



03-02-23

## The 10 most innovative companies in sports of 2023

These companies, clubs, and leagues are deploying technology and new content tools to engage bigger crowds in their games.

*Explore the full 2023 list of Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, 540 organizations that are reshaping industries and culture. We've selected the firms making the biggest impact across 54 categories, including artificial intelligence, augmented and virtual reality, gaming, and more.*

If you're lucky enough to score a ticket to catch a Savannah Bananas baseball game at the team's 4,000-seat Grayson Stadium—the waiting list for a home game is now half a million people deep—you might see a player step up to home plate wearing 10-foot stilts or swinging a flaming bat. And the guy in the banana-yellow Mad Hatter getup dancing atop the dugout? That's the team's owner, Jesse Cole. The team, which has more than four million TikTok followers, once competed in the Coastal Plain League, but dropped out last year to pursue its version of sports-based entertainment via exhibition matches. "We're a circus that happens to have a ball game break out in the middle of it," says Savannah Bananas director of entertainment Zack Frongillo. "We spend zero dollars on marketing. Our social media promotes our brand, which drives ticket sales, which drives merchandise."

Not every team is quite so focused on content at the expense of competition, but the quest to engage fans at every turn is fueling innovation throughout sports organizations. Athletes Unlimited is rewriting the rules for professional sports. It features women's leagues in softball, volleyball, lacrosse, and basketball where there are no team owners. Instead, teams are reshuffled weekly, injecting an element of pickup-ball spontaneity into elite-level competition. At the end of each season, the leagues crown individual champions based on overall season-long stats, and athletes share in the profits.



[Illustration: [Bratislav Milenkovic](#)]

[Togethxr](#) is another entity raising the profile of elite women athletes—by elevating their stories. Founded by Alex Morgan and Sue Bird, among other athletes, the two-year-old media platform recently produced a documentary on WNBA player AD Durr’s return to the league after battling long COVID. Another of its short films offers a candid look at Olympic gold medalist swimmer (and Togethxr cofounder) Simone Manuel’s diagnosis with overtraining syndrome (OTS).

To enliven the fan experience, the [Famous Group](#) deploys a real-time video-game engine that can overlay visual elements in a real-life stadium during a broadcast. The technology has transformed Atlanta’s Mercedes-Benz Stadium into a racetrack to promote the carmaker’s EV lineup and inserted prowling panthers into the Carolina Panthers Bank of America Stadium. For the 2022 Stanley Cup Finals, it surprised jumbotron viewers by turning a Zamboni into a giant Chipotle burrito— then having a massive hockey-gloved hand smash through the ice to grab it. All of these companies seem to be guided by the same kind of question that Frongillo says drives the Savannah Bananas: “What have our fans never seen before?”

## **ATHLETES UNLIMITED**

*For giving athletes more opportunities to play*

The first professional sports entity organized as a public benefit corporation, [Athletes Unlimited](#) launched in 2020 with a mission to empower elite women athletes. Beginning with leagues for softball and lacrosse, AU added volleyball in 2021 and last year seized an even bigger spotlight when it launched its women’s basketball league, providing female hoopers another chance to play

professionally in the U.S. during the WNBA offseason, rather than head overseas. Players in all sports compete under a point system that rewards both individual and team performance, and each week the four highest ranking players are declared captains and redraft teams for the following week's competition, keeping things fresh for fans. Many basketball games in 2022 aired on the CBS Sports Network, a deal that extends through the 2023 season. Athletes Unlimited signed a multi-year rights agreement in 2022 with ESPN for softball and lacrosse games, and viewership for the softball telecasts were up 56% in 2022 over 2021. In 2022, Athletes Unlimited grew its overall sponsorship revenue 122%, with brand partners that include Nike, Gatorade, Topps, Caesars, Sportradar, and GEICO. The company raised \$30 million in new funding in September to expand its efforts.