

Street & Smith's

# S&S SPORTS BUSINESS JOURNAL



CHAMPIONS 2025

# Cheers to a Champion

Carmen Policy has provided trusted counsel during 50 years of NFL dealmaking

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## REACHING THE NEXT GENERATION OF FANS

Drilling Down into Content, Consumption Patterns and Platforms

The YouTube Playbook: Growing Younger Audiences Through Smart Content

Digital Media: Monetizing Sports Content Fans Actually Want



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# STATE OF PLAY

## PRICES UP

The Jets are raising 2026 season-ticket prices an average of 3.5%, citing the addition of a ninth home game.

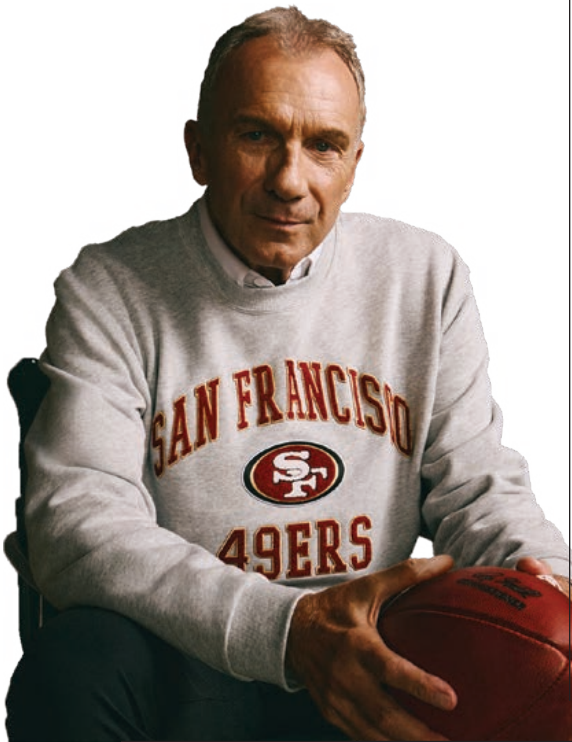
## THE METER

## PRICES DOWN

The Dolphins will keep 2026 season-ticket prices flat, offering modest reductions on select seats and a \$250 food-and-beverage credit for club seat holders.

## FASHION SENSE

LULULEMON secured an NFL license and launched a premium apparel and accessories collection featuring all 32 team marks, available through Fanatics and NFL retail channels.



## 100 Days And Counting

Team USA wrapped up its biennial media summit in New York last week as the Milan-Cortina Games marked 100 days until its opening ceremony on Feb. 6. The Empire State Building lit up red, white and blue to mark the occasion. As the movement makes the final push toward the Winter Games, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee reviewed topics such as security, sponsor plans and lobbying support for college Olympic programs. The USOPC projects a total of 294 athletes, with 225 Olympians and 69 Paralympians making up Team USA. Only 14 have qualified so far.

## MONEY TALKS

“The partnership with Paramount has already been incredible, and it just keeps getting bigger and better.”

— DANA WHITE, UFC president and CEO

## TAKING ATTENDANCE

# 32,066

Announced crowd at the Vancouver Whitecaps' playoff opener against FC Dallas — a franchise record for home playoff attendance.



## YOU'RE HIRED

The WTA named veteran sports business executive **VALERIE CAMILLO** its next chairperson, effective Nov. 17. Camillo, an SBJ Game Changers honoree in 2016, succeeds outgoing chairman Steve Simon, who is retiring at the end of the year.





**ABRAHAM MADKOUR**  
PUBLISHER AND  
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

# One day in Baltimore

**M**Y UBER DRIVER, Brad, said he quickly accepted my request for a ride to 1 Winning Drive in Owings Mills, Md. “I get to take you to The Castle!” he beamed. I looked at him, puzzled, and he said, “Ravens headquarters. It’s called The Castle. It’s unbelievable.” So, yes, he knew the destination, and I could tell he loved sports, and as I’m prone to do, I proceeded to pepper Brad with questions about his fandom during our 20-minute ride.

It’s these focus groups of one that really enlighten me. Here’s what I found out: A Maryland native, 55 with a family, he is an avid Ravens and Orioles fan. He used to have two season-ticket club seats at M&T Bank Stadium, right on the 40, and never missed a game. He loves the stadium and overall experience — loud, energetic, exciting. When I asked why he gave them up, he said the weight of time and the increased cost of the club seats were too much, and he didn’t want to be in the upper level — “Too unpredictable up there!”

Now, he goes to two home games a year, and purchases tickets on the secondary market or through a contest, giveaway or other Ravens-related groups. He takes Uber to not deal with parking. He gets to the stadium around 10 a.m. for a 1 p.m. game, and pays \$100 each for two tickets to an all-you-can-eat-and-drink, privately run tailgate. After the game, he will gamble at the casino next door to let traffic subside. He goes to four Orioles games a year, but says the summer months are too busy and his schedule has him up so early — 3 a.m.! — he can’t do night games.

When I asked what he missed about the Ravens season tickets, he said the fan energy and the high after a Ravens win. But he added, “Now, I’m either walking to my favorite sports bar or having friends over, and it’s just easier, cheaper, and I honestly see more of the game. And my bathroom is right there.” When I asked how the live experience could be better, his comments were consistent. “It’s great live. I love it, but it’s just a long, expensive day, and frankly, it’s easier and more comfortable staying home.”

What does he wish he had more of? Understandably, access — to current and former players and coaches. “I love to hear their stories about the games I saw them play in.” I was struck by his love of road trips — he does at least two Ravens road games a year. He has gone to every Ravens away playoff game and was at Super Bowl XLVII in New Orleans, when they won. He’s been to at least 15 other NFL venues to watch

the Ravens — fully dressed in Ravens gear “head to toe, wouldn’t have it any other way.” He generally goes with a group organized by a local tour company, flying in the night before to take advantage of the tour’s special events and tailgates. His favorite venue: Arrowhead Stadium. His favorite fans: Kansas City and Buffalo. “They razz me, but they are just having fun and they’re welcoming.” The toughest experience he’s had: Foxboro and Philadelphia. His favorite start time? Sunday, 1 p.m. Least favorite? Monday and Thursday nights. Favorite all-time Raven? **Joe Flacco**.

Brad was ebullient when we pulled up to the gate of the Ravens’ Under Armour Performance Center. He joked to the gate attendant, “I’m here for a tryout!” As we drove through the lot, he was pointing out details, including which executives and players drove which cars. As I got out of the car, he jumped out and belted, “Welcome to The Castle!”

I love these interactions, and while there are no surprises in Brad’s comments, it’s always eye-opening to hear from a true fan who spends a considerable amount of his disposable income on local sports teams.

► **RAVENS HQ:** Brad was right about The Castle, which may be the best-kept secret in sports. It’s a remarkable headquarters and training facility, built in 2004 but having undergone multiple renovations over the years. Set in the quiet, leafy suburb, it’s one of the most elite team facilities I’ve ever seen, and another indication of the mindset of owner **Steve Bisciotti**, who is one of the most low-profile but also underrated owners in sports. Everything is state of the art, from the traditional practice fields, weight training and recovery spaces, to an elegant auditorium, extensive broadcast studios and grand stairways and hallways lined with paintings from games during the team’s Super Bowl years. There is also a team dining hall that was buzzing on a Tuesday, as players, staff and guests eat for free.

It’s obvious Bisciotti and his leadership team put a lot of thought into this, with designs on developing the best environment for the team and staff. Finally, I’ll say I didn’t expect to see a massive portrait of the late Ravens owner **Art Modell**, standing on a football field in his fedora, prominently featured in the reception area. I found that to be another classy touch in an incredibly classy facility.

*Abraham Madkour can be reached at [amadkour@sportsbusinessjournal.com](mailto:amadkour@sportsbusinessjournal.com).*



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Cover image by Spencer Brown

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# UPFRONT



The subject of sports betting was top of mind at the start of the World Series in Toronto, which came one day after the FBI charged Miami Heat guard Terry Rozier with conspiring to rig prop bets.

## Perilous Proposition

Arrests and investigations have leagues taking a second look at the risks involving player props. BY BILL KING AND MIKE MAZZEO



**A** FEW HUNDRED FEET from a Rogers Centre outfield sign featuring Toronto Blue Jays sportsbook sponsor theScore Bet, MLB Players Association head Tony Clark addressed the heightened attention now paid to the ever-growing menu of player prop bets that the union saw as a concern “from Day 1” of sports betting legalization.

A day earlier, the FBI had charged Miami Heat guard Terry Rozier with conspiring to help a childhood friend rig prop bets based on his promise to intentionally underperform.

Player props also are at the center of an MLB investigation of two Cleveland Guardians pitchers, who were placed on paid leave in July as the result of suspicious bets placed on two individual pitches.

In September, the NCAA stripped three Fresno State basketball players of their eligibility for rigging prop bets.

With the World Series about to open on Oct. 24, Clark found himself answering questions about the proliferation of bets placed on individual players’ performance.

“We’re in support of removing any types of bets, props or otherwise, that could create issues for our guys on the field,” Clark said prior to Game 1. “We’ve heard about prop bets of late, and it was one of the things that we were concerned about from Day 1 as well.

“Every time there’s a situation that arises related to gambling, the concern doesn’t lessen. It gets greater.”

A day later, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred defended the league deals with sportsbooks and data distributors that not only unlocked vast new revenue streams, but also gave the league visibility into suspicious bets and mandated integrity guidelines that the sportsbooks initially opposed.

“We didn’t ask to have legalized sports betting,” Manfred said. “It kind of came, and that’s the environment in which we operate. ... Once you’re in that environment where sports betting is happening, the crucial issue is access to data. That means you have to have a relationship with the sportsbooks. Like most relationships, if you want something from them, you need to give something back to them.”

The relative ease with which some player props can be manipulated, and the increase in online harassment of players by bettors who lost money on them, has led regulators in 15 states that offer legal sports betting to ban wagers on individual college players. But in pro sports, state regulators thus far have taken no action, leaving the leagues and sportsbooks to set any guardrails through their commercial agreements.

It was a structure born of those relationships — integrity monitors working on behalf of the leagues, and sportsbooks identifying suspicious bets that they then reported to law enforcement — that led to the charges brought against Rozier and those alleged to have placed bets based on his information. That model has underpinned the investigations of nearly all of the integrity-related cases that have led to charges and league disciplinary action.

### Enforcement and restriction

**IN SPORTSBOOK CIRCLES**, the FBI's recent high-profile arrests were hailed as an example of the system working as intended.

"Enforcement is a key part of driving deterrence," said Fanatics Betting & Gaming CEO Matt King. "People need to see what the impact is of violating the law."

Still, the reputational fallout stung. Last week, after commerce committees in the Senate and House requested information about the NBA's betting policies, the league sent a memo informing teams that it would reassess "how sports betting should be regulated and how sports leagues can best protect themselves."

"We believe there is more that can be done from a legal/regulatory perspective to protect the integrity of the NBA and our affiliated leagues," the league memo stated. "In particular, proposition bets on individual player performance involve heightened integrity concerns and require additional scrutiny."

The sportsbooks last agreed to tighten restrictions on prop wagers at the request of the NBA at the start of last season, when they agreed to stop offering under bets on players on two-way and 10-day contracts following the league's ban of Jontay Porter, a fringe player who was found to have removed himself from games to make sure his unders hit.

That move had minimal impact and would not have applied to Rozier. This time, the NBA — and other leagues — are likely to seek broader restrictions, such as reducing the menu of players and setting bet size limits on the most easily manipulated wagers.

"I do think there will be additional restrictions that come out of this that are driven by all the constituents," King said. "What they are specifically, I don't know yet. People are still gathering the facts. But as has occurred over the first seven years of sports betting in the United States, I do think there will be common-sense regulation that comes out of this."

This will be tenuous ground for the U.S. sportsbooks, which have increasingly built their apps around fans' affinity for player prop wagers, which, when combined with each other into parlays, have come to underpin their offerings.

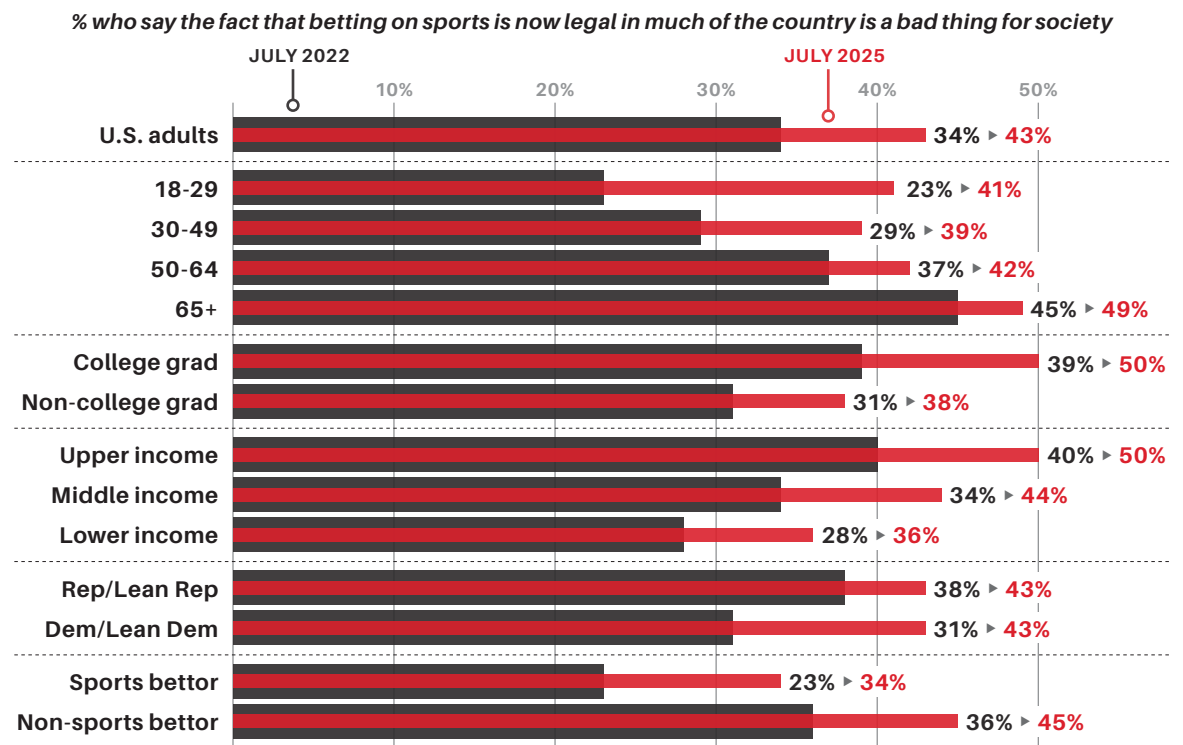
They are not only wildly popular, but more profitable than most other bets.

"There are lots of ways to combat [integrity risks], but some of those ways might not be commercially in the best interest of the operators," said Matt Holt, who founded the widely used bet monitoring service now known as IC360 and recently launched regulatory advisory firm Gaming Compliance International. "With all of the tax rates and license fees and compliance mandates, regulators are in a tough spot to not interfere commercially with what the operators' business is."

"In a perfect world, where this won't disrupt the business of [their] licensees, what are the things [regulators] can do? Both market limitation and bet size limitation would have a huge impact."

## U.S. SENTIMENT AROUND SPORTS WAGERING

Even before the latest controversy, more Americans were seeing legal sports betting as bad for society, across demographic groups, according to a Pew Research Center survey.



Note: Analysis based on findings from a survey of 9,916 U.S. adults who are part of the Pew Center's American Trends Panel, conducted from July 8 to Aug. 3, 2025. Overall margin of error is plus or minus 1.3 percentage points.

Source: Pew Research Center

Thus far, only Ohio has gone public with plans to create restrictions around certain player prop bets in pro sports, with Gov. Mike DeWine leading that charge following the investigation into the Guardians. Last week, DeWine said he would hold off on a microbet ban while the leagues pressed the sportsbooks to take down the riskiest of them — including pitch-level bets — on their own.

The investigation into Guardians pitcher Luis Ortiz is centered on a pair of pitches he threw in June: a first-pitch ball in the second inning against the Mariners on June 15, and a first-pitch ball in the third inning against the Cardinals on June 27. IC360, an MLB integrity monitor, flagged those pitches amid an unusual uptick in first-pitch betting activity on whether they would result in a ball or hit-by-pitch, triggering the league's probe, which remains ongoing. Details surrounding Cleveland pitcher Emmanuel Clase's involvement are unclear.

"Microbetting" pitch-level markets that enable bettors to wager on the outcome of the first pitch of an inning, whether a pitch is a ball or a strike and the speed of a particular pitch have drawn increased scrutiny by legislators, regulators, the union and the league because they are the most problematic integrity risks. That's because a single actor can directly affect the outcome of a bet on his own without having a significant effect on the overall outcome of a game.

In August 2024, DraftKings acquired Simplebet, a B2B provider of automated, in-game, microbet odds setting. JMP Securities reported that DraftKings, which already owned 15% of Simplebet, paid \$195 million for the remaining 85% of the company, with a \$70 million upfront payment.

Simplebet co-founder and former CEO Chris Bevilacqua said that the provider did not offer pitch-level markets early on because MLB expressed

concern about integrity risks. But by the time he left, there were two to three pitch-level markets that proved very popular with bettors, accounting for about half of Simplebet's baseball handle on DraftKings. The average bet size on a pitch-level market was \$5-\$6, Bevilacqua recalled. Another industry source said the average microbet at some sportsbooks now exceeds \$30.

"I think that both the league and union are right to be hyper focused and hyper sensitive to the integrity issues," Bevilacqua said.

Holt suggested bet limits would address those issues.

"You wouldn't have to eliminate those markets," said Holt, who also serves on the board of microbetting platform nVenue. "If there is a cap of \$500, then the ability to make a lot of money isn't there, and thus the attempts on manipulation, in theory, would obviously go down."

"When you have books taking \$10,000 or \$50,000 on those markets, then the temptation is always going to be there."

While King said he was willing to discuss limiting, or even taking down, some of the higher-risk, lower-return bets, he cautioned against broader restrictions.

"I don't accept the premise that player props are inherently bad," he said. "You're in a world where they are a critical part of the consumer offering, and if you want a healthy and regulated market, you need to make sure your consumer offering in the regulated market is competitive with that in the illegal market. If you start talking about banning player props, you will quickly end up in a world where the illegal sports betting operators have a vastly superior offering and you drive a massive amount of business into the illegal market — where there is no surveillance at all." ❌



# PICKLEBALL PHENOM

ANNA LEIGH WATERS IS BIG BUSINESS ON AND OFF THE COURT,  
DELIVERING MAJOR EXPOSURE TO THE RISING SPORT

BY ROB SCHAEFER

**A**NNA LEIGH WATERS picked up pickleball when she was 10 years old. It was 2017 — years before the sport was unanimously branded as America’s “fastest growing” — and her Florida-based, tennis-playing family had evacuated to her grandparents’ home in Pennsylvania in preparation for Hurricane Irma.

Waters’ grandfather, Neil, initially broached the idea of playing to pass the time.

“[At first] we were like, ‘No, that’s an old person’s sport,’” Waters recalls, smiling. “I was like ... ‘Do you hit a pickle over the net?’ I had no idea what

it was.”

Eventually she caved, and immediately she was hooked. Within a year, Waters was playing pro-level tournaments alongside her mom, Leigh. At 14, she was the sport’s No. 1-ranked women’s player.

Now 18, Waters is a mainstay atop the rankings of the PPA Tour, the United States’ leading professional pickleball tour, and the salary sheet of the United Pickleball Association (which houses the PPA and team-based Major League Pickleball), earning seven figures annually on and off the court.

She is a phenom, often referred to as pickleball’s “GOAT,” and in turn steadily growing her presence

as a brand ambassador and spokesperson for the sport.

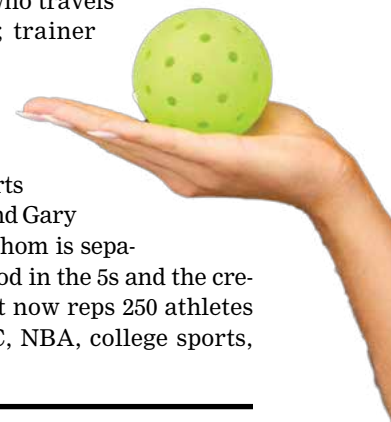
“She’s the Tiger Woods, the Serena Williams, of pickleball,” said Waters’ manager/agent Ryan Harwood, who works as an adviser to the agency that represents her, VaynerSports. In a sign of the emerging nature of the sport, Harwood is also the co-owner and general manager of the Major League Pickleball franchise Waters plays for, the New Jersey 5s, and a shareholder in the UPA (which negotiates player contracts between players and the league, not teams).

“I see her as a unique generational talent,” Harwood continued. “She has this trifecta of age, dominance and marketability on her side.”

Harwood and Waters met when she was first drafted to the 5s in 2023. He’s become a trusted adviser and confidant, central to her inner circle, along with Waters’ parents and grandparents; physical trainer Dr. Ashton Tyree (who travels to tournaments with her); trainer Brandon Oakes; and bus driver Eric Wooley.

Earlier this year, Waters switched her representation from Octagon to VaynerSports — a firm co-founded by AJ and Gary Vaynerchuk (the latter of whom is separately partners with Harwood in the 5s and the creative agency VaynerX) that now reps 250 athletes across the NFL, MLB, UFC, NBA, college sports,

A mainstay atop PPA Tour rankings, **Anna Leigh Waters** is earning seven figures annually on and off the court.



gaming and surfing, in addition to pickleball. The firm, with Harwood quarterbacking, now manages everything from Waters' player contracts to brand deals to social media channels.

## GROWING PORTFOLIO

Waters' portfolio of brand partnerships includes Delta, DoorDash, RXBar, eyewear maker Pilla, feminine care line U By Kotex and, most recently, cosmetics retailer Ulta Beauty. She also is set to headline the fourth edition of the Pickleball Slam showcase in April alongside Andre Agassi, James Blake and former WTA star Genie Bouchard.

All of those deals were done by VaynerSports in the past four months.

"We're very selective in who I decide to partner with. We really want to make sure that it's a product, or something, that I love," Waters said. "Your audience can definitely tell what's natural and what you're using, versus when you're just taking a check and doing social media posts."

### ANNA LEIGH WATERS' BRAND DEALS

- Delta
- DoorDash
- RXBar
- Pilla
- U By Kotex
- Ulta Beauty
- Fila
- Paddletek

The Ulta deal, a one-year pact to start, is an example of Waters' personal passion points guiding marketing opportunities; she says she

grew up using its skincare and makeup products. The deal will include a logo placement on Waters' kit and Waters joining a collective of Ulta ambassador female athlete influencers that the brand is launching early next year.

"What Anna Leigh has been able to accomplish in her given sport of pickleball is so intriguing at such a young age — and that matches back to what an aspirational person she is and what she can bring to this vast community of beauty enthusiasts that we have," said Ulta Beauty CMO Kelly Mahoney. "And then, of

course, pickleball is such a sport that's accessible to just about anybody, and we found that to be really interesting."



**ABOVE:** Earlier this year, Waters made a high-profile appearance on the ESPYs red carpet.

**BELOW LEFT:** Waters' apparel (Fila) and paddle (Paddletek) deals are among her most lucrative.

Waters' apparel (Fila) and paddle (Paddletek) deals — which are among her most lucrative, Harwood said — are set expire at the end of this year.

"It's exciting. This is the first time my apparel and paddle deal has been up at the same time, so we're having some interesting conversations with a lot of different, exciting companies," Waters said. "I don't think there's a wrong choice. Right now, I'm just keeping an open mind."

Harwood characterized that Waters' annual off-court earnings are in the mid-seven-figures, comparing her in this respect to a highly-ranked women's tennis player. However, "the No. 1 player in the world on both the men and women side in pickleball are definitely outliers," he cautioned.

"They have earning power in a very different way than the rest of them," Harwood said. "There's a big drop-off from 1 to No. 2, there's a big drop-off from No. 2 to No. 3, big drop-off from three to four, four to five — and then it's like, boom, massive [drop-off]. Those five players all have solid earning power, but there's massive drop-offs between them."

Waters' UPA salary, meanwhile, pays more than \$2 million annually, tying her with PPA Tour men's

doubles/mixed doubles No. 1 Ben Johns as the highest-paid player in the association. The UPA is renegotiating its player contracts to reflect a more prize-money-weighted structure — as opposed to guaranteed-salary deals it handed out in 2023 — but UPA CEO Connor Pardoe said he anticipates that Waters' status among the league's highest paid will remain.

"When you're starting a professional sports league — which is basically what we've done over the past five years — if you ask people, they'd say you need to build it around stars," Pardoe said. "People have asked me, how is pickleball growing so fast, or why is it growing so fast? There's a lot of reasons for that. But I think a big part of it is having players that we can help tell stories around. Anna Leigh is definitely one of those people for us."

Pardoe added that in the UPA's conversations with sponsors, he's found Waters to be a pivotal draw. DoorDash, MLP's title sponsor, is one example.

"When we got talking with them about how we wanted to expand their pickleball footprint, it wasn't a question for them," he said. "They wanted Anna Leigh to be the person that was doing their advertisements for them."

## COOKING UP WHAT'S NEXT

Outside of competition and direct sponsorship, Waters said she has contemplated making equity investments in pickleball-focused companies, although she acknowledges this is a long-term focus.

Her most acute entrepreneurial interest in the near term is in content creation. This month, she plans to launch a YouTube channel dedicated to cooking, her main off-court hobby.

Waters also dedicates travel time to promoting pickleball. This week, she will play at the weeklong, UPA-organized Pickleball World Championships at the Brookhaven Country Club in Farmers Branch, Texas, which drew 57,000 fans last year. Earlier this year, she made a high-profile appearance on the ESPYs red carpet. And in 2026, she is eyeing potential international stops, including a possible trip to Asia (where the UPA has begun expanding its events).

"Doing those events kills two birds with one stone," Waters said. "It helps me and my brand to grow, but it also helps the sport grow. That's something I've been really focused on is helping to grow the sport, because I love it so much and I feel like other people love it as soon as they try it, too."

# Know Your Pickleball

■ **PPA Tour:** A leading tour of individual pickleball players, including top stars Anna Leigh Waters and Ben Johns, co-owned by Tom Dundon and other investors. Will host 20 events in 2025 and is expanding to international markets like Asia and Australia.

■ **Major League Pickleball:** A team-based league replete with a draft, regular-season standings and end-of-season playoffs. Hosted 14 events in 2025 and has 22 city-based teams across its premier and challenger levels (with another expansion franchise to be added next year).

■ **United Pickleball Association:** The holding company that sits above the PPA Tour and Major League Pickleball, formed through a merger between the two properties in 2024. Players who sign contracts with the

UPA compete across both properties. The UPA has raised \$90 million from investors including SC Holdings, Al Tylis and Dundon Capital since the merger.

■ **Association of Pickleball Players:** The other leading individual tour in the U.S., majority-owned by Inter-sport. Will host 24 events in 2025 and, starting in December, has joined with six international pickleball leagues/federations to form a global tour of events.

■ **National Pickleball League:** A 12-team league, initially for pros age 50 and above, that is eyeing expansion to add more teams and age divisions.

■ **USA Pickleball:** The national governing body for the sport in the U.S. Sets rules, certifies equipment, trains referees, sanctions tournaments and hosts an annual national championships event every November.

# U.S. Soccer rides World Cup momentum to highest revenue since 2017

**U.S. SOCCER GENERATED \$263.7 MILLION IN REVENUE** during the 2025 fiscal year, according to its annual financial report. That figure marks a 37% increase from its haul in 2024 and its highest total since the 2017 fiscal year when it hosted the Copa América Centenario in June 2016.

The uptick reflects the federation tapping into the business buzz around soccer in the lead-up to next summer's FIFA World Cup in North America. The organization's \$250 million National Training Center project outside Atlanta has also spurred a sharp increase in fundraising activity.

BY ALEX SILVERMAN

After expenses and investment returns, the nonprofit posted a net surplus of \$8.3 million, down about 9% year over year. It's the second straight surplus for the organization after posting deficits each year from 2018 through 2023. The federation's fiscal years run from April 1 through March 31.

U.S. Soccer has seen significant commercial momentum ahead of the World Cup, with income from sponsorships, licensing and fan engagement increasing by 19% in 2025 to \$121.1 million. The federation secured deals with The Home Depot, Bank of America, Jim Beam, Henkel and Haleon during the fiscal year.

The governing body also raised \$50.3 million in philanthropic contributions, about seven times as much as in 2024. CEO JT Batson has made fundraising a major area of emphasis, hiring Leah Heister Burton from the Guggenheim Museum and Founda-



U.S. Soccer CEO **JT Batson** has led the national governing body to back-to-back annual surpluses.

of the federation's revenue in 2025, down from 33% a year ago.

U.S. Soccer also dramatically expanded both its assets and debt as it pushes toward the opening of its new training center in Fayetteville, Ga., next year.

Total assets rose from \$192 million in 2024 to \$459 million in 2025, fueled by the donation of \$12.5 million in land and an \$86.4 million increase in construction-in-progress as work accelerated on the training center project. To finance the build, the national governing body conducted its

first bond raise, issuing \$200 million worth of debt. U.S. Soccer CFO Chelle Adams previously told Sports Business Journal the bond offering attracted more than \$3.2 billion in initial orders, indicating strong investor demand.

The governing body's next financial report, covering the 2026 fiscal year, should show continued commercial momentum, as newly signed sponsorships with Kellanova, American Airlines, Purina, Ferrara and Chobani will appear for the first time. The 2027 fiscal year could mark U.S. Soccer's peak earning period, coinciding with the opening of the training center in spring 2026 and the World Cup that summer.

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## K.C. creating invite-only VIP hospitality hub for 2026 World Cup

**KANSAS CITY'S 2026 WORLD CUP HOST COMMITTEE** is creating an invite-only hospitality space called KCHouse that local leaders hope will serve as a hub for business with long-lasting impact on the region. The committee, which goes by KC2026, unveiled its preliminary plans to 2,000 local business leaders last week at the Kansas City Area Development Council's annual meeting.

Locally based architecture firm Populous designed the KCHouse concept. Work will begin in April to transform a retail space on the city's Country Club Plaza into a sleek, cosmopolitan hub for local and visiting business executives, world leaders, celebrities, politicians and other VIP guests. The three-level location will feature a lounge with a stage for thought leadership programming and entertainment, a cafe, conference rooms, a rooftop bar, social spaces and viewing areas for World Cup matches. It will also serve as the launch point for VIP transportation to and from games at Arrowhead Stadium.

"It's a hub for global business in a hospitality setting," said KC2026 CEO Pam Kramer. "This is the most heads of state and C-suite executives that we've ever going to have in the region, so we want to make sure that we're telling our story and connecting to them with our economic development partners."



Access to KCHouse and brand exposure within its walls will also be selling points as KC2026 continues to court potential host city supporters (sponsors) and donors to fund operations. So far, the committee has announced Populous, Purina and Black & Veatch as host city supporters, and Kramer said several more deals will be revealed in the coming weeks.

The committee didn't disclose how much it expects to spend on the KCHouse project. Kramer said she anticipates the expense to be "revenue neutral" from a budget perspective, with sponsorship and donor funding offsetting the costs of

K.C.-based architecture firm Populous designed the KCHouse concept.

building it out.

Earlier last week, KC2026 unveiled its plans for a 25,000-capacity FIFA Fan Festival at the National WWI Museum and

Memorial that will be free to fans. The region's willingness and ability to invest in robust ancillary programming stands in contrast with other host cities that have expressed concerns about having the necessary resources to do so in their own markets.

Kramer attributed the all-in approach to strong public support from both Missouri

and Kansas' state governments. More than just tourism, the region collectively sees the World Cup as an opportunity to plant the seeds for future business growth.

"It's about how we change the way people think about the region or introduce the region to them," Kramer said. "How do we start to sow the seeds so that, in 10 years, we can look back and say, 'That business is here because they first came to Kansas City during the World Cup,' or 'That company grew exponentially because of a relationship that was formed during the World Cup.'" — **A.S.**

## PEOPLE IN SPORTS BUSINESS | MARKUS SCHREYER



Vanderbilt Enterprises CEO **Markus Schreyer**, center, came to the school from the hospitality world and is now helping Commodores athletics find new revenue across key areas such as sponsorship, food and beverage, and merchandise.

## Vanderbilt's Markus Schreyer is leading new-look revenue-generating arm

**M**ARKUS SCHREYER has always taken a bit of a blank canvas approach to his career.

There's a layer of creativity required in roles that have spanned from Hilton and Starwood Hotels to senior leadership at Marriott. Hospitality, after all, necessitates flexing one's imagination.

BY BEN PORTNOY

But after 25 years in the hospitality business, Schreyer — the recently minted CEO of Vanderbilt Enterprises — is putting his mind and that approach to the task of boosting the Commodores' bottom line.

"Probably 95% of my roles in my career, I started on a white piece of paper, a white canvas and was asked to rethink a business," he said. "That's kind of what [Vanderbilt AD Candice Storey Lee] asked me to do here."

How and why Schreyer wanted to leap headfirst into the chaos of college athletics is a broader discussion. Opportunity is part of it. Innovation, too.

Schreyer was hired in May to head up Vanderbilt Enterprises, an amalgamation of the school's revenue-generating arms outside of the academic side of the university (including athletics). The idea was to better position

### 3 QUESTIONS WITH ...

**MARKUS SCHREYER**  
VANDERBILT ENTERPRISES

#### Why were you interested in the job?

"What really convinced me for that position is the vision of Chancellor Diermeier here at

Vanderbilt University. From the first conversation we had in that search process for the CEO role, when you think about industry leadership, we want to be the best in whatever we do."

**How would you describe the role of Vanderbilt Enterprises?** "It's really about embracing both [academics and athletics]. You see a lot of universities that are extremely strong in

academics or extremely strong on the field, but we are doing both."

**How is sponsorship helping the mission of this new entity?** "If you work with us in athletics, you also want to work with us in research, student development and our labs. If you're coming through education, then how can we again play the full spectrum of the university? That's exciting."

Vanderbilt for the increased financial pressures higher-ed and athletics face.

"Everybody has to get ready for the new world, and you have to set aside all paradigms and develop new ideas," Vanderbilt Chancellor Daniel Diermeier said in May. "It's going to be an era where disruption will be needed and will be rewarded."

What that's led to — along with a football program that has evolved from SEC doormat to a top-10 ranking in the AP Top 25 this fall during coach Clark Lea's tenure — is a new-look revenue machine that Schreyer and the school's senior staff have already seen bear fruit.

Schreyer projects food and beverage revenue to nearly double this year at

FirstBank Stadium. Merchandise is on track for a 150% increase. Sponsorship and licensing revenue — which incorporates the athletic department's deal with Learfield — is also slated to nearly double.

"This isn't just a project to amplify the athletic department; it's one to amplify the entire university," said Dany Berghoff, head of North America for CAA Executive Search, which assisted Vanderbilt in landing Schreyer. "As we kind of thought about who is going to be that partner to not only amplify the overarching athletic department, but also was going to be able to leverage what he was able to do from a commercial perspective and a business building perspective in athletics

... that's why Markus was such a great choice."

That Vanderbilt is enjoying early success in Schreyer's time on campus is as much a reflection of the building blocks that were laid in place over recent years as his brief tenure.

Lee's time as athletic director, along with Diermeier's arrival from the University of Chicago in 2020, coincided with the completion of the Huber Center basketball operations and practice facility, along with massive renovations to the north and south end zones at FirstBank Stadium. The stadium projects included adding 20 suites and 1,000 club seats as part of the Commodore Club, loge boxes and a new video board.

Those efforts dovetailed with the fundraising campaign "Vandy United," a recently completed \$300 million effort that helped pay for the projects.

The school also launched the "Dare to Grow" campaign in 2023, a \$3.2 billion undertaking that touches myriad pieces of the university's academic side and is designed to reinvest in its future.

That kind of backing brings opportunity. Schreyer said the school is exploring ways to better monetize those improved facilities through things like concerts (obviously a different kind of challenge in a city with musically inclined venues like Nashville).

"You see a lot of universities that are extremely strong in academics or extremely strong on the field, but we are doing both," Schreyer said. "How can Vanderbilt Enterprises support? No. 1 is revenue generation. New business models. Everything beyond the academic revenue. It's about growing our audience here in Nashville, but also national, international and thinking about making Vanderbilt a household name."

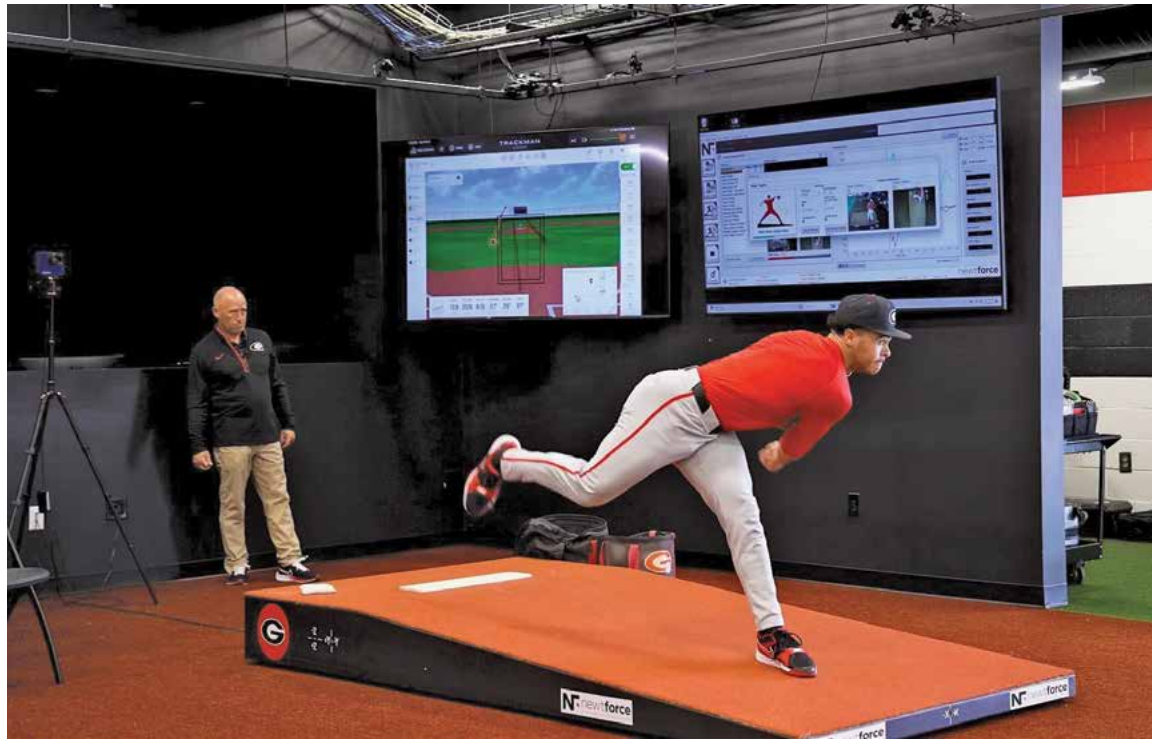
Schreyer almost sighed in reliving his alarm ringing at 4 a.m. on Oct. 25 in preparation for ESPN's "College GameDay." He departed for campus by 5:30 a.m. to be on-site for the show's first appearance at Vanderbilt in 17 years.

At the time of the last "College GameDay" broadcast in Nashville in 2008, Schreyer was on the verge of changing jobs from a lengthy run at Hilton to a new role at Starwood Hotels & Resorts. Many more years in the hospitality space followed.

And yet here Schreyer is, in the center of Vanderbilt's aggressive and bold plan for driving revenue to help fund the increasingly costly proposition of fielding competitive college athletics programs.

Not exactly straightforward. Then again, nothing ever is.

# ▶ THE INSIDERS



University of Georgia coach **Wes Johnson** watches one of his pitchers throw in the team's high-tech pitching lab.

## TECH

# From brute force to NewtForce: streamlined pitching analysis through data collaboration

**A**S THE INSPECTOR made his final rounds following renovations to the University of Georgia's Foley Field, head baseball coach **Wes Johnson** and some sports tech vendors were among those waiting outside. As soon as the ballpark received its certificate of occupancy, they went to work so Bulldogs pitchers could immediately start using the two new high-tech pitching tunnels.

Outfitted with **NewtForce** pitching mounds and motion-capture cameras powered by **Movrs** algorithms, pitchers fired fastballs while scaffolding, forklifts and hard hat-wearing construction workers were still cleaning up the space. That's how much Johnson — one of the sport's most innovative pitching minds — prioritized the data his athletes could glean from the synchronization of biomechanics analysis and ground reaction forces in real time. Prior systems required processing times too long to make immediate adjustments.

The idea behind the NewtForce pitching mound originated with Johnson, who mentioned the idea to his childhood friend of more than 40 years, **Kyle Barker**, who operates his own aerospace engineering firm, **AeroNautique**.

"If you're really going to get into development, you need it real time," Johnson said. "A pitcher can't wait to throw pitches seven minutes at a time. We started testing it, and it's a leader in the industry. This is something that nobody has been able

to perfect, quite frankly, except him."

For Barker, this installation was a milestone he had waited for since the company's founding in 2020. Sports technology, he explained, suffered by existing in "fractured silos of excellence." Joining forces with other providers — in this case, multi-camera motion capture from **Movrs** — lets the end user get better insights in a more seamless fashion. By syncing biomechanics data and mound force data, coaches can quickly pinpoint areas needing improvement.



BY JOE LEMIRE

"Movrs has been a great addition for us there because they buy into that vision," Barker said. "A lot of these coaches will tell you they don't need any more data. They need to try and figure out what to do with what they've got."

Representatives from numerous MLB organizations have visited Athens, Ga., to see Georgia's facilities and take notes for their own operations. Johnson said the pitching tunnels — which, in addition to **NewtForce** and **Movrs**, have **Trackman** radars and **Edgertronic** super slow-mo cameras — are used daily, with each pitcher getting assessed about three times a week (though not always while throwing baseballs at full effort).

"This is not medical-grade, research-level data acquisition," Barker said. "This is getting on the ragged edge of sampling rates and wait times and trying to find a sweet spot where we can give you something before the guy gets the ball back and

throws the next pitch."

Then, a coach can give a cue for the pitcher to adjust his movement in hopes of effecting change. That rapid feedback loop, he added, can help identify necessary tweaks far more expeditiously than a strength and conditioning coach designing an eight-week program to correct a physical defect — which might still happen but can sometimes be avoided.

"What's completely liberating to the right kind of coach there is he can be wrong," Barker said. "He can be wrong two or three times in that session, and see it because he's seeing the next pitch — we've wasted two pitches, not two months."

Making this new system possible was a joint integration stemming from **Movrs**' change in business model from direct sales to a partner-led approach. **Movrs** is a graduate of the **Comcast NBCUniversal SportsTech Accelerator**, through which it has collaborated with **Sky Sports** and **NBC Sports**.

"We had to figure out where we sat in the value chain, so we went to this partner model, and **NewtForce** represents our first partner," said **Movrs** CEO **Dorian Pieracci**. "If we want to explore or go into baseball, we want a partner who's going to go and leverage our technology and our capabilities."

The ideal partner for **Movrs**, he added, is a firm with technical proficiency to build a differentiated product and then also a capable, compatible executive team. **NewtForce**, led by Barker and former MLB pitcher **Zach Day**, checked both of those boxes in baseball, and **Pieracci** hopes to find similar counterparts in other sports and even other industries.

"**Movrs** helps people and artificial intelligence agents understand how humans move and interact in the real world by generating structured data from video," he said. "Ultimately, whether that's for sports, whether that's for robotics, whether that's for whatever else, the partner model actually allows us to do that across a variety of markets and verticals."

Georgia's Johnson, whose career has wound through seven colleges and a stint as the **Minnesota Twins**' pitching coach, was an early adopter of biomechanical analysis a dozen years ago. While at **Central Arkansas** some 15 years back, a researcher visited the team to run studies measuring the directional force pitchers were placing on their back foot — how much was down into the mound or back toward the pitching rubber.

Early versions of **NewtForce** a decade ago weighed "about two tons," Johnson recalled, but even the prototypes provided the missing dataset. Since then, Barker has streamlined the hardware to be less cumbersome.

"We started to see extreme relevance in what we were getting," Johnson said, "and then obviously he's taken it and gone to the moon."

More than 50 high-tech mounds have been installed to date. **Pittsburgh Pirates** ace **Paul Skenes**, who pitched for Johnson at **LSU**, began using **NewtForce** in college and has said, "The mound removes the guesswork."

Initially, the **NewtForce** mound had cameras shooting video, but the data wasn't synchronized with the imagery. The new setup with **Movrs** approaches the "holy grail" of analysis, Johnson said.

**Joe Lemire can be reached at:**  
[jlemire@sportsbusinessjournal.com](mailto:jlemire@sportsbusinessjournal.com).

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## MARKETING AND SPONSORSHIP

# The popularity of padel (however it's pronounced) is rising in the U.S.

**M**AYBE YOU'VE HEARD this tale before. It's about an unfamiliar yet flourishing racket sport, with outside investment pouring in and growth restricted largely by the amount of facilities available in which to play.

Nope, we're not referring to pickleball — which

**Sports & Fitness Industry Association** research has labeled America's fastest-growing sport for the past four years. Its first cousin is padel, a European import, which has also seen impressive U.S. growth in recent years.

Padel is more akin to squash than pickleball. It requires a higher degree of athleticism and a more expensive court

enclosed by glass and wire mesh, and the cost of the equipment and court time is a few levels up from pickleball. Across the industry, no one sees it eclipsing pickleball's current popularity — or ever, for that matter. Still, in terms of a sport coming into its own, padel now is where pickleball was five or six years ago, and is primed for growth. Last year, more than 3,200 padel clubs opened worldwide, representing a 26% increase from the year prior.

Just one substantial complication. Across the U.S., there's disagreement on how to pronounce padel. Is it “paddle,” like an oar, or “pa-dell”? Call it the latter-day version of “to-may-to” versus “to-mah-to.” Like that dilemma, it remains unresolved.

Consequently, within a recent **Pro Padel League** deck, one of the initial pages dealt with “WTF is padel and how do you pronounce it?” The PPL announced a \$10 million capital raise this spring, with funding from **Left Lane Capital**, **Kactus Capital**, **Gary Vaynerchuk** and others. A more recent sale of partial equity in the New York City PPL franchise valued it at \$10 million — which is impressive however the sport is pronounced.

“It's a great spectator experience. The demos are young and affluent, and there's a lot of value to be created at a time all racket sports are really growing,” said **Diane Gotua**, a former **NBA** and **Fanatics** executive who's been the PPL's chief commercial officer since May. Gotua calls the sport “paddle,” but she suggested some are avoiding that pronunciation since it is too close to paddle tennis.

“Pah-del” seems the more accepted pronunciation in Europe, especially Argentina and Spain, where the sport gained popularity after being invented in Mexico in the 1970s. Spain now claims around 6 mil-

**“It's a great spectator experience. The demos are young and affluent, and there's a lot of value to be created at a time all racket sports are really growing.”**

— **Diane Gotua**, chief commercial officer, PPL



Last year, more than 3,200 padel clubs opened worldwide, representing a 26% increase from the year prior.

lion padel players and 20,000 courts. Across the U.S., there are fewer than 700 padel courts and perhaps 110,000 players, but there are widespread predictions of exponential growth, even with construction of a padel court costing around \$25,000 to \$30,000.

The comparison of padel with pickleball inevitably arises. Are they complementary, or do they cancel each other out? The **Global Padel Report** notes: “While pickleball also demands good footwork and quick reflexes, the smaller court and lighter ball require less physical exertion.” The report also says that 30% of padel clubs have pickleball courts. Still, there's a different psychographic with padel, along with different demographics.

“Padel is Formula 1, while pickleball is more NASCAR,” said **David Levy**, CEO of **Horizon Sports & Experiences**, which consulted with the Pro Padel League before its 2023 launch. “Like F1, padel is going to have more technology and be more upscale and overall faster, with a smaller, elite audience. All the stars in pickleball are American. The padel stars are European and Latin American, so it's going to be different in feel.”

**Franklin Sports** has been selling pickleball equipment since 2016 and had pickleball players as endorsers since 2021, and its X-40 is the official outdoor ball of **USA Pickleball**. It has dabbled in lower-end padel

equipment, but is prepping a full “premium-priced” padel line for release to retail early next year.

“The TAM on padel is not what pickleball is and it never will be,” acknowledged **Franklin President Adam Franklin**, “but it's growing fast, and it's growing with premium price points that we feel will hold.”

**Franklin Sports'** new padel rackets will be retail priced at \$300-\$400, along with a new ball and accessories. There's been a bit of a retail glut for pickleball equipment, but **Franklin** insisted that “retailers that have been carrying pickle in a big way are wanting to get into padel — with the right brands — as long as they don't repeat the mistakes some of them made with pickle, when they took everything from everybody.”

“The best news is that we've seen pickleball becoming a feeder sport for padel, so the growth is now consistent,” he added. “Now it's about building more courts.”

Agreements for **Franklin Sports** with padel leagues and players are forthcoming. In the meantime, there's that nettlesome pronunciation snag to adjudicate.

“I've been talking to C-suites and the leaders of all the padel leagues and padel organizations around the world, and there's even disagreement there,” **Franklin** chuckled. “I was already a bit confused between a pickleball paddle and a padel racket, but at least that's consistent. As growth continues, we'll develop a standard.”

**Terry Lefton** can be reached at [tlefton@sportsbusinessjournal.com](mailto:tlefton@sportsbusinessjournal.com).



At Hard Rock Stadium, queues for the shuttle clear 45 to 60 minutes after a game, and post-game waits average 8 to 10 minutes.

decade, with the addition of the Miami Open tennis tournament and the Miami F1 Grand Prix. Mola's team isn't unique among pro sports organizations in finding more important ways to use what formerly was just surface parking.

Roughly 1,600 cars parked at HRS Express satellite lots during the shuttle's 2024 debut, but 2,900 cars used off-site lots during the Dolphins' home opener this season against New England, an 81% jump. Geico was brought in as a sponsor for the 2025 NFL season, helping offset the cost of the program. The Geico deal "gives us a chance to tell a story about what this is," Mola said. "This isn't just about parking; this is about a way to get to the stadium."

The University of Miami began running HRS Express buses for Hurricanes football games this fall, and the Dolphins are utilizing the shuttle service in a new young professionals club they launched; its \$120 ticket includes transportation to the stadium and to postgame party spots in Fort Lauderdale and Miami.

The shuttle system also creates a clear rideshare destination outside of the stadium's immediate ecosystem. When a fan hits the rideshare button on the stadium's app or website, the HRS Express is the first option that comes up, part of an active campaign to promote the shuttle service that also includes in-stadium and in-game messaging.

Most stadiums and arenas geofence their venues, essentially creating an invisible digital fence that doesn't allow rideshare cars inside. Beyond the geofence is usually a free-for-all. Mola hopes to continue growing the percentage of HRS Express users seeking rideshares at the satellite lots, a possible (partial) solution to the rideshare conundrum that most arenas and stadiums face in the U.S. and Canada, especially post-event.

"It's a supply/demand challenge," he said. "When a big venue like ours unloads, it's 10% [of the stadium]; that's a lot of riders at one moment that come out the door. There is a higher demand at that moment than there is supply of vehicles, and that's one of the big issues for venues everywhere."

The HRS Express can ingest that demand in bigger gulps. The average Hard Rock Stadium game-day car holds 2.5 passengers; every 250 people riding the HRS Express takes a hundred cars off the road.

That means fewer pedestrians crossing walkways and forcing traffic to stop as they make walks as long as 20 to 25 minutes to their cars.

And less traffic means a better experience for the roughly 14,000 to 15,000 season-ticket members who still park in the lots surrounding the stadium.

"When you talk about transportation and traffic and cars, it's all tied together," Mola said. "It's one of those things that we think will be imperceptible to our members, but they're going to get home faster every game, get to the game faster."

*Bret McCormick can be reached at [bmccormick@sportsbusinessjournal.com](mailto:bmccormick@sportsbusinessjournal.com).*

## FACILITIES AND TICKETING

# How Geico HRS Express speeds fans in and out of the Hard Rock Stadium fray

**M**IAMI DOLPHINS FANS stuck in pre- or post-game traffic around **Hard Rock Stadium** may have longingly watched a steady stream of dark buses emblazoned with Geico zip past in the black-car lane.

They're the Geico HRS Express buses, and they exist to get fans to and away from Hard Rock Stadium as quickly as possible, using the reserved traffic lane the Dolphins created for premium seating ticket holders around 2015.

"They're passing traffic as they're getting out, which makes them feel like they've got VIP status," **Jose Mola**, Hard Rock Stadium's vice president of stadium and campus operations, said of the HRS Express riders.

The effects ripple outward, helping the stadium's operations team empty the site quicker, reducing pedestrian traffic that slows the filling or emptying of stadium parking lots. It brings structure to the often

haphazard rideshare setups that surround sports venues. And it's decreased the number of cars parked on-site by a third since 2023, meaning land can be repurposed for higher uses.

Here's how it works:

The satellite lots sit 10 miles north of the stadium at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and five miles to the south at the Golden Glades parking garage. Parking at those sites costs \$10, but riding the HRS Express to the stadium is free. For fans dropped off at the satellite lots (either by a friend, taxi, dirigible or an Uber or Lyft), their HRS Express experience would be free.

Hard Rock Stadium arranged a partnership with Academy Buses to provide 110 buses (and drivers).

Those buses line up just outside the stadium's north gate after events. Eight to 10 buses load simultaneously — with an assist from Hard Rock Stadium staff — then move off the property through the black-car lanes for the 10- to 15-minute drive to the satellite lots. The stadium worked with the Department of Transportation to ensure that once on the highway, the buses have a straight shot to the satellite lots.

Queues clear 45 to 60 minutes after the game, and postgame waits average 8 to 10 minutes, Mola said.

The HRS Express appears to be improving its riders' game experience. It posted a net promoter score (NPS) of 96 following the Dolphins' 2024 season finale against the 49ers, at that point its fifth consecutive game with an NPS deemed "world class," meaning 70 or higher. More than 7,500 left the stadium on an HRS Express after the Dolphins' Sept. 29 "Monday Night Football" game against the Jets.

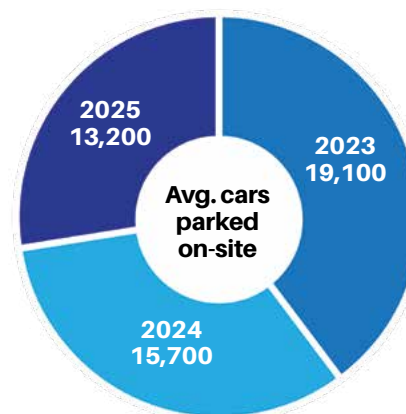
"To make it really effective, you have to make it convenient and more compelling than driving," said **Hassan Madhoun**, director of Momentum Transport Consultancy, whose firm was not involved with the Hard Rock shuttle system but works with sports organizations to design similar concepts. "So, you have to look at the journey, the transfer onto the bus, the ride to the stadium and especially the ride back on egress, to make it more compelling than driving."

## THE RIGHT FORMULA

Hard Rock Stadium's campus and event calendar have shifted significantly during the last

## HRS EXPRESS RIDERS

Parking by the numbers



Riders	2024	2025	Growth %
Inbound	4,100	6,542	59.7
Outbound	3,900	7,400	89.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,000</b>	<b>13,942</b>	<b>74.3</b>



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# The NFL's master craftsman

**CARMEN POLICY'S** fingerprints are all over the modern pro football business, and so are his friends

BY BEN FISCHER

**I**T WAS THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS IN 1978 AND Ed DeBartolo Sr.'s secretary called Carmen Policy with a request: Come to the office tomorrow to meet the boss. Arrive at 5:30 a.m., before there would be witnesses.

Under the cover of northern Ohio's pre-dawn darkness, DeBartolo Sr. gave Policy a secret order: "Eddie's on the verge of making a huge mistake. What you have to do is make sure it doesn't happen, OK?"

He was talking about his son, Eddie DeBartolo Jr., who had just finished his second season as owner of the lowly San Francisco 49ers, purchased by the family for less than \$17 million. The huge mistake his father was hoping to prevent? Hiring Stanford football coach Bill Walsh to lead the 49ers.

DeBartolo Sr. had heard from an authority no less than Paul Brown himself — the "pope of football, especially in Ohio," Policy says — that Walsh wasn't head coach material. Dolphins owner Joe Robbie said the same thing.

Policy stared across the desk at the dark-eyed man in a three-piece suit, dumbfounded. DeBartolo Sr. was probably the most powerful person in Policy's life. But how could he do what was asked? He was Eddie's friend and lawyer. Perhaps the DeBartolos saw it as the usual father-son business relationship, but Policy could be disbarred for secretly undermining the Walsh deal.

Figure it out, DeBartolo Sr. said. Stop the hire, or at least make sure Walsh's contract is short with a low salary so firing him would be cheap. Of course, neither happened.

Walsh got the job and a huge contract. For three years, Eddie helped Policy hide the details from his father. Probably the only reason they succeeded was the distance separating San Francisco from Ohio.

They kept the secret until the Super Bowl victory party in January 1982, Walsh's first of three Lombardi Trophies, when DeBartolo Sr. finally asked directly what Walsh earned. Policy told him.

Exhaling, DeBartolo Sr. only said: "You're so lucky you won the Super Bowl."

It was one of countless times in Policy's life that he appeared stuck in the middle of a complicated, high-stakes dispute, only to emerge with friends on both sides and good feelings all around.

Policy's NFL résumé says CEO of the 49ers and Browns, and limited partner in the latter. A more accurate job description is adviser, mentor and all-around right-hand man to some of the most remarkable people in the last 50 years of the NFL. His shrewd strategic mind, trusted counsel and easy way of

"When Carmen spoke, owners listened. He was a consistent, calm voice, always fair, never playing favorites or coming in with preconceived notions. Carmen was a builder, whether it was a dynasty in San Francisco or a second act in Cleveland."

**ROGER GOODELL**, NFL commissioner

friendship earned him a seat in the rarefied air of ownership circles, and his fingerprints are all over the league's business.

Since 2004, he's been a winemaker and grandfather first. But the sports industry is never far away. Even

## The Champions

Sports Business Journal will honor the Champions Class of 2025 throughout the year:

Date	Champion
April	Carol Stiff
June	Frank Vuono
July	Ross Greenburg
August	Gene Smith
September	Dave Checketts
<b>November</b>	<b>Carmen Policy</b>

that for generations, even today, and I think he thrived in it."

Policy's savvy led him to become a critical adviser to Commissioner Paul Tagliabue and senior staff, said former NFL senior vice president Frank Hawkins. While official communication comes from the top down in the NFL, Policy was an expert in

the always robust back channels between owners and executives.

"Carmen was not only incredibly smart and a great negotiator, and just generally a good human being and a lot of fun to be around, but he was able to put a finger on the pulse of that back channel," Hawkins

said. "He knew what he could share with Paul and the rest of us at the league office without impairing his ability to continue to participate in that flow of information."

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# CHAMPIONS CARMEN POLICY

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## AN EDUCATION IN RESILIENCE

If you left out every second of his career in sports, Policy's life would make a good novel. Perhaps by John Grisham. Born to an Italian family in a working-class immigrant neighborhood in Youngstown in January 1943, Policy's childhood was marked with loss. His mother died when he was nine, and his father passed when he was 15. His grandparents and community rallied around him, and set the stage for a classic American success story.

Before she died, his mother hounded him about his schoolwork and steered him to every public speaking engagement she could find. Church services, prayer breakfasts, luncheons — if there was a chance to hone young Carmen's poise and presentation, she took it. The Catholic Church infused his upbringing, and so did the culture of long hours and mutual aid endemic to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish and Smokey Hollow neighborhoods.

Policy recalls the ubiquity of six-day workweeks and early-morning trips to the factories. "It's just, 'Come on, let's go, every day,'" he said. "And it becomes part of your view of how the world works, how you're supposed to think, how you're supposed to act, how you're supposed to feel. And the church is involved, too — you should be helping your neighbor down the street, too."

Policy charmed everybody. While his academic credentials in high school and Youngstown State University were good, they weren't good enough for Georgetown Law — at first. Relationships and personality put him over the top. A high school chum's father knew the Youngstown State president, who also knew the dean of the Georgetown Law Center. After a meeting, the three men agreed Policy was worth a chance — Policy called it an unofficial form of affirmative action.

Policy was ahead of the game academically, graduating from Georgetown in 1966 at just 23. Policy joined a small private practice in Youngstown and augmented that with work in the city prosecutor's office. That gave him criminal experience.

His reputation as a lawyer grew. He quickly became known among northeastern Ohioans of means — including some figures in organized crime — as their attorney of choice. At some point as a young lawyer, Policy recalls, he attended a charity golf outing and struck up a friendship with Eddie DeBartolo, a "feisty kind of effervescent guy" whose father's company owned one of the largest retail real estate portfolios in the country. A few years later, Policy represented a contractor whom the DeBartolo Corporation owed \$600,000; Policy got it for him, upsetting DeBartolo Sr. but earning his respect in the process.



Policy served on seven NFL committees and working groups, including the powerful finance committee.

In those days, Policy hobnobbed with the elites, but took care of his employees, too. In 1975, the Mahoning County Legal Secretaries Association honored him as the "Boss of the Year." (His son, Green Bay Packers CEO Ed Policy, says: "He doesn't just manage up; he manages up, down and sideways extremely well.") The next year, at age 33, he argued a losing case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court that

dealt with the use of wiretapping evidence.

In 1978, Policy played a starring role in one of the most notorious trials in Ohio history, when a Cleveland jury convicted Policy's client, Ronnie "The Crab" Carabbia, of murdering mob kingpin Danny Greene with a car bomb. The evidence was overwhelming and Carabbia went to prison. But the trial dragged on for months, and Policy became a main character in the nightly news. He emerged with a reputation as one of the state's best young attorneys. "He was excellent," lead prosecutor Carmen Marino told Cleveland Scene magazine in 2006. "He was diligent, almost to a fault. We were in that trial six days a week for three months, and he was always well-prepared. He made an excellent closing argument."

But 2,500 miles away, the DeBartolos had bought the 49ers, and within a year, Policy would be knee-deep in sports, helping negotiate Walsh's contract for his friend,

Eddie. Over the coming decade, the 49ers became a dynasty, but in a reflection of his unique role with the team, his own work ethic and the relatively simple nature of the NFL at the time, Policy didn't close his Ohio law practice until 1989, deep into the 49ers' dynasty.

## 'EDDIE'S SECOND BRAIN'

Walsh changed everything for the 49ers. Before him, the 49ers had won 10 or more games twice since their founding in 1946. In Walsh's third season, 1981, the 49ers won 13 games and the Super Bowl. They hit double-digit wins in 16 of the next 17 years, missing that mark only in the strike-shortened 1982 campaign.

At first, Policy was just an informal adviser, still living in Ohio and only involved on team business at DeBartolo Jr.'s request. But their personal bond grew, DeBartolo recalls, and with it Policy's role. By 1982, at age 39, Policy was made general counsel, though he still flew home to Ohio after games.

"It was almost like a little snowball," DeBartolo said. "As the time and the years went by, he was just more and more involved, more and more looked upon with great respect and admiration. To me, he was my man, my friend, and something other than just an employee. We were like brothers."

49ers players from that era describe DeBartolo as an especially enthusiastic, emotional owner who loved his players deeply and wanted to reward them handsomely for all the winning. Policy's job was to channel that infectious exuberance into business sense.

"He was Eddie's second brain," said 49ers Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana, who recalls DeBartolo making outrageously generous, off-the-cuff salary promises to players, only to leave the details to Policy. "Mr. D. loved the players and would do anything for us, and he'd say something, but then Carmen would come in and say, 'I know Eddie said this,

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## IN THE WORDS OF THE NFL'S MOST POWERFUL PEOPLE

### New England Patriots owner

**Robert Kraft:** "When we came in, in 1994, he ran what I considered the best team in the league at that time. The Patriots had never won a championship and hadn't sold out in years. We wanted to model ourselves after them, and try to build a team that would represent what they were across the country and the West Coast, and build it up here in the Northeast. I used to go visit him, and he always shared his knowledge and he was a great guy. He was very open. We came in green, and I think he was very helpful. He was someone who was respected and influential."

### Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones:

"He's extraordinary in all of his people skills, his logical approach to problems, his ability to problem-solve. There's no one superior to him in the NFL on that, he was always at the top. He had a way of dealing with people that made them feel like they were at the top of the mountain, and he is a very, very artful communicator. He is that way in front a group, and he's that way individually. I trusted him as much as I could trust a known, up-front competitor ... If you were president, he's the kind of guy you'd want to send as a statesman to negotiate a peace settlement."

## When Policy's words shifted a Super Bowl

**IN THE DAYS BEFORE** the October 2003 owners meeting in Chicago, NFL Chief Operating Officer Roger Goodell called Browns CEO Carmen Policy with a request for help.

The owners would be voting to award hosting rights to the 2008 Super Bowl. Finalists were Tampa, Washington, D.C., and Arizona. Washington owner

**BY BEN FISCHER**

— Dan Snyder, in his fourth year and not yet a pariah among his colleagues, was lobbying “so hard you can’t believe,” Policy recalls.

Goodell and his boss, Commissioner Paul Tagliabue, wanted the game to go to Glendale, Ariz., a wealthy, growing market where the Cardinals and the state were building a dome. It was strategically important, not to mention a place where good weather in February could be counted on.

But it was an ownership deci-

sion, not an executive one, and Goodell and Tagliabue worried Snyder had the votes. Goodell asked Policy to speak on behalf of Arizona.

In that room, Policy became a litigator again,

delivering a brutally effective closing argument on behalf of Arizona. Policy dug into his memories of the 49ers’ first Super Bowl in Detroit in 1982, when a bad snowstorm caused major logistical challenges.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to defrost the Super Bowl,” Policy recalls saying. “Let’s take it

out of the beautiful freezers of the great Midwest and Northeast, and let’s bring it back to the sunshine and glorious weather as we celebrate our colossally successful and popular game.”

Arizona won. “Snyder went ballistic,” Policy said. “He used terrible language in describing what had happened. He was really, really upset, but the truth of the matter was it was time [for Arizona.]”



The league turned to **Carmen Policy** when it needed help lobbying owners to hold the Super Bowl in Arizona.



# CONGRATULATIONS

## CARMEN POLICY

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# CHAMPIONS CARMEN POLICY



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but can we talk about this more? I'll get back to you.”

The genius of Policy, even in the early days, Montana recalls, is how deftly he managed to walk back the owner's words without hard feelings.

“He wasn't adversarial about it, he did it in a friendly way,” Montana said. “He just had a way about making you feel good about making you change your mind.”

As Policy remembers, Walsh was the first to ask for his help on player contracts. Walsh recognized it might be useful to keep his and general manager John McVay's hands clean in tough negotiations.

“They would call me the ‘mouthpiece from Ohio,’” Policy said. “So let them hate Carmen if they want to, just so there was nobody within the team they hated. And that's a decent strategy.”

From 1981 to 1990, the 49ers won four Super Bowls. Policy calls that era “Camelot,” and credits DeBartolo for following exuberance and instincts, creating the family environment so many teams aspire to and being generous to players, even if Policy personally objected on business grounds.

“The players knew my door was open and my mouth was closed, which was very important,” Policy said.

Harris Barton, a private equity investor who started on the 49ers offensive line for 10 seasons, said Policy has been his friend from the day he arrived at team headquarters as a first-round draft pick in 1987. Barton socialized with Policy and his wife, Gail, and Policy introduced Barton to numerous business leaders, including Visa CEO Carl

Pascarella.

These were the early days of Silicon Valley, when the Bay Area drew many of the world's smartest and most ambitious people developing the modern tech sector. With all the winning, many of those entrepreneurs were 49ers fans, too, and Policy recognized what that meant for the team's top and bottom lines.

“Carmen understood what was going on in the Bay Area way before anyone else in sports did,” Barton said.

**LEFT:** 49ers owner Eddie DeBartolo Jr. (left) named Policy team CEO in 1991.

**BELOW:** Policy speaks at a Bill Walsh memorial, joined by Steve Young (left), Joe Montana and DeBartolo.

Policy would invite industrialists, entrepreneurs and investors to games and pepper them with questions about their own companies and potential ideas for the 49ers too, Barton said. He'd introduce players to them, which led directly to Young's and Barton's lucrative investing careers. Policy's own confidence and risk tolerance fit well in that Bay Area culture, Barton said.

“Bill Walsh was the only guy I ever met who could not only run a football team, but run General Motors, too,” Barton said. “Well, Carmen was the guy who couldn't run a football team but could run General Motors, and the 49ers needed that. Carmen understood it was a business experience, and this could be something huge.”

## WHEN THE GLORY GOT COMPLICATED



After the third Super Bowl in January 1989, Walsh resigned, citing immense burnout. The winning continued under new head coach George Seifert, but holding it all together was getting harder.

The Montana-Young quarterback controversy raged after Walsh traded for Young in 1987. In early 1991, the top-seed 49ers lost the NFC Championship

## CARMEN POLICY

- **Born:** Jan. 26, 1943, Youngstown, Ohio
- **Family:** Wife, Gail; five children: Dr. James F. Policy, pediatric orthopedic surgeon practice and adjunct professor at Stanford Medical School; Daniel A. Policy, attorney and business consultant; Edward R. Policy, Green Bay Packers president and CEO; Kerry Policy Groth, works in hospitality and special events in the wine industry; and Kathleen Marie Policy, attorney; eight grandchildren (five grandsons and three granddaughters)
- **Education:** Youngstown State Uni-

versity (1963); Georgetown University Law Center, Juris Doctorate (1966); Georgetown Law Center Board of Visitors, emeritus member; UCSF Foundation, lifetime director; California Academy of Sciences, trustee emeriti

### 1966

- Passes bar exam; bar association membership in Virginia, Ohio and District of Columbia

### 1979

- Joins San Francisco 49ers as out-

side counsel and adviser to Edward DeBartolo Jr.

### 1982

- 49ers win Super Bowl XVI
- Named 49ers vice president and general legal counsel

### 1990-1998

- Member of NFL Finance Committee

### 1991

- Named 49ers chief executive

### 1994-1995

- Named by Pro Football Weekly as NFL Executive of the Year
- Named by The Sporting News as NFL Executive of the Year and among the Most Influential People in Professional Sports
- Named by GO among the Most Influential People in Professional Sports

### 1995

- 49ers win fifth Super Bowl under Policy
- Accepts the Silver Cable Car Award from the San Francisco Convention &



Policy shows off the Super Bowl rings he amassed during his years with the 49ers.

game to the New York Giants, and a late Montana injury paved the way for Young. That offseason, DeBartolo made Policy president and CEO.

Modern free agency was on the horizon and the 49ers decided to leave Hall of Fame safety Ronnie Lott and star running back Roger Craig unprotected in the “Plan B” free agency system in 1991. The next season, San Francisco missed the playoffs for the first time in nine years. Then, the 49ers traded Charles Haley to the archrival Cowboys. The salary cap was implemented — a system designed to make life difficult for pricey super teams like the 49ers.

“It’s getting uglier,” Policy recalls of the time. “We are losing some of our champions. We’re losing some of the best knights of the round table, and they’re heading off into other kingdoms.”

In summer 1993, Ed Policy recalls, he was home in Ohio during a break from Notre Dame, and he found himself in a familiar situation: riding shotgun while his father drove, negotiating a contract from his car phone. This time it was agent Leigh Steinberg on the other end, and they were talking about Steve Young’s then-record nearly \$27 million extension.

“It sounded like he and Leigh had a good relationship,” Ed said. “I don’t remember it being contentious at all. Very respectful and professional, but also very

informal.”

But pressure created innovation. The 1993 collective-bargaining agreement that ushered in free agency and the salary cap in 1994 coincided with the Niners and the Cowboys facing off in three consecutive, bitterly contested NFC Championship games.

After the Cowboys beat the 49ers in the NFC title game for the second straight year after the 1993 season, a sullen DeBartolo told Policy: “We cannot let this happen again.”

The first step was liquidity. Just like they had for Walsh’s contract 15 years earlier, the best friends conspired against DeBartolo Sr., hoping for him to free up another \$10 million for the roster.

Policy quickly saw the weakness in the salary cap system — it was an annual cash spending limit, whereas the most valuable players signed multiyear deals. Signing bonuses and deferred payments in far-out contract years could be used to lower the impact on any single year.

Today, even casual fans know this. But for awhile, it seemed that only the 49ers did. From November 1993 to September 1994, according to the New York Times, the 49ers shifted \$20 million from the capped payroll to bonuses or long deferrals, and narrowly

got under the first cap of \$34.6 million without losing many veterans. Then, they signed a flurry of free agents cut from other cap-stressed teams with extremely low salaries and big signing bonuses. The coup de grace was Deion Sanders, for whom Policy outmaneuvered the Atlanta Falcons despite offering less than one-third the salary.

The scheming wasn’t the result of a brainstorming session or an academic paper. This wasn’t Moneyball. It was desperation to please an owner sick of losing to the Cowboys, Policy said.

“We had to survive,” Policy said. “It wasn’t long term. I was interested in maintaining a veteran team for as however long I could.”

“It was a must. I wouldn’t put up with anything less,” said DeBartolo, who was increasingly away from the team in those days, spending time in Ohio with his dying father. “While I was trying to do that, Carmen and everybody else had their marching orders. He knew what he had to do.”

Whatever the motivation, it worked: The 49ers finally beat the Cowboys and won their fifth Super Bowl after the ’94 season.

The thing to remember about the salary cap is that Policy was on the NFL finance committee at the time. He helped create the system that limited the 49ers.

“He understood that the health of each individual team is, in some ways, a function of the health of the overall NFL, and you want to have a structure that promoted the health of the joint enterprise,” said former NFL General Counsel Jeff Pash. “Within that structure, he would compete vigorously and he would work as hard as he could to have the 49ers come out on top.”

“He was one of the front runners of professional sports really becoming a business,” Ed Policy said of his father. “He was one of the guys who built that 49ers dynasty, and the NFL started designing all kinds of rules to dismantle that dynasty. One of the ways they sustained it was learning how to manage the salary cap in some pretty unique and novel ways, and we still use those today.”

But the push took its toll. The NFL’s modern media rights largesse that would change owners from millionaires to billionaires was just starting to develop, and the spending couldn’t last forever. The broader DeBartolo real estate business never recovered from the late 1980s collapse. In 1997, Policy and Tagliabue were in a car together in San Francisco, on their way to a meeting about a proposed new 49ers sta-

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Visitors Bureau for progress in business for the city

- Receives San Francisco Mayor’s Fiscal Advisory Committee Award
- Part of special committee to negotiate a lease at Hollywood Park for the Raiders to remain in Los Angeles
- NFL expansion committee member for the Carolina Panthers
- NFL expansion committee member for the Jacksonville Jaguars

#### 1998-2004

- Cleveland Browns, president and CEO

#### 1998

- Receives 10% ownership stake in the Browns, with the remaining held by majority owner Al Lerner

#### 2001

- Endows the Carmen and Gail Policy Clinical Fellowship, in support of civil rights, at Georgetown University Law Center

#### 2002

- NFL expansion committee member for the Houston Texans

#### 2003

- Member of the league’s “L.A. working group,” along with owners Dan Rooney of the Steelers, Bob Kraft (Patriots), Wayne Huizenga (Dolphins) and Jerry Richardson (Panthers)
- Sells 10% stake in the Browns to Lerner family

#### 2004

- Establishes winery Casa Piena in Napa Valley

#### 2008-2012

- San Francisco 49ers, consultant (sta-

dium project)

#### 2015

- Selected as director of Carson Holdings LLC, for a football stadium planned by the Chargers and Raiders
- Accepts the John Carroll Award from Georgetown University for accomplishments and services as an alumnus

#### 2017

- Inducted into Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame

— Compiled by Emma Grace Jimenez

# CHAMPIONS CARMEN POLICY

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dium. Tagliabue got a call alerting him that DeBartolo was under investigation as part of a political corruption scandal in Louisiana.

DeBartolo pleaded guilty to a felony a year later (he was pardoned in 2020) and subsequently was suspended by the NFL, replaced by his sister, Denise DeBartolo York. He never returned. But during the investigation, the corporation's board of directors took a stronger hand, which as Policy recalls, was the end of his unique brotherly relationship with the owner.

"Once I started dealing with the DeBartolo Corp. and its board and some of the new people that were brought in there, and also some of the people who were involved with Eddie on outside business matters, then it had become perfectly clear that I was no longer in a position to be influential in resolving things," Policy said. "I also realized that unless I could be part of the solution, I had no relevance in the process."

Around that time, former ABC Sports President Dennis Swanson told Policy he should consider the Cleveland expansion team as a life raft, and suggested he speak with MBNA chairman and CEO Al Lerner, who was known to be considering a bid for the expansion Cleveland Browns. Policy knew Lerner casually as a former limited partner to Browns-turned-Ravens owner Art Modell, but little else.

In one whirlwind trip to New York City, Policy had dinner with Tagliabue, who also thought Cleveland could be an opportunity for Policy but didn't know how much he'd already spoken to Lerner. He spent most of the next day with Lerner finalizing their plan to bid for the Browns.

Time has healed the Policy-DeBartolo wounds, but Policy said the end in San Francisco was hard. "When you have a relationship with a guy like I had with Eddie, and he gave you the opportunities he gave me, it's hard to have anything come between that."

## A VOICE IN THE OWNERS ROOM

When DeBartolo made Policy the president and CEO of the 49ers in 1991, he had already deputized him as his representative on most league matters. Policy was DeBartolo's right hand at a critical moment in league history in 1989, when DeBartolo and 10 other owners blocked the near-certain election of Saints executive Jim Finks as commissioner, eventually leading to Tagliabue's term.

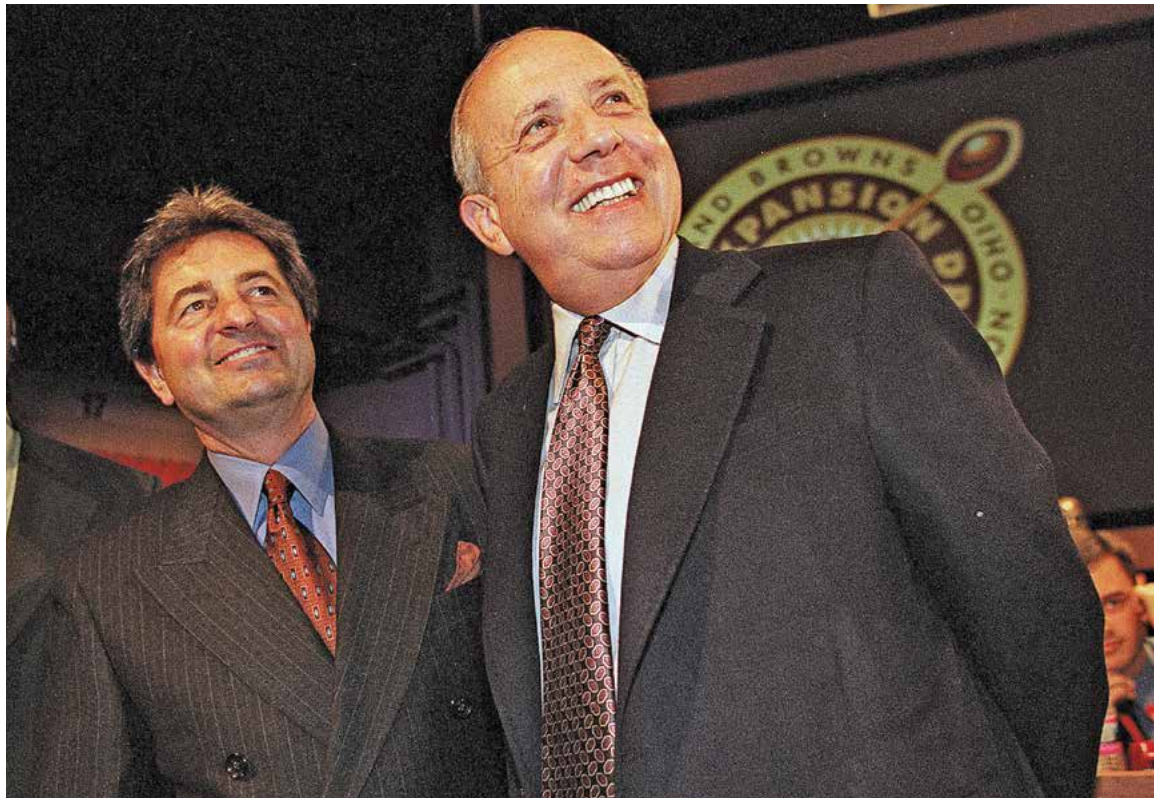
NFL owners occasionally let their top executives speak for them, but Policy was especially important. Nobody doubted he spoke for the franchise; his influence and stature as a non-owner among owners was probably equaled in NFL history only by Tex Schramm.

That continued after Policy became a limited partner and president and CEO of the Browns in 1998, as the top executive under majority owner Lerner.

He served on seven NFL committees and working groups, including the powerful finance committee from 1990 to 1998. Colleagues, friends and rivals say Policy shined in the rough-and-tumble world of league policy and ownership politics.

**RIGHT: Al Lerner (right) provided Policy a second act with the Browns.**

**BELOW: Owners such as Jerry Jones (with wife Eugenia Jones in 1993) said Policy could see both sides of a debate.**



"He had a way, almost as if he was standing in front of a jury giving a closing argument," said Joe Ellis, former NFL and Denver Broncos executive. "He could be convincing, he could be passionate, he could be empathetic — but at the end of the day, you clearly understood where he stood."

Pash says Policy is sought out by league insiders on major subjects, even decades after his retirement, because of his range of experiences with a wealthy dynasty team, a lowly expansion club and the league itself. "When you call him and talk about an issue with him, he won't offer opinions or advice — he'll ask some pretty good, probing questions to get you where you need to go," Pash said. "And he's genuinely interested. He's not interested because he can send you a bill for his time."

Policy became so influential that other owners depended on him for guidance. Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie bought his club in 1994 and was taken with Policy's intellect and savvy in the owners' room, and track record on the field.

"I wanted the Eagles to be more like the 49ers when I bought the team, and who was running it? Carmen,"

Lurie said.

Calling on skills learned as a young litigator, Policy could see every angle to a debate. He also never forgot the simple fact that he was a hired hand, not an owner, even if often he was considered a de facto owner.

"We looked at him as a peer," said Patriots owner Robert Kraft.

## THE NFL'S CLOSER

In 2002, NFL owners were debating an increase to the debt limit for teams, a step that had extra gravity because the league was starting to take on debt itself for the first time with its stadium financing program.

Policy's boss, Lerner, was skeptical, given his banking roots. Lerner could have been the ninth vote to block the increase, but Policy told him not to because it was so important to some of his most important colleagues, said Hawkins, then the NFL's senior vice president of business affairs. "You could tell Carmen had done his political work, and told [Lerner] if he torpedoed it, he'd really isolate himself with the membership," Hawkins said. Lerner went along and approved the increase.

Longtime NFL spokesman Greg Aiello recalls another time Eagles owner Norman Braman took an unusually forceful tone with Tagliabue early in his tenure. "I don't work for you, you work for me!" Braman said.

While accurate, that kind of thing isn't usually said explicitly and the air was thick with strife. Until Policy spoke. Nobody can remember exactly what he said, but the tension broke instantly. "What's that old saying? You don't remember much of what someone says to you, but you do remember how they make you feel," Aiello said. "And



Carmen is the master of making you feel good.”

From small-time legal disputes in Youngstown to commissioners and owners, for Policy, there’s never been much difference between effective negotiations and being a good friend. The same tactics and traits that made him personally popular were his secret to getting deals done. It’s his legacy — or at least, what he hopes is his legacy.

“I would like [people to say]: ‘He treated people well, and when he spoke, they listened,’” Policy said. “If you stop to listen when someone’s speaking, there’s a sense of respect that comes with that.”

NFL owners love to talk about how they are comfortable as both fierce competitors and close business partners. The 1990s dynamic between Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and Policy proves the point.

During training camp in 1992, Jones negotiated with Policy on the terms of the 49ers’ shocking trade Haley, the Hall of Fame pass rusher, to the Cowboys.

“We agreed to do that while he was driving home through traffic,” Jones said. “It was the most impactful club-to-club business we ever did.”

Then, a few years later, Policy played an important role in settling the white-hot litigation between the NFL and Jones over the Cowboys’ single-team sponsorship deals. It was Policy’s ability to dispassionately see both sides of the debate, Jones said. A friend of the NFL as an institution, Policy was inclined to take the old guard’s side. But as a businessman, he understood Jones’ push for a more aggressive approach to revenue.

“He was not someone who would necessarily agree with me, but he was very effective with me,” Jones said. “It helped me communicate with the league for Carmen to be part of the other teams’ view. Carmen could really reason, and I had huge respect for him. He was as important as anybody in working through the ultimate settlements we made.”

Policy was appointed to the league’s finance committee in 1990, putting him in the center of the highest-stakes debates. He and Steelers owner Dan Rooney unsuccessfully tried to find a way to keep Modell from relocating the Browns to Baltimore, then a few years later, teamed up with Lerner to bid on the Cleveland expansion franchise.

“He was a hard worker, and you could probably call him relentless on things he was involved in,” said Art Rooney II, Dan’s son and the current Steelers owner. “By the same token, he never let things get ugly, and even if there was a disagreement, he was always willing to have a constructive dialogue about things.”

Twenty years later, Rooney II and Policy again saw a lot of each other when the league formed the Los Angeles relocation committee to address the tripartite dilemma of the Oakland Raiders, San Diego Chargers and St. Louis Rams all needing new stadiums. Policy was an adviser to the Raiders/Chargers plan to build and share a stadium in Carson, Calif.; Rooney was part of the committee that approved that plan, only to be shockingly overruled by the full ownership, which rejected the committee’s recommendation and backed the Rams’ plan to build SoFi Stadium. The vote was a sign that the old guard of the NFL was giving way to more powerful, new-age, wealthy owners like Stan Kroenke.

Today, Policy and Rooney both acknowledge the success of SoFi Stadium. “He didn’t let his ego get in



Policy founded Casa Piena wines after he and his wife, Gail, bought a vineyard in Napa Valley in 2003.

the way of getting things done, and everybody appreciated his point of view,” Rooney said. “He was always trying to get the best solution possible for the league.”

### FROM THE BOARDROOM TO THE VINEYARD

In 2002, Lerner died of brain cancer. His son, Randy, inherited the Browns. The younger Lerner and Policy never jibed well, and in 2004, Policy stepped down. The Lerner family bought back his 10% ownership interest for an undisclosed price.

While putting the Browns back in Cleveland was a victory for the league and the northeastern-Ohio-returned-Californian Policy, the team has been a poster child for on-field futility as an expansion club. The new stadium Policy helped get built has never hosted a home playoff game; the Browns have never won their division.

The team started with one hand behind its back, Policy said, because the Lerner ownership group only had one season — every other modern expansion franchise had two — to create and organize a team. Also, he said, the league overcorrected after owners

“He was a hard worker, and you could probably call him relentless on things he was involved in.”

**ART ROONEY II**, Pittsburgh Steelers

decided the last round of expansion, the Jaguars and Panthers in 1995, were given excessively generous expansion drafts.

Wistfully, Policy says the team was finding its way — the Browns posted a winning season and qualified for the playoffs the year Lerner died — but the ownership transition stopped the momentum.

“I felt so bad we couldn’t do better. Honestly, I did,” Policy said. “We were getting there, though. If Al had

lived, it would have been a different story.”

In 2003, Policy laid the groundwork for a return to California. He and Gail bought a vineyard in Napa Valley from Rose Mondavi, and founded Casa Piena wines — that’s Italian for “full house,” a nod to their love of family and entertaining. The label makes limited supplies of high-end cabernet sauvignon.

It fulfilled a passion for wine Policy learned as a child in Youngstown, watching Italian neighbors compete for bragging rights over their basement-fermented reds. In 2019, the couple sold the land and vineyard, but retained the wine business itself. Today, they’ve downsized into a still-ample retirement house, with a pool, a guest house and plenty of room for grandchildren.

It’s a good life, Policy acknowledged over a leisurely dinner in June at Bistro Don Giovanni, a breezy roadside restaurant just north of Napa. A favorite of his, the restaurant feels custom-tailored to Policy’s own life story, blending Italian red sauce cuisine with light, Californian flavors.

As he reflects on the past five decades, Policy thinks back on the endless parade of negotiations, and intense disputes between powerful, wealthy people who were used to getting their way. Today, there’s so much money in the system that even losses for the players at the top of the sports business can be lucrative (see Dan Snyder’s \$6 billion exit). That wasn’t nearly the case in Policy’s heyday. “If the money’s not there and you’re keeping things moving in the right direction and so forth, in some ways that’s a bigger task,” Policy said.

Policy talks about the “majesty and magnitude of the NFL and what it’s accomplished, and what it’s capable of.” The league is so robust, he said, that the biggest challenge is commissioner succession. But he knows from experience that nothing should be taken for granted, and it can fall apart quickly.

“It’s all tenuous,” Policy said. “It’s all so quirky. One move this way in life, and everything goes in a whole different direction. And then you sit back and you say, ‘Holy God, I was able to hold on for dear life as this locomotive traveled down at bullet-train speeds and be part of it.’” ✕

# IN-DEPTH COLLEGE BASKETBALL PREVIEW



## Inside the puzzle of programming college basketball

**D**AN MARGULIS flips through his spreadsheet, the puzzle pieces rattling around in his head. It's early October when ESPN's senior director of programming and acquisitions nestles into a chair at SEC Basketball Media Day, his job mostly done for the coming season.

The screen before him includes varying color coding, shades of gray and time slots. There are tweaks to be made, final sign-offs, etc.

**BY BEN  
PORTNOY**

Such is life in piecing together ESPN's college basketball schedule, which will include around 7,500 games across linear and digital.

"It's like Jenga," Margulis said. "You're putting the pieces in, it's all set and then you pull one out and everything falls down. You've got to go buck up."

College basketball is one of the largest programming lifts in

sports television. The scale varies by network, but carving out windows that stand out in an increasingly crowded linear landscape is a constant challenge.

The process begins with meetings at the Final Four in April and concludes in the weeks leading up to the first games come opening night on Nov. 3. By season's end, thousands of employees stretching from programming to production, to talent and everywhere in between, will have helped put on north of 1,500 linear games across ESPN, Fox and CBS.

"It's crazy. It's insane. It is. It really is insane," said Geordie Wimmer, Fox Sports vice president for production. "But you know what? We're used to it. We don't even think of it that way anymore. We really don't. This is the time of year when you're going to get a blank spreadsheet and you're going to have to start filling it in."



**FAR LEFT:** ESPN reporter **Molly McGrath** interviews members of the Tennessee men's basketball team. ESPN will broadcast nearly 900 games on linear this season, covering about 630 men's games and 250-plus women's games.

**LEFT:** Fox's college basketball broadcast schedule will feature approximately 300 games split between Fox, FS1 and FS2. Film director, producer and screenwriter **Spike Lee** (center) got in on the action last season as he huddled with Fox analyst **Jim Jackson** (left) and play-by-play announcer **Gus Johnson**.

trading. Barnes concurs: There's an element of shuffling to the process. Derek Crocker, Fox Sports vice president of college sports, notes there's a persistent push and pull in trying to find the best windows for games.

Programming is effectively a game of chutes and ladders — each move might send you sliding down to the beginning, or up a few rungs, before eventually landing at the final schedule.

"The hardest piece is just the number of hours that you have to spend looking at a spreadsheet, looking at multiple spreadsheets and making sure you're tracking everything correctly," Crocker said.

"As we get further into the process on cable," Barnes said, "it's more about volume and plugging in windows and putting together a schedule that is consistent throughout the season so that we are a destination for college basketball, really from Nov. 3 all the way through March."

Grabbing a specific window is also a chore. The NBA and NHL are in full swing this time of year. College football's postseason now extends well into January. Then there's the behemoth that is the NFL.

Good luck finding a stand-alone time.

"If you're working on NFL, you walk in and say 'Get the hell out of the way,'" Margulis joked. "Sometimes there's a misconception that because of the tonnage, if we lose a [basketball] game here or there, it's no big deal. But it adds up and there are certain matchups that just cut through and certain periods that cut through. ... It's really picking the battles where it makes the most sense."

A crowded calendar, however, isn't the only battle networks face in driving viewership. Consumers are paying increasingly less attention. That means networks have even less opportunity to capture an audience.

Fox Sports Executive Vice President Jordan Bazant noted during a Big East roundtable in New York last month that the network's research suggested there are 75 college basketball games per week on linear. By contrast, fans on average consume parts of only two games per week.

Those trends have since seen Fox add two college basketball windows on Friday night and Saturday in prime time in recent years in hopes of better developing a captive audience.

"The question is, how do you make sure that those games really stand out besides two great brands playing together?" Bazant said. "You try and give great lead-ins, but it's really a competitive environment. We have really great colleagues in the space with ESPN, CBS, NBC and TNT."

"It's, how do you deliver a high-quality product with a high-quality matchup? That's the competitive landscape we're dealing with."

### 'We consider ourselves ducks'

**ESPN'S TONYA ALLEYNE** starts to smirk.

How do you best characterize this time of year? Ducks. Yes, like the bird.

"We consider ourselves ducks," Alleyne explained. "On the surface, we look smooth, but underneath that, we are paddling our little butts off to just get the season up and running."

Once programming sets the schedule and irons out time slots, production staff, talent and every other peripheral part of any given broadcast are set to start booking their travel and coordinating prep.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26

#### COLLEGE BASKETBALL ON TV BY THE NUMBERS

**1,500+**

Total linear broadcasts

**630**

ESPN men's games

**300**

Fox games

**300**

CBS games

**250**

ESPN women's games

**75**

Games per week on linear

### 7,500 games, one calendar

**THERE'S A** flow chart to this whole endeavor.

Programming is the head of the snake. As it goes, the operations, production and talent go. No one can move forward with planning for any game until programming confirms its slot on the calendar.

"It's like building a puzzle," said Bess Barnes, CBS Sports' vice president of programming. "We have windows that we're looking to fill, and we do focus first on those high-impact windows."

The sheer volume of college basketball makes finding viewership-driving windows uniquely challenging.

ESPN will broadcast nearly 900 games on linear this season (around 630 men's games and 250-plus women's contests). Fox's slate is in the neighborhood of 300 games split among Fox, FS1 and FS2 (most will be on FS1).

CBS, too, will have more than 300 games spread across CBS, CBS Sports Network and Paramount+, along with teaming up with TNT to broadcast March Madness — a complex effort in its own right.

Managing all of this, naturally, takes explicit attention to detail. "It's a lot of prayers and a lot of Excedrin," quipped Meg Aronowitz, ESPN senior vice president of production.

At ESPN, one of the company's myriad in-house spreadsheets has more than 100 rows and well over 1,000 columns designating varying arms of the operation for each game. Filling it out takes time, conversations with conference partners and bartering between sports leads at the headquarters in Bristol to ensure desired time slots.

Margulis will tell you programming is an exercise in horse

# IN-DEPTH COLLEGE BASKETBALL PREVIEW

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

Alleyne, a former Seton Hall basketball captain who's been on the production side at ESPN for over a decade, notes there are built-in ways to keep everyone's schedule straight or to recruit help anywhere it might be needed.

For example, ESPN keeps an archive of anyone who has ever been hired by the network. So, if there were a need for a makeup artist in Idaho, there's a person for that already in the system.

"When you're watching it at home, you don't know and you'll never see them," Alleyne said. "But they're an essential part of making sure that our shows run smoothly."

Each broadcast also takes different forms operationally. In essence, the networks scale production to balance cost, technology and talent, while also attempting to deliver consistent quality across thousands of live broadcasts.

Wimmer characterizes it as a sliding scale that determines if games are shot in-person, remotely or in some hybrid fashion.

"A third of games are kind of done different ways [operationally]," Wimmer said. "But our talent — and everyone's going to say the same thing — we feel like we have the best talent in the business. They're always going to be on-site. You can't replicate that feeling of being at courtside."

Aronowitz puts the talent portion of the planning in football terms: It's like a depth chart. Teams of on-air and behind-the-camera staff are shuffled into a hierarchy that allows ESPN to plug its best teams into the biggest games.

How that's all worked out, however, comes in the offseason.

Aronowitz rolls countless hours of talent tape outside the season on the hunt for potential promotions and possible changes to her talent depth chart.

"Play-by-play is an art that evolves," she said. "It's kind of like jeans — one year you're a skinny jeans person, and the next year you're a wide-leg pants person. We're always looking for the next iteration of play-by-play."

## Women's basketball becomes a priority play

**PROGRAMMING WOMEN'S** college basketball has its own quirks.

Viewership for the sport has grown exponentially. How networks capitalize on that in scheduling is evolving.

ESPN has six high-major matchups set for ABC this season, including South Carolina at LSU at 8:30 p.m. ET on Feb. 14, along with Texas-Tennessee and UNC-Duke the following day at 1 p.m. and 3 p.m., respectively.

Fox's efforts include slotting a rematch of last season's title game between No. 1 South Carolina and No. 5 UConn at 4:30 p.m. on FS1 to lead its Thanksgiving week coverage. CBS and TNT also have women's matchups slotted for later this season.

There have already been massive postseason returns. The women's national title game recorded 8.5 million viewers across ABC/ESPN last year after hitting a Caitlin Clark-fueled 18.9 million viewers the season before. No previous women's title game had topped 6 million viewers from 1996 (when ESPN began airing the title game) to 2023.

In looking for the best windows, Margulis makes it a point to push ESPN teams not to think less about tentpole franchise names like "Big Monday" or "Super Tuesday," and more about maximizing whichever window features a women's game.



**"We consider ourselves ducks. On the surface, we look smooth, but underneath that, we are paddling our little butts off to just get the season up and running."**

Tonya Alleyne of ESPN



ESPN reporter **Holly Rowe** interviews Connecticut's **Paige Bueckers** after she led UConn to the national title last April in Tampa. Bueckers has moved on to the WNBA, but ESPN has six high-major women's basketball matchups scheduled for ABC this season.

"He's really pushing hard to make sure that we're doing that in the women's space," Aronowitz said. "It's displacing some men's games in some ways, but that's how you grow a sport and he has the courage to do it, and our bosses are all on board for that because women's basketball is well on its way to being on the rise, if not there already."

Beyond this shuffling of windows, networks have the conferences to consider. They share preferences on certain games, windows, etc., and the networks work to fill those needs. These days, that requires significant cohesion.

The Big Ten's media rights deal includes Fox, NBC and CBS. The Big 12 has deals with ESPN, Fox, CBS, Peacock and TNT. The ACC has relationships with ESPN and The CW. The Big East is slated to be on Fox, TNT, NBC and ESPN.

"All leagues that have multinet network deals now are going to have to sort of work their way through being all over the place and [be discoverable]," Big East Commissioner Val Ackerman said. "If you're all over the place, you've got to find a way for the networks to cross-promote you, or have a really active social media operation, so that fans know where they can find you."

There's a longer game playing out in the networks' efforts to bolster their basketball capabilities.

The early 2030s are primed for mass disruption. The bulk of the major conference media deals are up during that timeframe. The rights to the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments each expire in 2032, as well.

In the meantime, building out the broadcast capability to potentially take on those rights is paramount.

"If there ever was an opportunity for ESPN to get the men's and women's tournament at the same time — both contracts are up in '32 — we need to be prepared by '32 to be able to do the men's tournament," Aronowitz said, noting it's no guarantee ESPN would bid. "And whether we get it or whether we don't, that would be foolish of us to not be prepared for that."

Preparation today means piecing together the 2025 season. But with those games largely programmed and scheduled, the "fun," as Margulis puts it, is slated to begin.

"[College basketball's] fun," Margulis said. "We spend all our time talking about NIL and all the things — and I get it, it's not Archie and Jughead at Riverdale High anymore. But we tend to forget that it's great." ❌

### KEY BROADCAST DATES AND CONTESTS FOR THE 2025-26 SEASON

#### NOV. 3

Opening night

#### NOV. 8

Alabama at St. John's (Madison Square Garden), noon ET on FS1

#### NOV. 18

Kansas vs. Duke (Champions Classic), 9 p.m. ET on ESPN

#### NOV. 24-27

Men's and Women's Players Era Tournament (Las Vegas), TNT/TruTV

#### DEC. 2

UConn at Kansas, 9 p.m. ET on ESPN2

#### DEC. 13

UConn at USC (Women's), 5:30 p.m. ET on Fox

#### DEC. 20

St. John's vs. Kentucky (CBS Sports Classic), 12:30 p.m. ET on CBS

#### FEB. 14

South Carolina at LSU (Women's), 8:30 p.m. ET on ABC

#### FEB. 21

Duke vs. Michigan (Washington, D.C.), 6:30 p.m. ET on ESPN

#### MARCH 7

UNC at Duke, 6:30 p.m. on ESPN

#### MARCH 15

Selection Sunday

#### APRIL 3

Women's Final Four (Phoenix), 7 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. on ESPN

#### APRIL 4

Men's Final Four (Indianapolis), 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. ET on TBS

#### APRIL 5

Women's national championship, ESPN

#### APRIL 6

Men's national championship, TBS



Rick Pitino was the center of attention at Big East Basketball Media Day last month.

## How Rick Pitino reinvigorated St. John's basketball's bottom line

**THERE'S ANOTHER** universe in which Rick Pitino isn't here.

He wouldn't be meandering about the floor at Madison Square Garden in mid-October, sporting a subtly striped black suit and patterned red tie, while a horde of Big East media members follow his every move.

He'd be off in a distant land, excommunicated from the big time following the fallout of "Sneaker-gate" and the FBI investigation into the underbelly of college basketball's recruiting world.

How times have changed.

"There's pressure on all of us in today's world," Pitino said of the sky-high expectations for his St. John's squad this winter. "But we look at pressure as a great thing."

Pitino heads into the season armed with a roster believed to be one of the Big East's costliest, and under a spotlight that has suddenly recast him as anything but radioactive.

That the coaching legend has himself a squad worthy of a top-five pre-season ranking in the AP Top 25 is as much a reflection of the investment made in St. John's basketball program and Pitino himself.

**FROM THE BIG EAST  
MEDIA DAY  
NEW YORK CITY**

**BEN PORTNOY**

"New Yorkers know real from fake," St. John's Athletic Director Ed Kull said of how Pitino has reinvigorated boosters. "They know fraud from phony. They know BS from straight shot — and [Pitino] for sure is that person."

Kull, who's nearing the end of his first year at St. John's after six years at Fordham, has a long relationship with Pitino. The two met during Kull's days at Vitaminwater, where he was among the company's first hires.

The former Stony Brook baseball player had flown to Louisville around 15 years ago to shoot a spot with Pitino featuring former Duke star Christian Laettner — the same Laettner who sank Pitino's Kentucky squad in the 1992 Elite Eight. They hit it off, and their respective brand savvy has helped resource the Johnnies for a March run.

"You can kind of see where his brand, his understanding of the business, is so strong and powerful and how to present himself," Kull said. "It's really been a good match that way in terms of how he's elevated all aspects of what we're trying to do."

There's something to this marriage between Pitino and St. John's.

Big East schools are resourced in such a way they can go all-in on basketball revenue sharing without fear of running up on the \$20.5 million cap spelled out in the House settlement. Football schools, meanwhile, are doing financial gymnastics to make the math work.

"That is our strength [being a basketball-only conference]," said St. John's President Rev. Brian Shanley. "Whether or not that helps us compete vis-à-vis the football schools, I know some of them are a little bit worried that we don't have to pay the football money. But from what I see on television, it doesn't look like the football schools are hurting yet."

Big East schools are believed to be spending, on average, in the mid- to upper-seven figures in revenue sharing on basketball, multiple league sources told Sports Business Journal. St. John's is understood to be on the high end, if not into eight figures.

Kull declined to share specifics on St. John's spending but noted, "We find ourselves definitely in the top percentage of the Big East Conference."

That tracks, considering the infrastructure the school has put in place

post-House, including the creation of the Red Storm Investment Legacy Fund — an avenue for boosters to contribute to the school's revenue-sharing efforts.

"We're dealing with professional athletes now," Pitino opined. "So you treat them professionally."

In the pre-House settlement environment last year, St. John's operated on an NIL budget between \$3.5 million and \$4 million thanks in part to contributions from billionaire booster Mike Repole.

Rosters like St. John's, of course, don't come cheap. That's where the marriage between school and coach has created a Sinatra-esque melody emitting from the Queens campus.

St. John's will play a record 13 games at Madison Square Garden this year to account for ticket demand — an effort that comes after selling out seven of nine games at Carnesecca Arena on campus in 2024 and another three at MSG.

The uptick in games at the Garden is significant. Pitino estimated it takes around 13,000 people to break even on games played at the world's most famous arena, where Kull noted the school can generate as much as a threefold profit.

Demand is part of that equation. Kull pointed to the school recently reseating its basketball venue and a 30% upcharge in ticket sales having little impact on the number of stubs sold. He also suggested naming rights for the on-campus arena could help offset the school's growing investment in basketball.

Consider the 73-year-old Pitino a driving force in that thinking.

"St. John's was averaging five to six games per year [at MSG] and they were averaging 5 or 6,000 people," Pitino said, referencing his arrival in 2023. "They were bleeding financially. Now we're getting 19,000 people and they're making money ... I'd love to see someday us play 15 or 16 games in the Garden."

Speaking with a group of around 200 at a Big East roundtable on college basketball last month, Shanley quipped, "People come up to me on the street — 'cause I'm always geared up when I'm not collared up — and they want to talk about St. John's."

The hope Pitino has brought to what was once a downtrodden and disparate program is significant.

Shanley put it simply: "When you're winning in New York, everything is good."



clinicians and nonprofit organizations can operate collaboratively with teams, rather than under them, the result is authenticity. Conversations truly resonate because they aren't filtered by PR strategy or limited by liability language.

### Commanders and Cardinals: Turning awareness into action

**THE SECOND** Raise Awareness for Mental Health Game will be hosted by the Washington Commanders on Nov. 30, where the theme of the pregame discussion is prioritizing mental health in youth and youth sports. During that event, I'll lead a fire-side chat with former NFL player Marcus Smith,

**Marcus Smith** — shown at Eagles camp in 2017 — has been outspoken about mental health.

who has courageously shared his own mental health journey through the years.

Smith's story is a great reminder that the future of player development lies in developing athletes' emotional regulation, self-awareness and resilience. That's truly where the future of athletic performance lies.

On Dec. 7, the Arizona Cardinals will host their inaugural Raise Awareness for Mental Health game, in partnership with the ABSPP, APAF, LIFE and the Maricopa County Medical Society Foundation. Each ticket purchased through the dedicated group link will include access to an exclusive pregame panel and contribute \$5 directly to mental health programs supported by APAF and MCMS-F. This translates to tangible impact.

### Redefining strength and success

**IN MY WORK** with athletes and executives, I've seen the same pattern on repeat: Performance excels when mental health is integrated into preparation rather than being treated as an afterthought. It's clear that optimizing performance requires intentional strengthening of emotional regulation, focus and recovery. However, this can be done only when athletes feel safe to engage.

When care comes solely from within an organization, players may question whether that vulnerability can affect their contracts or playing time. External clinicians bring confidentiality and neutrality, qualities that make it easier for athletes to speak honestly.

It's time we stop seeing these external partnerships and collaborations as supplementary and start seeing them as essential to support athlete well-being. League clinicians and outside resources can collaborate to support athletes.

These games represent a model that should be replicated across all professional leagues. They weren't driven by a corporate agenda or mandated by the league office, but rather by collective purpose — clinicians, nonprofits, players and teams all have a seat at the table.

This is just the starting blueprint for how teams can align fan engagement, philanthropy and health advocacy in ways that make a lasting impact. Change is coming to professional football's mental health conversation and it's being built, piece by piece, through teamwork.

*Dr. Brook Choulet is a concierge sports and performance psychiatrist, founder of Choulet Performance Psychiatry, and president of the American Board of Sports & Performance Psychiatry.*

# Mental health awareness maturing in the NFL

**T** HIS FALL, three NFL teams will take the field under a new kind of spotlight: Mental Health Awareness Games. But these games weren't conceived in a league office or marketing department. They were built from the ground up by clinicians, advocates and athletes who are driving mental health forward in sports, without waiting for permission.

BY DR. BROOK  
CHOLET

Over three consecutive weeks and across Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Phoenix, this series of games represents a cultural inflection point for professional sports. It brings up the question of who leads the mental health movement in sports — leagues, clinicians or the other organizations in the space?

### Collaboration more than a year in the making

**THE FIRST OF THREE** mental health games will take place on Nov. 23 at SoFi Stadium, when the Los Angeles Rams host the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The Rams' Raise Awareness for Mental Health Game brings together the American Board of Sports & Performance Psychiatry, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the American Psychiatric Association Foundation and The Hidden Opponent.

Ahead of kickoff, there will be an invitation-only panel held at YouTube Theater, at which experts from across the country will come together to discuss the importance of addressing athlete mental health and well-being, especially in professional sports.

As Dr. Carrie Hastings, sport psychologist for the Rams, explains: "There is such power in the NFL partnering with nonprofit organizations, including the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, because it helps decrease the stigmas of mental illness and help-seeking behavior among athletes. The NFL's collaboration with groups such

as the American Psychiatric Association Foundation amplifies the effort to address mental health needs as a unified front, particularly among a population that is still learning that emotional expression is not a sign of weakness."

That kind of teamwork between league clinicians and outside experts is exactly what's needed to make meaningful change and move the needle. While professional sporting leagues have made good progress in providing resources and addressing mental health, real change often faces a barrier of infrastructure, trust and accessibility.

### The red tape behind the headlines

**MANY PROFESSIONAL LEAGUES**, including the NFL, have implemented wellness programming. Teams also are required to hire a mental health clinician who can be available on-site to players as well. However, even the best intentions can get tangled in bureaucracy.

Mandated programming and on-site clinician availability can create uncertainty among players about what's confidential and what might make its way back to front offices or coaching staff. No matter how clearly confidentiality is explained, the fear of "what if" remains. What if I'm seen walking into that office? What if I'm labeled as struggling?

Those quiet doubts can be powerful deterrents. Because what happens when an athlete doesn't feel complete privacy? They stay silent.

That's where collaborations such as these awareness games matter. Independent providers and nonprofit organizations can come together to engage with players and fans without corporate barriers, giving them the freedom to build trust and tackle topics that often stay behind locker-room doors.

It's critical to understand that outside partnerships aren't a threat to league programming, but rather a bridge that makes it more effective. When

## ▶ FACES & PLACES

### CELEBRATING WOMEN IN SPORTS

SBJ 2025 Forty Under 40 honoree and Tepper Sports & Entertainment CEO **Kristi Coleman** (front row, third from left) helped ring the Nasdaq opening bell Oct. 23 alongside a group from Forbes to celebrate women in the sports industry.



### LEADERS CLUB SOCIAL IN CHICAGO

**Anna Burandt** of Playfly Sports and **Michelle Adamle** of FanDuel Sports Network attended the Leaders Club Social event at the Cleveland Cavaliers-Chicago Bulls game on Oct. 9 at the United Center. Members got a VIP tour of the arena and joined a fireside chat with Jason Howard, Chicago Bulls VP of ticketing, and Snow League Chief Technology Officer Nate Schnader.



### 'ALLEN IV3RSON' PREMIERE

The premiere of "Allen Iverson," the three-part docuseries airing on Prime Video, took place at Regal Times Square on 42nd Street in New York City on Oct. 20. From left: Director **One9**; **Jeremy Castro**, VP, Authentic Studios; Jersey Legends co-founder **Shaquille O'Neal**; **Corey Salter**, COO, Authentic Brands; **Colin Smeeton**, president, Authentic Studios; **Marc Rosen**, president, entertainment, Authentic Brands; Jersey Legends co-founder **Mike Parris**.



### NEW BALANCE SALT LAKE CITY DISTRIBUTION CENTER

New Balance opened its Salt Lake City Distribution Center on Oct. 9. The new facility will play a central role in New Balance's North American distribution network. (From left:) **Chris Larsen**, GM, distribution services for New Balance; **Dave Wheeler**, New Balance COO; **Krystin Morris**, VP, operations, distribution at New Balance; and **Ammy Espinal**, senior human resources generalist.



### WSF SALUTE TO WOMEN IN SPORTS

The Women's Sports Foundation hosted its annual Salute to Women in Sports Gala at Cipriani Wall Street in New York City on Oct. 22.

**ABOVE:** Former Indiana Fever star and Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame member **Tamika Catchings**; Champion for Equality Award recipient **Herb Simon**, chairman/owner of Pacers Sports & Entertainment; and NBA Commissioner **Adam Silver** shared a moment backstage.

**RIGHT:** Kynisca Sports International founder/CEO **Michele Kang** (left) accepted the 2025 Billie Jean King Leadership Award from **Ilana Kloss**, CEO of Billie Jean King Enterprises and member of the WSF executive board.



# CLOSING SHOT



**Carson Hocevar** is among the upstart drivers who will be featured in the upcoming NASCAR series on YouTube.

## A Race To YouTube

Documentary series on young drivers highlights NASCAR's efforts to increase its presence on the massive platform. Early numbers show it's winning.

BY ADAM STERN

**THE RACING RENAISSANCE** that has taken place since the pandemic has featured a heavy rotation of documentaries, and NASCAR is focusing on one of the biggest media platforms in the world for its next one.

NASCAR and Connor Schell's Words + Pictures worked together on a five-episode series called "Rising" that will air for free on Google's YouTube channel Nov. 17-21. It will follow young drivers — 22-year-old Carson Hocevar from the Cup Series, 20-year-old Jesse Love from the Xfinity Series and 23-year-old Rajah Caruth from the Craftsman Truck Series.

NASCAR put a specific effort on growing its presence on YouTube after focusing more on other platforms such as X, TikTok and Instagram in prior years. That renewed focus has paid off, as NASCAR made gains in monthly subscribers and views.

For example, NASCAR gained 50,000 subscribers during February this year versus 30,000 in February 2024 and 12,000 for the same month in 2023, according to Social Blade data. In the last 30 days, the NASCAR channel on YouTube has generated more than 10,000 new subscribers and nearly 24 million views, according to Social Blade. NASCAR now boasts 1.57 million YouTube subscribers.

"It's the No. 1 platform in the world. I started at NASCAR very focused on how we can grow our presence — our NASCAR channel — on YouTube. I mean, there's more than, what, 2.5 billion active users globally? You're seeing now the emphasis that other sports are putting on YouTube," said John Dahl, NASCAR's senior vice president of content, citing the Kansas City Chiefs-Los Angeles Chargers game from Brazil that the NFL put

on the platform. "That tells you all you need to know about how important YouTube is and will be in the future, and the more that I think we can control our own destiny with an increasing presence and growth of our YouTube channel and NASCAR channel, I think the better positioned we are for the future."

Other motorsports series on YouTube include Formula 1, which has 13.6 million subscribers; IMSA (1.04 million); Formula E (997,000); Monster Energy Supercross (726,000); and IndyCar (445,000).

Other projects NASCAR did this year are the "Earnhardt" documentary on Prime Video and one on Bowman Gray Stadium that aired on FS1.

Word + Pictures' Matthew Chase has been directing and producing the series since the season opener at Daytona in February. Three of the episodes

are finished, and the fourth is far along. But the fifth and final one will have a quick turnaround: It is still being shot because Love made the championship race Nov. 1 at Phoenix.

Hocevar is a mercurial talent who has ruffled plenty of feathers with fellow drivers for his moves on the track in recent seasons. Dahl joked that he recalled a race this year that Hocevar nearly won, but in the process upset several star drivers, an example of how he's making a name for himself in a sport that favors mavericks.

"I was listening to the coverage and I'm like, 'I hope people haven't forgotten how many drivers Dale Earnhardt would rub the wrong way in his prime,'" Dahl said. "This is part of the sport's legacy and history: You have to have a wide range of characters and personalities, so we lean right into that." ✖



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