

January 2026

# SME in the News

As the year gets underway, a closely contested Wild Card weekend underscored the continued power of live sports to drive mass audiences. Across sports, media, and entertainment, broader trends, from global growth to evolving distribution models, point to strong momentum heading into 2026.



## Live Sports Continue to Dominate the Media Landscape

Sports once again proved to be one of the most powerful drivers of mass audiences in media.

- **Sports Nearly Sweep Top Television Audiences:** Sports are projected to account for [96 of the 100 most-watched U.S. telecasts of 2025](#), tying the all-time record set in 2023. Football overwhelmingly led the way, with college and NFL games comprising 92 of the top 100 broadcasts, including an estimated 84 NFL games. The expansion of the College Football Playoff also pushed college football to a record eight appearances in the top 100, while MLB placed two World Series games in the list for the first time since 2019.
- **Wild Card Viewership Reaches Decade High:** The NFL delivered its [most-watched Wild Card round since 2016](#), with the six games across Fox, CBS, Prime Video, NBC, and ESPN averaging 31.9 million viewers, up 13% year-over-year. Amazon's exclusive Packers–Bears matchup averaged 31.6 million viewers, [marking the most-streamed NFL game ever](#) and Amazon's most-watched NFL broadcast to date. Fox also posted a major milestone, with 49ers–Eagles averaging 41 million viewers, the most-watched game of the weekend and [Fox's highest-rated Wild Card game since 2015](#). ESPN's Texans–Steelers game added 29.1 million viewers, tying the network's second-best Wild Card performance on record. Part of the increase may be attributable to Nielsen's [enhanced methodology](#) to more accurately measure viewership.

- **NBA Viewership Improves Under New Media Deals:** [Viewership in the NBA is up 18%](#) year-over-year in the first season of its new media-rights agreements, supported by increased exposure across broadcast and streaming platforms. The league has reached a record 115 million U.S. viewers for national games to date.



## NBA Pushes Further Into Global Markets

Basketball's international growth story continues to accelerate, particularly across Asia and Europe.

- **NBA Re-Engages Chinese Market With Preseason Games in Macau:** The Dallas Mavericks and Houston Rockets will play [two preseason games in Macau](#) in October as part of the NBA China Games 2026. These games follow the league's gradual re-entry into the Chinese market, which began with preseason games in Macau in 2025 after several years of reduced activity. The NBA had largely paused games and large-scale events in China following the [2019 fallout](#) that disrupted broadcasting and commercial relationships. The Macau games reflect a deliberate effort to re-engage Chinese fans and partners while operating within a more cautious commercial and political framework.
- **European Regular-Season Slate Takes Shape:** The NBA also announced a [six-game European regular-season](#) schedule over the next three years, beginning with a game in Berlin this past Wednesday and a London matchup this Sunday, followed by games in Manchester and Paris in 2027, and Berlin and Paris in 2028. These games mark several milestones, including the NBA's first-ever regular-season game in Germany and its first regular-season game in Manchester, reinforcing Europe as a core long-term growth market.



## Women's Sports Show Both Momentum and Growing Pains

Investment and infrastructure continue to improve across women's sports, even as structural challenges remain.

- **WNBA CBA Talks Continue:** The WNBA and its players' union [failed to reach a new collective bargaining agreement](#) by the January deadline, extending negotiations into a status quo period. The impasse centers on revenue sharing and compensation, underscoring the growing economic importance of the league as players push for a more transformative deal amid rising popularity.
- **NWSL Invests in Long-Term Infrastructure:** Chicago Stars FC announced plans to build [the first club-owned performance center](#), securing a dedicated facility for training, recovery, and operations. Beyond player development, facility ownership gives the club greater operational control and creates a long-term real estate asset, marking a step toward a more institutional operating model for women's soccer.



## The FIFA World Cup Pushes Sports Streaming Further Downstream

- **FIFA Expands Into Social Platforms:** FIFA named [TikTok its first-ever “preferred platform”](#) partner ahead of the 2026 World Cup, integrating the platform into official World Cup distribution and monetization. The partnership enables curated match content, creator-led storytelling, and ad-supported monetization, while positioning TikTok as a central hub for fan engagement beyond live broadcasts.
- **Betting Platforms Enter the Distribution Mix:** FIFA will also allow some [licensed betting platforms to stream](#) World Cup matches to account holders, significantly expanding access points for live games and highlighting how sports wagering platforms are becoming part of the live sports media ecosystem.
- **Strong Demand Drives Evolving Ticket Strategy:** Initial pricing for the expanded 48-team World Cup highlighted the unprecedented global demand for the tournament, [prompting FIFA to introduce a Supporter Entry Tier](#) with \$60 tickets for loyal fans. The adjustment reflects FIFA’s ability to balance revenue maximization with accessibility as interest in the event continues to surge.

### And On a Fun Note...

I’ve mentioned before how the lines between sports, media, and entertainment are blurring—and awards season is offering a fresh reminder. No, I’m not referring to [Josh Allen getting a shout-out](#) at the Golden Globes. I’m talking about Timothée Chalamet’s Golden Globe win for portraying a table tennis legend in *Marty Supreme*, which I caught in theaters this week; recommended if you enjoy bold, frenetic films (and a heavy dose of [’80s music](#)). And if Fanatics’ recent move to launch [Fanatics Studios](#) is any indication, we’re likely to see even more crossover ahead.

Reach out to me if you have other examples of SME convergence or see anything else interesting in this space. Finally, I’ll leave you with this: check out Sports Business Journal’s [predictions for 2026](#) including the centralizing of local media rights, sports TV re-bundling to address the fragmentation of rights, and private equity’s continued push into sports.



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