



**KANTAR**

# **NOW & NEXT in FAN ENGAGEMENT**

**10 Opportunities  
for 2021**

All data are Kantar U.S. MONITOR: COVID-19 Survey (April 23-29, 2020; N =2,000) unless noted otherwise  
Please contact the U.S. MONITOR team for any questions regarding methodology



# NOW & NEXT in Fan Engagement: 10 Opportunities for 2021

#1



Rebuilding Confidence

#2



Commanding Attention

#3



The Social Justice  
Balancing Act

#4



The Gen Z Problem

#5



No Sure Thing

#6



Women on the March

#7



Game On

#8



Amateurism is Over

#9



Pushing the Boundaries

#10



Come Together

# Sports in 2020-2021

## Disrupted, but not defeated



Blindsided by the disruption of 2020, the sports industry enters a new year on an uncertain footing. Big questions—such as **“When will it be safe enough to return to live events?”** and **“Is sports in danger of losing the next generation of fans?”**—loom large for the future of sports. Facing down a deadly pandemic, social unrest and political upheaval, 2020 was a year to forget for many businesses around the world. But with a business model reliant upon drawing large crowds to both drive revenue and excite fans watching from home, the sports industry was uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19’s devastation. For sports, the result was historic losses—and a near-term outlook for the industry that is as volatile as it has ever been.

A new, energized marketplace is coming into focus, and it’s tempting to assume that a return to so-called normal will bring packed stadiums and sky-high sports viewership. As Americans evaluate what works and what doesn’t in their lives, they’re seeking a reset and a new way forward. The sports industry—like everything in the culture under review—must rise up and respond to fans’ evolving aspirations. While challenges abound, opportunity presents itself to those willing to reimagine the role of sports in a post-pandemic world.

**Kantar Sports MONITOR’s 2021 Fan Engagement Study** was created to deliver a foundational understanding of modern sports fans in this time of great change. (See [appendix for details](#).) By scanning the sports landscape and analyzing the results of this in-depth study of fans’ attitudes and motivations, the Kantar Sports MONITOR team has identified the following **10 critical opportunities for engaging modern sports fans**. We hope it helps you and your organization validate assumptions and challenge thinking, and inspires new ideas for success in the sports marketplace of tomorrow.

# #1

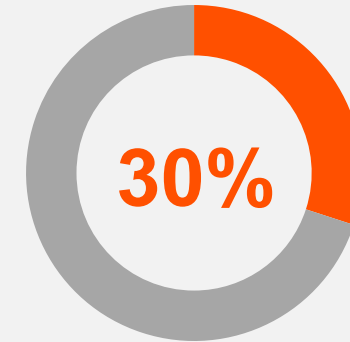
## Rebuilding Confidence

Engaging the COVID-era sports fan will require reassurance about the safety and hygiene of live events.

### WHAT TO KNOW NOW

Most sports fans have adopted a safety-first mentality throughout the pandemic; they wear masks, and they favor both the enforcement of safety guidelines by businesses and a more communal approach to combatting COVID-19. Their wariness has extended to their approach toward live sporting events, too, with most fans opting to take a wait-and-see approach to attendance in the summer months. Now, nearly a year after COVID-19 came to the U.S., fewer than one-third of fans are confident that attending an event is safe.

I am extremely/very confident that attending a live sporting event in my area is safe today  
(December 2020)



vs. 29% in October 2020

### WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

With the vaccine rollout proceeding more slowly than anticipated, the first half of 2021 is likely to be more like 2020 than most sports marketers would prefer. Yet, as leagues and teams gradually welcome fans back, venues' top priority must be squarely focused on rebuilding fans' confidence in the live sporting event experience. But as the pandemic's impact on American life diminishes later in 2021, it will be critical for teams and venues to understand how fans respond to added safety features. With attendance pre-pandemic on a long-term decline for most sports, delivering a satisfying event experience becomes even more important.

Would make me feel safer/  
improve my experience at a  
sporting event

Ample hand  
sanitizers available 67%

Mandatory mask  
wearing for  
admittance 64%

Stadium is certified  
clean by third party 60%

Would not make me feel safer/  
would hinder my experience  
at a sporting event

Proof of COVID  
vaccination required  
for entry 22%

Proof of negative  
COVID-19 test  
required for entry 20%

Restricted ability to  
move freely to ensure  
social distancing 17%





To return to work, play, and spectate, sports and entertainment executive leaders and managers need to build confidence in fans, staff, athletes and talent that their health and safety is paramount. Once confident enough to return, the industry needs to deliver fans an even better live event environment and experience than existed prior to the pandemic.”

*Lou Marciani, Director,  
Innovation Institute for Fan Experience*

# #2

## Commanding Attention

Accelerating media and technology trends mean that sports will need to fight harder than ever to maintain its elevated status in American life



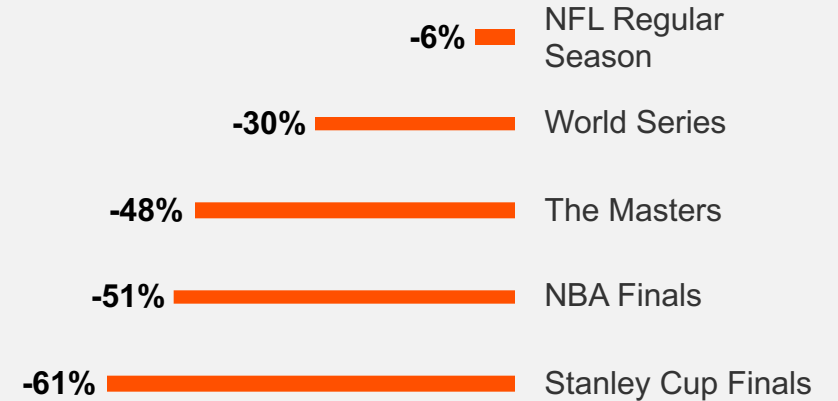
## WHAT TO KNOW NOW

Sports broadcasts remain the undisputed king of television, securing 75 out of the top 100 most-viewed programs of 2020. Nevertheless, most sports leagues experienced significant declines in TV viewership vs. 2019. A variety of cultural or pandemic-related issues contributed to the splintering viewership, but a fundamental issue facing sports is the move away from cable TV to streaming services. With six million more people cutting the cable cord in 2020, sports coverage is rapidly becoming an opt-in experience instead of being almost ubiquitous in decades past.

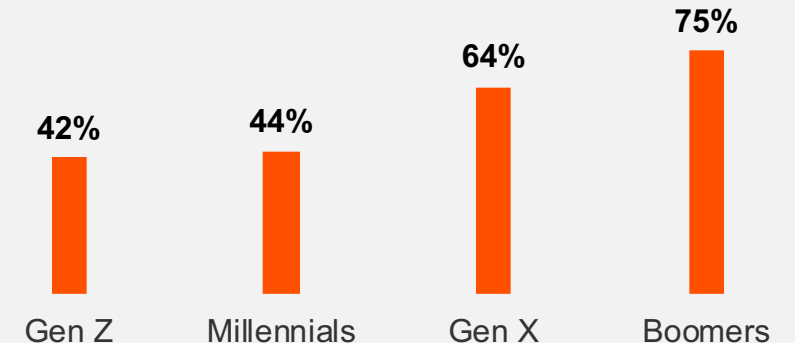
## WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

Competition for fans' attention and discretionary income is set to stiffen. Sports leagues, teams and their media partners will need to work even harder to engage fans, most of whom want to feel just as connected to sports, but at a fraction of the time it took in the past. As Americans' preferences accelerate away from live television and full broadcasts of games, redoubling efforts to command and maintain the attention of modern sports fans is required. Sports marketers who showcase the human side of athletes, highlight the emotional appeal of sports, and provide a less time-intensive way of engaging will be on-trend with modern sports fans.

% change in viewership: 2020 vs. 2019



Most preferred way of following live sports games:  
Live broadcasts of the game on TV







We've seen major disruptions in people's behavior patterns. As a result, even after people have been vaccinated and sports are being played as scheduled again, I think there is going to be, for a number of years, a discernible leveling-off of sport not returning to the same viewership levels it had pre-pandemic."

*Dennis Deninger, Sports Communications  
Professor, Syracuse University*

# #3

## The Social Justice Balancing Act

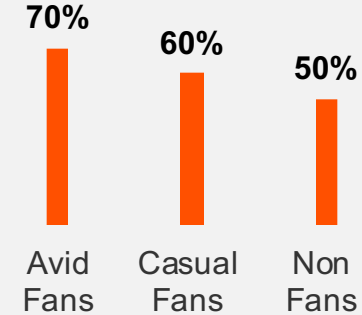
Sports must strike the right balance between social progress and pragmatism



## WHAT TO KNOW NOW

2020 was a year that featured a historic reckoning with racial injustice, with socially active athletes such as LeBron James, Naomi Osaka, Patrick Mahomes and Maya Moore mobilizing for change related to police brutality, voting rights and other politically charged issues. Instead of seeking to quell or silence it, virtually all sports leagues publicly honored and supported the Black Lives Matter movement—effectively casting their lot with Millennial and Gen Z sports fans, who increasingly want athletes to use their clout and influence for positive change.

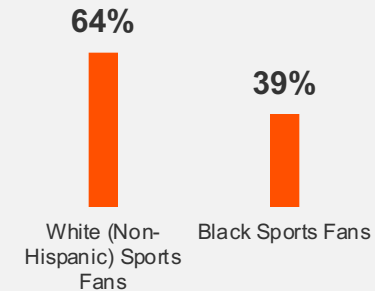
I consider myself a supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement



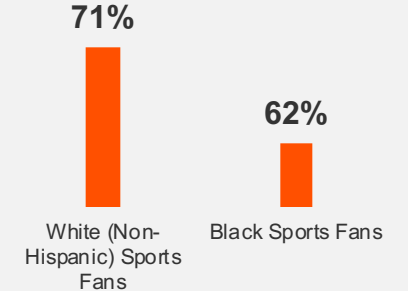
## WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

With athletes realizing their power to enact change in 2020, leagues, teams and sponsors must be prepared to show how they're moving beyond words and making a tangible difference to inequities in sport and in society. Trickier to manage, however, may be the growing fatigue many sports fans are feeling about the presence of political activism in sports. While athletes' social activism was a relatively minor factor in the ratings downturn experienced in 2020, after a long, trying election, many fans will be seeking the traditional comfort, community and escape they get from sports—not more distractions from what drew them in.

Social justice protests in sports have made following sports less enjoyable for me



Athletes should speak out regarding social issues, but not on the field







That was the moment when I said, ‘I don’t want to just tweet. I don’t want to just wear a T-shirt with some words of protest. I want to do something that truly makes a difference’.”

*Malcolm Jenkins, defensive back of the New Orleans Saints, about the murder of George Floyd*

# #4

## The Gen Z Problem

A generation with different values, expectations and motivations demands a more personal strategy for sports

## WHAT TO KNOW NOW

Pre-pandemic, concern was growing in the sports industry that Gen Z (Americans born between 1997 and 2010) were not developing the same kind of emotional connection to sports as previous generations of Americans. Now, due to the effect of the pandemic on schools, youth participation in sports has plunged as much as 50%, and time spent online has surged, creating a potential long-term engagement problem for traditional sports leagues and properties.

# 36%

of Gen Z sports fans are avid fans (vs. 44% of Millennial sports fans)



## WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

Sports marketers must rise to the challenge of bonding with a generation coming of age with endless entertainment options at their fingertips. But a more fundamental issue than understanding *how* Gen Z fans engage with sports is developing insights into *why* they're drawn to sports—and what is likely to keep them coming back for more. Reversing this downward engagement trend calls for strategies that put the human side of sports and athletes in focus, something this generation has learned to expect in the more personal and intimate culture found on social media.

### Top three favorite types of content on athletes' social media among Gen Z sports fans

Sharing everyday aspects of personal life (family, friends, hobbies, etc.)

57%

Behind-the-scenes looks into their private lives

49%

Sharing of everyday struggles or vulnerabilities

38%





There's no strategy for bringing in a 35-year-old fan for the first time. You have to make them a fan by the time they're 18, or you'll lose them forever."

*Tim Ellis, Chief Marketing Officer, NFL*

# #5

## No Sure Thing

Legalized sports gambling may be the next big thing—but ensuring the integrity of the game must take precedence

## WHAT TO KNOW NOW

Legalized sports gambling's moment has arrived. Two years after a Supreme Court decision overturned a law prohibiting sports wagering, three-quarters of U.S. states have legalized sports betting or have introduced legislation to do so in 2021. With Americans wagering approximately \$3 billion—a new record—on legal sports in October 2020, enthusiasm is growing about this potentially lucrative revenue stream, given the positive impact gambling is known to have on various forms of sports engagement (viewership, attendance, etc.).

## WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

With U.S. states experiencing steep budget shortfalls, legal sports gambling is sure to expand in the coming years. Less certain is the impact that the expected mainstreaming of sports gambling coverage will have on the viewing experience—particularly among more casual fans, many of whom want no part of sports gambling terminology or trends. While most sports fans support the expansion of sports gambling, a far more important priority for the industry is safeguarding the integrity of the game. By not doing so, a sport risks becoming the next boxing or horse racing, falling from grace due to the undue influence of gambling.

Morgan Stanley projects legalized sports gambling to generate

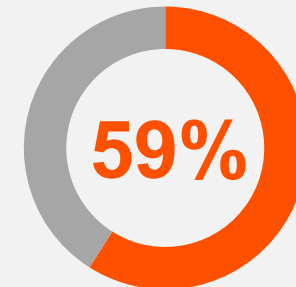
**\$7 bn**

by 2025

### Feelings about legalized sports gambling in the U.S.



I believe that legalized sports gambling will lead to more fixed games for personal financial gain  
(December 2020)



### Preference for sports gambling coverage







The question isn't whether or not we do mobile sports betting. The question is more how and who makes the profit. This is very lucrative."

*Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York,  
reversing his previous opposition due to  
shortfalls in the state budget*

# #6

## Women on the March

Women broke through in 2020, but will need more corporate support to make the next leap forward



### WHAT TO KNOW NOW

In many ways, it was a breakthrough year for women in sports. Women seized opportunities to lead organizations (Marlins' GM Kim Ng), coach teams (Spurs' Assistant Becky Hammon) and even play at the highest levels of male-dominated sports (Vanderbilt's placekicker Sarah Fuller). The WNBA and NWSL bucked the industry trend and showed big viewership gains year-over-year, and the WNBA even broke the all-time sales record for team- or league-branded merchandise on Fanatics with its orange hoodie.

# 493%

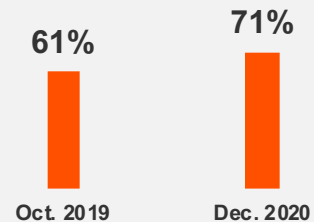
The National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) viewership increase for their challenge cup vs. 2019.



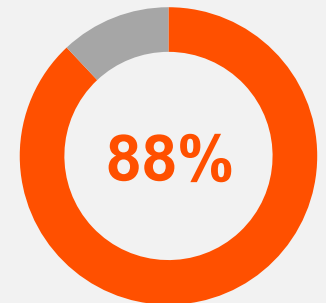
### WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

The longtime explanation for the lack of investment in women's sports has been low viewership ratings, particularly when compared to Tier I men's sports. But as the appeal of women's sports grows and athletes like Serena Williams, Alex Morgan and Breanna Stewart emerge as role models to young girls and boys alike, these excuses become less tenable. While its audience size or cultural impact may never compare to those of men's sports, women's sports and athletes have proven they can be a powerful draw and a sponsorship asset, if given adequate marketing support and investment. It's past time for sports marketers to awaken to this big opportunity hiding in plain sight.

I wish the culture of sports could change to be more inclusive of women than it is today



In general, today's female athletes are good role models for young women and girls







Women's sport has, by necessity, had to be a lot more creative, a lot more flexible. I think at this time when we all have to adjust on how sporting events may look, and how we can introduce new opportunities, and how we can change peoples' expectations and still bring great competition and entertainment to our audiences, women's sports is very well-placed to do that and adjust very, very quickly."

*Alexandra Armas, Chief Executive of golf's Ladies European Tour*

# #7

## Game on

Growing sports will require moving beyond the artificial digital and traditional divide and join forces with e-sports

### WHAT TO KNOW NOW

Many industries suffered in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, but one exception to the downward trend was gaming and e-sports: With millions of American sports fans stuck inside with few options beyond marble racing competitions, playing and watching video games became a natural way to fill downtime and bond with family members or remote friends. As the pandemic accelerates digital trends, it's no wonder that more fans see e-sports as being "on the way in" than any other traditional sport.

### WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

Sports marketers too often treat e-sports fans as a wholly different segment from traditional sports fans, and e-sports as competition for the attention of the nation's youth. But with gaming's cultural cachet surging, brands that embrace e-sports as a way of deepening engagement with Gen Z and of expanding the appeal of traditional sports will have an edge. While stereotypes of aggressive jocks and basement-dwelling gamers persist, the reality is that these segments are increasingly converging; the upshot is that sports-themed video games are playing an even larger role in nurturing a love of sport for the next generation of fans.

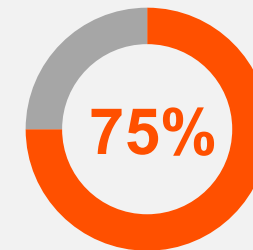
# 83%

The percentage increase in number of hours spent on Twitch in 2021 vs. last year (17 billion vs. 9 billion)

Sports that fans consider "on the way in"

E-Sports	50%
American Soccer	44%
International Soccer	39%
MMA	36%
College Basketball	31%

Playing sport-themed video games makes me follow and play sports even more (December 2020)



Among sports fans who have played a sports-related video game in the last year



NASCAR's iRacing virtual event in May featuring NASCAR drivers not only drew a new record for viewership of e-sports on live TV, but it attracted 255,000 people who had not watched a NASCAR event in 2020, too.



In 2050, when we list the biggest sports in the world, we're going to start with soccer and the next thing we name is going to be a video game ... The ceiling for [esports] is a lot higher than most traditional sports. “

*Bryce Blum, founding partner at esports-dedicated law firm ESG Law*



# #8

## The End of Amateurism

The Naming Image Likeness debate settled, it's time to focus on win/win solutions that aid athletes

### WHAT TO KNOW NOW

The events of 2020 put Naming, Likeness, and Image (NIL) issues in college sports on the backburner, but with a new Congress and several U.S. states pressing the NCAA for clarity and action, it's likely to be front-and-center again in 2021. The once-contentious debate around compensating college athletes is now all but settled. Virtually all involved parties—athletes, politicians of both parties, sports fans, and even the NCAA—are now on record as being in favor of allowing athletes to use their NIL rights for compensation. Now the key issue is what, exactly, will be allowed under the new rules—and who will ultimately decide them.

### WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

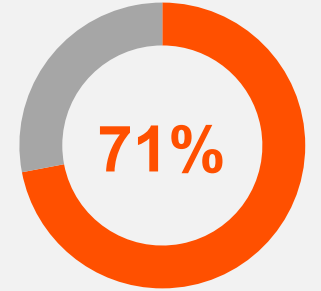
Few in the sports industry expect a resolution to NIL and associated issues until at least June 2021, when the Supreme Court is set to rule on the NCAA's antitrust status. Once finally settled, however, we can expect an explosion of opportunities for student athletes in top sports like football and basketball—particularly with local businesses and on social media. Managing the complications associated with NIL will be anything but easy, but time is clearly running out for what's now widely viewed as an exploitative system. Determining how to help student athletes benefit from the vast NIL changes while still maintaining the reputation of college sports should now be the focus of all.

# \$14.1

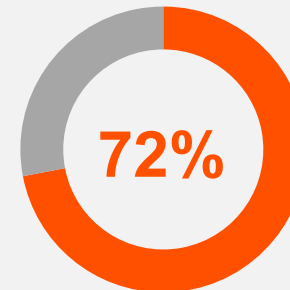
Billions in revenue collected by college sports programs in 2017, up from \$4 billion in 2005

Source: Dept. of Education

I believe university athletic programs take advantage of athletes



Collegiate athletes should be allowed to use their image or likeness to earn money



## THE DARLOW RULES

HOW TO BECOME AN ELITE MARKETER.

The University of North Carolina hired former Adidas marketing director Jeremy Darlow to teach an online course dedicated to teaching college athletes how to develop and grow their personal brands.



The only people on campus that are prohibited from benefiting from their name, their image and their likeness are student-athletes. And that's just not a sustainable position ... given the fact that many of these college athletic endeavors are now multi-billion-dollar industries that are generating a lot of revenue for corporate sponsors and for university programs.”

*U.S. Senator Marco Rubio*

# #9

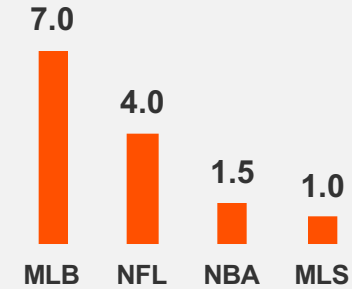
## Pushing the Boundaries

As it seeks to recoup lost revenue, sports must be mindful of fans' values and views of intrusive marketing

### WHAT TO KNOW NOW

Sports leagues are facing a revenue shortfall after the coronavirus pandemic laid waste to their 2020 plans. According to Bloomberg, the NFL, MLB, and NBA lost a combined \$13 billion in revenue due to huge drops in ticket sales, sponsorships and merchandise. While the long-term financial picture remains solid for most professional leagues, pressure is mounting on them to squeeze more growth out of fans through new sponsorship categories, allowing more on-jersey or field logos, or expanding into new geographic markets.

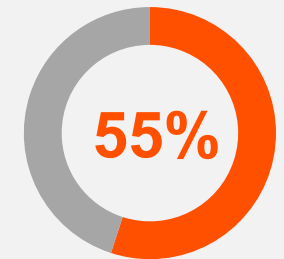
Estimated lost revenue in 2020 (\$ billions)



Source: Bloomberg, November 2020

Feelings about corporate logos or ads on jerseys or on the field/court:

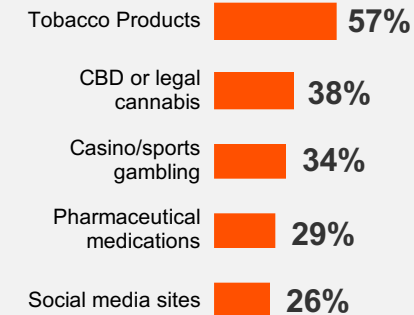
It makes no difference on my enjoyment of the game/sport



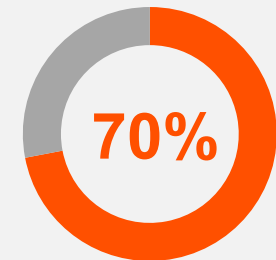
### WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

In general, opposition to efforts to accept new sponsorship categories or advertising on jerseys tend to be overstated; most fans either don't notice or don't care if it doesn't interfere with the action on the field of play. But sports marketers must still be mindful about how the pending influx of ads and sponsorships plays with fans, particularly among casual fans and parents of young children. If these fans leave an experience feeling bombarded or, worse, offended, embracing these routes will only prove to be counterproductive to growing the long-term appeal of sports, particularly if they see it as another way sports is taking without giving back.

Would feel negatively about brands in these categories sponsoring your favorite sport:



Professional sports leagues and teams only care about making money







As an economist, you stand back, you look at the carnage that's taking place—dumbfounded, awestruck, mind-numbing. All of those phrases, they're all relevant because we just have never seen anything on this scale.”

*Patrick Rishe, professor of sports business at Washington University in St. Louis, on the economic impact of COVID-19 on sports*

# #10

## Come Together

Damaged by divisiveness, the sports industry must rally around common causes

### WHAT TO KNOW NOW

The sports industry took a reputational hit in 2020. Embroiled in controversies that irritated both the political left (returning to play amidst COVID-19) and right (embracing Black Lives Matter), in a September Gallup poll sports saw a 15-percentage point decrease in favorability vs. the previous year —the biggest slide of any of the 25 industries measured. The only segments that maintained a positive view of the industry are 18- to 34-year-olds, non-whites, and Democrats, with whites, those aged 55+ and Republicans all turning strongly negative on sports.

# 23rd

**The sports industry's ranking among 25 industries. Sports now has a net-negative rating after dropping 15 percentage points vs. 2019.**

Source: Gallup, September 2020



### WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

As the stress and strife of 2020 subside and the COVID-19 vaccinations proceed, we should expect some of the fans who soured on sports to return in 2021. But re-engaging wayward sports fans will require more than just putting away the cardboard fans and saying, “Play Ball.” In a vastly changed marketplace, leagues, teams, sponsors and other properties should emphasize the timeless qualities of sports that created a cultural and financial juggernaut in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Doing so will require moving away from the divisive debates and celebrating how sports can bring together people from all walks of life.

#### Extremely/very important to experience as a fan

- #1 The excitement of watching games
- #2 Source of entertainment
- #3 Relaxing experience
- #4 The beauty of the sport
- #5 Bonding with my family





One thing that became really clear to us this year is that when you don't have that live product, people don't have that excitement of going to the ballpark, and it affects how many games they watch on TV."

*Rob Manfred,  
Major League Baseball's Commissioner*



# NOTES



- All data shown, unless otherwise indicated, is from **Kantar Sports MONITOR**'s Fan Engagement Study, a nationally representative study of 4,500 sports fans ages 12+. This 35-minute survey was fielded in December 2020.
- "Sports fans" are any respondents who agree with the statement, "I consider myself a sports fan."
- Kantar Sports MONITOR is a syndicated fan insights service for brands and sponsors seeking a deeper, more human connection with the modern sports fan. Contact Ryan McConnell ([Ryan.McConnell@kantar.com](mailto:Ryan.McConnell@kantar.com)) or Steve Kulp ([Steve.Kulp@kantar.com](mailto:Steve.Kulp@kantar.com)) if you have any questions or want to learn more about Sports MONITOR.