**Headline:** Trump’s Battle for U.S. Sports

**Teaser:** Donald Trump’s targeting of established sports leagues and promotion of alternatives have partly reshaped the American sports landscape. Increasing politicization is continuing to challenge its role as a key form of entertainment and culture, with the prospect of further disruption with a second term.

By John P. Ruehl

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**[Article Body:]**

Following conservative outrage over the 2024 Summer Olympics opening ceremony and, in particular, the depiction of a scene resembling that in Last Supper, former U.S. President Donald Trump [labeled the spectacle a disgrace](https://www.barrons.com/news/trump-says-olympic-opening-ceremony-was-a-disgrace-1411b362). The comments marked the most recent effort by the 2024 Republican presidential nominee to merge politics with sports and echoed other [right-wing figures](https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/07/29/the-extravagant-olympics-opening-ceremony-cant-hide-the-truth-about-a-divided-france) across Europe as well as [Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](https://www.barrons.com/news/iran-s-supreme-leader-condemns-olympics-opening-ceremony-9fb371a3).

Sporting events, from national competitions to the Olympic Games, help elevate regional and national pride and provide a [powerful platform](https://ucsdguardian.org/2020/06/07/sports-culture-is-american-culture-and-its-worth-studying/) for cultural and political statements. Alongside international events, domestic U.S. sports leagues and events are deeply embedded into national identity. Their commercialization into [billion-dollar businesses](https://www.visualcapitalist.com/u-s-sports-leagues-by-revenue/), alongside associated media, advertising, gambling, and other industries, has not only increased their scale but also added pressure to avoid controversies that threaten revenue.

Trump’s relationship with major U.S. sporting leagues and entertainment has historically involved financial interests, and, more recently, political maneuvering. He has sought to align with or challenge established American sports leagues for economic and political benefit. By doing so, he has disrupted the stability of the U.S. domestic sports scene, upsetting the traditional balance of bread and circuses in the country. As the U.S. Olympic team competes in Paris, any conflict with Trump may escalate tensions with some domestic leagues—which could have larger implications if he is reelected.

[Team USA’s flagbearer](https://sports.yahoo.com/lebron-james-serve-flagbearer-team-131601050.html) at the Olympics, LeBron James, quickly found himself at odds with Trump [shortly after the former president took office](https://www.nba.com/news/did-lebron-james-go-too-far-criticism-president-trump), trading comments in the media and on social media. Many in the NBA echoed James’s sentiment. The Golden State Warriors’ reluctance to accept Trump’s invitation to the White House after winning the 2016–17 NBA championship [saw Trump criticize the team and rescind the invitation](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/golden-state-obama-visit-785031/), while the former president routinely [went back and forth](https://www.dallasnews.com/business/2019/12/03/president-trump-apparently-still-calls-mark-cuban-for-stock-market-insight/) with Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban throughout his term.

In 2019, Trump seized an opportunity to criticize the NBA and tie the political left to a lack of patriotism. That year, Daryl Morey, then general manager of the Houston Rockets, [tweeted in support](https://www.vox.com/videos/2019/11/11/20959250/china-nba-houston-rockets-hong-kong) of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, leading to backlash in China. The NBA attempted to downplay the issue to save face, as China [was becoming a huge market](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/sports/basketball/nba-china-hong-kong.html). Trump criticized the league and its commissioner Adam Silver for pandering to Beijing. In the aftermath, NBA exhibition games in China were canceled, sponsors paused deals, and broadcasts were suspended.

Alongside growing international sensitivities, the NBA’s handling of domestic social and political issues has long been complicated by liberal-minded players and some of the more conservative or politically neutral fans. [In 1996](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/oct/15/mahmoud-abdul-rauf-nba-protest-national-anthem), NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf began sitting during the national anthem to protest U.S. foreign policy. His decision resulted in a suspension and fines until he compromised by standing for the anthem but silently praying during it. The NBA point guard was traded the next season and faced reduced playing time, leaving the league a few years later to play overseas. Hastily brushed under the rug, the incident was a blight on the NBA’s reputation across various communities.

Following the murder [of George Floyd](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lebron-james-responds-president-trump-protest-criticism/) in 2020, Trump [criticized athletes and the NBA](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-white-house-officials-criticize-nba-players-amid/story?id=72651348) for allowing players to kneel for the anthem and wear social justice messages on jerseys. Trump accused the league of alienating its fans to put pressure on the NBA, which found itself embroiled in controversy over the anthem again.

Trump has had similar confrontations with the NFL. By the time Trump assumed office in 2017, the NFL was attempting to manage the fallout over Colin Kaepernick, who had begun kneeling during the anthem to protest racial injustice and police brutality the previous season. He later went unsigned as a free agent, with many speculating that his political stance was part of the reason why. Trump exploited the situation by criticizing Kaepernick and the NFL’s response to other players who had followed suit. The league’s [cultivation of military and patriotic symbolism](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/sports/football/nfl-patriotism.html), far more than other leagues, made it particularly vulnerable to Kaepernick’s protest. The aftermath saw [reduced ratings](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1527002520944452), [attendance](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6980564/), and sales, as well as a $1 million [lawsuit involving Kaepernick](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/21/sports/colin-kaepernick-nfl-settlement.html).

Though a compromise was made [in 2018](https://www.sbnation.com/2018/5/23/17368782/nfl-national-anthem-protests-rule-annual-spring-meeting), allowing players to remain in the locker room for the national anthem, the controversy flared up again [in 2020](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/13/sports/football/nfl-protests.html) after George Floyd’s murder, before largely subsiding under Biden.

Trump’s tensions with the NFL date back to the 1980s. Amid several discussions about purchasing NFL teams, Trump bought the New Jersey Generals [in 1983](https://www.sportshistoryweekly.com/stories/donald-trump-usfl-nfl-football-herschel-walker-doug-flutie%2C1122), a team in the newly formed United States Football League (USFL). Trump pushed the USFL, which played in the spring and summer, to move to an autumn schedule to directly compete with the NFL. The USFL then filed an antitrust lawsuit against the NFL in 1986 for monopolizing TV broadcast rights and preventing the USFL from securing contracts and stadium leases.

Despite winning the antitrust lawsuit, the USFL was awarded only a [symbolic $1](https://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/30/sports/usfl-loses-in-antitrust-case-jury-assigns-just-1-in-damages.html) in damages, which hastened the USFL’s collapse later that year. Nonetheless, the USFL had given NFL players [more leverage in negotiations](https://www.sportshistoryweekly.com/stories/donald-trump-usfl-nfl-football-herschel-walker-doug-flutie%2C1122#google_vignette), and its dissolution helped trigger the NFL’s [1987 players’ strike](https://deadspin.com/the-1987-nfl-players-strike-created-the-modern-nfl-1819152183/), tarnishing the league’s image and interrupting its season.

The NFL has since [achieved unprecedented success](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-massive-the-nfl-really-is-in-4-charts/), establishing itself as the [most-watched](https://www.reviews.org/tv-service/live-sports-statistics/) domestic league and one of the most powerful sports leagues in the world. In the face of this, Trump has continuously promoted alternatives over the years. The former president was a fixture at college football games, particularly [in the South](https://apnews.com/article/7751ba0c79f147a98f9a30524a5b4c5b). And in 2020, the XFL, a rival league, was founded by longtime Trump ally Vince McMahon, [merging with a reincarnated USFL](https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/xfl-usfl-merger-ufl-united-football-league-teams-2024-season/) in 2023 to form the United Football League (UFL), which Trump has endorsed.

The UFL has yet to make a significant impact, and Trump hasn’t expressed support for any NBA alternatives. Instead, weakening the NBA’s stability and reputation could serve as a strategy to erode its global dominance against the increasingly competitive [EuroLeague](https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/nba-europe-lague-fiba-euroleague-basketball/) and [Chinese Basketball Association](https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1821905-how-the-chinese-basketball-association-became-the-hot-destination-for-nba-talent).

Major League Baseball (MLB) has occasionally caught some of Trump’s ire, though tamer in comparison to the NBA or NFL. Despite being invited and expressing interest in throwing the first pitch at a Yankees game, [Trump abruptly reneged on his decision in 2020](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/27/us/politics/trump-yankees-fauci.html). Shortly after leaving office, Trump [called for a boycott of the MLB](https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/546282-trump-calls-for-boycott-of-mlb-for-moving-all-star-game/) after the league moved its All-Star Game out of Georgia because of the state’s voting laws. Trump meanwhile took a [more neutral stance](https://thehockeywriters.com/nhl-history-united-states-presidents/) with the National Hockey League (NHL).

Outside the big four domestic sports leagues, Trump has been active in other areas for decades. [Since the late 1990s](https://www.ajc.com/sports/how-many-golf-courses-does-donald-trump-own/NZpwwicWdN02iRkxnTq8lM/), Trump has purchased and invested in high-profile golf courses and developed friendships with major players [like Tiger Woods](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/05/us/politics/tiger-woods-trump-medal-of-freedom.html). Initially, Trump cultivated ties with the Professional Golfers Association (PGA), as well as the smaller United States Golf Association (USGA) and PGA of America, leading to several tournaments being hosted at his golf courses. However, these relationships became more complicated after he became president, and most severed ties in the aftermath of the 2021 insurrection. Trump has since [thrown his support](https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Articles/2024/04/05/donald-trump-liv-golf-course-hosting-saudia-arabia-pif) behind LIV Golf, a new league launched in 2021 and backed by Saudi funding, in a bid to maintain his influence in the sport.

Boxing has similarly been a major area of Trump’s involvement in sports. In the 1980s, many notable boxing matches [occurred at Trump casinos and properties](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/new_jersey/Donald_Trump_Mike_Tyson_Michael_Spinks_Atlantic_City_boxing.html). Trump developed a strong relationship with entities like the [World Boxing Council](https://wbcboxing.com/en/round-12-donald-trump-and-boxing/) (WBC), and figures like [Mike Tyson](https://www.grunge.com/297284/the-history-of-mike-tyson-and-donald-trumps-unlikely-relationship/) and [Don King](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/18/us/politics/donald-trump-don-king.html). However, as the sport [declined in popularity](https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1370083-boxing-breaking-down-the-steady-decline-of-the-sweet-science) and Trump faced significant [financial losses in the 1990s](https://www.npr.org/2016/10/03/496314538/trumps-financial-moves-in-the-90s-genius-or-colossal-failure), his connections to the sport diminished—though he still has had some involvement [since leaving office](https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/boxing/2021/09/11/donald-trump-evander-holyfield-boxing-commentary/8306078002/). The former president also made efforts to [capture the NASCAR crowd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/18/trumps-nascar-event-was-targeted-his-base-but-maybe-he-should-have-gone-hockey-game/) during his presidency, and in May 2024 he made an appearance at the Charlotte Motor Speedway for the [NASCAR Cup Series Coca-Cola 600](https://www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/sports/nascar/2024/05/26/former-president-trump-nascar-coca-cola-600/73862224007/).

But it is in World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE; formerly the World Wrestling Federation) and Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) where Trump has consistently found the most support. At the 2024 Republican National Convention in July, Trump was introduced by WWE star Hulk Hogan and later UFC chief executive Dana White. Both are notable allies of the former U.S. president. Trump’s connections to wrestling, including hosting major tournaments, have been well-known [since the 1980s](https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2669447-donald-trump-a-history-of-the-presidential-candidates-involvement-with-wwe), while Dana White brought up their 25 years of friendship during his RNC speech. In 2023, [TKO Group Holdings](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/09/12/tko-wwe-ufc-acquisitions.html) was founded after both organizations merged.

While Trump has long been able to count the WWE as a partner for business and publicity, the UFC’s [meteoric rise](https://www.fightful.com/mma/rise-ufc-exploration-sport-s-growth-and-popularity-recent-years) in recent years has made it an even more valuable ally. Having an ally like Dana White at the helm helps, and in addition to the 2024 RNC Convention, Dana White also spoke at the 2016 and 2020 conventions to support Trump. Trump frequently interacted with [Dana White and other UFC figures](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/aug/16/ufc-dana-white-donald-trump-relationship) during his presidency, elevating the league’s status as well as that of the former president.

[In support of Trump’s 2020 reelection bid](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/oct/28/ufc-donald-trump-dana-white-campaign), Donald Trump Jr. conducted a statewide bus tour in Florida in collaboration with the UFC, which included appearances from several fighters and local politicians, including Senator Marco Rubio. Since losing the election, Trump has frequented major UFC events. One of his first major public appearances after leaving office in 2021 came in July of that year at [UFC 264 to an enthusiastic crowd in Las Vegas](https://sports.yahoo.com/ufc-264-former-president-donald-trump-appearance-055212196.html). In June 2023, he and Dana White walked out with Mike Tyson at UFC 287 to [rapturous applause](https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/ufc/donald-trump-ufc-287-mike-tyson-b2316672.html), repeated again at UFC 302 in July 2024 [in Newark, New Jersey](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/02/us/politics/donald-trump-ufc-newark-dana-white.html).

On top of the UFC’s significant growth over the last 30 years, its potential [for more growth has increased its value](https://www.espn.com/mma/story/_/id/38883008/examining-ufc-future-30-years). Its financial power became more apparent in 2023 when Bud Light paid the organization [more than $100 million](https://www.outkick.com/sports/has-the-ufc-surpassed-nhl-as-the-4th-most-popular-sport-in-us) to become its official beer. The decision aimed to draw previous Bud Light drinkers back to the brand following a boycott of the beverage after its partnership with transgender liberal influencer Dylan Mulvaney. [In February 2024](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-bud-light-second-chance-dylan-mulvaney-super-bowl-ad/), Trump stated that the brand deserved “a second chance,” a statement that no doubt brought relief to Anheuser-Busch’s boardroom days before the Super Bowl.

Trump’s ire and attempts to tie in conservative backlash have not always prompted sports leagues to adopt a defensive stance. He made negative comments toward the U.S. women’s soccer team in [2019](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/26/trump-megan-rapinoe-soccer-team-1383587) and [2023](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/08/07/trump-us-womens-soccer-team-00110074), and toward [star player Megan Rapinoe](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/26/trump-megan-rapinoe-soccer-team-1383587) after the team refused a White House visit and some players [chose not to sing the national anthem](https://time.com/5613766/trump-says-inappropriate-megan-rapinoe-national-anthem-protest/). Trump’s comments have only helped elevate the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL), which has [seen enormous growth since](https://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2023/11/14/the-nwsl-had-a-record-breaking-year-with-more-growth-is-expected/) he took office. The [NBA](https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/30/us/pelicans-jazz-blm-tribute-nba-spt-trnd/index.html) and [NFL](https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/nfl-national-anthem-policy-2020-kneeling-protests/1o88fwivdxvqu1d8nnbiw5dw3z) meanwhile eventually accepted players kneeling for the anthem in 2020 following public pressures.

Major sports teams are an increasingly popular purchase for billionaires, [enticed by the strong returns in recent years](https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/money-and-power/a60129641/billionaire-status-sports-team-owners-nfl-nba/). Nevertheless, many owners and leagues breathed a sigh of relief when Trump left office. If elected again, another spike in the politicization of commercial sports is likely. Trump will likely attempt to co-opt friendly domestic sports leagues, teams, and individuals to amplify his platform and financial position, with the UFC ready to play a prominent role in a potential second term. Conversely, by agitating unfriendly sports entities, Trump seeks to weaken their ability to confront him.

Through his political clout and ability to influence their bottom line, reshaping U.S. sports leagues appears to be a major project for the former president. Though Trump’s interactions with major sports leagues have become deeply political, they are heavily influenced by financial considerations. Ari Emanuel, for example, is the CEO of Endeavor, which owns TKO Group Holdings, and is also the brother of Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff and Biden’s pick for U.S. ambassador to Japan.

And despite his contentious history with major sports leagues, Trump is known for his adaptability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he naturally sought out [influential allies](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/oct/28/ufc-donald-trump-dana-white-campaign) like Vince McMahon, Dana White, and the NFL’s Jerry Jones and Robert Kraft to aid his efforts to reopen the country. Additionally, the [“Opening Up America Again”](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/openingamerica/) approach also included NBA commissioner Adam Silver and Mark Cuban. However, Trump’s belief in the power of financial leverage to shape American sports will only be tested further in a potential second term.