

February 2026

SME in the News

The past few weeks delivered a concentrated run of major sporting events, highlighted by the most-watched Winter Olympics in over a decade and the NBA's most-watched All-Star Game in 24 years. Strong audiences for the Daytona 500 and record-setting MLS opening weekend attendance further underscored the continued ability of premium live sports to aggregate large audiences across broadcast, streaming, and in-person platforms.

Live Sports Reinforce Their Global Scale and Engagement

Recent marquee events reinforced live sports' ability to deliver large audiences at scale, with measurable gains in reach and engagement.



Milano-Cortina Becomes Most-Watched Winter Games Since 2014:

The Milan Cortina Olympics averaged [23.5 million U.S. viewers](#), making them the most-watched Winter Games in over a decade and representing a 96% increase versus the Beijing Games four years ago. The figure reflects combined audiences across NBC, Peacock, CNBC, USA Network, and digital platforms, underscoring the effectiveness of NBCUniversal's cross-platform distribution strategy. February marked the first time a single network carried the Super Bowl, Winter Olympics, and NBA All-Star Game in the same month, with [215.6 million Americans tuning into at least one of those events](#), illustrating the power of mega-event clustering.



USA Hockey Victory Provides Tailwind for the NHL:

Team USA's 2–1 overtime victory over Canada – sealed by Jack Hughes' golden goal – delivered a nationally resonant moment in the [NHL's first Olympic participation in 12 years](#) coming [46 years to the day](#) after the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" gold medal. The gold medal game [averaged 20.7 million](#) viewers across NBC, Peacock, and USA Network, peaking at 26 million during overtime, making it the most-watched sporting event in U.S. history to begin before 9 a.m. ET and the second-most-watched hockey game in NBC Sports history.



NBA All-Star Format Shift Reflects League's Global Identity and Drives Ratings Surge:

The NBA's move from the traditional East vs. West structure to a USA vs. World round-robin format helped drive the All-Star Game to more than [46 million viewers across NBC and ESPN platforms](#), the largest audience in 24 years and more than triple last season's reach. After years of criticism that the game lacked intensity, the revamped format was widely praised for being more competitive and giving the matchup clearer stakes, restoring energy to an event that had seen declining engagement.



Daytona 500 Draws Strong Audience Despite Schedule Change:

The Daytona 500 [averaged 7.49 million viewers on Fox](#), up 11% year-over-year, making it the most-watched motorsports event since 2023. The race also surpassed last year's Indy 500, which had [7.09 million viewers](#), reinforcing its position as one of the premier annual events in American motorsports.



MLS Opens 2026 with Record-Breaking Attendance:

A crowd of 75,673 fans for LAFC vs. Inter Miami at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum marked the [largest opening weekend attendance in MLS history](#) and the second-largest standalone crowd ever for the league. The marquee matchup headlined a record-setting Matchday 1 overall, with [387,271 total fans across the weekend](#). The league averaged 25,818 fans per match, [up 5% year-over-year](#), underscoring continued momentum entering the 2026 season.

Women's Sports Goes Primetime

Dedicated primetime windows and standalone rights negotiations signal that women's sports are increasingly being positioned as scalable, independent commercial franchises.



ESPN Launches "Women's Sports Sundays":

ESPN will debut *Women's Sports Sundays* in Summer 2026 - a [first-of-its-kind, recurring primetime program](#) built around marquee WNBA and NWSL matchups across nine consecutive weeks. Positioned as more than a programming block, the initiative establishes women's sports as the main Sunday night event and will be supported by studio, digital, and social coverage across ESPN's broader media ecosystem. The new franchise replaces *Sunday Night Baseball*, signaling a meaningful reallocation of premium broadcast real estate.



WTGL Media Rights Talks Signal Growing Demand in Women's Golf:

The LPGA-backed Women's TGL (WTGL), launching in winter 2026–27, is in active talks for its [first media rights deal](#). Reported interest from ESPN, Golf Channel/Versant, and Scripps Sports reflects growing demand for premium women's golf inventory. Notably, WTGL is pursuing a separate agreement from TGL, signaling confidence that the women's league can stand on its own commercially as networks continue to lean into women's sports.

Stadium Economics and Mixed-Use Development Accelerate

Franchises continue to leverage on-field momentum and investor interest into broader real estate and commercial ecosystems.



Mets Set Citi Field Revenue Record:

Citi Field generated a record [\\$311.4 million in revenue](#) in 2025, up from \$260.8 million the prior year. Attendance reached a new high of [3.2 million](#) fans, driving \$157.6 million in ticket revenue, while premium seating revenue nearly doubled to \$39.1 million and concessions rose 55% to \$38.3 million. The late 2024 signing of Juan Soto materially boosted fan interest and premium demand, serving as a key catalyst for expanded stadium economics and revenue growth.



Chicago Bears Advance \$5B Stadium Development:

Momentum is building behind the Bears' proposed [\\$5 billion domed stadium](#) in Indiana, as the state advances a public-private framework pairing roughly \$2 billion in team capital with tax-backed public funding. The proposed Hammond site near Wolf Lake could include a broader mixed-use development, potentially featuring an entertainment district alongside the stadium.



Braves' Battery Development Drives Real Estate Growth:

The Atlanta Braves reported a [45% increase in mixed-use revenue](#) to \$97 million in 2025, as The Battery Atlanta - the retail, residential, and entertainment district surrounding Truist Park - delivered a record year. While the Braves missed the playoffs, total revenues still rose 11% to \$732.5 million, underscoring how ballpark-adjacent real estate can serve as a stabilizing and growing revenue stream independent of on-field performance.



MLS Stadium Construction Boom Accelerates:

MLS's stadium build cycle continues to gain momentum, with [three new soccer-specific venues](#) set to open over the next three years – Inter Miami's 25,000-seat Miami Freedom Park this spring, NYCFC's \$780 million Etihad Stadium in 2027, and the Chicago Fire's \$750 million downtown stadium in 2028. These projects follow six clubs that moved into new venues between 2021 and 2025, signaling what league executives describe as "MLS 3.0" - a sustained phase of infrastructure investment aimed at strengthening club economics and long-term growth.

And On a Fun Note...

The men's gold medal hockey game was easily the most exciting event in our household (not surprising when you have both Americans and Canadians in the family). But beyond that, two of my favorite viral moments from the Winter Games came from slightly less expected corners of the ski world. Norwegian cross-country superstar [Johannes Klæbo's uphill sprint topped out at 11.4 mph](#) (a 5:16 mile...uphill...on skis). And then there was [Snoop Dogg explaining skimo](#), which made its Olympic debut this year.

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