

BUSINESS INSIDER

ESPN goes big on women's sports with multi-year Athletes Unlimited softball and lacrosse deal



AU softball player Janie Reed leaps for a catch. Quinn Harris/Getty Images

- **ESPN will broadcast Athletes Unlimited softball and lacrosse competitions for the next two years.**
 - **The multi-year agreement will bring at least 90 games to ESPN, ESPN2, and ESPNU.**
 - **It's the biggest TV deal in AU's history and further develops ESPN's women's sports portfolio.**
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"Put women's sports on TV" has become a rallying cry among women's sports enthusiasts, who know that access and exposure to competition is essential to grow the games they love.

ESPN and Athletes Unlimited heard them loud and clear.

The sports broadcasting giant struck a deal with AU to exclusively carry its softball and lacrosse competitions for the next two years. In total, fans will be able to tune in live for more than 160 games across ESPN's platforms.



Kayla Wood competes during Athletes Unlimited's inaugural lacrosse season. Athletes Unlimited

With at least 90 of those contests accessible on ESPN, ESPN2, or ESPNU, the agreement marks Athletes Unlimited's biggest TV deal to date and further develops ESPN's women's sports portfolio.

"We are proud to collaborate with ESPN to solidify Athletes Unlimited Softball and Athletes Unlimited Lacrosse as two of the major pro sports leagues in the US," AU CEO and Co-Founder Jon Patricof said in a release. "This deal establishes our presence as a major force in the pro

sports landscape in the US, while serving as yet another reminder of ESPN's commitment to women's sports."

Athletes Unlimited, a collective of women's sports leagues that was founded in 2020, has reinvented the scoring systems in softball, volleyball, lacrosse, and basketball while bringing each game to the masses. The leagues' unique athlete-centered model offers a markedly different product from the more traditional professional sports leagues ESPN typically carries.



Athletes Unlimited softball players huddle up. Athletes Unlimited

In each league within Athletes Unlimited — including softball and lacrosse — players earn points based on both team wins and individual performance. The player leaderboard changes in real-time, and at the end of each week, the top four point earners become the captains of reshuffled squads for the following week's games.

"ESPN is excited to expand its relationship with Athletes Unlimited and be part of their innovative approach to women's professional sports," ESPN President of Programming and Original Content Burke Magnus said in the release. "We are looking forward to showcasing these world class softball and lacrosse athletes as part of our longstanding commitment to women's sports."

Athletes Unlimited's inaugural two-week softball league — AUX Softball — is scheduled for June 13-25 in San Diego. All 18 games — including a double-header on the 50th anniversary of Title IX — will be available to fans on either ESPN, ESPN2, or ESPNU.



Pitcher Aleshia Ocasio chats with her catcher during an Athletes Unlimited game. Athletes Unlimited

The third season of AU's five-week championship softball campaign — which will feature at least 27 of the players participating in AUX softball the month prior — kicks off at the end of July and runs through August in Rosemont, Illinois. Thirteen of the 30 games will appear on ESPN2 or ESPNU, with the remaining 17 airing live on ESPN+.

ESPN will have special coverage of the championship league draft as well. On May 4, a handful of college players will earn invitations to compete in Rosemont for their rookie seasons during a livestream from the espnW Summit in New York City.

Finally, the second iteration of Athletes Unlimited is set for summer 2022, but dates and location have yet to be announced. Those games, as well as original content including a multi-part series that follows four AU lacrosse rookies, will also find a home on ESPN's networks.

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