SPORTSMETRIC

2026 / ORIGINAL FIELD GUIDE

THE SPORTS CMO DECISION GUIDE

A practical field guide to audience evidence, athlete partnerships and the moments that move attention.

AUDIENCE / EVIDENCE / ACTION



A source-first operating manual for the people making decisions about athletes, teams, creators and sports moments.

SPORTSMETRIC.COM

OCTOBER 2026

00 / THE BRIEF

Marketing has to make the next decision, not just the next deck.

A useful sports marketing report should make a meeting shorter and a decision better.

The job has expanded

A sports marketing lead may need to evaluate partnerships, plan content, watch changing audiences, align with PR and explain choices to finance—all while working from incomplete signals. A bigger dashboard does not resolve that tension. A decision process does.

The question underneath the data

Which audience are we trying to reach, what public evidence supports this opportunity, what would we need to learn next, and who owns the decision? Ask those four questions before a shortlist becomes a pitch.

What this guide offers

A source-first method for comparing athletes and creators, a way to read attention around sports moments without claiming causation, a 90-day operating cadence and two printable planning worksheets.

TAKE INTO THE ROOM

This is a practitioner guide, not a survey of sports CMOs. General marketing research inspired the questions; the recommendations and frameworks here are Sportsmetric's own.

01 / THE DECISIONS

Five questions before the next budget meeting.

Start with a decision that someone can actually make. Every signal should help answer one of these.

01

Where is attention forming?

Compare dated audience and activity signals across athletes, teams and competitions. Check the sport, region and platform actually covered; do not call one channel a measure of the whole fanbase.

02

Who can help us reach the right people?

Look beyond raw follower rank. Put sports context, creative relevance, observable audience activity and source-backed associations next to each candidate.

03

What is worth activating now?

An injury update, return, rookie emergence or off-season storyline can change the conversation. A moment offers a planning window, not proof that it caused growth.

04

What can we credibly say happened?

Separate an official deal or product announcement from a tagged post or a mention. Then separate observed exposure from the business outcome you hope to achieve.

05

What would change our mind?

Write down a threshold, evidence gap or test that could reverse the shortlist. A good recommendation is easier to trust when its limits are visible.

02 / EVIDENCE

A four-level evidence ladder.

A useful story and a verified claim are not the same thing. Label each before you share it.

01

Documented announcement

A team, athlete, brand or publisher names the partnership, launch or event. Save the original link and publication date. Do not silently add a fee, contract length or exclusivity.

02

Observed activity

A public post, campaign asset or branded appearance is visible. It is evidence that activity occurred, not automatic proof of a paid or ongoing agreement.

03

Dated audience measurement

A follower or post-engagement snapshot describes one account, platform and observation window. Compare like with like and show the dates used.

04

Hypothesis to investigate

Fit, market appetite and why attention changed often remain hypotheses. Name what evidence would test them. Never promote a modeled guess into a reported fact.

TAKE INTO THE ROOM

Put the source next to the claim. If the link disappears, the confidence in the claim should change with it.

03 / PARTNERSHIPS

Choose a partner for the brief, not for the leaderboard.

The most-followed athlete is not necessarily the most useful partner for a specific campaign.

01

Audience

What is the buyer trying to reach? Platform followers are one count; audience geography, age or affinity need their own measured source.

02

Context

What does this athlete or creator actually talk about? Compare sport, community, posting patterns and the stories people already associate with them.

03

Evidence

Which brand relationships are documented, and which are merely visible post activity? Put source type and date in the shortlist.

04

Activation

Can your team make something relevant together? Define the desired content, rights and timing; confirm commercial terms directly with the parties.

TAKE INTO THE ROOM

Working brief: audience goal → 5 candidates → 2 evidence gaps each → 1 test. No black-box compatibility score required.

04 / GROWTH CONTEXT

Women's sports belong in the core plan.

Treat each competition as its own audience and commercial context—not a generic niche to add after the men's shortlist.

WNBA

Look at athletes, teams, game moments and year-round narratives. Document product and brand activity separately from social mentions.

Women's soccer

Compare leagues, clubs and national-team moments carefully. A local fanbase, a global tournament audience and an individual player's following are different measures.

Tennis

Follow athletes across tournament seasons and platforms. Check dated observations rather than assuming a one-week match result explains an audience shift.

College & NIL

Start with the athlete's audience and documented activity; verify eligibility, rights and the terms of any proposed NIL arrangement outside a public profile.

05 / MOMENTS

The moment is not the mechanism.

Injuries and returns can change conversation. They do not automatically reduce an athlete's marketing relevance.

CAITLIN CLARK / WNBA

On July 18, 2026, the WNBA reported a 45-point game in Clark's fourth appearance since returning from a back-injury absence.

INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS / JUL 11, 2026

3,873,043

INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS / JUL 25, 2026

3,905,934

OBSERVED CHANGE BETWEEN THESE DATES

+32,891

Her Instagram follower count rose between these two observed dates. This does not tell us what portion, if any, came from her return, performance, other coverage or platform changes.

TAKE INTO THE ROOM

Sportsmetric observation from the published athlete snapshot, reviewed October 29, 2026. The cited WNBA article confirms the game and injury context, not the cause of follower growth.

06 / MEASUREMENT

Build an evidence trail across three horizons.

The board asks for outcomes. Do not disguise reach or audience growth as revenue.

01 / EXPOSURE

What was published?

Keep campaign dates, placements, documented partner activity and platform-native delivery or reach when you actually have it. Name the source and owner.

02 / RESPONSE

Did anything move?

Track comparable search, social or survey observations over defined windows. Show the baseline, denominator and sample. A change is not a controlled experiment.

03 / BUSINESS OUTCOME

Was there value?

Use your own qualified leads, sales, sign-ups, ticketing or brand-lift study, with consent and agreed attribution. Sportsmetric cannot infer ROI from follower movement alone.

TAKE INTO THE ROOM

Decision rule: if the outcome data is not available, say “not measured” and recommend the next instrument—not a fabricated return.

07 / AI & TRUST

Let AI organize the research. Keep people accountable for the claims.

An AI-first appearance is not a better decision. Good operations use automation with a human sign-off.

01

Ask for linked evidence

A generated summary should point back to the original story, post or measurement. Remove any claim you cannot trace.

02

Protect identity

Match the verified athlete and sport, not just a name in a headline. Never attach a story about another player to the wrong profile.

03

Preserve uncertainty

Label reports as dated and return plans as plans. Do not manufacture injury timelines, contract values or current status.

04

Keep the approval chain

Assign an owner for brand safety, rights, legal review and audience methodology. Record what was checked before a recommendation leaves the team.

05

Use AI where it helps

Summarize source sets, surface missing fields and draft briefs. Do not allow generated creative to imply an athlete's endorsement without permission.

08 / OPERATING CADENCE

A 90-day system for better decisions.

This is a sequence for a small team with finite time, not a promise of a 90-day commercial result.

01

Days 1–15 / Agree on the decision

Name the audience and business objective, the owner, budget guardrails and the difference between success and an interesting chart.

02

Days 16–30 / Build a sourced shortlist

Choose a bounded set of athletes, teams or creators. Record supporting links, dates, relevance and disqualifying unknowns.

03

Days 31–60 / Run a small activation

Define the creative, rights, baseline and measurement window before launch. Watch the context around the campaign without overstating causality.

04

Days 61–90 / Review and decide

Compare results against the agreed plan. Document what remains unmeasured and decide whether to repeat, revise or stop.

09 / WORKSHEET A

The one-page partnership brief.

Use this before asking a team or agency for a list of names.

01 / The commercial question

What choice are we making, by when, and who owns it?

02 / The audience

Which sport, community and geography matter? What is actually measured?

03 / The activation

What will the partner create or participate in? Which rights need approval?

04 / The evidence bar

What source would confirm a fit? What missing fact would stop us?

> TAKE INTO THE ROOM
> If you cannot fill the evidence bar, the next action is research—not a contract.

10 / WORKSHEET B

The campaign measurement contract.

Write down what “worked” means before the first post goes live.

01 / Observable exposure

Which placements and dates will we actually receive?

02 / Comparable response

Platform, account, baseline window, comparison window and denominator?

03 / Business outcome

What will our own systems or an agreed study measure?

04 / Review decision

What result, limitation or surprise would make us change the plan?

> TAKE INTO THE ROOM
> Not measured is a valid finding. Causal impact needs a stronger study than a before/after chart.

11 / BOARDROOM QUESTIONS

Ten questions worth taking into the room.

If a recommendation cannot survive these, it needs more work before it needs more slides.

01	What specific decision will this evidence change?
02	Whose audience are we counting, on which platform, and when?
03	Are we comparing like-for-like periods and definitions?
04	Which partnership facts come from official announcements?
05	Which examples are only public-post observations?
06	Does this shortlist represent the sports and communities we claim to serve?
07	What cannot be concluded from the observed audience movement?
08	Who has verified rights, brand safety and legal constraints?
09	What outcome data do we own, and what is missing?
10	What would make us repeat, revise or stop this investment?

TAKE INTO THE ROOM

Bring evidence, assumptions and next steps into the same conversation.

12 / NOTES & SOURCES

Methods before certainty.

A short disclosure so this guide can be shared without misrepresenting its evidence.

What this is

An original Sportsmetric practitioner guide for sports marketers. It is not a sports CMO survey and does not report representative market-wide findings.

The reference that raised the questions

Marketing Brew, The State of the CMO, 2026. Its survey covered more than 450 Marketing Brew newsletter readers, not a representative sample of sports marketing leaders. We have not reused its survey results as Sportsmetric research.

The worked example

The WNBA / Associated Press report dated July 18, 2026 describes Clark's game and prior absence. Instagram counts of 3,873,043 on July 11 and 3,905,934 on July 25 come from Sportsmetric's observed public athlete data, reviewed October 29, 2026. The counts are descriptive, subject to platform changes and not proof of why the audience moved.

Data boundaries

No claim in this guide establishes a partnership fee, athlete availability, geographic demand, return on investment or causal campaign effect. Validate commercial, rights and health claims with the relevant parties.

ORIGINAL SOURCES & NEXT STEP

Marketing Brew source report ↗

WNBA / AP article ↗

Sportsmetric public research tools ↗

Contact Sportsmetric ↗