

Sports Businesses Adapt To Disruption

Idea In Short

Traditional sports businesses that once relied on ticket sales, broadcasting rights and stadium sponsorships now compete directly with phones, streaming platforms and fans who expect instant access to everything. The organizations pulling ahead are not the ones resisting that shift, they are the ones rebuilding ticketing, media, fan relationships, merchandise and membership around digital access rather than physical attendance. Mobile ticketing replaces the paper stub and opens new data-driven revenue streams. Leagues and clubs increasingly produce their own media instead of depending entirely on broadcasters. Social platforms let a supporter thousands of miles from a stadium become a paying fan. Merchandise now operates as international ecommerce, and memberships increasingly serve supporters who may never attend a single game in person.

What happens when a sports business built around people physically showing up suddenly has to compete with phones, streaming platforms and fans who expect everything to happen instantly? The only way to survive that competition is to adapt, and adaptation is exactly what sports businesses have spent the past decade doing. Traditional sports businesses relied on remarkably simple foundations: sell tickets, sell broadcasting rights, sell shirts and sign sponsorship deals. Fans no longer experience sport that simply. They watch highlights before breakfast, follow players directly on social media, buy merchandise from another continent and expect their ticket, parking instructions and stadium map to live on their phone. The sports industry has been disrupted, and the sections below cover what most businesses are doing about it.

The ticket office moves into your pocket

The first and most visible change happened to the ticket itself, which is slowly disappearing in paper form. Major League Baseball's Ballpark app now lets supporters store, transfer and manage tickets digitally while also providing schedules, stadium information, offers and notifications. Some clubs use rotating digital barcodes designed to make screenshots harder

to resell or counterfeit, closing off a channel scalpers once relied on. This shift spans nearly every major sport, including the National Football League [NFL], soccer leagues around the world and even a sport as old as horse racing.

What looks like a small operational change carries large business consequences. It introduced new cybersecurity considerations that organizations now manage as a standing cost of doing business, but it also gave sports organizations more freedom to work with. Fans need to create an account and share their data before they buy a ticket, and that single requirement opens new paths for upselling and recurring revenue that a paper stub never could. A club that knows which section a fan sits in, how often they attend and what they buy at the concession stand can target that same fan with a parking upgrade, a merchandise bundle or a renewal offer timed to the moment it is most likely to land. None of that targeting was possible when a ticket was just a printed stub with a seat number on it. The ticket was only the beginning of that shift. Researching and betting now happen digitally too, and horse racing, a sport many people still picture as stuck in another era, has advanced as much as any other. Someone interested in Breeders' Cup handicapping can research a race online, place a bet, book tickets and travel accommodations and fly thousands of miles to Keeneland, all from a few minutes of tapping on a phone.

Sports organizations become media companies

For decades, sports organizations produced the competition while broadcasters produced the media around it, and that distinction is fading quickly. Formula 1 launched F1 TV in 2018 as its own direct-to-consumer streaming platform, and by 2026 the service offers live race weekends, onboard cameras, team radio, live timing, telemetry, archived races and multiple viewing tiers across its supported markets. That matters because Formula 1 no longer needs a traditional television network to reach its fans. It can produce its own shows, own the subscription relationship directly, supply specialized content a conventional broadcaster would rarely have airtime for, and learn exactly what its most committed viewers choose to watch. The shift toward direct-to-consumer sports media is not limited to motorsport, either. US viewers who stream a sports event at least once a month are projected to climb past 90 million by the end of 2025, up from 57 million in 2021, as leagues increasingly take over game production themselves rather than leaving it entirely to broadcast partners. Streaming the game: how the rise of digital platforms is changing sports consumption

Football clubs are running a smaller-scale version of the same strategy. Manchester City

produces its own live matchday programming, documentaries, training footage, interviews and behind-the-scenes content through its website, its app and its City Studios operation, and its Matchday Live programming has attracted audiences measured in the millions. A club that controls its own media no longer waits for a broadcaster to decide a story is worth telling.

Social media turns local clubs into global brands

This may be the single biggest change in how sports businesses operate. Geography used to determine who could have a meaningful relationship with a team, since a club sold most of its tickets and merchandise to people close enough to actually attend a game. Digital platforms dissolved that boundary almost entirely. A teenager in Seoul can watch Manchester City training clips, follow players on Instagram, subscribe to club content and buy a shirt without ever setting foot in Manchester.

Manchester City's 2024-25 annual report said its social audience averaged 52 million active users per month across major platforms, helped heavily by short-form video and international player interest.

That figure changes the economics of fandom in a direct way. Nielsen's 2025 global sports report found that streaming has pulled in a wider range of fans than traditional broadcast ever did, with viewers aged 50 and older rising 21% between 2022 and 2024 alone, a sign that digital distribution is not just reaching younger fans but expanding the fan base across age groups. The future of sport: Nielsen's 2025 report reveals growth drivers An overseas supporter may never buy a season ticket, but they can still purchase merchandise, subscriptions and digital memberships while adding real value to a club's sponsorship deals.

Merchandise becomes a global ecommerce business

The club shop used to be exactly that, a shop. A fan traveled to the stadium, bought a scarf and went home. Merchandise operations today increasingly resemble international ecommerce businesses rather than stadium kiosks.

Manchester City's retail sales, for example, have grown across physical shops, online channels and marketplaces, with particularly strong international growth in Asian markets. The club has partnered with ecommerce technology company VTEX to build a more integrated digital purchasing experience that covers both products and fan experiences in a single flow. A supporter discovers a new shirt on Instagram, clicks through, buys it from a phone, adds personalization and receives shipping updates, then gets offered tickets, membership or another club experience later in that same relationship.

This sequence matters because it turns a single purchase into an ongoing channel. A scarf bought at a stadium kiosk ends the transaction the moment the fan walks away. A shirt bought through an integrated digital storefront keeps the club in contact with that fan long after the purchase, through personalization data, shipping updates and follow-up offers that a physical shop could never generate on its own.

Memberships become more than season tickets

Traditional membership models are changing just as much as ticketing and media. In the past, becoming a member of a sports club typically meant priority access to tickets and, perhaps, a plastic card arriving in the post. Clubs can now build entire digital ecosystems around membership instead.

Manchester City's current memberships combine ticket access with digital content, online-shop benefits, hospitality discounts, competitions and other experiences bundled into a single relationship. This shift matters because sports organizations have recognized that not every valuable supporter attends every game. Someone living thousands of miles away can still want a formal relationship with the club, and digital memberships create a tier that sits between a casual follower and a season-ticket holder, something that simply did not exist when membership meant little more than a mailed card.

That middle tier turns out to be where a large share of future revenue growth sits. A casual follower who never converts into a member spends money only when a sponsor's product happens to cross their feed. A digital member pays a recurring fee for a bundle of benefits, which gives the club a predictable revenue line and gives the fan a reason to stay engaged between games rather than only during a handful of appearances with a broadcast crew. Clubs that treat membership as a static list of ticket-priority perks are leaving that predictable revenue on the table.

Summary

None of these shifts replace what made sports businesses valuable in the first place, the competition itself. What has changed is the distance between a club and its most casual supporter, and the number of ways that supporter can now spend money without ever buying a ticket. Mobile ticketing, owned media platforms, global social reach, ecommerce-grade merchandise operations and flexible memberships all solve the same underlying problem, turning a geographically limited fan base into a global one. Clubs that treat this as a technology upgrade will fall behind clubs that treat it as a new business model. The organizations adapting fastest assume fan behavior will keep changing every year and build their systems to change alongside it.