



Sports in the United States

Sports in the United States are an important part of the nation's culture. Historically, the most popular sport has been baseball. However, in more recent decades, American football has been the most popular spectator sport based on broadcast viewership audience. Basketball has grown into the mainstream American sports scene since the 1980s, with ice hockey doing the same towards the end of the 20th century. These sports comprise the "Big Four".

In the first half of the 20th century, boxing and collegiate football were among the most popular sports after baseball. Soccer has emerged as the fifth most popular sport in the 21st century. Golf, tennis, and collegiate basketball are other spectator sports with longstanding popularity. Tennis is currently considered to be the sixth most popular sport in the United States. Most recently, mixed martial arts has been breaking records in attendance and broadcast viewership for all combat sports.

Based on revenue, the major professional sports leagues in the United States and Canada are the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and the National Hockey League (NHL). At \$16 billion in revenue, the NFL is the most valuable sports league in the world.^[1]

The market for professional sports in the United States is about \$69 billion, roughly 50% larger than that of all of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa combined.^[2] All these leagues enjoy wide-ranging domestic media coverage and, except for Major League Soccer, all are considered the preeminent leagues in their respective sports in the world. Although American football does not have a substantial following in other nations, the NFL does have the highest average attendance (67,254) of any professional sports league in the world. MLB has the second highest average attendance of any sports league in the U.S. (29,293)^[3] followed by MLS, the NBA, and the NHL. Of these five U.S.-based leagues, all but the NFL have at least one team in Canada.

Professional teams in all major sports in the United States operate as franchises within a league, meaning that a team may move to a different city if the team's owners believe there would be a financial benefit, but franchise moves are usually subject to some form of league-level approval.^[4] All major sports leagues use a similar type of regular-season schedule with a post-season playoff tournament. In addition to the major league-level organizations, several sports also have professional minor leagues, active in smaller cities across the country.

As in Canada and Australia, sports leagues in the United States do not practice promotion and relegation, unlike most sports leagues in Europe. Another notable distinction is that most sports fans in the United States tend to follow more than one team sport, depending on the time of year, unlike the case in many parts of the world where fans might avidly follow only one team sport such as soccer or

baseball. Thus, it is possible for a U.S. sports fan who follows multiple sports to spend practically every single day of the year watching professional sports, since there is no time of year when all the Big Five leagues would be off-season.

Sports are particularly associated with education in the United States, with most high schools and universities having organized sports, and this is a unique sporting footprint for the U.S. College sports competitions play an important role in the American sporting culture, and college basketball and college football are more popular than professional sports in some parts of the country. The major sanctioning body for college sports is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Colleges collectively receive billions of dollars from TV deals, sponsorships, and ticket sales. In 2019, the total revenue generated by NCAA athletic departments added up to \$18.9 billion.^[5]

Based on Olympic Games, World Championships, and other major competitions in respective sports, the United States is the most successful nation in the world in baseball, basketball, athletics, swimming, lacrosse, beach volleyball, figure skating, tennis, golf, boxing, diving, shooting, rowing and snowboarding, and is one of the top five most successful nations in ice hockey, wrestling, gymnastics, volleyball, speed skating, alpine skiing, bobsleigh, equestrian, sailing, cycling, weightlifting and archery, among others. This makes the United States the most successful sports nation in the world. The United States has been referred to by some as the Hegemon of World Sports.^{[6][7][8][9][10][11][12]} The United States has placed first in the Summer Olympic medal table 19 times out of 30 Summer Olympics and 29 appearances. Unlike most other nations, the United States government does not provide funding for sports nor for the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee. The United States Olympic contingent is additionally the only Olympic contingent in the world to receive no government funding; neither training and development costs nor prize money are provided by the U.S. national government.^{[13][14][15][16][17]}

History

American football, indoor American football, baseball, softball, and indoor soccer evolved out of older British (Rugby football, British baseball, Rounders, and association football) sports.^[18] However, basketball, volleyball, beach volleyball, racquetball,



From top, left to right: Michael Jordan as part of the U.S. men's basketball team, U.S. baseball team, Danica Patrick driving at the IndyCar Series, Sydney McLaughlin, American football Army–Navy Game, the skateboarder Tony Hawk, the 1980 Miracle on Ice hockey game, Christian Pulisic as part of the United States men's soccer

pickleball, skateboarding, snowboarding, Ultimate, wind-surfing, and Water Skiing are fully American inventions,^[18] some of which have become popular in other countries and worldwide.^[19]

team, the start of the 2015 Daytona 500, and golfer Michelle Wie West.

Up until the American Civil War, cricket was a somewhat popular sport in the United States, with presidents such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln having played or watched the game.^{[20][21]} However, cricket at the time was a sport played over several days, and during the Civil War, troops preferred to play the newly rising game of baseball, which was much shorter in duration and did not require a special playing surface to be played.^{[22][23]}



A Grand entry at the 2018 Boswell FFA Rodeo in Boswell, Oklahoma.

Olympics

American athletes have won a total of 2,764 medals (1,105 of them gold) at the Summer Olympic Games and another 330 (114 of them gold) at the Winter Olympic Games, making the United States the most prolific medal-winning nation in the history of the Olympics. The U.S. is ranked first in the all-time medal table even if all the incarnations of Russia and Germany are combined, leading the second-placed Russians by 430 gold and 957 total medals. These achievements are even more impressive considering the fact that the American Olympic team remains the only in the world to receive no government funding.^{[24][15][17]}

The United States hosted both Summer and Winter Games in 1932, and has hosted more Games than any other country – eight times, four times each for the Summer and Winter Games:

- The 1904 Summer Olympics in St. Louis, 1932 Summer Olympics and 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles; and the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta;
- The 1932 Winter Olympics and 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York; the 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley, California; and the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Los Angeles will host the Summer Olympics for a third time in 2028. Salt Lake City will host the Winter Olympics for a second time in 2034, marking the tenth Olympics hosted in the United States.

The United States has won the most gold and overall medals in the Summer Olympic Games, even if the medal totals of the Soviet Union/CIS and Russia are combined, and has topped the medal table 19 times.^[25] The country has won the second most gold and overall medals in the Winter Olympic Games, behind Norway, but has topped the medal table only one time, in 1932. If all of Germany's and Russia's incarnations are combined, the United States slips to fourth in the all-time Winter Olympic Games table.

Individual sports

Golf

Golf is one of the most popular participation sports in the United States, with approximately 24 million people playing golf on a regular basis as of 2023.^[26] Golf's origins can be traced back to 15th century Scotland, where players would hit a pebble around sandy dunes using a stick or primitive club. The game has evolved over centuries into the version played today, which involves hitting a small, dimpled ball into each hole on a course in as few strokes as possible.

Introduced to America in the late 19th century, it quickly gained favor among the upper class. The United States Golf Association was founded in 1894 to establish rules. Iconic courses like Augusta National and Pebble Beach have hosted legendary tournaments.

Since the 1970s, the landscape of golf in the United States has seen significant advancements, particularly in the recognition of female players. This has been highlighted by increased support for women's golf programs, the expansion of women's tournaments, and greater representation of female golfers at all levels of the sport.^[27] Babe Zaharias won 10 major championships and was an Olympic gold medalist. Nancy Lopez claimed 48 LPGA Tour titles, including three majors, in the 1970s and 1980s. Patty Berg, a founding member of the LPGA, won 15 majors. Juli Inkster, a two-time Solheim Cup captain, captured seven major championships. More recently, Lexi Thompson has emerged as a top player, winning multiple LPGA events, including a major championship.

In 2020, nearly 25 million people or around 8% of the total population of the U.S., played golf on a golf course in the United States, according to the National Golf Foundation.^[28]

Boxing

The United States became the center of professional boxing in the early 20th century.^[29] The National Boxing Association was founded in 1921 and began to sanction title fights. One of the most iconic figures is Rocky Marciano, who remains the only heavyweight champion to retire undefeated. Holding the World Heavyweight title from 1952 to 1956, Marciano's aggressive style and unyielding determination made him a legend in the sport. Another prominent figure is Jack Dempsey, a heavyweight champion from 1919 to 1926, known for his fierce, fast-paced fighting style that captivated fans and made him one of the most popular athletes of his time. Joe Louis



Michael Phelps celebrates after winning his eighth gold medal in the 2008 Summer Olympics

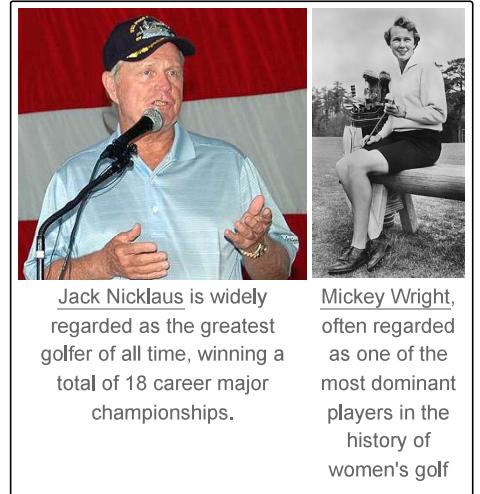


Francis Olympic Field of Washington University in St. Louis, site of the 1904 Olympic Games

was an American professional boxer who competed from 1934 to 1951. He reigned as the world heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949, and is widely considered to be one of the greatest heavyweight boxers of all-time.^{[30][31][32][33]} Louis is widely regarded as the first person of African-American descent to achieve the status of a nationwide hero within the United States, and was also a focal point of anti-Nazi sentiment leading up to and during World War II.^[34] Floyd Patterson, who became the youngest boxer to win the world heavyweight title at age 21, also left a lasting impact on the sport, defending his title in the early 1960s. Since the late 1990s, boxing has declined in popularity.^{[35][36][37]}

Boxing in the 21st century has experienced a decline in mainstream appeal, largely due to the rise of mixed martial arts (MMA) and the dominance of other major sports. The sport faces several challenges, including a fragmented organizational structure, safety concerns for athletes, and ongoing controversies surrounding matches and governance. Despite these issues, boxing continues to maintain a dedicated fanbase and remains a significant part of American sports culture. As of 2021, boxing participation in the United States reached approximately 6.7 million people, indicating a robust growth in the sport's popularity.^[38]

Women, however, were largely excluded from the professional scene for much of boxing's early history, as the sport was dominated by men. Women made significant strides in boxing in the late 20th century, with Christy Martin leading the way in the 1990s. Known as "The Coal Miner's Daughter." Her success opened doors for more female athletes. In the 21st century, champions like Laila Ali, the daughter of Muhammad Ali, and Claressa Shields further elevated women's boxing.



Popular team sports

Overview

The most popular team sports in the United States are American football, baseball, basketball, ice hockey, and soccer. All five of these team sports are popular with fans, are widely watched on television, have a fully professional league, are played by millions of Americans, enjoy varsity status at many Division I colleges, and are played in high schools throughout the country.

Sport	Favorite spectator sport ^[39]	TV viewing record (since 2010) ¹	Major professional league	Participants (millions) ^[40]	NCAA DI Teams (men + women)	States (HS) ²
<u>Football</u>	41%	127.7 million	<u>NFL</u>	8.9 million	249 (249M + 0W)	51
<u>Basketball</u>	9%	30.8 million	<u>NBA</u>	24.4 million	698 (351M + 349W)	51
<u>Baseball</u>	10%	40.0 million	<u>MLB</u>	11.5 million	589 (298M + 291W)	49
<u>Soccer</u>	5%	29.3 million	<u>MLS</u>	13.6 million	531 (205M + 332W)	51
<u>Ice hockey</u>	4%	43.6 million	<u>NHL</u>	3.1 million	102 (61M + 41W)	20

1. TV viewing record measures the game with the most TV viewers in the U.S. since 2005 for each sport:
2025 Super Bowl,^[41] 2016 NBA Finals Game 7,^[42] 2016 World Series Game 7,^[43] 2014 FIFA World Cup Final,^[44] and 2010 Winter Olympics Gold medal ice hockey game.^[45]
2. The column titled "States (HS)" represents the number of states that sponsor the sport at the high school level. For the purpose of this table, Washington, D.C. is counted as a state.^[46]

The five most popular sports teams on Instagram from the United States as of October 4, 2024:^{[47][48][49][50][51]}

#	Team	Sport	Followers
1	<u>Golden State Warriors</u>	<u>Basketball</u>	32.4 million
2	<u>Los Angeles Lakers</u>	<u>Basketball</u>	24.6 million
3	<u>Inter Miami</u>	<u>Soccer</u>	17.1 million
4	<u>Cleveland Cavaliers</u>	<u>Basketball</u>	16.5 million
5	<u>Chicago Bulls</u>	<u>Basketball</u>	10.1 million



Claressa Shields,
professional boxer and
professional mixed
martial artist.

American football



Location of the franchises (teams) of the big five leagues in United States and Canada.

Football has the most participants of any sport at both high school and college levels, the vast majority of its participants being male.^{[52][53]} Millions watch college football throughout the fall months, and some communities, particularly in rural areas, place great emphasis on their local high school football teams.

College football in the 20th century grew from a regional sport into a national phenomenon. In the early years (1900-1940s), the game gained popularity with top schools like Yale and Harvard, and conferences such as the Big Ten and SEC were formed. The popularity of college and high school football in areas such as the Southern United States (Southeastern Conference) and the Great Plains (Big 12 Conference and Big Ten Conference) stems largely from the fact that these areas historically generally did not possess markets large enough for a professional team.^[54] The first major bowl game, the Rose Bowl, was played in 1902, and the sport's popularity increased with television broadcasts in the 1950s. From the 1950s to the 1970s, legendary coaches like Bear Bryant and Knute Rockne shaped the game, and the integration of African American players began to break racial barriers. The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of powerhouse teams such as Miami and Nebraska, while the BCS system was introduced to determine the national champion. By the end of the century, college football had become a major part of American culture, with game days and traditions uniting fans and communities across the nation. Nonetheless, college football has a rich history in the United States, predating the NFL by decades, and fans and alumni are generally very passionate about their teams.

The NFL has the highest average attendance (67,591) of any professional sports league in the world and has the highest revenue^[55] out of any single professional sports league.^[56] The NFL has two conferences, the AFC and the NFC. The AFC has 4 divisions (AFC East, AFC North, AFC South, and AFC West). The NFC also has 4 divisions (NFC East, NFC North, NFC South, and NFC West.) Each division has 4 teams, with a total of 32 teams in the NFL.^[57]

The National Football League (NFL) in the 20th century underwent significant development, transforming from a regional league to a dominant force in American sports. Established in 1920 as the American Professional Football Association (APFA), it was renamed the NFL in 1922. Early years were marked by organizational instability and competition with other football leagues. However, the 1930s saw key innovations such as the introduction of the NFL Draft and a championship game, which contributed to the league's growing popularity. The 1950s and 1960s marked a period of expansion, with television broadcasts increasing national exposure.

The creation of the Super Bowl in 1967, following the merger between the NFL and the American Football League (AFL), solidified the league's prominence. The 1970s saw further expansion and the rise of dominant teams like the Pittsburgh Steelers, while the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by increased commercialization, lucrative television contracts, and the emergence of star players. By the end



The Dallas Cowboys playing against the Broncos in Super Bowl XII.



The NFL's [New England Patriots](#) vs. the [Pittsburgh Steelers](#).

of the 20th century, the NFL had firmly established itself as the most popular sport in the United States, with the Super Bowl becoming one of the most-watched events globally. During the 20th century, several star players helped shape the NFL's growth and popularity. Some of the most notable include: [Red Grange](#), [Johnny Unitas](#), [Jim Brown](#), [Vince Lombardi](#), [Joe Namath](#) and [Terry Bradshaw](#).

Basketball

In high school basketball, [Indiana](#) has 10 of the 12 largest high school gyms in the United States,^[59] and is famous for its basketball passion, known as [Hoosier Hysteria](#).

Of those Americans citing their favorite sport, basketball is ranked second (counting amateur levels) behind football.^[60] However, in regards to revenue the NBA is ranked third in popularity.^[61] More Americans play basketball than any other team sport,

according to the National Sporting Goods Association, with over 26 million Americans playing basketball. Basketball was invented in 1891 by Canadian physical education teacher [James Naismith](#) in [Springfield, Massachusetts](#).

The [National Basketball Association](#) (NBA) is the world's premier professional basketball league^[62] and one of the major professional sports leagues of North America. It contains 30 teams (29 teams in the U.S. and 1 in Canada) that play an 82-game season from October to June. After the regular season, eight teams from each conference compete in the playoffs for the [Larry O'Brien Championship Trophy](#). Professional basketball is most followed in cities where there are no other sports teams in the four major professional leagues, such as in the case of the [Oklahoma City Thunder](#),^[63] the [Sacramento Kings](#), the [San Antonio Spurs](#), the [Memphis Grizzlies](#), or the [Portland Trail Blazers](#).

NBA began in 1946 with the formation of the [Basketball Association of America](#) (BAA), which merged with the [National Basketball League](#) (NBL) in 1949 to create the NBA. The league initially faced challenges related to finances and public interest. However, the 1950s saw the rise of [George Mikan](#), a dominant center for the [Minneapolis Lakers](#), whose success helped establish the league's credibility. In the 1960s, the NBA gained wider popularity, driven by the fierce rivalry between the [Boston Celtics](#), led by [Bill Russell](#), and the [Los Angeles Lakers](#), featuring stars like [Jerry West](#) and [Elgin Baylor](#).

The [Women's National Basketball Association](#) (WNBA) is the premier professional women's basketball league in the United States, founded in 1996. The league consists of 12 teams and runs from May to September, with playoffs to determine the champion. Notable players include [Diana Taurasi](#), [Sue Bird](#), [Lisa Leslie](#), and [Maya Moore](#). Although historically lower-paying than the NBA, the WNBA has seen improvements in player salaries and sponsorships in recent years. Many players also compete overseas during the off-season to

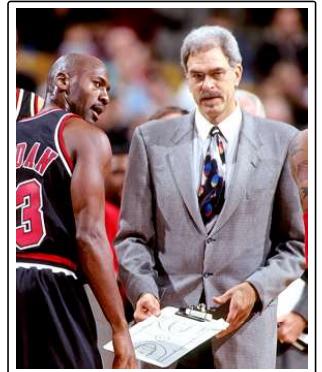
supplement their income. The league features a blend of American and international talent, with players from countries like Australia, Bosnia, and Canada making significant contributions. The WNBA has played a key role in promoting women's professional sports in the U.S. and continues to grow in popularity.

Baseball

Baseball and a variant, softball, are popular participatory sports in the U.S. Baseball was the first professional sport in the United States.^{[64][65][66]} The highest level of baseball in the U.S. and the world is Major League Baseball. There are a total of 30 MLB teams. The World Series of Major League Baseball is the culmination of the sport's postseason each October. It is played between the winner of each of the two leagues, the American League and the National League, and the winner is determined through a best-of-seven playoff.

The New York Yankees are noted for having won more titles than any other U.S. major professional sports franchise. The Yankees' chief rivals, the Boston Red Sox, also enjoy a huge following in Boston and throughout New England. The Philadelphia Phillies of the National League are the oldest continuous, one-name, one-city franchise in all of professional American sports,^[67] and enjoy a fanbase renowned for their rabid support of their team throughout Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley, and have famously been dubbed as the "Meanest Fans in America".^[68]

Every four years in March, the World Baseball Classic is held, which is the national team game, the most popular baseball national team game.^[69] In the 20th century, MLB became a defining part of American culture. The century began with the formation of the American League in 1901, creating a two-league system with the National League. The first World Series was held in 1903. The Black Sox Scandal of 1919, in which several Chicago White Sox players were accused of fixing the World Series, led to the creation of the Commissioner of Baseball role to enforce stricter oversight. The 1920s and 1930s were marked by the dominance of Babe Ruth, whose power hitting changed the way the game was played, and the Yankees became a dominant force in baseball. In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, becoming the first African American player in MLB, marking a pivotal moment in both sports and civil rights. The 1950s and 1960s saw MLB expand with the relocation of teams like the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants to California, while stars like Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, and Willie Mays became household names. The 1970s brought the rise of the Cincinnati Reds' Big Red Machine, and the 1980s and 1990s saw the league's financial growth and the rise of free agency. Despite the 1994 strike



Chicago Bulls Michael Jordan and Phil Jackson 1997



Many players and analysts have called Stephen Curry the greatest shooter in NBA history.^[58]