

OPENSponsorSHIP

State of Athlete & Influencer Marketing 2026 Report

Data, Insights & Strategy from the World's Largest Athlete Marketing Platform

25,000+

Athletes & Creators
On Platform

160

Sports
Represented

120

Countries
Active

9,000+

Deals Accepted
8,000+ Completed

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About This Report

OpenSponsorship is the world's largest athlete marketing platform, connecting brands with 25,000+ professional athletes, influencers, podcasters, and creators across 160 sports in 120 countries. Launched in 2015, we have brokered over 9,000 accepted deals and 8,000+ successful brand-creator matches, giving us the largest proprietary dataset in athlete marketing.

This report draws on a decade of deal data, our analysis of more than 14.9 million pieces of creator content, and a front-row seat to how the influencer marketing industry is changing in real time. Our goal is straightforward: to give brand marketers the clearest possible picture of what is actually working in athlete and influencer marketing in 2026, and what is not.

Ishveen Jolly (backed by investors Serena Williams and David Blitzer) is the Founder and CEO of OpenSponsorship, winner of SBJ Game Changer 2025 and Forbes 30 Under 30. OpenSponsorship became profitable in 2024 and had its best year on record in 2025, growing revenue by 200% year-over-year.

Executive Summary

The influencer marketing industry is at a turning point that most brands have not addressed yet. After years of chasing follower counts and average engagement rates, many are quietly realizing the metrics they built their strategies around were not telling the full story.

In the meantime, the definition of an influential creator partner is broadening quickly. Yes, athletes are the gold standard when it comes to authentic influence. But now they're being considered in the same contracts with podcasters, wellness influencers, lifestyle bloggers, and niche content creators. This report covers five critical shifts every brand marketer needs to understand heading into 2026:

- Why average engagement rate is the wrong metric, and what to use instead
- Why athletes continue to outperform traditional influencers on the metrics that matter
- How the creator mix is expanding beyond sport
- Why the 2026 sports calendar represents a once-in-a-generation brand opportunity
- How to structure influencer campaigns for real ROI

“The brands winning in influencer marketing in 2026 are not the ones with the biggest budgets. They are the ones asking better questions.”

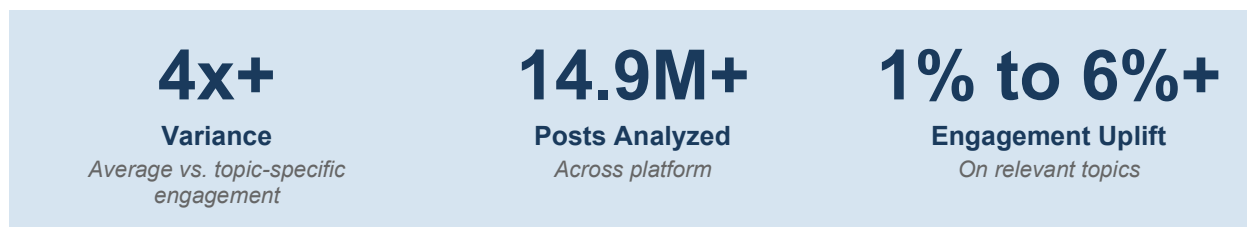
Section 1: The Measurement Problem

Why Average Engagement Rate Is Failing Brands

Ask any brand marketer how they evaluate a potential influencer partner and the answer is almost always the same: average engagement rate. It is everywhere, easy to compare, and in our experience, almost completely useless as a predictor of campaign success.

Here is the core problem. A creator's average engagement rate is calculated across all of their content, every post, regardless of topic, format, or audience relevance. That average flattens everything and hides the signal that actually matters: how does this creator perform when they post about something relevant to your brand?

After analyzing more than 14.9 million pieces of content across our platform, we have found that the gap between a creator's average engagement rate and their topic-specific engagement rate can be 4x or higher. That is not a marginal difference. It is the difference between a campaign that drives real results and one that burns through budget.



A Real-World Example

Consider a brand in the women's health space evaluating two athlete partners. Athlete A has a 4% average engagement rate. Athlete B averages 1% across their account. Most brands would call Athlete A.

But what if Athlete B regularly posts about hormonal health and menopause? On those specific posts, her engagement rate hits 6%, six times her account average, because her audience is deeply invested in exactly that content. For a women's health brand, Athlete B is the far stronger choice. Average engagement rate would never surface her.

“The creators that are perfect for your brand may be hiding behind unremarkable averages.”

Three Shifts Brands Should Make Now

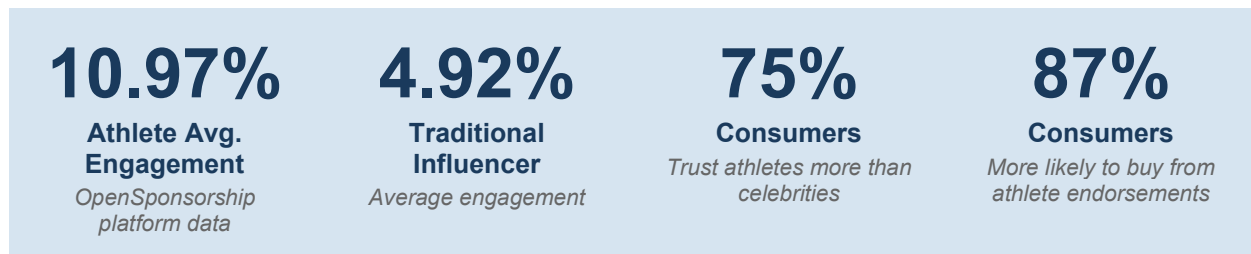
- **1. Only look at posts, not averages.** Demand post-level engagement data from your platform or agency on topics relevant to your brand. If they cannot provide it, they are giving you an incomplete picture.
- **2. Broaden your search criteria.** If you are automatically filtering out creators with less than 3% average engagement, you are cutting some of your best potential partners from the pool.
- **3. Stop benchmarking against industry averages.** There is no universal good engagement rate. Define what success looks like for your specific brand objective, then build your creator shortlist around that goal.

Section 2: Why Athletes Still Win

The Authenticity Advantage

Athletes have something that is genuinely hard to fake in today's creator economy: influence that was earned before they ever posted a piece of sponsored content. They've influenced before they were well known. They have a following, command attention, and have earned trust organically, because of what they have done in public, under pressure, in real time.

Our platform data across 14.9 million posts confirms a consistent, widening performance gap between athletes and traditional influencers. The numbers are not close.



The 10.97% versus 4.92% engagement gap is more than a 2x performance advantage for athletes across our platform. This is not a marginal edge. It is a structural advantage built on earned trust and authentic community, two things that cannot be bought with a bigger content budget.

What Drives the Engagement Gap

Traditional influencers cannot replicate three advantages owned by athletes, including:

- Built-in passionate communities. Fans have an emotional investment in their favorite athletes, built from watching them win, lose, compete, or struggle. That connection translates directly into higher content engagement.
- Performance-based credibility. An athlete's platform was built on doing something demonstrably difficult in public. When they recommend a product, it carries weight that a curated social presence cannot match.
- Authentic struggle narratives. Their career trajectory naturally generates compelling storytelling, challenge, setback, comeback, that audiences connect with deeply.

The ROI Case

Marketing budgets are under more scrutiny than ever in 2026. Every dollar has to show a return. Athlete partnerships consistently deliver:



These numbers hold across brand categories, campaign types, and creator tiers. That consistency is what makes athlete partnerships a structural advantage rather than a lucky outcome.

OpenSponsorship Platform Data Snapshot

Our proprietary deal data reveals clear patterns in what brands are buying and how campaigns are performing in 2026. One of the most significant commercial indicators is average deal size. In 2024, the average deal on our platform was approximately \$2,500, and by 2025 we reached \$5,147, a 100% year-over-year increase. That growth reflects two things: brands are coming to us with bigger budgets, and full-service managed campaigns are commanding higher investment than self-serve ever did.

Metric	Data
Average deal size 2024	~\$2,500
Average deal size 2025	\$5,147 (100% increase YoY)
Top sports categories by deal volume	Golf and American Football
Fastest growing non-sport category	Health and Wellness (strongest growth in 2026)
Top female athlete sports by deal volume	Track & Field and Golf
Top female athlete sport for 2026	Marathon runners
Average social posts per deal	3.5 (up from 2.9 in 2024, approx. 20% increase YoY)
Non-athlete deal growth 2024 to 2025	7x year over year
Deals accepted since 2015	9,000+
Deals completed since 2015	8,000+

The 7x growth in non-athlete deals between 2024 and 2025 is the single most significant trend in our platform data. Brands are rapidly expanding their definition of what makes a valuable creator partner, and the results are validating that expansion.

Section 3: The Expanding Creator Mix

Beyond the Athlete

OpenSponsorship launched in 2015 with a simple tagline. Athletes are vastly underused marketing assets. Truth be told, this remains mostly true today. Since then, the creator economy has evolved and the biggest brands are thinking beyond traditional categories.

By 2025, 75% of OpenSponsorship activations went to female athletes, fueled in part by explosive growth in women's sports. The equation is simple, female athletes produce higher-quality engagement content, and more of it. Track & Field and Golf take the lead in deal volume. Marathon runners are emerging as the breakout category of 2026.



The New Creator Categories

Brands coming to OpenSponsorship in 2025 and 2026 are increasingly looking for creators across categories that would not have been considered sports marketing five years ago:

- **Health and Wellness Creators.** The fastest-growing “non-sport” segment on the platform in 2026. Brands in supplements, women’s health, fitness, and longevity are discovering that wellness creators, especially women over 40 sharing content about menopause, hormones and longevity, are generating extraordinary engagement with **highly purchase-ready audiences**.
- **Podcast Partners.** The rise of athlete-hosted podcasts has ushered in a new sponsorship opportunity that merges the trust-factor of athlete endorsement with long-form audio engagement. Brands are beginning to build packages that include social content and podcast placement.
- **Lifestyle and Niche Creators.** From financial influencers to outdoor sports enthusiasts to comedians with athlete-adjacent audiences, the common thread is not the category. It is the authenticity of the connection between creator and audience.
- **NIL College Athletes.** The NIL era has opened up thousands of college athletes as viable brand partners. Despite having little to no formal content strategy, NIL athletes consistently outperform expectations because their enthusiasm is real and their audiences are highly engaged.

Why the 40-Plus Female Market Is the Biggest Opportunity Most Brands Are Missing

Women over 40 are one of the highest-spending, most loyal audiences across consumer marketing and remain drastically underserved by an influencer marketing industry that favors younger and more aspirational audiences.

Our social listening tool scans for creators outside of our community who are already organically creating content around topics like menopause, heart health, hormonal fitness, and longevity. Many of these creators have mid-sized but extremely engaged audiences and are seeing campaign performance far exceed industry benchmarks.

“The brands getting it right are not looking for the biggest name. They are looking for the most relevant audience.”

Section 4: The 2026 Sports Opportunity

The Biggest Sports Year in a Generation

2026 is shaping up to be the most commercially significant year in sports marketing history. The FIFA World Cup comes to North America this summer, spanning the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The Winter Olympics in Milano Cortina has already driven record brand investment. The NBA, NFL, and WNBA all enter critical commercial moments. Women's sports leagues continue to grow at rates nobody predicted five years ago.

For brands with athlete marketing programs, or brands considering entering the space, the opportunity window is now. Brands that build their athlete and creator rosters ahead of the summer World Cup will be significantly better positioned than those who wait.

\$97B

Global Sponsorship Market
2025 valuation

\$108B

Projected by 2030
Growing at 7%+ CAGR

48

Teams in FIFA 2026
Largest World Cup ever

Women's Sports: The Commercial Moment Has Arrived

The data tells a clear story: women's sports are no longer an emerging market. They are a growth market. WNBA viewership records have been broken. Women's soccer, basketball, tennis, and track are commanding audiences that brands would have dismissed a decade ago.

On our platform, female athlete deal volume has reached 75% of all deals. Track & Field and Golf lead by volume. What's the fastest growing category in 2026? Marathon runners. This sport skews toward health-conscious, high-income audiences that are extremely brand responsive.

NIL in 2026: What Brands Need to Know

The NIL landscape has significantly evolved since 2021. College athletes are no longer a novelty in brand campaigns. They are a strategic asset. Key trends heading into 2026:

- Volume is a strategy. Brands like Vitamin Shoppe have successfully activated 120-plus college athletes simultaneously, creating a wave of authentic content at scale that no single macro-influencer can replicate.
- Authenticity over polish. The content that performs best from NIL athletes is consistently the least staged. Sports audiences gravitate to raw enthusiasm, not scripted endorsements.

- Values over reach. What's working? When brands focus on the athletes' values, discipline, teamwork, resilience, rather than just follower counts, they enjoy significantly stronger brand affinity metrics.

Section 5: Building Campaigns That Deliver ROI

The Full-Service Advantage

The performance gap between managed and self-managed campaigns shows up consistently in our data. When brands handle outreach, negotiation, briefing, and delivery on their own, results suffer. Not occasionally. Consistently.

This is why we moved from a self-service marketplace to a full-service, tech-enabled model. The data made the decision for us. When clients partner with us from creator selection to content delivery and ROI reporting, campaigns perform better, brands stick around longer and results compound. We know this because the data has proven it with an average deal size increasing by 100% from 2024 to 2025.

One additional indicator: the average number of social posts per deal has grown from 2.9 to 3.5 year over year, a 20% increase that reflects deeper creator engagement and more robust campaign execution.

Five Principles for High-ROI Athlete Campaigns

- **1. Match on topic, not just audience size.** Dig into post-level engagement to find creators who have demonstrated real resonance with your category.
- **2. Think beyond the post.** Creator content is a starting point, not a completed campaign. Reinvent it for paid social, your website, email, PR. The right creator content can create 10x value when strategically amplified.
- **3. Define success before you start.** What is the objective? Is it brand awareness, driving trial, UGC creation, or reaching a specific audience? The answer will dictate your choice of creators, content you brief, and metrics you track.
- **4. Treat the first deal as a test.** Set clear objectives, measure campaign performance transparently, and let the data inform you how you run the next campaign. The brands seeing the highest long-term ROI are the ones who iterate, not the ones who make one big bet and walk away.
- **5. Build toward long-term relationships.** One-off deals can work. But recurring partnerships with creators who genuinely use and believe in your product are where athlete sponsorship truly separates itself from other marketing channels.

“The match is just the beginning. Making the partnership actually work is the hard part, and that is where most brands leave value on the table.”

What a Strong Campaign Looks Like

Every campaign we look back on with pride shares the same starting point. The brand comes in with a clear audience target and a genuine product-athlete fit. We use post-level data to build a creator

shortlist that has already demonstrated resonance with the relevant category. The campaign is managed end-to-end, contracts, content briefing, delivery, and reporting. And the results are used to build the next, better campaign.

Hugo Boss came to us to launch a new fragrance, activating with top NBA and NFL athletes. The campaign performed well enough that they resigned before the results report was even finalized, with 2026 campaigns already in motion around the NFL Combine and Draft. That cycle of performance, learning, and reinvestment is what athlete sponsorship looks like when it is working.

Conclusion: What to Do Next

We have watched this industry move faster than most brands can keep up with. The ones falling behind are not losing because of budget. They are losing because they are still measuring the wrong things, treating creator partnerships like media buys, and missing the biggest sports calendar in a generation. The ones pulling ahead have figured out that athlete marketing is not a line item. It is a growth strategy.

The shift does not start with technology or budget. It starts with asking better questions. Who has the most relevant audience for my product, not the most followers? What does this creator post about when no one is paying them? What does the data show at post level, not account level? Those three questions alone will put you ahead of most brands still running on autopilot.

Here is what we recommend doing right now:

Stop measuring averages and start measuring relevance. Pull post-level engagement data on topics that matter to your brand. If your current platform or agency cannot provide that, you are working with incomplete information. A creator averaging 1% across their account may hit 6% or more on the exact content your audience cares about. That is the match you are looking for.

Build a creator roster, not just a campaign. One-off deals produce one-off results. The brands compounding their ROI year over year are the ones treating creators as long-term partners, briefing them on brand direction, and giving them the freedom to produce content that their audiences actually respond to. Our average deal now generates 3.5 social posts, up 20% year over year. Depth of relationship drives that number.

Act on 2026 now, not in Q3. The FIFA World Cup, the continued explosion of women's sports, and the maturing NIL market are converging this year in a way that will not happen again for a long time. The brands building their rosters now will be significantly better positioned than those scrambling to activate in June.

Look where others are not looking. Marathon runners. Women over 40 posting about menopause and hormonal health. NIL college athletes with no formal content strategy but audiences that genuinely trust them. Golf. These are not obvious choices, which is exactly why they are delivering results that are outperforming the obvious ones.

Go full-service or go deep on your own expertise. The performance gap between managed and self-managed campaigns in our data is significant and consistent. If you are going to manage athlete partnerships in-house, invest properly in the tools and expertise to do it well. If you are not, find a partner who will be accountable for results, not just distribution.

OpenSponsorship exists to make that shift easier. With 25,000-plus athletes and creators, 14.9 million posts analyzed, AI-powered matching, social listening technology, and a 70% female team that specializes in the creator categories most brands are just discovering, we are in a position to help brands find the right partners and make those partnerships deliver.

200%

Revenue Growth

OpenSponsorship 2025

336%

Q4 EBITDA Growth

Year over year

4.7x

LTV:CAC Ratio

Nearly double 2024

Ready to build your 2026 athlete marketing strategy?

Visit opensponsorship.com or email ishveen@opensponsorship.com

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