

Move Over World Cup: Can MLS Turn Hype into Habit?

Major League Soccer on the US World Cup Opportunity

Defining the Opportunity

The World Cup 2026 arrived in North America this summer with a substantial commercial commitment behind it. Advertisers and sponsors in the US have collectively directed over \$3.5 billion toward the tournament, demonstrating a considered bet on the soccer audience.

The reach justifies the attention. An estimated 62.8 million fans watched World Cup matches this summer.

Major League Soccer offers one of the most accessible windows into the passions and what moves the American soccer fans for brands and sports franchises. The World Cup audience may have been different, but the underlying dynamic is the same: these fans deeply identify with the sport and are unusually loyal to the brands that support it. They are more sponsor-aware, more sponsor-loyal, and more accurate at identifying official partners than fans of any other league studied.



Who is the American Soccer Fan?

Soccer fans in the US carry a strong sense of identity around the sport, according to MarketCast's 2025–2026 Sports Sponsorship Effectiveness Report.

Among MLS fans, 24% say being an MLS fan is the first thing people would say about them. Another 38% cite it as one of their main characteristics, a figure that has grown five percentage points year over year. Additionally, the share of those saying it is not a main characteristic has fallen eight percentage points over the same period.

For brands, that distinction carries real implications: fans this invested in a league are equally invested in the brands that show up for it.

#1 Fan



24%

** The FIRST THING people will say when describing me is that I am an [LEAGUE] FAN*

Soccer Fans are a Captive Audience

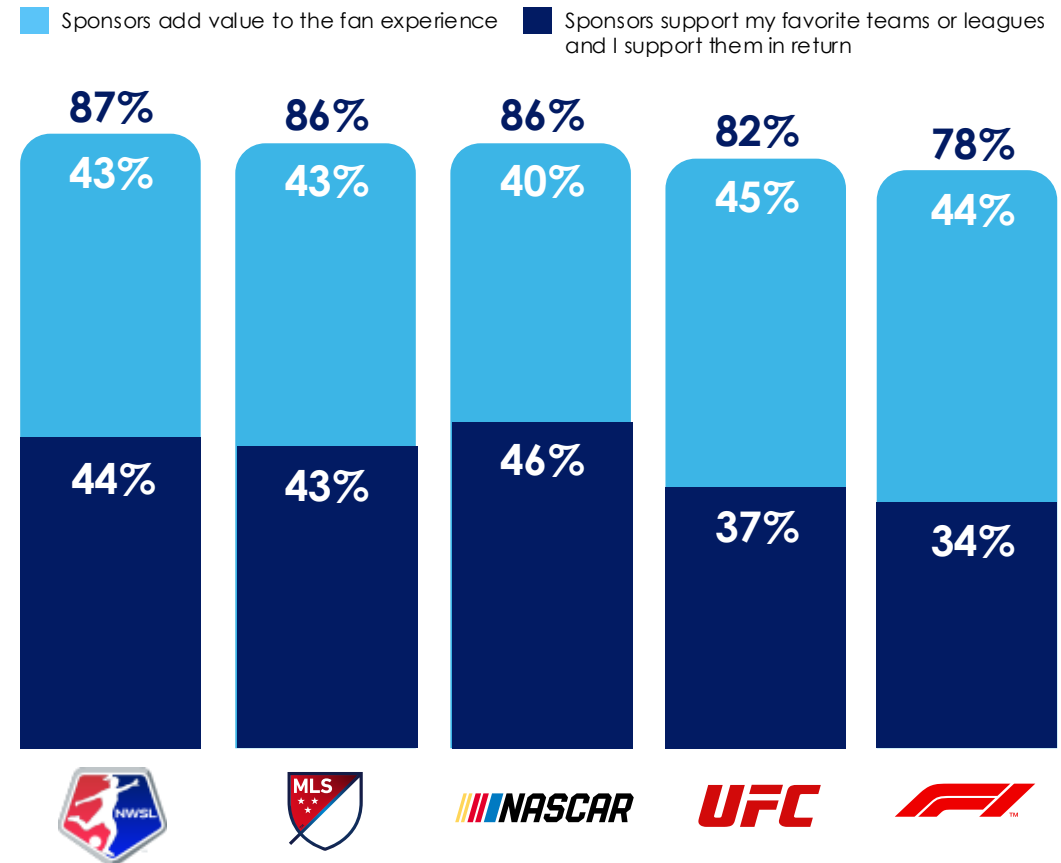
Soccer fans do not just watch their league. They pay attention to who supports it.

Among MLS fans, 82% say it is important to be aware of league sponsors, the biggest year-over-year gain of any league studied, up 14 percentage points.

That attention translates into commercial behavior. Forty percent of MLS fans say sponsors add value to their experience. Forty-six percent of MLS fans say they actively support brands that support their league.

Soccer fans are also the most accurate at distinguishing official sponsors from general broadcast advertisers. MLS fans lead all leagues at 70%. For official sponsors, that discernment amplifies the value of their investment. For brands without official status, it limits how far ambient exposure can travel.

Attitudes Toward Sports Sponsors





Fireside Chat:



Cory Bildstein

Head of Partner Solutions & Insights, MLS

Cory Bildstein is a senior executive at Major League Soccer focused on how organizations can turn major cultural moments - from the FIFA World Cup to league-wide campaigns - into lasting emotional connections and lifelong fans.



Lana Busignani

CEO, MarketCast

Lana has led global marketing, media, and consumer insights and brings a unique perspective on how brands can move beyond measuring attention to understanding what truly drives fan passion, loyalty, and cultural relevance.