Knit

Who's the Next Face of the League?

A Knit Research Study on Star Power,
Fan Identity & Athlete-Led Engagement

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It's Not Just About Who Wins

Every generation has its icons. In sports, these figures are often remembered as much for their presence off the field as their performance on it. Michael Jordan didn't just dominate on the court —he became a cultural force. Serena Williams didn't just win titles— she shaped conversations around power, motherhood, and race.

In 2025, the question isn't just who wins. It's who connects. Who inspires. Who resonates across fan bases, across demographics, across time. Knit set out to answer one big question: **Who's the next face of the league—and what makes them one?**

About the Study

We surveyed 528 U.S.-based sports fans ages 18+, supplemented by 105 qualitative video responses. Respondents had to follow at least one of the five major leagues: NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, or WNBA. The study was fielded July 15-18, 2025.

Participants were balanced by gender and ethnicity to census representation, with generational splits including Gen Z (55), Millennials (155), Gen X (152), and Boomers (166). Key segment analysis included favorite leagues, athlete preferences, generational values, and openness to athlete-driven marketing and brand partnerships.

Key Findings

These are the core insights from our research—data-backed, voice-supported, and immediately actionable:

NFL leads in followership, but the NBA leads in athlete promotion.

The NFL was most followed (280 respondents), while the NBA was viewed as best at marketing its athletes (85.6%).

Star athletes reshape how leagues are perceived.

58.3% of all fans—and 81.7% of Gen Z—say standout athletes make them more likely to engage with a league. Leagues feel more exciting (74.1%), modern (70.1%), and relevant (68.3%) when stars are featured.

Fans crave substance over celebrity.

The most admired athlete traits were humility, work ethic, and authenticity. Archetypes like the Fearless Competitor (27.1%) and Community Hero (25.6%) ranked well above flashy personas.

Archetype preferences shift by generation.

Gen Z prioritizes dominance and visibility. Millennials value balance—performance and impact. Gen X and Boomers seek purpose-driven leaders and community figures.

Cultural connection is a double-edged sword.

While 83.5% of fans value authenticity and content quality on social media, 104 respondents said cultural influence has no bearing on an athlete's status. Younger fans and NBA followers disagreed.

The best brand partnership of all time? Jordan and Nike.

Nike was the most cited brand (by far), often named alongside Michael Jordan. But most fans struggled to name any current partnerships—signaling white space for deeper athlete-brand storytelling.

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Loyalty Doesn't Cross Leagues

One of the clearest findings in our study was that fans don't just follow sports—they follow their sport. Most respondents named a single league as their most important, and they rarely ventured into others.
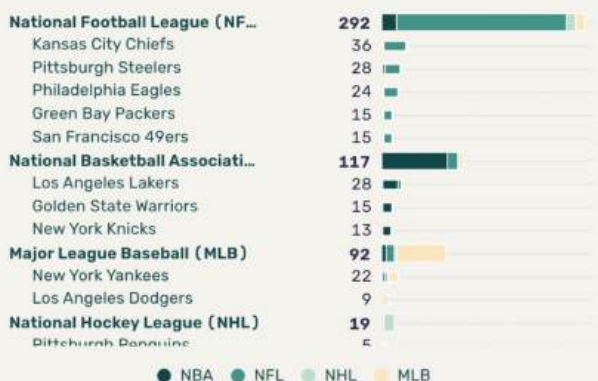
The NFL was dominant in both numbers and intensity. Fans of teams like the Kansas City Chiefs and Dallas Cowboys described deep-rooted loyalty that passed through families. In the NBA, Lakers and Warriors fans showed similar passion. The MLB's Yankees and Braves sparked regional pride and nostalgia.

What's striking isn't just who fans cheer for—but how rarely they switch. Cross-league loyalty was minimal. Once a fan, always a fan—especially when anchored by a star athlete like Patrick Mahomes or LeBron James.
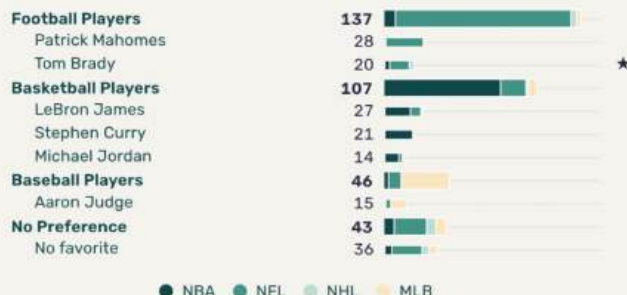
Fans tend to stay loyal within their favorite league with minimal cross-league overlap, with top teams & athletes - like Mahomes & the Chiefs in NFL or LeBron & the Lakers in the NBA - emerging as favorites

Favorite Team - By Primary League of Interest

National Football League (NF...	292
Kansas City Chiefs	36
Pittsburgh Steelers	28
Philadelphia Eagles	24
Green Bay Packers	15
San Francisco 49ers	15
National Basketball Associati...	117
Los Angeles Lakers	28
Golden State Warriors	15
New York Knicks	13
Major League Baseball (MLB)	92
New York Yankees	22
Los Angeles Dodgers	9
National Hockey League (NHL)	19
Pittsburgh Penguins	5

● NBA ● NFL ● NHL ● MLB

Favorite Athlete - By Primary League of Interest

Football Players	137
Patrick Mahomes	28
Tom Brady	20
Basketball Players	107
LeBron James	27
Stephen Curry	21
Michael Jordan	14
Baseball Players	46
Aaron Judge	15
No Preference	43
No favorite	36

● NBA ● NFL ● NHL ● MLB

Q1_1.Favoriteteam. Thinking about the leagues you follow, which team do you cheer for the most? N=517
Q1_2.FavoriteAthlete. And who's your favorite athlete? N=517

The Face of the League Isn't Famous—They're Familiar

Being the face of a league, it turns out, isn't about who shouts the loudest. It's about who shows up with purpose. When asked what traits matter most in defining the face of the league, fans overwhelmingly prioritized authenticity, character, and on-field effort.

They saw social media presence, nationality, and even championship wins as secondary to an athlete's core demeanor and values.
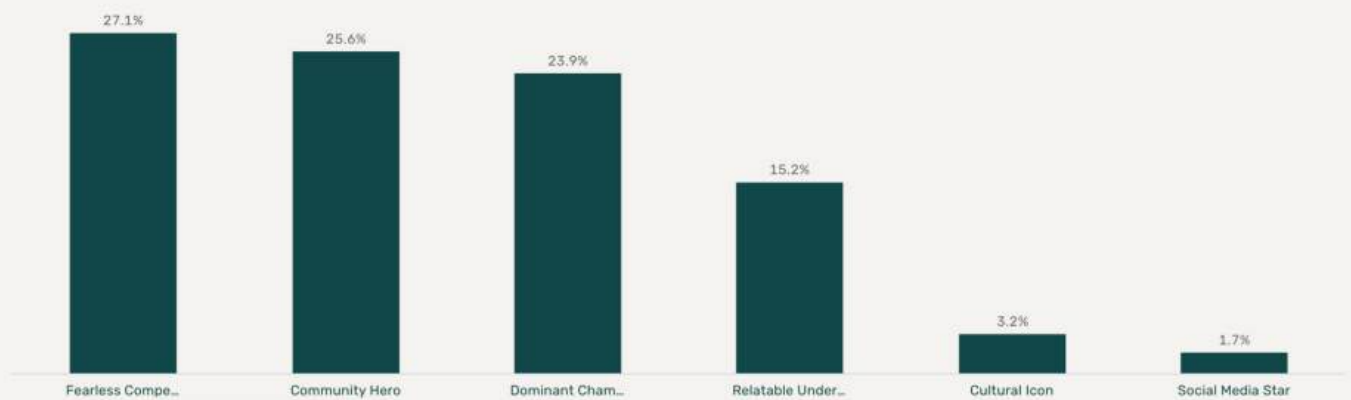
They gravitated toward a few dominant archetypes. The **Fearless Competitor**—someone who leads with drive and intensity. The **Community Hero**—a player who gives back and sets an example. And the **Dominant Champion**—someone who wins, but wins with grace.

These archetypes aren't mutually exclusive, and many of today's favorites—like LeBron James and Steph Curry—bridge more than one.

**Fans favor a balanced blend of grit, purpose and performance as about 1/4th are drawn to each -
*Fearless Competitor, Community Hero & Dominant Champion***

This suggests the ideal 'face of the league' is someone who not only performs at the highest level, but also stands for something greater and connects meaningfully with fans

What Type of Athlete Should Represent a League?

Category	Value
Fearless Compe...	27.1%
Community Hero	25.6%
Dominant Cham...	23.9%
Relatable Under...	15.2%
Cultural Icon	3.2%
Social Media Star	1.7%

Q3.AthletePersonaAli. Which one of these best describes the kind of athlete you believe should be the "face of a league"? N=528

It's about who shows up with **purpose.**

Fearless Competitor

Community Hero

Dominant Champion

Generational Gaps, Cultural Bridges

There's no single formula for the perfect athlete. What fans value depends heavily on when they were born—and where they sit in life.

Gen Z fans want dominance. They admire athletes who win, but also disrupt and inspire. Think highlight reels, crossover moments, and visible activism.

Millennials want depth. They appreciate performance, yes—but also want to see humility, relatability, and positive social impact.
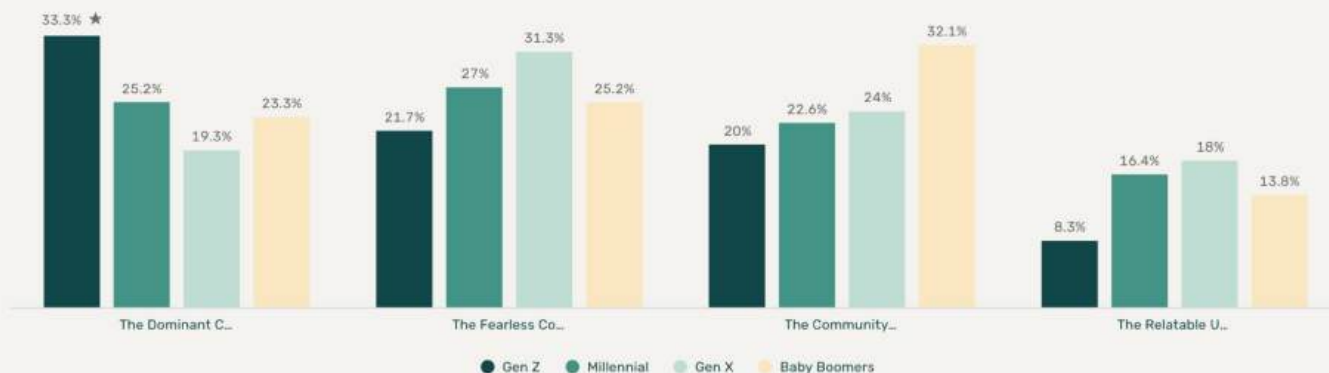
Older fans value purpose. They trust athletes who lead with community involvement, consistency, and quiet leadership.

This divide reflects shifting life stages and media diets. And for leagues and brands, it reinforces the need for multi-dimensional storytelling.

Generational divide in archetype preferences - younger fans gravitate toward dominance, middle-aged fans admire grit and determination, and older fans value community impact and purpose

This likely reflects shifting life-stage values: Younger fans seek inspiration and hence, drawn to emotionally expressive athletes who disrupt norms and win big. Middle-aged fans, navigating responsibilities and challenges, resonate more with perseverance, resilience and grit - qualities they likely see in themselves. Older adults, shaped by eras that valued humility and responsibility over showmanship, appreciate purpose-driven athletes

What Type of Athlete Should Represent a League? - By Generations

	The Dominant C...	The Fearless Co...	The Community...	The Relatable U...
Gen Z	33.3% ★	21.7%	20%	8.3%
Millennial	25.2%	27%	22.6%	16.4%
Gen X	19.3%	31.3%	24%	18%
Baby Boomers	23.3%	25.2%	32.1%	13.8%

● Gen Z ● Millennial ● Gen X ● Baby Boomers

Q3.AthletePersonaAli. Which one of these best describes the kind of athlete you believe should be the "face of a league"? N=528

Today's Faces: Mahomes. LeBron. Ohtani.

When fans were asked who best embodies the role of "face of the league," three athletes consistently rose to the top—not just for what they do on the field, but for who they are off it.

Patrick Mahomes

Has become the defining figure of the NFL not just for his jaw-dropping plays, but for the way he leads. Fans describe him as a consummate team player—grounded, humble, and relentless in his pursuit of excellence. He's a leader who elevates those around him and makes winning feel collaborative, not self-serving.

LeBron James

In the NBA, LeBron James continues to hold iconic status. His longevity and consistent dominance are only part of the story. What resonates even more with fans is his role as a mentor, advocate, and cultural voice. He's seen as more than an athlete—a role model who has used his platform to inspire, uplift, and lead beyond the game.
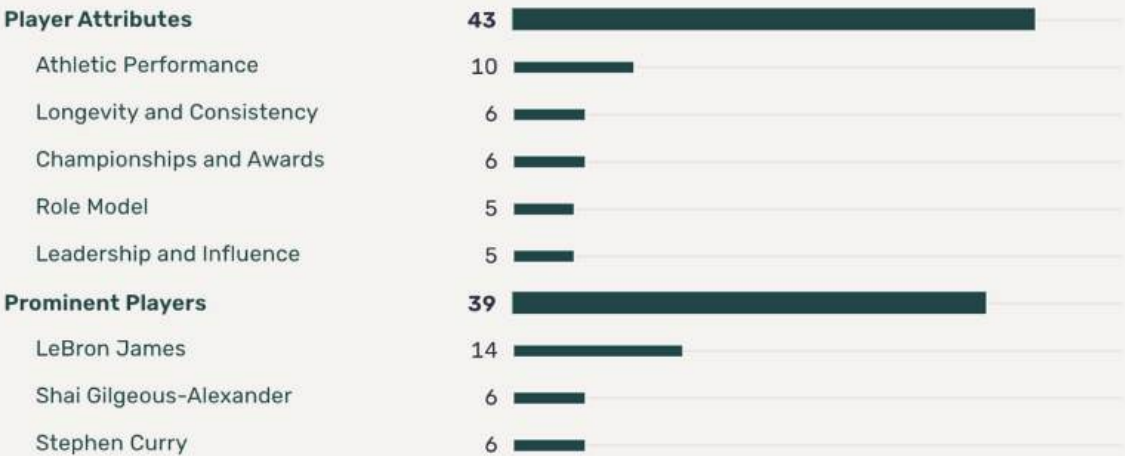
Shohei Ohtani

Over in the MLB, Shohei Ohtani is carving out a unique kind of stardom. Fans celebrate his once-in-a-generation talent, but also his humility and grace under pressure. Ohtani's international appeal has given the league a broader global footprint, and his quiet confidence makes him both approachable and aspirational.

NBA Fans define the "Face of the league" by standout performance, consistent excellence, leadership and being a strong role model

LeBron James stands out as the athlete who best represents these traits for fans

Player Attributes	43
Athletic Performance	10
Longevity and Consistency	6
Championships and Awards	6
Role Model	5
Leadership and Influence	5
Prominent Players	39
LeBron James	14
Shai Gilgeous-Alexander	6
Stephen Curry	6

VQ10. Who do you currently consider to be the "face of the league" in the NBA, and why? $[e://Field/VQ10...   N=26

In MLB, fans associate the "Face of the league" with performance and international appeal – led by Shohei Ohtani & Aaron Judge

Note: Low Base

Player Attributes	16
Exceptional Performance	7
Popularity and Global Appeal	6
Prominent Players	16
Shohei Ohtani	5
Aaron Judge	5
Personal Attributes	10
Respectfulness	4

VQ13. Who do you currently consider to be the "face of the league" in the MLB, and why? ${e://Field/VQ13...   N=14

Patrick Mahomes leads as the face of the NFL, reflecting fans' preference for elite performance, strong character & team impact

Player Attributes	140
Athletic Performance	31
Personal Character	29
Championship Wins	21
Popularity	14
Influence on Team	12
Prominent Players	69
Patrick Mahomes	30
Tom Brady	10
Uncertainty and Ambiguity	22
Lack of a Single Face	11

VQ11. Who do you currently consider to be the "face of the league" in the NFL, and why? ${e://Field/VQ11...   N=57

Why Star Power Matters

There's data to back what marketers often feel in their gut: a standout athlete isn't just a player—they're a growth engine.

Nearly **three in four fans (74.1%)** say that seeing a standout athlete in league promotions makes the sport feel more exciting.

+70%

More than 70% say it adds to the league's modern appeal.

68,3%

associate it with greater inclusivity and relevance.

Majority (75.9%) believe that leagues dp promotes their standout athletes, with NBA seen as best at promoting, followed by the NFL, while MLB and NHL lag in making their star athletes visible

League Promotion of Standout Athletes

- Extremely well: 32%
- Very well: 43.9%
- Somewhat well: 21%
- Not very well: 2.7%
- Not at all well: 0.4%

Differences by Primary League of Interest

	Promotes well (T2B)	Somewhat well	Promotes not so well...
NBA	85.6% ★	12%	
NFL	75%	23.6% ★	
NHL	68.8%	25%	
MLB	68.8%	26.2% ★	

Q3.AthletePersonaAli. Which one of these best describes the kind of athlete you believe should be the "face of a league"? N=528

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What People Are Saying

Real voices from real fans—on what makes an athlete stand out, stick, and inspire.

On the Power of Presence

"It's not just about who wins. It's about how they carry themselves—how they lead when the spotlight's off."

- NFL Fan, Gen X

"LeBron is more than a player. He's a blueprint for what athletes should be—on and off the court."

— NBA Fan, Millennial

"You don't forget athletes like Mahomes. He's elite, but he makes it feel like you're part of the story."

— NFL Fan, Gen Z

On What Makes a Face of the League

"It's not about being the best stat-wise. It's about being the most real—the one everyone roots for, even if they're not your team."

— MLB Fan, Millennia

"They've got to represent more than just the game. They've got to represent us."

— WNBA Fan, Gen Z

"The 'face of the league' should have grit, but also grace. They need to win and still feel human."

— NBA Fan, Gen X

On Brand Partnerships & Endorsements

"Michael Jordan and Nike—that's the gold standard. That wasn't just a partnership, it was a movement."

— NBA Fan, Boomer

"Curry made me respect Under Armour. I never looked at that brand until he made it cool."

— NBA Fan, Millennial

"I don't care who's in the ad unless they mean something. Give me a player with a story, not just a logo."

— NFL Fan, Gen Z

On What Drives Engagement

"If I'm going to follow a league, I need to feel something. Give me the chills, not just a stat sheet."

— MLB Fan, Gen X

"I follow athletes who stand for something. That's what keeps me coming back."

— NHL Fan, Millennial

"The league feels way more modern and inclusive when the right players are front and center."

— NBA Fan, Gen Z

On Cultural Influence & Authenticity

"The athletes who show up in their communities? That's who I support."

— WNBA Fan, Millennial

"They've got to be relatable. If they're just a highlight reel, it won't stick."

— NFL Fan, Gen Z

"Sometimes, I don't care where they're from or how many followers they have—I care if they feel real."

— MLB Fan, Boomer

knit leveraged its qual-at-scale capabilities to capture hundreds of 90sec+ video responses from real consumers, analyzed in real time using AI Contextual Analysis.

Brand Partnerships: Room to Grow

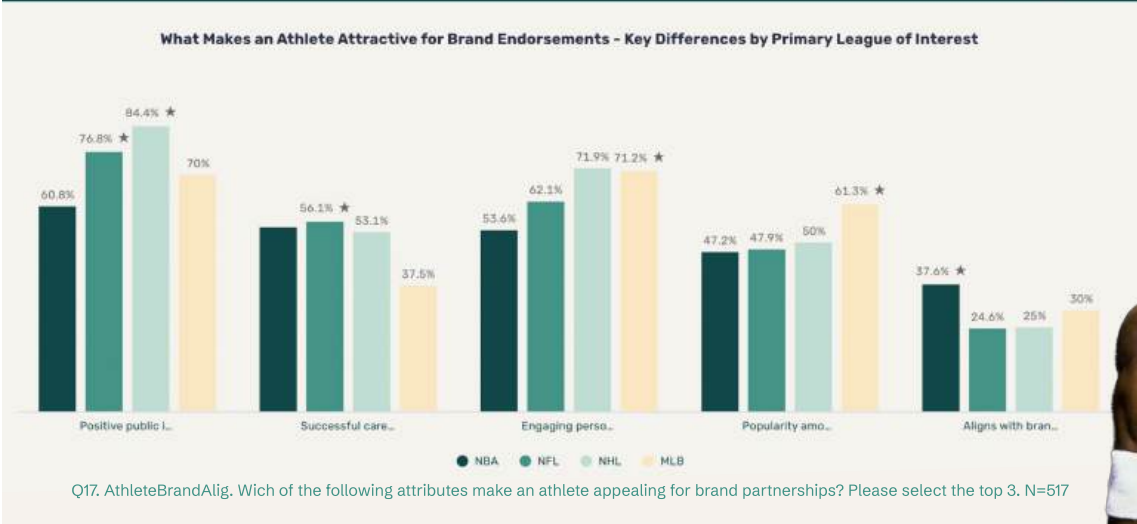Despite their influence, athlete-brand partnerships haven't kept up with fan expectations.

While most fans could name Nike and Jordan without hesitation, few could recall any other memorable partnerships. Those who did named campaigns like LeBron's "More Than An Athlete," Mahomes for State Farm, and Steph Curry's Under Armour story.
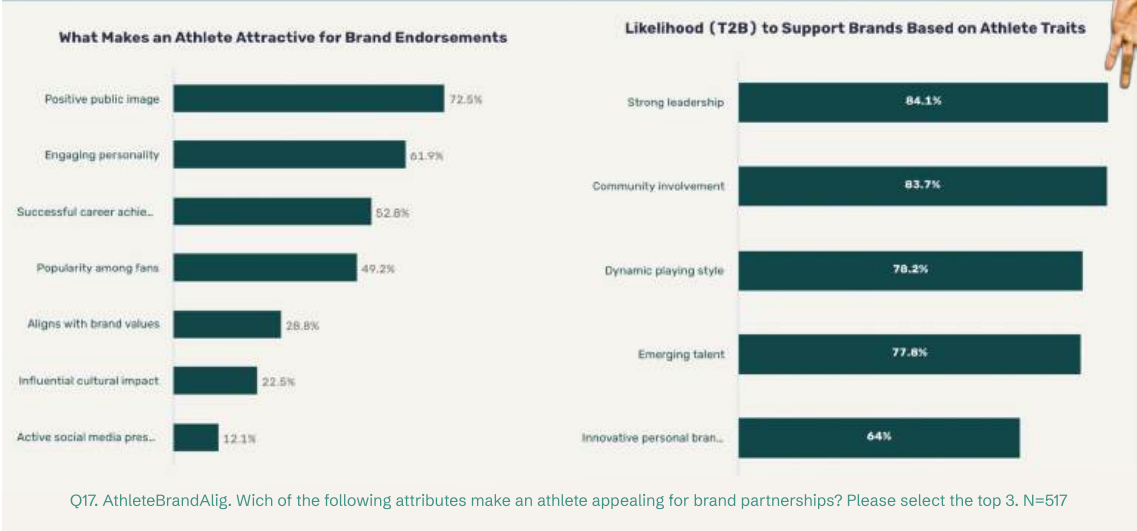
What fans want from these partnerships isn't novelty—it's values. They respond most to athletes who lead, inspire, and give back. And they support brands that showcase these traits with depth.

NFL, NHL & MLB fans value public image and personality, while NBA fans value a broader mix - image, achievements & personality, making them most receptive to well-rounded athlete-brand partnerships

What Makes an Athlete Attractive for Brand Endorsements - Key Differences by Primary League of Interest

	NBA	NFL	NHL	MLB
Positive public i...	60.8%	76.8% ★	84.4% ★	70%
Successful care...	—	56.1% ★	53.1%	37.5%
Engaging perso...	53.6%	62.1%	71.9%	71.2% ★
Popularity amo...	47.2%	47.9%	50%	61.3% ★
Aligns with bran...	37.6% ★	24.6%	25%	30%

Q17. AthleteBrandAlig. Wich of the following attributes make an athlete appealing for brand partnerships? Please select the top 3. N=517

Athletes with a positive public image, strong personality, career success, leadership qualities and community involvement are the most appealing for brand endorsements and boost support for brands

What Makes an Athlete Attractive for Brand Endorsements

Positive public image	72.5%
Engaging personality	61.9%
Successful career achie...	52.8%
Popularity among fans	49.2%
Aligns with brand values	28.8%
Influential cultural impact	22.5%
Active social media pres...	12.1%

Likelihood (T2B) to Support Brands Based on Athlete Traits

Strong leadership	84.1%
Community involvement	83.7%
Dynamic playing style	78.2%
Emerging talent	77.8%
Innovative personal bran...	64%

Q17. AthleteBrandAlig. Wich of the following attributes make an athlete appealing for brand partnerships? Please select the top 3. N=517

The Next in Line

Who fans believe will become the next face of their league

While Mahomes, LeBron, and Ohtani hold the spotlight today, fans are already looking ahead. When asked to name the emerging athletes who could define the future of their leagues, clear front-runners—and fresh storylines—began to take shape.

This isn't just about stats. It's about potential, presence, and the emotional resonance athletes are starting to build with fans today.

NBA: Shai and Ant Take the Lead

In a league fueled by charisma and global appeal, two rising stars have pulled ahead in fans' minds.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander was the most frequently named contender, with **23.1%** choosing him as the next face of the NBA. Fans pointed to his poise, leadership, and undeniable scoring power as reasons he's ready to take the torch.

Not far behind, **Anthony Edwards** captured the attention of **7.7%**, with respondents highlighting his energy, confidence, and star-making playoff moments. Other names earning recognition—included Jalen Brunson, Jayson Tatum, Tyrese Haliburton, Luka Dončić, and Victor Wembanyama.

NFL: A Post-Mahomes Era Emerges

While Patrick Mahomes remains the clear face of the NFL today, a new generation is closing the gap.

Jalen Hurts leads the pack of up-and-comers, cited by **7.0%** as the next in line. Fans see him as a calm, commanding presence with a strong personal brand and on-field excellence.

Josh Allen followed closely with **5.3%**, praised for his leadership, toughness, and connection with fans. **Justin Jefferson**, the electrifying wide receiver, earned **3.5%** for his breakout play and style.

Others like **Brock Purdy, Amon-Ra St. Brown**, and **Lamar Jackson** each received mentions, signaling that the future of the NFL may not be defined by one single figure—but rather a new wave of talent pushing forward together.

MLB: The Dual Dominance of Ohtani and Judge

While Shohei Ohtani and Aaron Judge are already widely recognized stars, fans view them not just as current icons—but as the continued faces of Major League Baseball's future.

In this smaller-base sample, **35.7%** named **Ohtani,** while the same share named **Judge**. Their dual dominance suggests a co-leadership era for MLB, each representing different strengths—Ohtani for international reach and versatility, Judge for power and presence.

Trailing behind were **Ronald Acuña Jr., Cal Raleigh, Paul Skees**, and **Juan Soto**. While they may not yet match the visibility of Ohtani or Judge, they remain on the radar as fresh faces in waiting.

—

Closing Thoughts:
The Future is Personal

In 2025, the next face of the league won't be decided by stats alone. It will be shaped by values, vision, and how that athlete makes people feel.

Fans want authenticity over image. They want athletes who show up—on the field, in their communities, and in their stories.

For leagues and brands, the message is clear: Don't just chase stars. Build them. Share their stories. And make those stories matter.

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Want access to the full study?

Reach out to the Knit team to get access to the full study to see how Knit's AI Platform brought this data to life and to dig deeper into the findings yourself.
Included in the full study, you'll get access to Knit's full report including:

Knit is the end-to-end consumer research platform top brands use to get deep quant and qual insights at scale in a single survey. The Knit AI-native platform automates key phases of the research process from scoping to storytelling, so you can do more research in less time and at a fraction of the cost.

Additional Key Takeaways & Recommendations

VOC Video Showreels

Theme Trees and Verbatims

And more
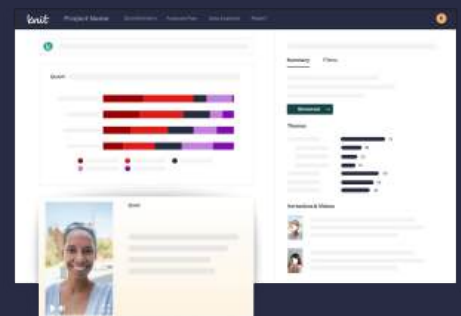
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