

Can Pro Sports Engage Gen Z Using eSports' Playbook?

As Gen Z continues to age into its buying power, it has become increasingly clear that pro sports leagues like the MLB, NFL and NHL are going to have to find innovative ways to attract younger viewers. Currently the statistics show a sizable gap in Gen Z's engagement as compared to previous generations.

In fact, we found that only **53% of zoomers consider themselves sports fans** compared to the 63% of all adults who do. Among men this gap widens, with Gen Z clocking in at 58% versus 75% of males from all generations.

Meanwhile, **eSports revenue is projected to jump** from \$694.2 Million in 2017 to over \$2.1 Billion dollars by 2023, and between 2020 and 2021, eSports viewership went up by 129% in the US alone. Viewers skew young, and the ability of leagues to capture the Gen Z market is notable. If the major leagues want to stay competitive, tapping into eSports' appeal might just give them that edge. Let's review the plays, shall we?

eSports 2023 Projected Revenue

\$2.1 Billion

up from \$694.2 Million in 2017



Play #1: eSports provide interactive experiences

When talking about Gen Z, the term “digital native” gets thrown around a lot. In truth, zoomers are more than digital natives; they combine the digital with analog and crave that interactivity when it comes to what media they choose to consume. Pro sports don’t always involve a lot of audience participation beyond cheering. On

the other hand, eSports have made the audience **a part of the action**. One small micro-transaction gets a mention during a Twitch stream and a simple follow can net a shoutout on Twitter.

Both the NBA and the WNBA have picked up on this and have surged forward with interactive apps like **Tap to Cheer**, which rewards participants with in-app rewards like animated celebrations for cheering and weekly leaderboards to track which teams garnered the most fan cheers. Has fostering that sense of connection between the audience paid off? Well, **40% of the NBA's fan base is under 35**, so you can call it for yourself.

Play #2: They connect league talent to Gen Z fans

Since Gen Z has grown up living such a robust digital life, their sense of interconnection with their peers is rooted much more heavily in online interactions than previous generations. They're used to being able to reach out to their friends whenever the urge strikes, and seek out community and connections online. Now those connections can include fandoms they associate with, teams they follow, and the athletes they admire on platforms from Twitter to TikTok.

Without Twitch, eSports wouldn't be the same, and that's an important lesson for major league sports. eSports legends stream outside of formal matches, **interacting with fans** and providing an accessibility that pro sports leagues haven't been able to match —

yet. As major franchises adopt the eSports playbook, that's changing.

Leagues like the NFL have started focusing on the personal aspects of the game, humanizing players with mic'd up sideline clips and close ups of elaborate touchdown celebrations. The NBA has also allowed players online space to champion social causes they personally believe in, which has fostered a sense of personal connection and an increased engagement with the league as a whole.


Play #3: eSports supply endless opportunities to engage

Once Gen Z has connected with players and athletes, they expect to *engage*. TikTok videos are great, but zoomers also want to see their favorite basketball player captaining a Madden team on Twitch or their favorite YouTube star in the MMA ring.

Media consumption by Gen Z is multi-layered and crosses between the small screen in their hands showing clips of players dancing to the big screen showing players scoring. It makes sense that Zoomers look for that same variety in major league sports and their interest can wane without it. Pro sports have taken notice.

US eSports viewership

129%



from 2020 to 2021

The leagues that have adopted eSports' modern tactics have seen increased engagement and growth. The **NBA boasts its own eSports league**, and has invested in Epic Games, which produces Fortnite, a Gen Z fave.

The results speak for themselves: the largest social media following of all sports leagues, with more than 100 million combined subscribers on Instagram, TikTok and Twitter.

Then there's the MLB. Investing in engagement has paid off and the league has seen success with its YouTube channel animations and free game of the week. Views were up 97% in 2021, with 43 Million hours logged.

Gen Z may be demanding, but they're also voracious. If pro sports

meet them where they're at, zoomers are willing to consume content at an astronomical rate. eSports are only continuing to rise in popularity with Gen Z. If pro sports leagues want in on that action, providing interactivity, connectivity, and variety is a winning strategy.

Bonus: Lean into your league's video game

We couldn't leave you with just a few tips stemming from quant insights – not when Knit specializes in providing our brand partners with Gen Z [Voice of Consumer Video Insights](#). So we'll sign off with this final nugget:

When asking Gen Z what's increased their fandom for sports in the past year, one of the top answers we heard over and over was **playing video games of that specific sport**. FIFA, Madden and NBA2k all stole the show – with Gen Z citing their growing affinity for the sport due to the more intimate exposure to players during gaming.