

# 2024 Global Sports Survey

**Chapter 5: Middle East's Sports Growth** 



#### SETTING THE STAGE

# Welcome to Altman Solon's **2024 Global Sports Survey**

The sports media industry is on a transformative journey.

As the sector undergoes multiple reconsolidation attempts by content distributors, streaming still cannot valorize sports rights on the same scale as traditional broadcast models, leading to unprecedented disruption.

This necessitates reshaping and expanding IP valorization for rights owners and media partners, firmly moving away from legacy models to new distribution and monetization strategies, especially to engage diverse fan communities.

The industry can rely on new drivers to accomplish this transition, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and a steady wave of private investment, particularly in the Middle East, where sports growth is unprecedented.

Amid these significant changes, we are delighted to present Altman Solon's 2024 Global Sports Survey to give a voice to all stakeholders in the sector, and foster a much-needed, interconnected dialogue on the future of the industry.

# The Survey

Online survey of **220 senior sports executives** globally, including rights owners, media distributors, and investors, and ~3,000 consumers interested in sports in 5 countries: U.S., U.K., Germany, Saudi Arabia, and China; the survey was fielded in June.-Sept 2024, supplemental consumer data provided by GWI.

# **The Firm**

We have completed demanding assignments for a wide range of highprofile sports businesses and their investors, developing a holistic view of the value chain and its key trends, and our focus on TMT can help sports accelerate its transformation.

### Learn more at https://www.altmansolon.com

### **The Editors**



### This report is the 5th of 5 publications and focuses on:

**Evolving Fan** Habits November 2024

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2025

ΑΙ & Innovation February 2025



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Altman Solon is the largest and leading worldwide strategy firm exclusively focused on telecommunications, media, and technology (TMT).

Over 600 consultants across 15 offices worldwide and a trusted advisor to C-level executives from blue-chip companies operating in 100+ countries.

#### David Dellea, Partner – Zurich

18+ years experience as trusted advisor in the sports industry

david.dellea@altmansolon.com linkedin.com/in/daviddellea

#### Matt Del Percio, Director – New York

16+ years experience as a TMT, sports strategy, and M&A advisor

matt.delpercio@altmansolon.com linkedin.com/in/mdelpercio

#### Dr. Christoph Sommer, Director – Zurich

10+ years experience in the media and sports media industry

christoph.sommer@altmansolon.com linkedin.com/in/christophsommer

The next phase for Middle Eastern sports is sustainable growth by elevating local properties to top-tier standards and further activating the regional ecosystem

# **Market Indicators**

### Middle East's Continuous **Sports Expansion**

Middle East entities are exploring multiple avenues to invest in sports

Once driven by members of royal families, foreign sports investments are now led by sovereign funds, aiming at long-term local economic impact

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Middle Eastern stakeholders can directly leverage international investments to support regional growth, including hosting recurring major international events

# A Growing and Young Fanbase

- **Reflecting Middle East's increased** focus on sports, interest in watching sports among younger generations is growing strongly
- Among 16-24-year-olds, interest rose from 27% in 2021 to 36% in 2024

To date, fans in the Middle East tend to prefer top-tier international clubs and leagues over domestic ones the challenge is shifting this fandom to domestic clubs to strengthen local sports ecosystems

### Value Creation: Asset Building **& Ecosystem Activation**

- The Middle East's growing young sports fanbase presents significant opportunities for value creation
- Growth opportunities in sports infrastructure, creating new competitions, attracting international stars, and developing community sports
  - Beyond sports, fans show interest in adjacencies like media/entertainment, implying broader **potential for value** creation through ecosystem building

# **Our Take**

- Sports in the Middle East has expanded rapidly, engaging stakeholders through global partnerships, regional entity growth, and major event hosting
- With a solid asset base established - including growing interest and fandom — the next phase is strengthening the local sports ecosystem, ensuring sustainable, long-term growth beyond one-off events or marguee athlete signings
- A major challenge is increasing engagement with domestic properties, while local fans generally still prefer major international teams or leagues over regional ones
- Value creation should combine "scale" investments to elevate local sports entities to **top-tier** benchmarks (e.g., major European football clubs), along with "scope" initiatives that use sports to activate adjacent, synergistic services, creating a virtuous cycle within the broader regional ecosystem

# Middle East's Continuous Sports Expansion

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Middle East's Sports Growth

Middle Eastern royal affiliates, sovereign funds, and state-owned corporations are exploring various avenues for sports investment

### Major Middle Eastern (ME) Sports Investors and Investment Pathways



Sources: Company information, Altman Solon

### **Investment Goals**

Early royal and private investments, often in football, were less structured and primarily aimed at enhancing international image, with limited local relevance

As part of Saudi and Qatar Vision 2030, governments seek to develop domestic sports markets through initiatives that maximize local social and economic impact

State-owned airlines use sports partnerships as a **powerful** marketing tool, while oil companies and government agencies use them to **reshape** their international images

### **Acquire Stakes in International Clubs and Leagues**

ME investors have traditionally invested in European football clubs such as PSG and Manchester City. Recently, they have diversified into other sports, including e-sports, golf, tennis, and F1, with more capital directed towards emerging leagues rather than individual teams

### **Invest in Growing Domestic Ecosystems**

ME entities are increasingly investing in domestic sports ecosystems, focusing on infrastructure, leagues, and community sports. Notable efforts include the Saudi Pro League attracting global stars like Ronaldo and Benzema, as well as the establishment of the Saudi Sports for All Federation

### Host Top International Events

ME countries are hosting major international events, including the F1 Grand Prix and the Qatar World Cup. Motorsports (F1), combat sports (UFC/Boxing), and golf (LIV/DP World Tour) are among the most prominent. The focus is on establishing annually recurring events rather than one-off occasions

### **Sponsor International Clubs and Leagues**

ME sponsors are using major sports clubs and events to **boost international** visibility and brand recognition. Partnerships include jersey sponsorships and broader collaborations in naming, logistics, and energy, with major players being state-owned oil and airline corporations

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### **Investment Pathways**

Sovereign funds now lead international investments, focusing on generating recurring local job opportunities & boosting tourism

### Middle Eastern-Led International Sports Investments – By Phase

Late 20	00s						
	Return	-motivated inv	Strategic investments dri				
Investors		<b>y royal members</b> ar ds are present but no		<ul> <li>Government-controlled sovereign</li> <li>Some created specialized sports d</li> </ul>			
Targets	• By the early to	d on <b>European foot</b> o mid-2010s, royal n ets, including the U.S	nembers expanded	their impact to <b>overs</b> lia	seas	More capital is	, especially top-tier c flowing into <b>other sp curring events in the</b>
Rationale	enhance glob	astern investments i <b>al image.</b> As portfol into other regions	• Under Vision 2030, sovereign funds events and tourism. As a result, gol regular tours in the Middle East				
Major Deals	2008	2009		2014 <b>EXAMPLE</b>	2018 <b>EXAMPLE 1</b>		
	81% Ownership Football-U.K.	100% Ownership Football-U.K.	قطر للإستئمارات الرياضية 100% Ownership Football-EU	100% Ownership Football (soccer)-U.S.	100% Ownership Football-U.K.	80% Ownership Football-U.K.	93% Ownership Golf-Global

Sources: Company information, Altman Solon

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# Middle Eastern stakeholders are increasingly investing in sponsorships, led by major state-owned airlines & oil companies

#### Qatar Saudi Arabia UAE 24% 34% 52% 15% 6% 153 35% 10% 6% 3% 11% 7% 2% 3% 10% 54% 170 33% 31% State-owned Government Multisport Motorsport Other<sup>1</sup> Football Esports Golf Corporations Agencies Saudi Arabia has the most active sponsors across the Middle East

and the most diversified portfolios, with football accounting for 24%, compared to Qatar's 52% and UAE's 34%

Notes: 1) Other (from most active to least active): Equestrian, Tennis, Cycling, Boxing, Handball, Wrestling, Sailing, Basketball, Polo, Triathlon, Rugby, Padel, Marathon, Cricket, Horse-racing, Swimming, MMA, Kitesurfing, Hockey, Climbing, Australian football, Weightlifting, Table Tennis, Squash, Gymnastics, Fitness Sources: Play the Game, Altman Solon

% of sports sponsorship deals, 2023

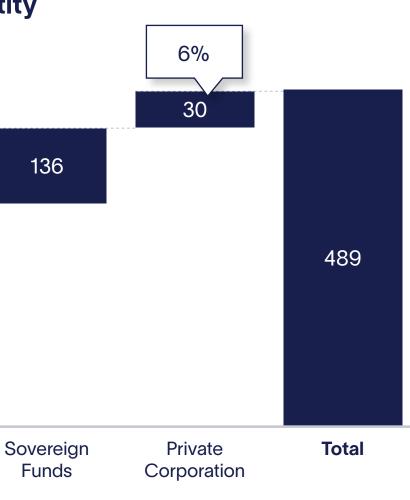
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### **Sponsorship Deals by Sport**

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### **Sponsorship Deals by Entity** % of sports sponsorship deals, 2023





Sponsorship investments are largely dominated by government-related organizations (i.e., 35%), with only 6% coming from private corporations

The Middle East has hosted numerous major international sporting events, leveraging its influence in top leagues and clubs

### Key International Sporting Events Hosted in the Middle East (non-exhaustive)

F1	Golf	Boxing/MMA	Tennis	Football	Equestrian	Wrestling
Saudi Arabia Grand Prix Held 3 times since 2021, \$55m/yr (2021-2030)	<b>PIF Saudi International</b> Asian Tour flagship event, \$5m prize fund (PIF sponsored in 2022)	<b>Clash on the Dunes</b> Fury vs. Usyk; Joshua vs. Ruiz Jr. rematch for WBA, IBF, WSO, IBO heavyweight titles	<b>Diriyah Cup</b> 2022 tournament for 12 ATP Pro players, \$2m in prize money	Supercopa de Espana €120m to be held annually at Adbullah Sports City (2019- 2022)	<b>Saudi Cup</b> Started in 2020, \$20m purse	WWE 10-year partnership (2018- 2028) with Ministry of Sport to host PPV events in Saudi Arabia, worth ~\$100m annually
<b>Qatar Grand Prix</b> Held once since 2021, \$55m/yr (2021-2032)	<b>Qatar Masters</b> DP European Tour, \$3.25m prize fund (held since 1998)	<b>ONE 166: Qatar</b> A combat sport event produced by ONE Championship (2024)	<b>Qatar Open</b> ATP Tour, held in Doha (1993-)	<b>2022 FIFA World Cup</b> Awarded hosting rights in 2010	World Arabian Horse Champ Qatar Brings together more than 100 horses from 25 countries	
Abu Dhabi Grand Prix Held 14 times since 2009, \$40m/yr (2021- 2030)	Multiple DP World Tour Events Including DP Tour Championship since 2009 (season finale, \$10m prize pool)	<b>Fight Island (UFC)</b> 5-year deal (2019- 2024), 14 PPV events at Yas Island since 2020	<b>Dubai Tennis</b> <b>Championship</b> ATP/WTA Tour, owned and organized by Dubai Duty Free (1993-)	<b>UAE President Cup</b> 12 teams compete annually for entrance of AFC Champions League (1974-)	<b>Dubai World Cup</b> A thoroughbred horse race held annually since 1996	
Bahrain Grand Prix Held 19 times since 2004, \$45m/yr (2022- 2036+)	<b>DP World Bahrain</b> <b>Championship</b> Feb. 2024, DP World went back to Bahrain after 13 years (\$10m prize pool)	<b>Brave Combat</b> <b>Federation</b> MMA promotion, founded by Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa in 2016	<b>Ministry of Interior</b> <b>Tennis Challenger</b> Part of ATP challenger tour with prize money of \$52k (2021-)			
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### **ALTMAN SOLON DEEP DIVE**

Legend: Recurring events held by commercial sports leagues owned/sponsored by Middle East investors



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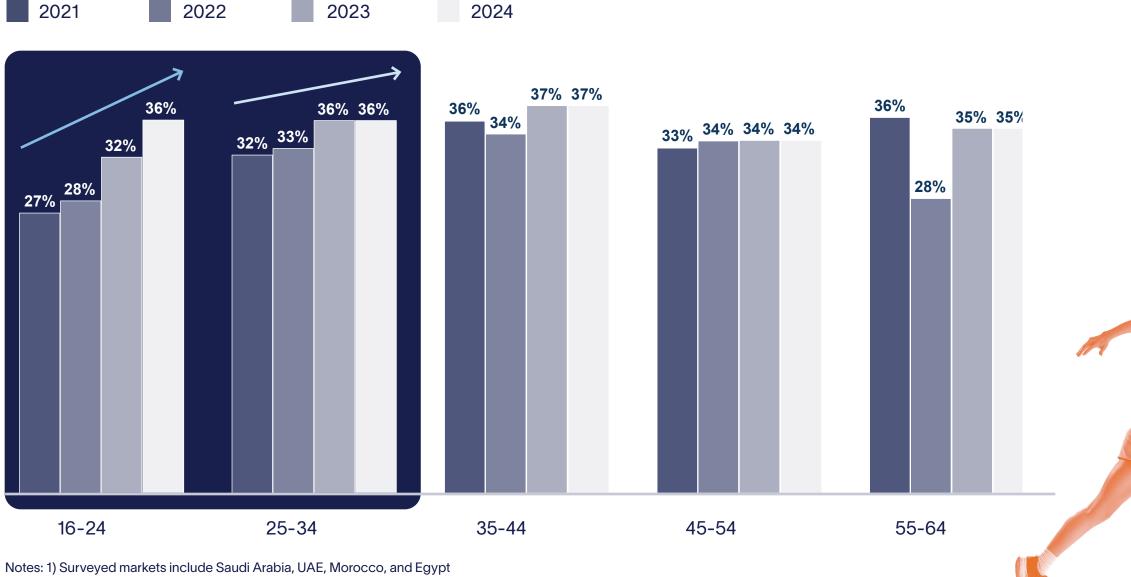


# Interest in sports among younger generations has grown, reflecting Middle East's increased focus on sports

### Interest in Sports Over Time - By Age

Q: Which of the following activities are you interested in?

% of respondents interested in watching sports ME/North Africa<sup>1</sup>



Notes: 1) Surveyed markets include Saudi Arabia, UAE, Morocco, and Egy Sources: GWI Core Survey Q1 '24 N=6,228, Altman Solon

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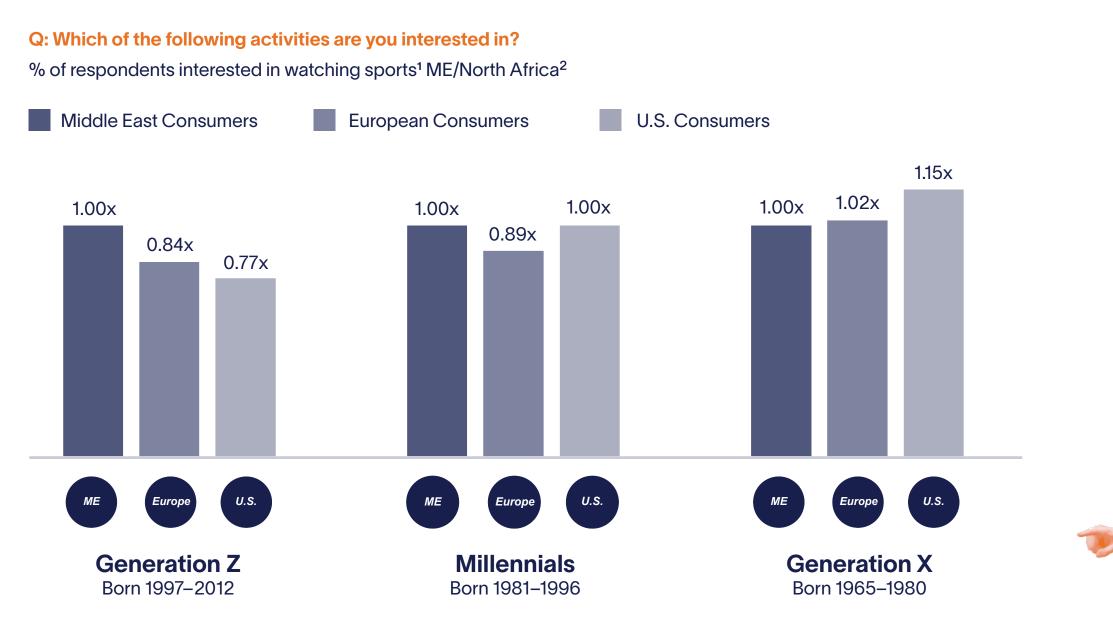
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- Interest in watching sports has increased significantly among younger generations in recent years
  - Among 16-24-year-olds, interest rose from 27% in 2021 to 36% in 2024; 25-34 age group has also seen an increase, but less pronounced
  - Growing interest can likely be attributed to the Middle East's increasing investment & focus in sports
    - Factors such as investment in domestic professional leagues, support for local sports participation, and investment in foreign sports leagues and teams have all played a role

# A new generation of sports fans is emerging in the Middle East, contrasting with Europe and U.S., where youth interest is lower

### Interest in Sports – By Generation



Notes: 1) Indexed to "All" Middle East Consumers, 2) Surveyed markets include Saudi Arabia, UAE, Morocco, and Egypt Sources: GWI Core Survey Q1 '24 N<sup>EU</sup> = 48,335, N<sup>US</sup> = 100,319, N<sup>ME</sup> = 6,228, Altman Solon

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- In the Middle East, Generation Z shows higher interest in sports viewership compared to their European and American peers
  - A growing cohort of sports watchers is emerging in the Middle East, likely driven by regional investments in domestic and foreign sports leagues and teams
  - In contrast, Europe and the United States are experiencing the opposite trend, with younger generations showing less interest in sports viewership compared to older generations

# Few sports disciplines including football and boxing are showing greater popularity among youth compared to 25+ year-olds

### Interest in Specific Sports Disciplines – Youth vs. General Population

Which of these sports/sporting activities do you follow, watch, or have any interest in? % of respondents, ME/North Africa<sup>1</sup>

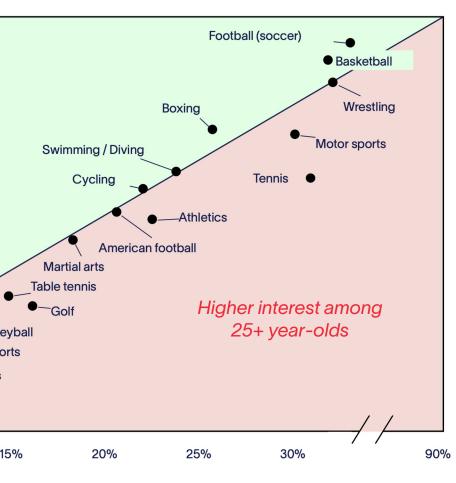
	25+ year-olds	18-24 year-olds			
#1	Football (soccer): 88%	Football (soccer): 86%	Football dominates interest among both groups	90%	
#2	Basketball: 32%	Wrestling: 32%		1	Higher interest among younger fans
#3	Wrestling: 30%	Basketball: 32%		30%	
#4	Boxing: 26%	Tennis: 31%		25%	
#5	Motor sports: 26%	Motor sports: 30%	Popularity		
#6	Swimming/Diving: 23%	Boxing: 25%	Popularity 18-24 year-old	20% S	
#7	Tennis: 22%	Swimming/Diving: 24%		15%	
#8	Cycling: 21%	Athletics: 22%		10%	Surfing
#9	American football: 19%	Cycling: 21%			Baseball Volley Volley Winter sport
#10	Athletics: 19%	American football: 20%		5%	Badminton Gymnastics Rugby
N=	1,361	4,867		0%	

Notes: 1) Includes Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Morocco Sources: GWI Core Survey Q1 '24 N=6,228, Altman Solon

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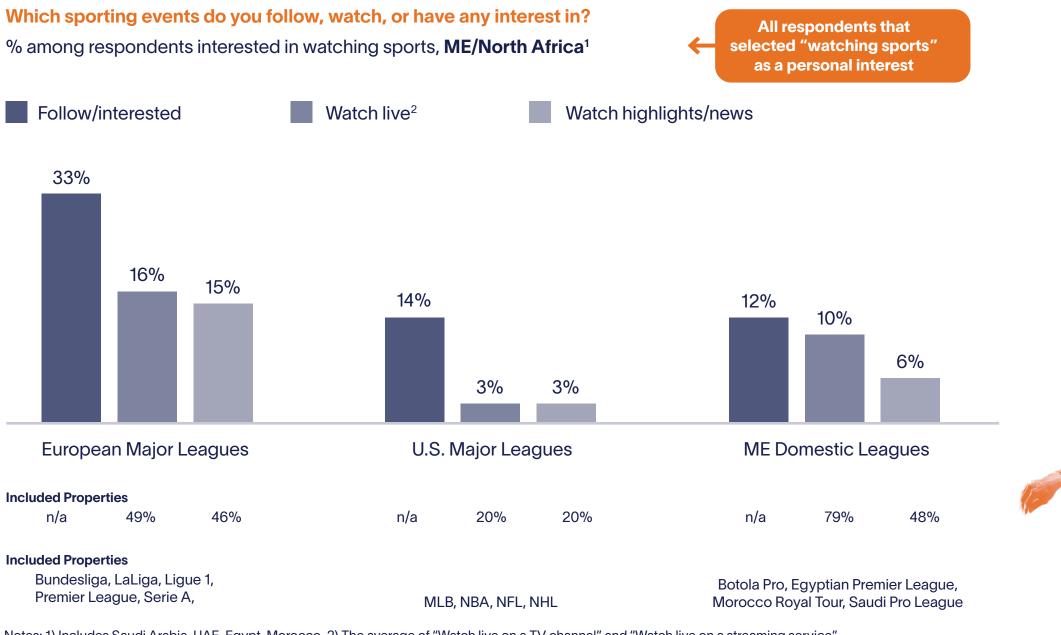
# **VOICE OF THE FANS**



### Popularity 25+ year-olds

# While EU football boasts the highest number of followers, domestic leagues achieve higher conversion rates of interest into live viewing

### Middle Eastern Fans' Interest in Specific Sports Properties



Notes: 1) Includes Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Morocco, 2) The average of "Watch live on a TV channel" and "Watch live on a streaming service" Sources: GWI Core Survey Q1 '23 – Q4 '23 N=8,688, Altman Solon

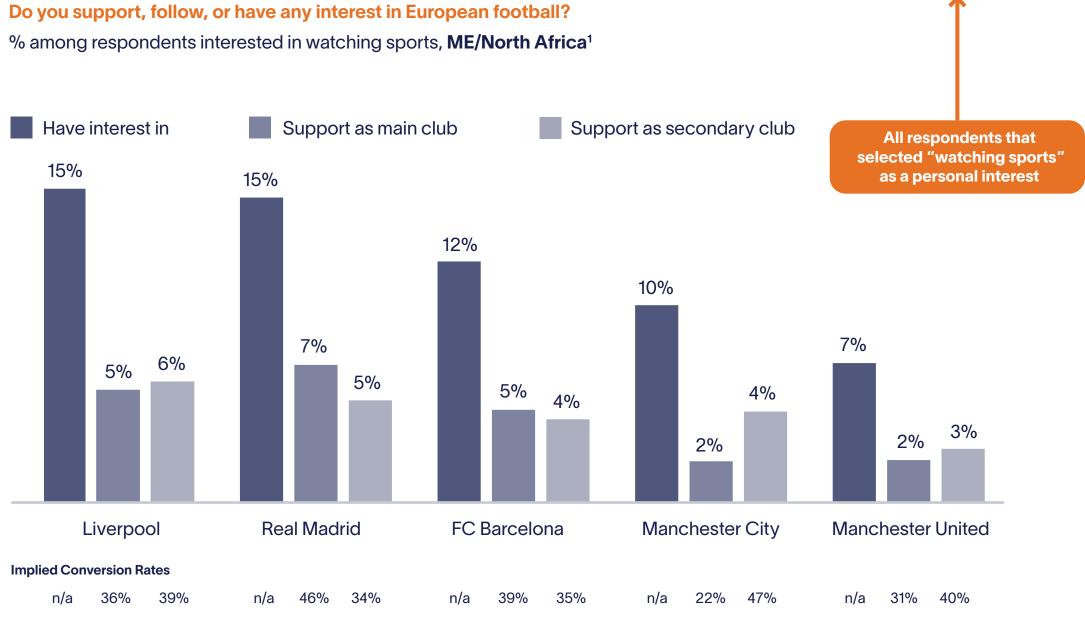
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- Sports viewers in the Middle East show greater interest in European football leagues than in domestic leagues
- However, only 49% of European football followers indicate they watch live matches
- Conversely, while Middle Eastern domestic leagues have lower followership, they achieve higher conversion rates of fans into live content consumption

# Top European football clubs, such as Liverpool and Real Madrid, enjoy substantial followership among Middle Eastern sports fans

### Middle Eastern Fans' Interest in Specific Sports Properties - Top 5 European Football Clubs



Sources: GWI Core Survey Q1 '23 - Q4 '23 N=8,688, Altman Solon

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- European football clubs have a strong following in the Middle East, with Liverpool and Real Madrid leading at 15% interest among sports fans
- Many fans actively support these clubs as their main or secondary team, implying deep engagement
- Given this interest in sports, the ambition is to further expand sports fandom domestically and strengthen the local sports ecosystems
  - Investment in local leagues, star signings, and improved fan experiences could help further increase engagement with regional teams



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### Middle East's Sports Growth

# The Middle East's growing young sports fanbase presents unique opportunities for sustainable value creation in the region

Value Creation Opportunities Through Sports Investment (1/2)

### **Survey Findings & Implications**

Middle East's growing cohort of young sports fans suggests room for greater engagement in the local sports ecosystem, implying significant value opportunities through investment

- Youth interest in sports in the Middle East has increased rapidly in recent years, likely due to recent investment in domestic and foreign sports ecosystems
- Sports fans in the Middle East cite higher interest in top-tier European sports teams & leagues than in domestic properties; however, only ~50% of those interested in top-tier leagues watch live vs. ~80% for domestic leagues

### **Sports infrastructure**

Investments in sports infrastructure can **increase interest and deepen engagement** with domestic leagues, including live event attendance

### **Global sports stars**

International sports stars elevate the global relevance of domestic leagues while strengthening local fandom and global engagement

Source: Altman Solon

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### **Avenues for Value Creation**

### **New competitions**

New competitions can boost engagement among younger fans and help revive interest in sports with declining relevance



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### **Community sports**

Community sports can foster local talent and enhance engagement among younger generations, creating long-term interest

# **Domestic investment has already bolstered** engagement in local sports, particularly in Saudi Arabia

### Value Creation Opportunities Through Sports Investment (2/2)

Investing in sports infrastructure



- Traditionally, sports infrastructure in the Middle East was **developed** for international events, such as the 22 Qatar World Cup, 27 Asian Cups, etc.
- Now, sports facilities are being transformed into multifunctional urban projects, including Saudi's NEOM, Qiddiya, Al Ula, Jeddah Downtown, and King Salman Park



Establishing new

competitions

- New domestic competitions are emerging in the Middle East, such as Baseball United (2024) and Saudi International (golf, 2019)
- The Saudi Arabia Women's **Premier League launched its first** official match in 2022 - since then, the number of teams has grown, and DAZN has agreed to broadcast a minimum of 2 games

### Bringing international sports stars



- Saudi Arabia's PIF acquired major stakes in four domestic football clubs, including Ronaldo's Al Nassr, and attracted top stars like Neymar, Benzema, Kanté, Mané, and Firmino
- During the summer transfer window, Saudi Pro League clubs spent a record \$907 million (net), second only to the Premier League's \$1.39 billion (net)

Sources: Company information, Altman Solon

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### Developing community sports



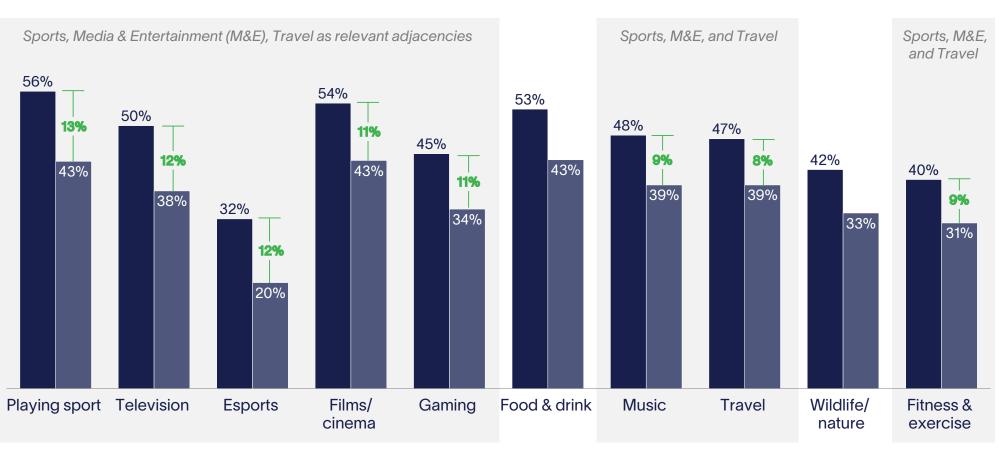
- for All Federation promotes physical activity through local competitions, community sports infrastructure, and sports education
- The introduction of community leagues, such as the Arab Youth Sports League (established in 2023), encourage sports participation across all ages



# Sports fans show greater interest in adjacent activities including media, entertainment, and travel, compared to all respondents

### Sports Fans' Interest in Adjacent Activities

Which of the following activities are you interested in? ME/North Africa<sup>1</sup>



Interest among sports fans<sup>2</sup> Interest among all respondents

Higher interest among sports fans vs. all respondents

Notes: 1) Surveyed markets include Saudi Arabia, UAE, Morocco, Egypt, 2) Sports fans defined by respondents indicating interest in watching sports Sources: GWI, Altman Solon

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Value Creation: Asset Building & Ecosystem Activation



**VOICE OF THE FANS** 

- Sports fans in the Middle East show significantly higher interest in adjacent activities, including sports, media & entertainment, and travel, compared to the general public
- Cross-sell opportunities exist across sports, media & entertainment, and travel platforms, enabling broader engagement
- Sports asset owners can benefit by developing integrated ecosystems that leverage fans' strong interest in related experiences







### Sports' Adjacent Market Map

### **Schematic**

Sports			Γ	Media & Entertainment	Travel/Tourism			
Professional	Participatory	At-Home		Indoor	Outdoor	Purpose based (tourism type/objective)		
Local pro leagues	In-person fitness	Publishing		Cinema	Theme & water parks	Group holidays	Education tourism	
International events	Mass sports	-	Music and radio	Family & kids centers	Studio parks	Family holidays	Space tourism	
Sports championships	Community leagues	TV and film		Immersive experiences	Arcades	Getaway holidays	Medical tourism	
Awards ceremonies	Youth leagues	Digital media		Ice skating	Exhibitions	Adventure tours	Destination weddings	
Live esports	Recreational sports	Social media		Performing arts	-	Honeymoons	Cruises	
Broadcast sports	Sports training camps	Video games		Night life	Live music concerts	CHM and sights tours	Religious destinations	
Mega esports events	Casual sportswear	Boardgames & cards		Recreation centers	Cultural experiences	Public festivals	Major live events	
Mega sports events	Smart sportswear	-	Interest based (hobbies/casual free time spend)	Arts & crafts	Collecting	Nature retreats	Parks & forests	
Sports betting	Virtual fitness	Leisure		Model building	Astronomy & watching	Sun & beach	Fish, hunt, camp	
Pro sportswear	Fantasy sports & games			Gardening	Cooking & tastings	Yacht & marina	Photography	
Pro stadium & fields	Gym & sports centers			Cultural centers	Public libraries	Volunteer/charity	Writing/composing	
Supporting ecosystem			Supporting ecosystem			Supporting ecosystem		
Distribution platforms	ms Destination mgmt. Retail, F&B		Retail, F&B	Accommodations	Travel & transportation	Marketing	Communication	

Source: Altman Solon

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#### **NON-EXHAUSTIVE HYPOTHESIS**

We believe the Middle East's next phase of sports growth is to focus on both boosting individual assets & driving value across the broader regional ecosystem

# Our Take

In recent years, **the Middle East has seen impressive sports growth** driven by **diverse stakeholders**, including royal affiliations, sovereign funds, and state corporations. Investments have ranged from **acquiring stakes** in and **sponsoring** international clubs and leagues, **hosting top events**, and **developing domestic ecosystems.** 

Historically driven by royal affiliations, **sovereign funds** now lead the charge with a focus on **sustainable local economic growth**. The region faces the **challenge to further boost fan engagement with regional properties**, as research shows Middle East fans having strong interest in major international teams and leagues.

With a **solid asset base** in place, we believe the **Middle East's next phase of sports value creation** will focus on **optimizing regional assets** to **match top-tier global benchmarks**. In football especially, sovereign funds can achieve this by using team ownership to operate like **centralized leagues** or **multi-club ownership structures**, driving efficient value creation through **scaling best practices**.

### All in all, **key steps** to achieve this include:

- Operational optimization: Improve **sports** (e.g., transfer policy, local athlete performance) and **non-sports** (e.g., commercial, business operations) processes of regional sports assets
- 2 Fan centricity: Consider regional specificities to boost fan engagement, including by collecting and analyzing fan data
- Broader value creation strategy: Identify synergies between sports and adjacent assets to maximize sportsrelated investments, including leisure, tourism, and entertainment (e.g., use sports venues and operating capabilities for hosting live events and festivals)
- 4 Strategic implementation: Define goals and KPIs for each initiative; continuously monitor impact and improver accordingly

Source: Altman Solon

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Successful projects will be those where investors add significant value, such as consolidating or growing undeveloped sports, rather than investing in established leagues or clubs.

Andreas Kaeshammer, Head of Football, Infront Sports & Media

Sports investments should target organizations diversifying beyond ticket sales and merchandise, embracing esports, innovative sponsorships, and digital monetization. Growth is also strong in health and wellness trends, including wearables, fitness tech, and wellness events.

Jamie Corr, Managing Director Sports, Burson

# Altman Solon is the leading global strategy firm focused on telecommunications, media, and technology



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# Our services in the sports industry:

- Strategy
- Target operating model
- Organizational design
- Go-to-market
- Financial planning
- Transaction support
- Feasibility assessments

# Specific strategy services in sports media:

- Rights packaging and auctioning
- Media rights servicing
- DTC, OTT, and Web3
- Content features and pricing
- Fan behavior research
- Remote / virtual production

### At Altman Solon we have built an impressive team of strategy professionals working at the crossroads of sports and media



**David Dellea** Zurich



Matt Del Percio New York



**Christoph Sommer** Zurich



Tereza Vaculikova Zurich



Livio Baumli **Zurich** 



Matt Rivet Los Angeles



**Christian Esser** 

Munich

**Robin Fasel** 

Zurich

**Justin Jameson** Sydney



Matteo Tiranti London



**Jeremy Smith** Sydney



**Alessandro Oehv** Zurich



Mateusz Lukaszewski

Warsaw

**Nolwenn Monnier** Zurich





**Oliver Wilson** 

London

**Otto von Wulffen** Munich





# **Our Research Partner**

The consumer research included in this publication was collected by our partner GWI as part of an online survey fielded between August and September 2024

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**Davide Tesoro-Tess** Milan



**Pascal Stefan** Munich



**Katrina Kazor** San Francisco



**Doug Meyers** New York

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