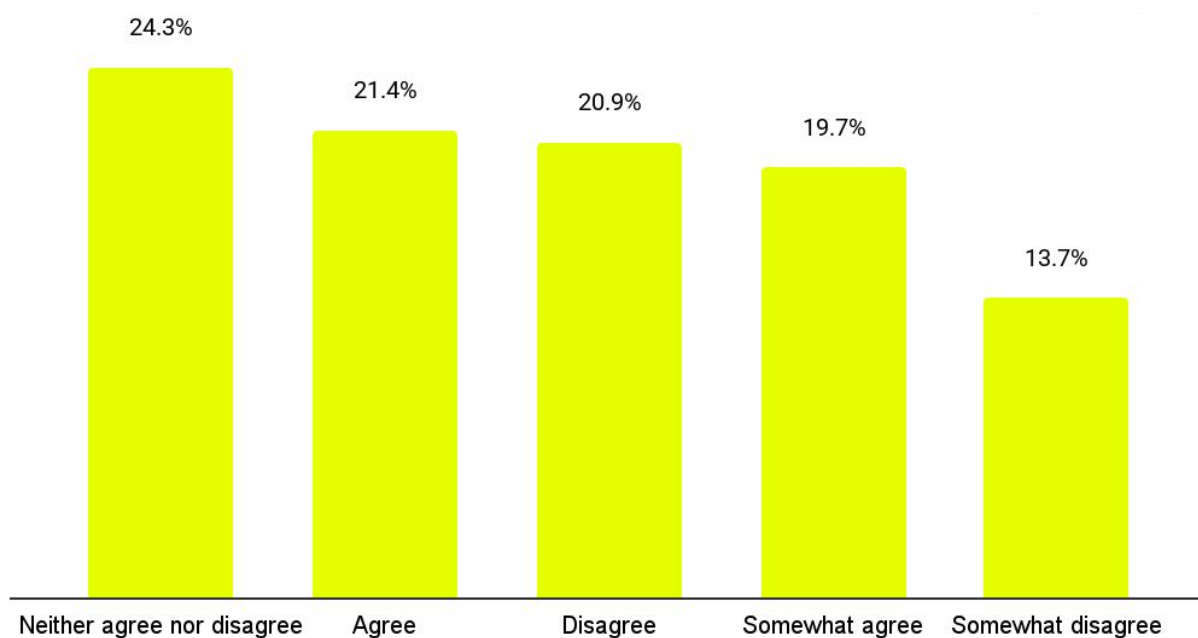


Question 18

Do you agree or disagree with this statement: I don't care if content is AI-generated as long as it's relevant and high quality.

When it comes to AI-generated content, fans are fairly divided, but leaning open-minded. Around 41% of respondents say they *agree* (21%) or *somewhat agree* (20%) that they don't care if content is AI-generated, as long as it's relevant and high quality. However, a nearly equal number, 39%, either *disagree* (21%) or *somewhat disagree* (14%). The largest single group (24%) sits squarely in the middle.

There's no overwhelming consensus on AI content, but there is a significant opportunity and many are ready to accept it if it delivers value. The key is transparency, quality, and relevance. For brands and media teams, it's not about hiding AI, it's about proving its worth.

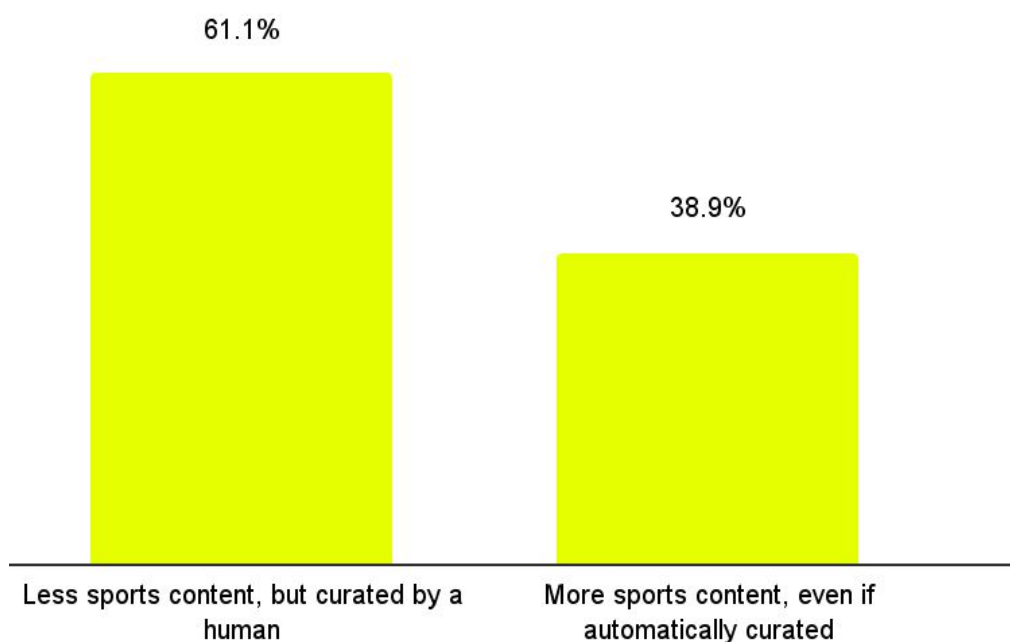


Question 19

Which would you prefer: More sports content, even if automatically curated Less sports content, but curated by a human?

When forced to choose, 61% of fans say they prefer less sports content if it means it's curated by a human, versus 39% who would opt for more content even if automatically curated. The preference for human touch outweighs the desire for sheer volume.

In the age of AI, authenticity still matters. While many fans accept or even welcome AI, human-curated content retains more trust and perceived value. For content teams, this doesn't mean balancing automation with human insight, especially for key storytelling moments or sentiment-driven content.

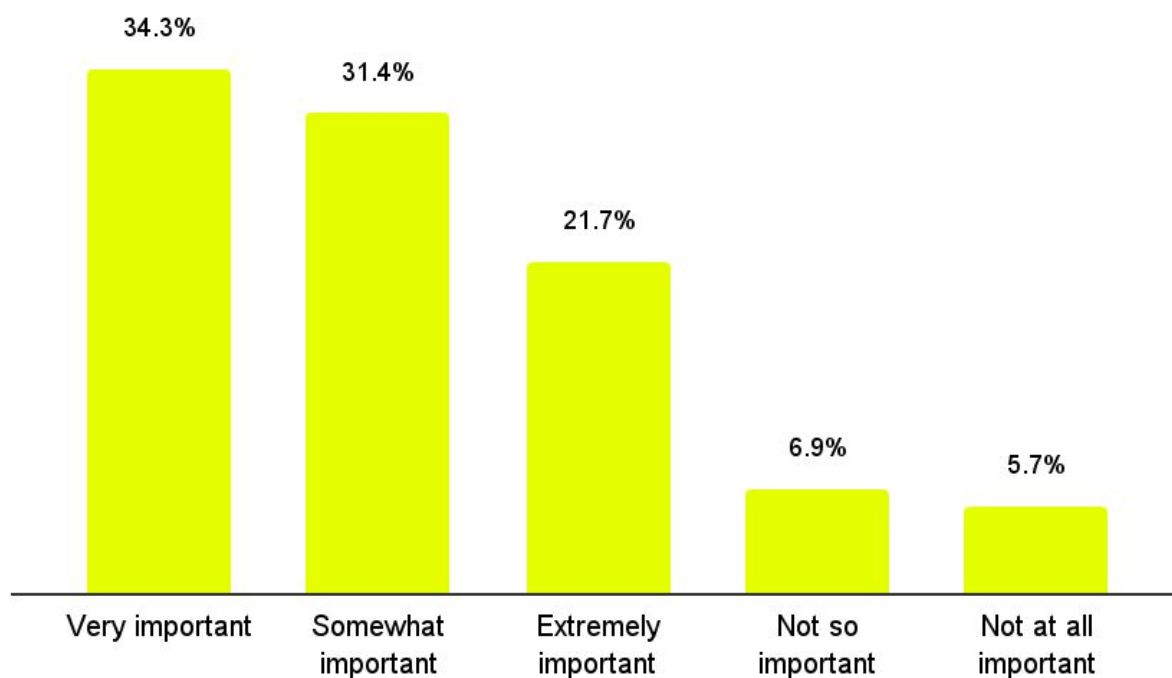


Question 20

How important is real-time content (e.g., highlights, reactions) during the first games of the season?

A commanding 87% of fans say real-time content, like highlights and reactions, is at least somewhat important during the first games of the season. Of those, over half consider it “very” or “extremely” important, reinforcing just how essential speed and immediacy are in engaging audiences from day one.

Opening moments matter. For fans, early-season games aren’t just warm-ups, they’re high-stakes opportunities to connect. Real-time content isn’t a bonus; it’s a baseline expectation. Teams, leagues, and publishers that prioritize speed-to-feed delivery are better positioned to hook viewers right from kickoff.



Question 21

How has your content consumption at season start changed over the past few years?

While 40% of fans say their content habits haven't changed, a clear trend is emerging among the rest: more fans are veering away from traditional sources. About 25% now rely less on TV or official sites, and nearly 23% are watching more short-form content. A smaller, but notable, 12% are actively seeking more personalized content.

There's a gradual but meaningful shift toward faster, more customized digital consumption, particularly away from legacy platforms. Even though a plurality hasn't changed yet, the combined momentum of short-form, decentralized, and personalized experiences is enough to signal a generational transition in how fans engage at season start.

