

**Sports Business Journal: Going gray: Sports TV viewers skew older**

***Study: Nearly all sports see quick rise in average age of TV viewers as younger fans shift to digital platforms***

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According to a striking study of Nielsen television viewership data of 25 sports, all but one have seen the median age of their TV viewers increase during the past decade.

**How top properties stack up**

Property	Avg. age of TV viewers in 2016	Change since 2006
PGA Tour	64	+5
ATP	61	+5
NASCAR	58	+9
MLB	57	+4
WTA	55	-8
NFL	50	+4
NHL	49	+7
NBA	42	+2
MLS	40	+1

Source: Magna Global

**The study, conducted exclusively for Sports Business Journal by Magna Global**, looked at live, regular-season game coverage of major sports across both broadcast and cable television in 2000, 2006 and 2016. It showed that while the median age of viewers of most sports, except the WTA, NBA and MLS, is aging faster than the overall U.S. population, it is doing so at a slower pace than prime-time TV.

The trends show the challenges facing leagues as they try to attract a younger audience and ensure long-term viability, and they reflect the changes in consumption patterns as young people shift their attention to digital platforms.

“There is an increased interest in short-term things, like stats and quick highlights,” said **Brian Hughes, senior vice president of audience intelligence and strategy at Magna Global**. “That availability of information has naturally funneled some younger viewers away from TV.”

Jeramie McPeek, former longtime digital media executive for the Phoenix Suns who now runs Jeramie McPeek Communications, a social media consultancy, also cited the movement of younger consumers to digital platforms.



Golf skews the oldest when looking at the average age of television viewers, and in response the sport has increased its digital initiatives.

Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

“It is smartphone and tablet usage by younger people who are on Snapchat or Instagram all day long and watching a lot of videos on YouTube and Netflix,” McPeck said. “Rarely are they watching TV and they are on their device constantly where they can watch videos on demand.”

None of the properties contacted contested the data, but most pointed to digital consumption among younger viewers, which was not included in the study and is growing rapidly. Some leagues, such as MLS, the NBA and WTA, will be bullish about the data while others such as the PGA Tour will continue to address the long-term viewership narrative around their sport.

Soccer skews the youngest on television, with a median age of 40 for MLS viewers in 2016, up from 39 in 2006. The PGA Tour skews the oldest, as the average age of its television viewers climbed from 59 in 2006 to 64 in 2016.

### **Adding on the years: Sports television viewership trends**

**Magna Global, on behalf of SportsBusiness Journal, analyzed three separate years of live, regular-season TV viewership on broadcast and cable sportscasts. Its analysis of Nielsen and U.S. Census data shows that golf circuits have the oldest viewers; soccer has the youngest.**

## Median age of television viewers, ranked oldest to youngest in 2016

Property	2000	2006	2016
PGA Tour Champions	NA	59	64
PGA Tour	NA	59	64
Figure skating	54	59	64
LPGA	NA	59	63
Horse racing	51	56	63
ATP	51	56	61
Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series	NA	49	58
Pro rodeo	51	53	57
MLB	52	52	57
WNBA	42	49	55
WTA Tour	58	63	55
Pro wrestling	28	33	54
Olympics	45	50	53
College football	47	48	52
College basketball (men's)	44	48	52
NFL	44	46	50
Boxing	45	47	49
NHL	33	42	49
UFC	NA	34	49
Action sports	31	33	47
EPL	NA	NA	43
NBA	40	40	42
MLS	NA	39	40

## Ranked by biggest change 2000-2016

Pro wrestling has seen its median age jump by 26 years since 2000 and the NHL has increased by 16 years. The WTA Tour is the only property to see its median age decline during that 16-year span, as well as over the past decade. The NBA has stayed fairly consistent, with the median age of viewers climbing only two years since 2000.

Property	Median age 2016 (change since 2000)
Pro wrestling	54 (+26 years)
NHL	49 (+16)
Action sports	47 (+16)
WNBA	55 (+13)
Horse racing	63 (+12)
ATP	61 (+10)
Figure skating	64 (+10)
College basketball (men's)	52 (+8)
Olympics	53 (+8)
NFL	50 (+6)
Pro rodeo	57 (+6)
College football	52 (+6)
MLB	57 (+5)
Boxing	49 (+4)
NBA	42 (+2)
WTA Tour	55 (-3)

Notes: When calculating the changes between years, rounding may lead to the appearance of math discrepancies for college football. The full numbers were compared, and the difference then rounded. A comparison to 2000 is not available for the LPGA, MLS, PGA Tour, PGA Tour Champions, international soccer, Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series, La Liga, UFC or EPL.

## Ranked by biggest change 2006-2016

Property	Median age 2016 (10-year change)
Pro wrestling	54 (+21 years)
UFC	49 (+15)
Action sports	47 (+14)
Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series	58 (+9)
NHL	49 (+7)
La Liga	39 (+7)
Horse racing	63 (+7)
WNBA	55 (+6)
ATP	61 (+5)
PGA Tour Champions	64 (+5)
PGA Tour	64 (+5)
Figure skating	64 (+5)
College football	52 (+5)
College basketball (men's)	52 (+4)
MLB	57 (+4)
NFL	50 (+4)
LPGA	63 (+4)
International soccer	39 (+4)
Pro rodeo	57 (+4)
Olympics	53 (+3)
Boxing	49 (+2)
NBA	42 (+2)

International soccer	NA	35	39
Liga BBVA Bancomer (MX)	NA	32	39

Note: Numbers have been rounded.  
Source: Magna Global's analysis of Nielsen and U.S. Census data.

MLS	40 (+1)
WTA Tour	55 (-8)

Notes: When calculating the changes between years, rounding may lead to the appearance of math discrepancies for college football and MLB. The full numbers were compared, and the difference then rounded. A comparison to 2006 is not available for the EPL.

The NFL in 2016 had a median TV viewer age of 50, up four from 2006; MLB rose four years as well to 57; the NHL was up seven to 49; and the NBA was up two from 40.

Regardless of the property, the numbers highlight why so many sports properties feel a sense of urgency to attract younger fans.

“There are now so many different ways to engage with properties, and people are getting highlights whenever they want,” said Doug Perlman, chief executive officer of Sports Media Advisors. “People have to question whether younger viewers are less inclined to watch or less inclined to watch as long.”

Ty Votaw, executive vice president of global business affairs of the PGA Tour, summed up the tour’s demographics: “While we may be older, our demographics have been of considerable higher quality than other sports and we have aged considerably slower.”

Votaw also noted that audience trends today can’t be solely focused on the linear TV viewer and pointed to a younger audience on tour-run digital properties.

“When you go to PGATour.com, the median age is 55 and for our PGATour Live (over-the-top network), the median age is 20 years younger than on broadcast,” he said.

On the other end of the spectrum, MLS credits its younger average age to the game itself and its multicultural reach. Fifteen percent of its fan base is under the age of 18, the highest such rate of the U.S.-based leagues (see charts).



The NHL has seen the average age of its television viewers increase by 16 years since 2000.  
Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

“It is the coming of age of our league and the connection we have with multicultural millennials and with people who grew up with soccer as their first participatory activity,” said Howard Handler, chief marketing officer of MLS, which counts ESPN, Fox and Univision as the league’s TV partners. “If you get into bigger trends, our game is a two-hour experience that isn’t broken up by a bunch of TV timeouts. We consider our TV deals to be progressive. We are the only league that has an exclusive Hispanic game of the week. Yes, we have a young demographic, but we have a lot more work to do. We are still driving scale.”

The NBA has the next-youngest TV viewership with a median age of 42, up from 40 in both 2000 and 2006.

“The youthfulness you see in the NBA is by design,” said Pam El, the league’s chief marketing officer. “Children start playing basketball at a young age and we have a strong youth program. Our players are pop-star icons and have strong appeal to young people. They have huge followings and young people follow young people. But you don’t just want millennials. You want to continue to keep viewers in all age groups.”

Like other leagues, the NBA has seen a strong uptick in digital consumption.

### **Changes in youth viewership**

Seventeen percent of La Liga's TV viewers were under the age of 18 in 2016, the biggest such share of any of the 25 properties measured. MLS is second with 15 percent, while golf brings up the rear with about 3 percent.

## Youth composition, ranked by total, ages 2-17 in 2016

Property	2000	2006	2016
Liga BBVA Bancomer (MX)	NA	20%	17%
MLS	NA	16%	15%
International soccer	NA	16%	13%
NBA	16%	14%	11%
Action sports	27%	23%	11%
Olympics	12%	9%	10%
EPL	NA	NA	10%
Boxing	9%	9%	10%
College football	10%	9%	9%
WNBA	16%	12%	9%
UFC	NA	12%	9%
Pro wrestling	31%	26%	9%
College basketball (men's)	12%	11%	9%
NFL	10%	10%	9%
NHL	16%	13%	8%
Rodeo	11%	10%	7%
MLB	9%	9%	7%
Figure skating	7%	11%	6%
WTA	5%	6%	6%
Horse racing	10%	7%	5%
Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series	NA	8%	5%
LPGA	NA	5%	4%

## Ranked by biggest change since 2000

Pro wrestling saw a decline of 23 percentage points from 2000-2016, while the NHL saw an 8 percentage point drop. Only the WTA Tour and boxing saw an increase in its younger-aged TV audience composition over the past 16 years.

Property	Ages 2-17 in 2016 (Change since 2000)
Pro wrestling	9% (-23 pct. pts)
Action sports	11% (-16)
NHL	8% (-8)
WNBA	9% (-7)
NBA	11% (-4)
ATP	4% (-4)
Horse racing	5% (-4)
Rodeo	7% (-4)
College basketball (men's)	9% (-4)
MLB	7% (-2)
NFL	9% (-2)
Olympics	10% (-1)
College football	9% (-1)
Figure skating	6% (-1)
Boxing	10% (+1)
WTA Tour	6% (+1)

Notes: A comparison to 2000 is not available for the LPGA, MLS, PGA Tour, PGA Tour Champions, international soccer, Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series, La Liga, UFC or EPL. Numbers have been rounded.

## Youth composition, ranked by 10-year change

Pro wrestling has seen its youth composition plummet by 17 percentage points over the past decade, the biggest such change of any property. Young viewers made up 8 percent of the NHL's overall TV audience in 2016, down from 13 percent a decade ago. The Olympics, boxing and college football were the only properties to see an increase in its youth composition, albeit barely 1 percent.

Property	Ages 2-17 in 2016 (10-year change)
Pro wrestling	9% (-17 pct. pts)
Action sports	11% (-12)
Figure skating	6% (-5)
NHL	8% (-5)
WNBA	9% (-3)
UFC	9% (-3)
La Liga	17% (-3)
Rodeo	7% (-3)
NBA	11% (-3)
ATP	4% (-2)
Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series	5% (-2)
Horse racing	5% (-2)
International soccer	13% (-2)
College basketball (men's)	9% (-2)
MLB	7% (-2)
PGA Tour	3% (-2)
PGA Tour Champions	3% (-2)
MLS	15% (-1)

ATP	8%	6%	4%
PGA Tour	NA	5%	3%
PGA Tour Champions	NA	5%	3%

Note: Numbers have been rounded.

LPGA	4% (-1)
NFL	8% (-1)
WTA Tour	6% (-1)
College football	9% (+1)
Boxing	10% (+1)
Olympics	10% (+1)
EPL	10% (NA)

NA: A comparison to 2006 is not available for EPL.

Note: Numbers have been rounded.

“We know that people are going to consume our content differently, not just through broadcast or on one device,” El said. “We know how millennials consume content and we have developed our offerings to meet that demand. You go where they go and you will attract fans in that age group.”

### Aging faster than the general population

The median age of the U.S. population was 37.7 years old in 2016, based on U.S. Census data, up from 35 years old in 2000. The median age of residents in U.S. markets that are home to a major league team has increased at the same rate as the rest of the country. However, the median age of TV viewers of nearly every sport has increased at a higher rate than that of the population. Only the NBA (median age rose by two years from 2000-2016, to 42) and WTA Tour (whose median age dropped by three years, to 55) have seen a change in median age that was less than the overall U.S. population. These are the five big league markets that saw the biggest increase in median age from 2000-2016, and the five that saw the least change in median age.

Market	Current median age	Change since 2000
Miami/Fort Lauderdale	41	+5
Detroit/Ann Arbor/Flint	40	+5
Green Bay	39	+5
Los Angeles/Riverside/Orange County	36	+4
Salt Lake City/Ogden	32	+4
Baltimore	38	+2
Orlando	37	+2

Seattle/Tacoma/Bremerton	37	+2
Tulsa	37	+2
Oklahoma City	35	+1

### Prime-Time Comparison

Additional data provided by Magna shows that while the sports television audience is aging at a faster rate than the overall U.S. population, it is doing so at a slower pace than prime-time TV. Through mid-May, the median age of viewers of such programming on ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC, excluding sports and specials such as political debates, rose by a range of 8-11 years compared to the same time period a decade ago.

### Median age of prime-time viewers

Network	2007	2017	Change
CBS	53	61	+8
NBC	49	57	+8
ABC	46	55	+9
FOX	40	51	+11

The WTA is the sole property studied to buck the trend toward older TV viewers. In 2016, the WTA's median age TV viewer decreased to 55, down eight years from 2006. It was the only property that saw a drop in the median age of its TV viewers during the past decade.

WTA President Micky Lawler said that the increased social media participation by WTA players and the growth in the WTA's OTT and digital offerings have attracted younger viewers to television.

"Our digital platform drives people to the linear live matches," Lawler said. "We need to get to 35. We have a ways to go."

While the study shows the progression toward older TV viewership in sports, it does not address any specific changes in the number of sports television viewers for any particular property. However, Magna data reveals that in 2016 the majority of properties saw an increase in the number of televised hours compared to 2006. For example, approximately 354 hours of live MLS action aired nationally last year, up tenfold compared to a decade prior. Only boxing, wrestling and the PGA Tour Champions saw their number of TV hours decline between those two years.

Magna Global is part of the IPG Mediabrands family and has no contractual relationships with any sports league or property in the study.