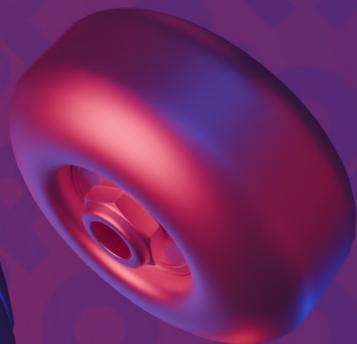


International Federations 2026



SPORTIVO SOCIAL

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Introduction



Tom Lloyd-Evans

Senior Performance & Insights Manager

Dear friends and colleagues,

2025 was an incredible year for sport and 2026 has already seen the Winter Olympic Games in Milano Cortina bring global attention back to International Federations (IFs). With competition for attention on social higher than ever, the challenge for IFs is standing out and most importantly being remembered.

This year marks the **10th edition of SportOnSocial International Federations**. Over the past decade, IFs have grown significantly in their social media performance, but success is now defined more by the ability to capture attention and build lasting recognition among fans.

That's why we're delighted to unveil the SportOnSocial International Federations 2026 Report. As always, the report is packed with insight and 2026 features some new additions:

- Chinese platforms Weibo, Douyin and WeChat are now fully integrated into the overall rankings for the first time.
- New longitudinal performance analysis over the past 10 years (2016–2025) and how IFs compare to commercial sports properties.
- Deep dives into how to build memory, what creates lasting lift and how to be distinctive.

The goal for International Federations is clear: win the battle for attention and make it last.

A big thank you to all our incredible report contributors.

Best wishes,

Tom

Chapter 1

Overview

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Methodology

The SportOnSocial International Federations League Table 2026 ranks 44 Summer and Winter Olympic International Federations (IFs) based on their social media performance in 2025.

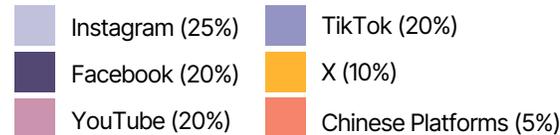
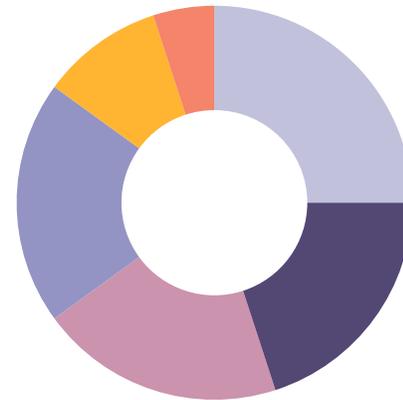
To determine the rankings, analysts from the Redtorch Research & Performance Lab used a combination of third-party tools, desk research and propriety technology to analyse 315k social media posts across 353 primary, discipline-specific and World Championship pages actively managed by IFs.

The platforms below (and their subsequent metrics) were analysed.

| | Total Followers/ Subscribers | Follower/ Subscriber Growth | Growth Rate | Engagement Rate | Total Engagements | Engagements Per Post | Total Impressions | Total Video Views | Views Per Video |
|-----------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Facebook | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓* | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Instagram | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓* | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| YouTube | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓* | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| TikTok | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓** | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Weibo | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Douyin | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| WeChat | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |

Platform weighting

Platform weighting is based on insights gathered from multiple SportOnSocial surveys conducted over the past 10 years (2016–2025).



Chinese platforms have been included in the overall league table for the first time, following increased adoption and usage by IFs, alongside a growing understanding that communications need to reach a global audience.

Notes

- Data correct as of 1 February 2026.
- As analysis uses open-source platform data, it is not possible to determine whether metrics are organic or paid.
- Instagram Stories metrics are not included as data not available.
- An IF performance index score (out of 100) is included in the overall rankings to highlight the gaps between positions and offer a clearer understanding of differences in rank.
- Post analysis was carried out on the top Instagram posts per IF, using the Redtorch AI Engine to quantify distinctiveness.
- The SportOnSocial League Table benchmarks IF social media performance only. It does not rank, evaluate or analyse the overall popularity of any sport.

* engagement rate = number of post engagements divided by number of fans (Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube)

** TikTok engagement rate = engagements divided by video views

SportOnSocial League Table 2026

| Ranking | International Federation | Change | Score |
|---------|--|--------|-------|
| 1 | World Athletics | 0 | 93.0 |
| 2 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | +2 | 89.4 |
| 3 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +4 | 88.5 |
| 4 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +11 | 87.9 |
| 5 | International Cricket Council (ICC) | -2 | 85.7 |
| 6 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | +2 | 81.7 |
| 7 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | -2 | 81.6 |
| 8 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | +1 | 80.9 |
| 9 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | -7 | 80.4 |
| 10 | World Rugby | -4 | 78.5 |
| 11 | United World Wrestling (UWW) | -1 | 71.6 |
| 12 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | +2 | 71.2 |
| 13 | International Handball Federation (IHF) | +14 | 67.2 |
| 14 | International Skating Union (ISU) | +4 | 66.8 |
| 15 | World Triathlon | +15 | 63.0 |
| 16 | Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) | -4 | 61.9 |
| 17 | World Archery (WA) | -6 | 60.7 |
| 18 | International Biathlon Union (IBU) | +2 | 60.3 |
| 19 | International Tennis Federation (ITF) | 0 | 58.3 |
| 20 | World Gymnastics | -7 | 56.6 |
| 21 | World Taekwondo (WT) | 0 | 53.6 |
| 22 | International Judo Federation (IJF) | -6 | 53.5 |

| Ranking | International Federation | Change | Score |
|---------|--|-----------|-------|
| 23 | International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) | -6 | 48.8 |
| 24 | International Bobsleigh & Skeleton Federation (IBSF) | +14 | 48.3 |
| 25 | World Climbing (IFSC) | +3 | 48.1 |
| 26 | World Baseball Softball Confederation (WBSC) | -4 | 40.5 |
| 27 | World Skate | +4 | 39.5 |
| 28 | World Curling | +5 | 36.0 |
| 29 | World Boxing | New entry | 33.1 |
| 30 | International Hockey Federation (FIH) | -5 | 32.8 |
| 31 | World Lacrosse | +4 | 31.0 |
| 32 | World Rowing | -6 | 30.5 |
| 33 | Fédération Internationale d'Escrime (FIE) | +3 | 28.8 |
| 34 | International Surfing Association (ISA) | -5 | 28.5 |
| 35 | International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF) | -3 | 26.5 |
| 36 | World Squash | -2 | 26.5 |
| 37 | International Federation of American Football (IFAF) | +5 | 25.0 |
| 38 | International Canoe Federation (ICF) | -15 | 19.1 |
| 39 | World Pentathlon (UIPM) | +2 | 17.7 |
| 40 | International Luge Federation (FIL) | -1 | 16.7 |
| 41 | International Ski Mountaineering Federation (ISMF) | +2 | 14.4 |
| 42 | International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) | -2 | 13.3 |
| 43 | World Sailing (WS) | -6 | 10.2 |
| 44 | International Golf Federation (IGF) | New entry | 3.9 |



Headlines

World Athletics

TikTok momentum drives World Athletics back to #1

World Athletics placed #1 overall for a second year straight – ranking #1 on Facebook, #2 on TikTok, #3 on Instagram.

A significant rise on TikTok (up from #9 last year) helped drive momentum to secure the top spot once again.

FIS

Milano Cortina 2026 build-up drives FIS growth

FIS was the highest ranked Winter IF (#4 overall, #1 on Instagram). Its +11-place rise was largely driven by Milano Cortina build-up content on Instagram.

The IF recorded the strongest growth among similarly sized IFs, with engagement levels comparable to IFs four to six times larger in audience size.

World Triathlon

Video-led growth powers the rise of World Triathlon

World Triathlon rose 15 places to #15 overall – the IF's best-ever ranking.

This surge was powered by standout growth on video platforms YouTube (up +24 places to #2) and TikTok (up +15 to #13), alongside ranking gains across every platform including Chinese ones.

Chinese Platforms

China is a long-term growth market

Unlike some global platforms where engagement declined after Paris 2024, China platforms continued to grow +18% YoY, proving them to be a high-focus area for IFs aiming for global attention.

Engagement surged across major Chinese platforms, e.g. WeChat (+476%*), Weibo (+27%), Douyin (+11%).

MiCo & LA28

Winter & LA28 sports capture rising fan attention

Winter IFs recorded an average engagement increase of +97%. New/returning LA28 sports grew by +40%.

Other IFs saw engagement decline by -9% on average. Most decreases occurred on X (36 IFs), Instagram (31 IFs) and YouTube (24 IFs).

Facebook & TikTok

Facebook & TikTok define the new platform balance

Facebook (+29%) and TikTok (+17%) were the only platforms where IFs recorded collective YoY engagement growth.

Facebook also saw an acceleration in audience growth (+21%): 29 of the 44 IFs improved their YoY growth rate vs 16 on Instagram.

*This year's report includes WeChat subscription and channels

2025 Shift: IFs Pivot Further Towards Video

Video is now the dominant format across social media platforms.

International Federations shift towards video

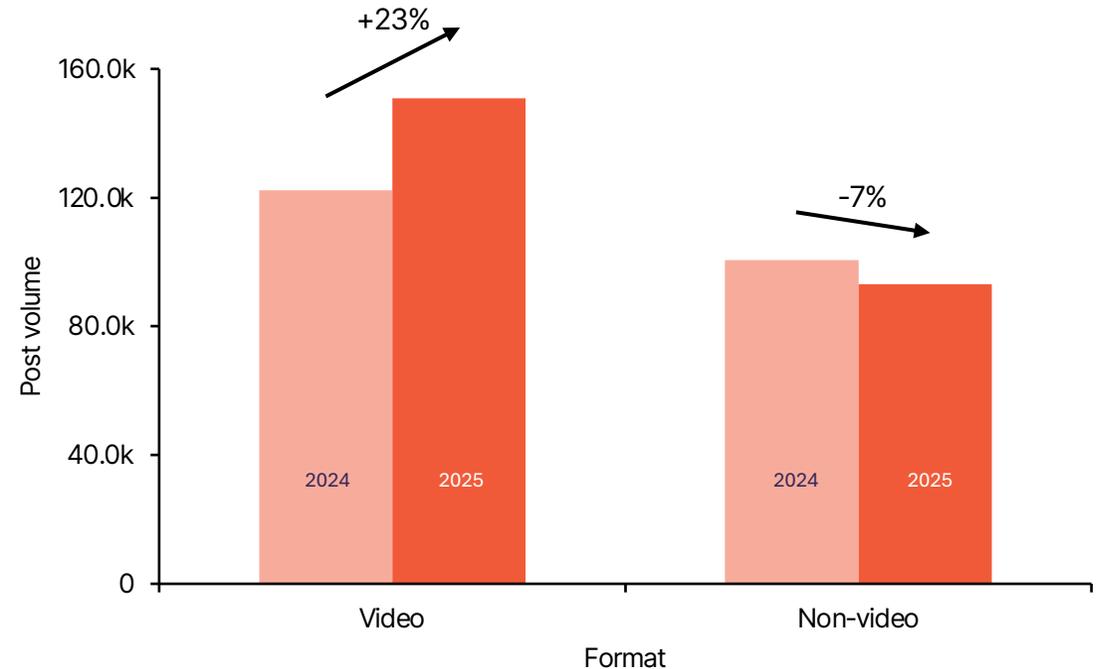
International Federations had significant YoY growth in post volume between 2021 and 2024, however IFs may have now reached full posting capacity, with post volume plateauing over the past two years.

While post frequency has plateaued, a clear shift by IFs towards video content has emerged, a SportOnSocial trend witnessed since 2022. Video now accounts for 62% of all IF posts, up from 54% in 2022.

This trend is visible across platforms: Instagram Reels (+18%), Facebook Reels (+17%), TikTok videos (+58%). YouTube saw increases across both video formats: Shorts (+38%) and long-form videos (+11%) whereas non-video posts have declined by -7% across all platforms.

The current challenge for IFs is how to capture attention in an increasingly crowded space, where fans are overloaded with short-form content that is often consumed passively.

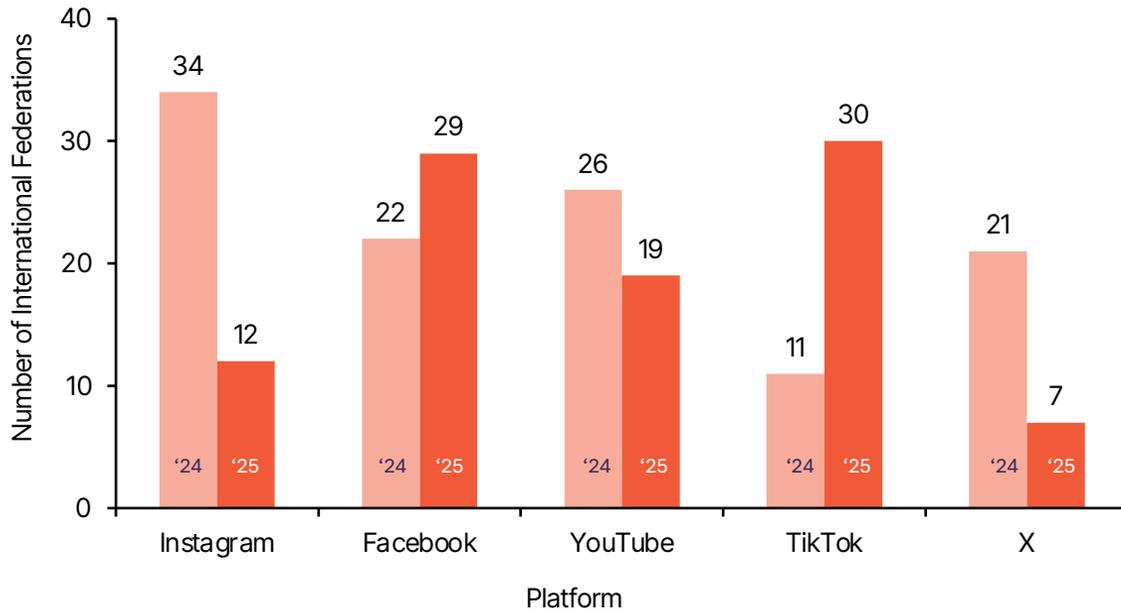
YoY post volume by format (excluding X)



2025 Shift: Platform Engagement Growth

Facebook and TikTok show unique engagement growth compared to 2024.

Number of International Federations which saw a YoY increase in engagement



Why Facebook and TikTok stand out

Facebook and TikTok were the only platforms to see YoY increases in engagement; they also saw more IFs reporting engagement growth than other platforms.

Thirty IFs on TikTok and 29 IFs on Facebook saw an increase in engagement vs 19 on YouTube, 12 on Instagram and 7 on X – platforms which collectively saw sizable declines in engagement vs last year.

They're very different platforms, but what's so special about Facebook and TikTok? Facebook has the broadest global reach and the largest total fan base for most IFs, which offers more opportunities for repeat exposure to build sustained engagement. TikTok is discovery-led, thriving on short video content that captures attention quickly, especially from younger fans.



The Battle for Attention: How Much Time Do Sports Really Have?

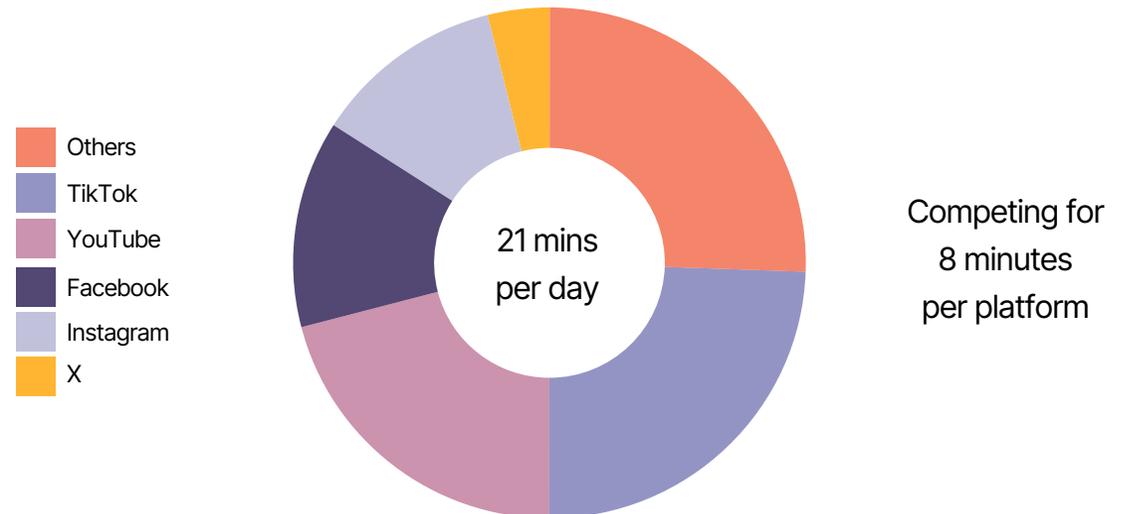
IFs have just 21 minutes per day to capture fan attention across social media platforms.

The average person spends 2 hours 21 minutes (141 minutes) per day on social media. Of this, 55–65% is typically spent on entertainment (including sport). If sport accounts for around a quarter of that entertainment time, then fans spend an average of 21 minutes per day consuming sports content.

However, that 21 minutes is split across multiple platforms. Users average 2–4 platforms daily, so sports organisations have only about 8 minutes on average to capture a user's attention on any given platform.

IFs must stand out if they are to make the most of this limited time. They need to create compelling content that grabs attention quickly while building lasting recognition at the same time. With competition from both entertainment giants and other sports, it's crucial that IFs craft content that leaves an enduring impression on fans.

Average time spent consuming sport on social media per day





Chapter 2

10 Editions of SportOnSocial

**SPORTON
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How IFs Compare to Commercial Sports Properties

IF growth tracks the market, while commercial sport drives faster, year-round growth.

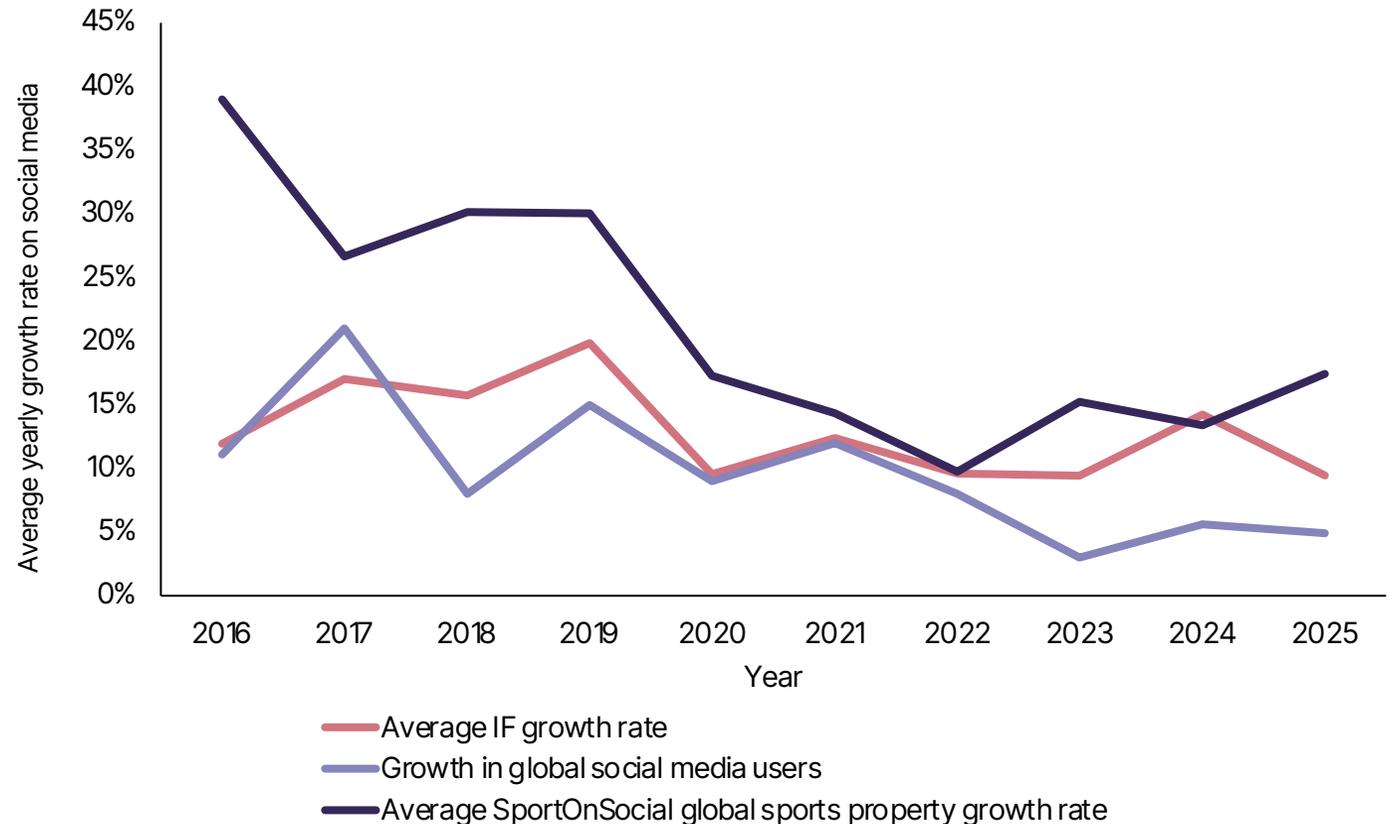
IF audience growth largely tracks market expansion

IFs have, over the past decade, delivered average audience growth of around +13% per year, only slightly ahead of the approximately 10% annual growth in global social media users. This suggests IF audiences have mainly expanded in line with overall platform adoption and major event cycles rather than through sustained increases in day-to-day relevance. Paris 2024 provided a global cultural moment for Olympic sport by driving a clear uplift in attention and helping accelerate audience growth across many IFs during the cycle.

Commercial sports properties create growth all year round

By comparison, leading global commercial sports properties have grown audiences at over +21% per year on average, consistently outperforming both IFs and the wider market. Their stronger median growth points suggest a greater ability to generate ongoing demand and cultural traction instead of relying on periodic global peaks. As global social media growth continues to slow, the opportunity for IFs is becoming clearer: future gains will depend less on market expansion and more on actively competing for attention through distinctive positioning and value brought to new audiences.

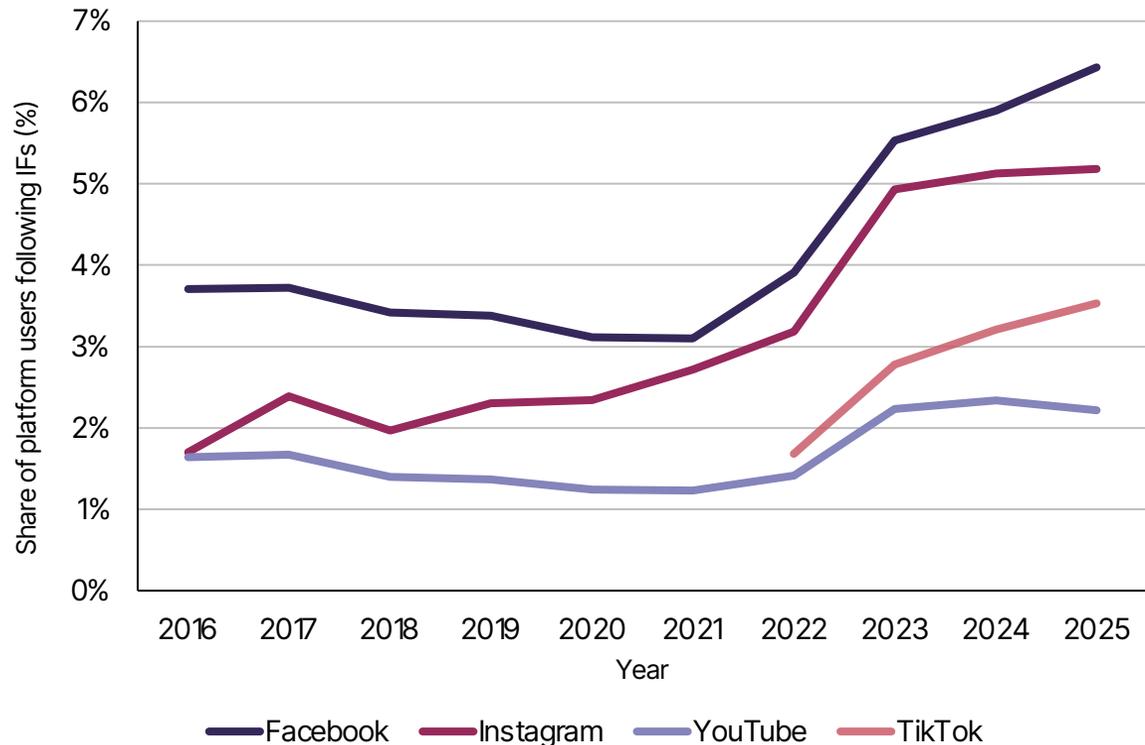
Sports audience growth vs global social media market growth (2016–2025)



Platform Penetration Slows as IFs Establish Presence

IFs have scaled their presence over a decade, but are now nearing a ceiling across platforms.

International Federation penetration across major platforms



Long-term gains in platform visibility

Over the past decade, IFs have increased their share of total users across the major social platforms, strengthening the visibility of Olympic sport in the global social ecosystem. Facebook rose from 4% to 6% penetration, Instagram from 2% to 5%; TikTok reached 4% within just a few years.

Penetration growth is now slowing

The more recent pattern, however, suggests this expansion is slowing. Over the last three years, penetration has largely plateaued across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, with only modest gains on TikTok. This indicates that IFs have established a meaningful presence on the major platforms but are no longer significantly expanding their share of total addressable audiences.

YouTube remains the clearest gap

Despite its scale, penetration has stayed at around 2%, suggesting that Olympic sport has yet to convert the platform's vast user base into a comparable level of IF audiences.

Outlook

More broadly, the data suggests that current formats and content approaches may be reaching their natural ceiling across the major platforms. Future growth will depend on whether IFs can define the new audience spaces they can credibly own and develop content products that fit them.



IF Engagement Rate Improves Despite Higher Output

Engagement rates are rising for IFs, narrowing the gap with global sports properties.

Long-term gains in platform visibility

IFs are closing the engagement gap despite higher publishing volume. Over the past decade, IFs have improved engagement rate per post from 0.06% in 2016 to 0.11% in 2025, peaking at 0.13% in 2023/24. Over the same period, the SoS benchmark group* declined from 0.40% to 0.18%, meaning the engagement rate gap between IFs and leading sports properties has narrowed significantly.

IFs are doing this while publishing far more frequently

Posting volume is a key part of the story. The average IF publishes at a much higher rate than the SoS benchmark group – around 11–15 posts per day vs 4–8. Despite this heavier publishing load, IF engagement efficiency has improved over time, suggesting they are responding better to audience behaviour even within a higher-volume content model.

Scale still leads, but efficiency is becoming more competitive

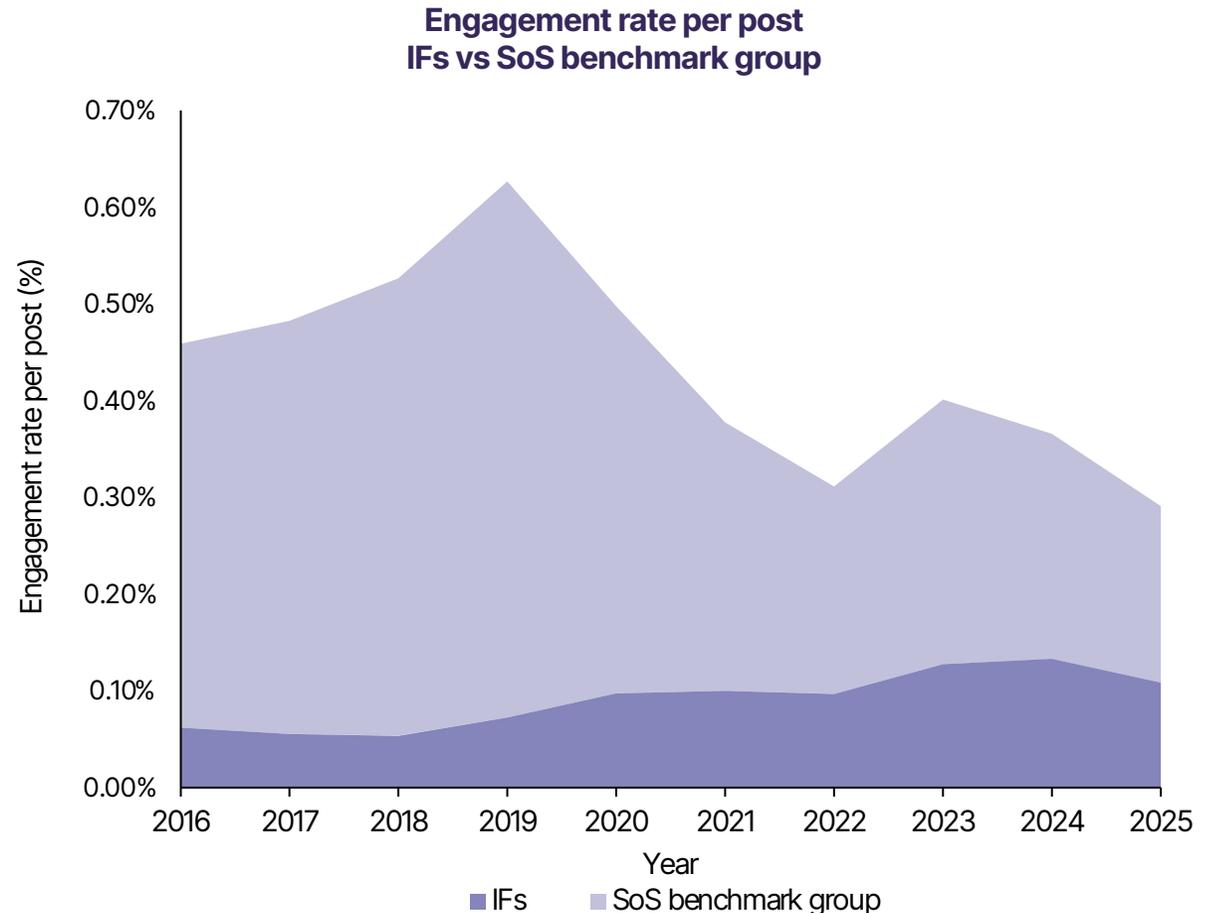
The SoS benchmark group still outperforms IFs on engagement rate per post, but the gap is no longer as wide. This reflects two shifts at once: (1) IFs are becoming better at converting audience size into interaction, (2) larger benchmark properties are finding it harder to sustain engagement intensity as audience behaviour fragments at scale.

What it means

The average IF remains less engagement-efficient than the strongest sports properties, but the gap is narrowing. More importantly, this is happening despite much higher publishing volume, suggesting the challenge is no longer simply output, but how effectively content systems align with audience behaviour and the conversion of scale into sustained attention.

Outlook

Future advantage is likely to come from improving the fit between content format, publishing rhythm and audience needs – not simply from posting more.





Chapter 3

Platform Breakdown

SPORTS
SOCIAL

Platform Breakdown

Facebook



Facebook – Top 20 IFs

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | World Athletics | 0 |
| 2 | World Gymnastics | +1 |
| 3 | World Archery (WA) | +3 |
| 4 | World Rugby | -1 |
| =5 | International Cricket Council (ICC) | +4 |
| =5 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | -3 |
| 7 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | -2 |
| 8 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | 0 |
| 9 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +8 |
| 10 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | +4 |
| 11 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +2 |
| 12 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | -2 |
| 13 | International Biathlon Union (IBU) | +2 |
| 14 | International Judo Federation (IJF) | +9 |
| 15 | International Skating Union (ISU) | -3 |
| 16 | Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) | -9 |
| 17 | International Handball Federation (IHF) | +7 |
| 18 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | +2 |
| 19 | United World Wrestling (UWW) | -3 |
| 20 | World Baseball Softball Confederation (WBSC) | -1 |



Facebook growth signals renewed audience momentum

The platform delivered a +29% increase in engagement and a +21% increase in audience growth across IFs, the highest YoY rise of any Western platform.

29 IFs increased audience growth on Facebook, with the same number also improving engagement YoY – the highest of any Western platform for growth, and second only to TikTok for engagement.

Video drives two-thirds of IF engagement on Facebook

Video generated 66% of average IF engagement on Facebook, up from 48% in 2024. Reels output increased by 17%, while non-video posts declined by -8% and the average engagement per video rose by 147% across all IFs.

Meta removed any distinction between traditional video and Reels in 2025, consolidating all video uploads under a single 'Reels' format.

Facebook – Creative Review

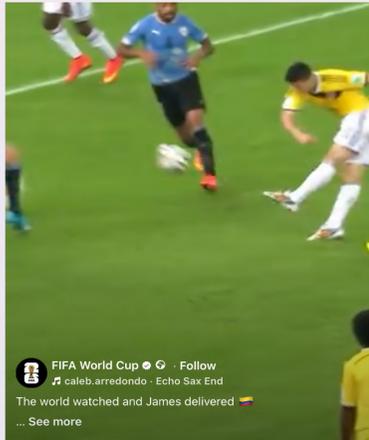
How are IFs gaining *attention* on Facebook?

IFs successfully generate attention on Facebook through the use of archive footage and content theme of nostalgia. Several of the best-performing posts on the platform in 2025 were the resharing of old clips.

Does this class as creative? Absolutely! Creativity doesn't solely rely on elaborate edits or having the best quality images. Sometimes the best tactic is to just keep things simple and let your sport do the talking through emotional storytelling.

Facebook is a key platform to support archive footage as it's suited to retrospective storytelling. Content circulates through sharing more than it does in real-time discovery, meaning historic sporting moments always remain relevant in the feed.

Leaning into the nostalgia of your sport can play a part in creating new memories but more importantly strengthen existing ones, tapping into the emotional connection fans already have with your sport and introducing new fans to what makes it so special.



How are IFs gaining *memorability* on Facebook?

Some IFs have successfully integrated logos and branded cues into their Facebook content (particularly within Reels) through end cards or subtle logo placement.

Interestingly, many of the best-performing IF posts on Facebook in 2025 feature very few Distinctive Brand Assets (DBAs). This doesn't necessarily mean DBAs reduce performance although it does highlight the challenge of balancing organic storytelling with visible branding.

Don't be completely put off, logos and branded end cards provide a practical solution. Logos can be embedded subtly within static posts or visuals while end cards allow video content to remain uninterrupted before linking the moment back to the IF. The drawback to end cards, of course, is their reliance on viewers watching until the end.

Without some form of recognisable branding, the content may well generate strong engagement but the memory structures being built will belong to the sport itself rather than to the IF that created it.



Platform Breakdown

Instagram



Instagram – Top 20 IFs



Instagram sees second year of overall declining engagement & growth

Engagement across IFs fell -21% YoY, while new fan growth declined by -25% - a second consecutive year of decline. Only twelve IFs increased engagement and sixteen increased growth, compared to 29 on Facebook.

Instagram remains a key storytelling platform, but engagement is increasingly driven by short bursts of attention rather than sustained audience interaction.

Instagram shifts further towards a video-first discovery platform

IFs posting frequency increased by +4% YoY, making Instagram the second most active platform after Facebook.

Content has shifted significantly towards short-form video as it dominates discovery and reach. Reels accounted for 50% of all IF posts vs 30% for carousels and 20% for photos.

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +12 |
| 2 | United World Wrestling (UWW) | +2 |
| =3 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | +5 |
| =3 | World Athletics | -2 |
| 5 | International Cricket Council (ICC) | +4 |
| 6 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +4 |
| 7 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | -5 |
| =8 | World Rugby | -2 |
| =8 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | -2 |
| =8 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | -3 |
| 11 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | +1 |
| 12 | International Handball Federation (IHF) | +12 |
| 13 | World Taekwondo (WT) | +3 |
| =14 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | 0 |
| =14 | World Gymnastics | -12 |
| =16 | World Climbing (IFSC) | +11 |
| =16 | International Skating Union (ISU) | +7 |
| 18 | International Biathlon Union (IBU) | -1 |
| 19 | World Triathlon | +7 |
| 20 | International Bobsleigh & Skeleton Federation (IBSF) | +19 |

Instagram – Creative Review

How are IFs gaining *attention* on Instagram?

Emotional storytelling is a key theme among the strongest performing IF Instagram content. Some of the best performing posts on the platform centre around raw athlete reactions and relatable human moments rather than the sporting action itself. ICC and FIFA are examples of this, sharing clips of athletes interacting with family.

'Authenticity' has been a buzz word in social content for a while, but it is proving important on Instagram. Emotional and unscripted personal moments humanise athletes and create a stronger connection with audiences.

In an era of 'AI slop', when half the time people don't know if something is genuine or fake, people want to connect with real human beings and share their emotions – that connection is key to making your sport relevant. It's time to move away from interviews and highlights alone and show off who your athletes really are.

This aligns closely to the way Instagram is used. The platform has evolved over the years, but it remained centred around people and personality.



How are IFs gaining *memorability* on Instagram?

We understand plastering a logo on every Instagram post isn't an ideal strategy. Think about what other Distinctive Brand Assets you have in your arsenal – colour, for example.

UCI do this well by using the rainbow bands. The colours appear consistently across graphics, videos and even in captions through the rainbow emoji. The rainbow also occurs naturally within the sport itself because of rainbow jerseys and event branding, so the branding is often visible even when sharing competition footage.

The key here is that repetition = recognition. The more audiences see content featuring the rainbow, the more they begin to associate the visual cue with UCI.



FIS: Building Momentum Ahead of Milano Cortina 2026



Overview

The International Ski & Snowboard Federation (FIS) ranked as the highest-performing Winter IF: #4 overall, #1 on Instagram. They climbed +11 places, marking the strongest growth among similar-sized IFs. They also recorded engagement levels on a par with IFs four to six times larger in audience size.

FIS has enjoyed consistent SportOnSocial success, remaining in the top 15 over the last decade. Their success stems from a carefully crafted strategy that emphasises community, storytelling and experimentation.

Ahead of Milano Cortina 2026, FIS recognised the Games as a major discovery moment. Their focus was expanding global discovery while maintaining strong engagement with core winter sports audiences.

'We've consistently focused on delivering value: timely in-season moments, accessible context year-round reasons to care across disciplines.' - Benjamin Stoll, Director of Digital and Innovation at FIS.

Key factors to the long-term success of FIS

- 1. Community-first platform strategy** – fan communities than distribution channels.
- 2. Athlete-driven storytelling** – building relatable characters and narratives.
- 3. Continuous experimentation** – testing new formats, partnerships and approaches.

Treating each platform as a community

FIS treats every social platform as a distinct community with its own role, formats and audience behaviour.

Instagram plays a central role by combining global reach with diverse storytelling formats. This allows FIS to balance fast highlights with deeper narratives about athletes and competitions. Instagram also acts as a springboard to guide fans to longer-form content and other FIS experiences. Such an approach ensures FIS maintains both scale and depth of engagement across its global fan base.

Athlete storytelling drives discovery

FIS has focused on making athletes more relatable in sports where faces are often hidden. They build heroes and characters through storytelling that highlights athlete personalities, rivalries and journeys beyond results.

Athletes are encouraged to act as co-creators to provide a collaborative approach that strengthens authenticity and ultimately expands reach.

Experimentation & partnerships drive growth

FIS consistently experiments with new storytelling formats and digital partnerships. A key example is its partnership with TikTok as a global entertainment partner, which amplifies discovery through platform-native storytelling and creator collaborations.

At the same time, FIS continues to evolve its content ecosystem to support broadcasters and commercial partners, including sponsored storytelling formats and branded content series.

Balancing discovery with core fans

FIS leaned slightly towards reaching new audiences in the run-up to Milano Cortina, recognising the Olympic cycle as a major discovery moment for the sport.

The 'I LOVE SNOW' campaign was designed to scale beyond existing fans but to remain authentic to the sport.

This required simplifying

- simplifying storytelling formats
- reducing technical language
- offering continued deeper coverage for dedicated fans through discipline specific channels/longer-form content.

China as a strategic growth market

China represents an important long-term growth market for winter sports. FIS treats Chinese platforms as a distinct digital ecosystem that requires local formats, partnerships and creators.

During the Olympic period, FIS generated 26.5m reach and nearly 600k engagements across Chinese platforms (including Douyin, Rednote, Weibo). Their ambition is to convert this reach into long-term community engagement and participation in winter sports.



Platform Breakdown

X



X – Top 20 IFs

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +2 |
| 2 | International Cricket Council (ICC) | +2 |
| =3 | International Skating Union (ISU) | +16 |
| =3 | International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) | +9 |
| 5 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | 0 |
| 6 | International Handball Federation (IHF) | +16 |
| 7 | World Athletics | -5 |
| 8 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | 0 |
| 9 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | +1 |
| 10 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | -9 |
| 11 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +6 |
| 12 | International Tennis Federation (ITF) | -5 |
| 13 | International Biathlon Union (IBU) | +9 |
| =14 | World Rugby | +1 |
| =14 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | 0 |
| 16 | World Baseball Softball Confederation (WBSC) | -5 |
| =17 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | -4 |
| =17 | International Judo Federation (IJF) | -8 |
| 19 | World Lacrosse | +8 |
| 20 | World Archery (WA) | -4 |



IF audiences decline on X for the first time with shift focus to other platforms

IFs collectively lost -1.2m followers on X – the first time IF audiences have declined on any platform in SoS history. Twenty-seven of 44 IFs saw a decline; the remaining 16 recorded only small increases, largely in markets where X remains more widely used.

X was the only platform to decrease in overall posts YoY (-27%), dropping behind Facebook and Instagram, after topping SportOnSocial rankings for the previous nine years (2016–2024).

Markets and tentpole events still drive strong engagement on X

ISU rose +16 places and saw a +65% YoY increase in engagement, partly driven by strong fan interest in figure skating in Japan, X's second-largest user base.

IHF also climbed +16 places, recording the highest YoY increase in new fans following the International Handball Championships.

Although overall audience growth is slowing, IFs can grow engagement on X when content aligns with passionate fan bases and coverage on key events.

X – Creative Review

How are IFs gaining *attention* on X?

In a digital world where there is a lot of discussion about raw, unedited 'authentic' content outperforming polished or heavily edited posts, many of the best-performing IF posts on X in 2025 feature stylised graphics.

The platform operates around real-time conversation and rapid information exchange. Fans are scanning feeds for results, records and key moments.

Stylised graphics package that information into a visually pleasing, easy to consume format that is immediately readable in a crowded timeline.

The graphics effectively act as both headline and content, allowing IFs to communicate information faster than via text or video alone.



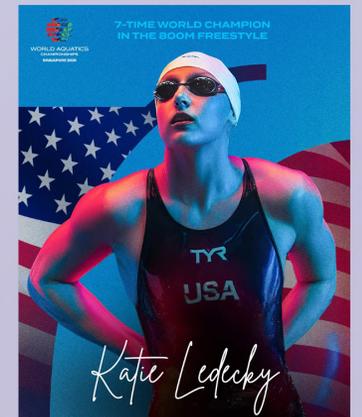
How are IFs gaining *memorability* on X?

Tone of voice is a key tool in making your content recognisable and memorable, especially on X, a platform built around community and discussion. This can come through captions/copy or even how you interact with other content and join conversations.

World Aquatics is a good example of this, using a consistent, punchy tone. Posts are typically built around short, attention-grabbing openers, with light use of modern phrasing and wordplay that helps content feel more aligned with how fans talk about the sport. On X it's about balance – maintaining credibility and authority as an IF while being an engaged part of the community.

There is a clear opportunity for IFs to strengthen their use of tone of voice by expanding where it is applied. X is built around conversation, yet many IFs focus on creating their own rather than joining existing ones. Engaging more consistently through replies, quote posts and interaction with relevant content would help reinforce tone of voice beyond owned channels.

Brands in other industries do this well. Wendy's, for example, has built a recognisable voice by actively engaging in conversations, not just publishing content. Applying a similar approach would help IFs extend their presence within the wider discussion and build stronger recognition over time.



Platform Breakdown

YouTube



YouTube – Top 20 IFs



Shorts output increases as engagement declines

IFs increased their Shorts output by +39% YoY, yet performance declined significantly. Shorts engagements fell -80% and views dropped -61% as the exceptional engagement levels of Paris 2024 proved difficult to replicate.

Shorts remain an important discovery tool, but high posting volume alone does not guarantee attention. IFs need stronger storytelling and clearer pathways from short clips to deeper fan engagement.

Long-form video regains prominence on YouTube

Traditional videos generated 57% of total IF video views (+36% vs 2024), indicating renewed audience appetite for longer-form viewing experiences on the platform. Shorts still drove discovery (54% of engagements), but their influence declined vs 2024.

YouTube is now the third largest platform for IFs and has become an even more important part of the overall platform mix. Long-form content remains central to YouTube's strength as a platform, allowing IFs to build lasting fan connection.

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +2 |
| 2 | World Triathlon | +24 |
| 3 | International Tennis Foundation (ITF) | +14 |
| 4 | International Cricket Council (ICC) | -2 |
| 5 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | -1 |
| 6 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | +1 |
| 7 | World Athletics | -2 |
| 8 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +1 |
| 9 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | -1 |
| 10 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | +3 |
| 11 | United World Wrestling (UWW) | +2 |
| 12 | World Climbing (IFSC) | +7 |
| 13 | World Rugby | -7 |
| 14 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | +4 |
| 15 | Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) | -2 |
| 16 | International Handball Federation (IHF) | +26 |
| 17 | International Skating Union (ISU) | +2 |
| 18 | International Surfing Association (ISA) | -2 |
| 19 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | -8 |
| 20 | International Biathlon Union (IBU) | +7 |

YouTube – Creative Review

How are IFs gaining *attention* on YouTube?

Some of the best-performing content on IF YouTube accounts in 2025 was user generated content (UGC) or non-competition footage.

FIBA, for example, shared clips of people playing street basketball or showing off trick shots, rather than professional competition. It showcased the accessibility and culture of the sport beyond the elite level.

Viewers frequently come to the platform not just for highlights but looking for a broader view of a sport, including skills, community and moments that don't appear in broadcast coverage.

The challenge is brand attribution. If the footage feels completely detached from the IF, viewers may remember the moment but not the organisation that surfaced it.



How are IFs gaining *memorability* on YouTube?

YouTube discovery relies heavily on visual scanning through recommended videos and search results.

Consistent thumbnails act as a critical brand signal. WTT is an IF who uses a highly standardised thumbnail style that makes its videos instantly recognisable when users are browsing recommendations or search results. It simply adapts colours to reflect the event referenced in the videos.

Consistent publishing and repeated formats can also help build memorability on YouTube. Regular series give audiences a clear reason to return to a channel, creating familiarity through repeated viewing over time. The FEI's RIDE series is a good example of a predictable (but engaging) format that builds memorability through habit.

Series can also help IFs drive recurring viewership outside of peak periods. This sustained presence builds mental availability, keeping the IF front of mind even when no events are taking place.



Platform Breakdown

TikTok



TikTok – Top 20 IFs

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | 0 |
| 2 | World Athletics | +7 |
| 3 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | +3 |
| 4 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | -2 |
| 5 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +7 |
| 6 | World Rugby | -1 |
| 7 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +3 |
| 8 | International Cricket Council (ICC) | -6 |
| 9 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | -1 |
| 10 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | -3 |
| =11 | World Taekwondo (WT) | +5 |
| =11 | United World Wrestling (UWW) | -7 |
| 13 | World Triathlon | +15 |
| 14 | Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) | -3 |
| 15 | International Handball Federation (IHF) | +5 |
| 16 | International Bobsleigh & Skeleton Federation (IBSF) | +17 |
| 17 | International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) | -1 |
| 18 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | -4 |
| 19 | International Biathlon Union (IBU) | +5 |
| =20 | World Gymnastics | +2 |



TikTok is the fastest audience growth platform for IFs

IF audiences on TikTok grew +16% YoY, the highest growth rate of any platform vs +8–10% across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. This growth pushed TikTok ahead of X in total audience size, reaching 63.4m followers, narrowly behind YouTube (64.6m).

TikTok is rapidly becoming one of the most important platforms for IFs to reach new audiences, particularly younger fans discovering Olympic sports.

IFs significantly increase TikTok output

IF posting frequency on TikTok increased +69% YoY, the largest increase across any platform. This resulted in increased engagement and audience growth, with more IFs improving performance than on any other platform.

IFs increasingly recognise TikTok's role as a discovery platform, where more informal and creative storytelling can unlock significant audience growth, especially among younger fans.

TikTok – Creative Review

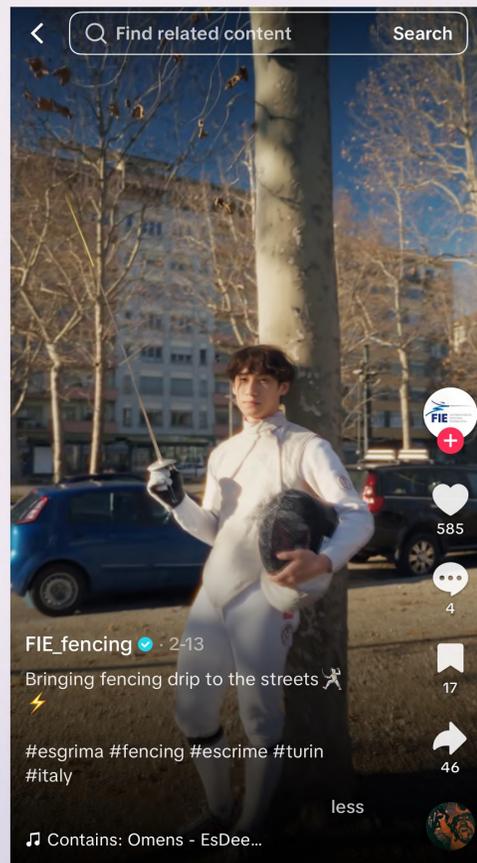
How are IFs gaining *attention* on TikTok?

TikTok discovery is heavily influenced by audio trends. Aligning sporting visuals with trending sounds dramatically increases the chances of the content appearing in recommendation feeds.

Music also provides structure and pacing, allowing fast cuts and highlights to feel intentional rather than random. It is the perfect tool to help build emotional storytelling.

FIE uses music-led edits to frame fencing in a way that fits naturally within TikTok's content ecosystem, transforming fencing from a technical sport into something visually rhythmic and culturally relevant within the platform.

For audiences unfamiliar with the sport, the edit becomes the entry point. Your music choice shouldn't be an afterthought but a key tool in your TikTok strategy.



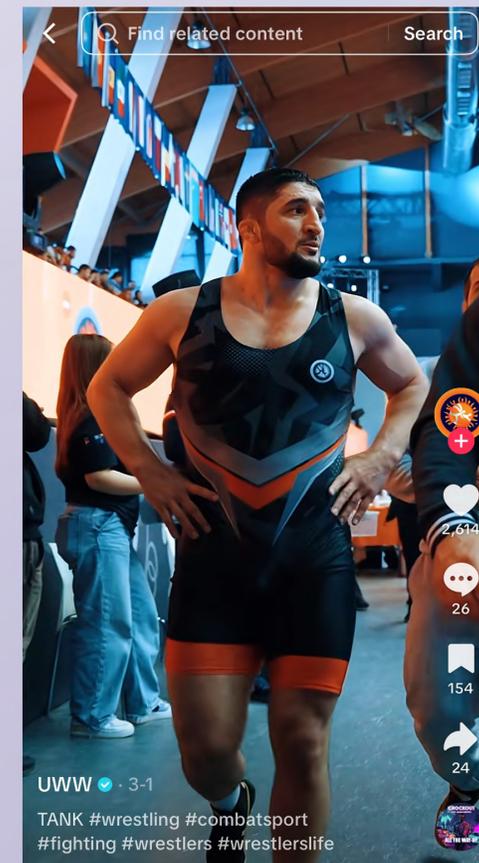
How are IFs gaining *memorability* on TikTok?

Some IFs achieve recognisability on TikTok without relying on overt branding.

UWW uses consistent colour grading that reflects its brand palette. World Taekwondo maintains a repeatable edit structure built around short clips, trending music and minimal captions. These elements combine to form a distinctive content signature.

On TikTok, where overt logos can feel intrusive, recognisability can be built through creative consistency rather than graphic branding.

Viewers learn to recognise the style over time before they even notice the account name.



Platform Breakdown

Chinese Platforms



Chinese Platforms – Top 20 IFs



Deep rooted sports continue to dominate Chinese platforms

The four top-ranked IFs remained unchanged – WTT, FIBA, BWF, FIFA. These sports benefit from deep-rooted fan bases in China built through participation, domestic leagues, national team success and longstanding broadcast visibility.

Success on Chinese platforms is strongly influenced by long-term fan culture and local relevance, making sustained presence and visibility critical for IFs seeking to grow in this market.

WeChat drives ISU into the top 5

ISU recorded the largest rise within the top 10, moving from #7 to #5 overall. The growth reflected stronger use of WeChat Channels, combining short video with live streaming and event updates.

WeChat's sharing functionality allows content to spread quickly through close social circles and community groups, enabling IFs to reach broad and highly engaged audiences.

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | 0 |
| 2 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | 0 |
| 3 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | 0 |
| 4 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | 0 |
| 5 | International Skating Union (ISU) | +2 |
| 6 | World Athletics | -1 |
| 7 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | -1 |
| 8 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +1 |
| =9 | International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) | +1 |
| =9 | Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) | -1 |
| 11 | International Tennis Federation (ITF) | 0 |
| 12 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +9 |
| 13 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | -1 |
| 14 | World Archery (WA) | +5 |
| 15 | World Rowing | +8 |
| 16 | United World Wrestling (UWW) | +9 |
| 17 | World Climbing (IFSC) | -4 |
| 18 | World Pentathlon (UIPM) | -3 |
| 19 | International Bobsleigh & Skeleton Federation (IBSF) | -5 |
| 20 | International Canoe Federation (ICF) | +8 |

Chinese Platform Breakdown – Top 10 IFs

WeChat

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | +1 |
| =2 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | -1 |
| =2 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | +3 |
| 4 | International Skating Union (ISU) | +6 |
| 5 | United World Wrestling (UWW) | +13 |
| =6 | Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) | -2 |
| =6 | International Tennis Federation (ITF) | +5 |
| 8 | World Athletics | -5 |
| 9 | World Archery (WA) | +9 |
| 10 | Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) | +6 |

Weibo

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | 0 |
| 2 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | 0 |
| =3 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | +1 |
| =3 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | 0 |
| =3 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | +1 |
| 6 | International Skating Union (ISU) | 0 |
| 7 | World Athletics | 0 |
| 8 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | 0 |
| 9 | Volleyball World (FIVB) | +13 |
| =10 | World Curling | +1 |
| =10 | International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) | 0 |

Douyin

| Ranking | International Federation | Change |
|---------|--|--------|
| 1 | World Table Tennis (WTT) | 0 |
| 2 | Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) | 0 |
| 3 | Badminton World Federation (BWF) | 0 |
| 4 | World Athletics | 0 |
| 5 | Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) | 0 |
| 6 | World Aquatics (AQUA) | -1 |
| 7 | International Skating Union (ISU) | +1 |
| 8 | Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) | -1 |
| 9 | Fédération Internationale de Ski et de Snowboard (FIS) | +1 |
| 10 | World Climbing (IFSC) | -2 |

Chinese Platforms - Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges

Balancing localisation with global consistency

China's digital ecosystem requires IFs to rethink how they manage global brand presence. Chinese platforms often demand local expertise reflected in culturally relevant content. This presents a strategic decision for many IFs around how much to invest locally and how to balance in-house management with China-based agencies.

Maintaining global brand consistency while adapting to local audience behaviour is another challenge. IFs must deliver culturally relevant content while ultimately preserving their international identity. To do this, IFs may need to adapt their visual/design identity, language typography, tone of voice and cultural references.

Opportunities

China: a long-term growth market

After the Olympics engagement declines on many platforms, yet Chinese platforms continued to grow +18% YoY, signalling sustained audience attention in "off-peak" periods. Engagement surged across major Chinese platforms: e.g. WeChat (+476%*), Weibo (+27%), Douyin (+11%). Confirming that Chinese audiences clearly remain highly active and reachable.

China represents a long-term growth market for Olympic sport. IFs that maintain a continuous presence between major competitions are better positioned to build loyal fan communities and sustain relevance over time. Winter IFs should continue to ride the Milano Cortina 2026 momentum so they can continue to grow post-Games.

Local storytelling drives audience growth

IFs seeing the strongest performance in China are those moving beyond generic global content. Successful strategies focus on local storytelling, domestic partnerships specifically for Chinese audiences. Treat the market as a distinct digital ecosystem rather than simply extending your global content strategies to guarantee sustained attention.

Ecommerce & sponsorship activation

We see Chinese platforms increasingly combining content, community and commerce within a single user journey. This creates opportunities for IFs to connect audience engagement and content performance with commercial outcomes through merchandise, event promotion and/or locally tailored brand partnerships.

Emerging platforms expand the ecosystem

New digital spaces are expanding beyond major platforms and creating additional opportunities to reach younger, highly engaged audiences.

RedNote is an algorithm-driven platform that rewards athlete lifestyle content and educational posts, helping connect sport with broader lifestyle narratives. It is particularly effective for niche sports as it allows IFs to reach highly targeted audiences within culturally relevant narratives.

Bilibili attracts younger audiences and favours longer-form content, making it well suited for behind-the-scenes and creator collaborations delivering deeper fan engagement. It's unique "Danmu" feature (live comment overlays) turns passive viewing into a real-time conversation to build community interactions and long-term brand loyalty.

WTT: Winning in China



Overview

WTT has built one of the strongest social media presences in Chinese sport. It ranked #1 overall in SportsOnSocial 2026 and 2025, with total engagements +240% higher than second-placed BWF. WTT ranked #1 on Weibo and Douyin and #2 on WeChat, highlighting its dominance across China's major platforms.

"Success on Chinese platforms is not just about numbers. It's about whether WTT content is part of the national sports conversation, and whether our storytelling resonates with audiences within such a vast and highly active digital environment." - **Zowie Zhou**, Head of China Social Media at WTT.

While table tennis has deep cultural roots in China, the performance of WTT is also driven by a strong understanding of local audiences, platform trends and the country's unique digital ecosystem.

Key factors leading to success

1. Global and local alignment: consistent storytelling/ brand identity across China and global teams.
2. Cross platform amplification: major moments shared across broadcast, PR and digital.
3. Shared insights/assets: collaboration multiplying content impact across channels.

Treating China as a distinct social ecosystem

WTT has built a strong presence across China's digital platforms by treating them as a distinct social media ecosystem rather than an extension of its global channels.

Each platform plays a specific role in this strategy:

- Weibo drives reach and real-time conversation during major events
- Douyin focuses on short-form entertainment and discovery
- WeChat supports deeper community engagement and fan services
- RedNote helps reach lifestyle audiences and expand the sport's cultural conversation among younger and female fans.

Key differences between Chinese and global platforms

Chinese platforms operate as far more integrated ecosystems than most Western social networks. They combine content, commerce, community and services within the same environment. Strategies need to connect these elements more directly.

The speed of the content cycle is also significantly faster. Chinese audiences want to remain part of the conversation and expect highlights, reactions and storytelling to appear within minutes of key moments.

As each platform has its own distinct culture, the format and tone must be carefully adapted for each platform to align with how Chinese fans consume and discuss sport online.

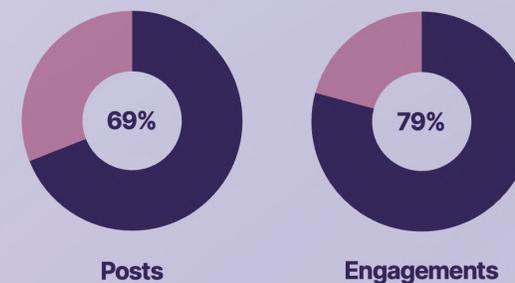
Athlete star power & storytelling

Chinese audiences connect strongly with storytelling around athletes. Players like Sun Yingsha and Wang Chuqin are seen as national heroes as well as competitors.

Audiences don't follow these athletes just for performance. Content that highlights their personalities, rivalries, training routines and emotional moments after matches performs particularly well on Chinese platforms. Fans follow their long-term career journeys closely, making athlete-driven narratives a powerful way for WTT to generate engagement and sustain conversation around the sport.

In WTT's top 100 most engaging posts on Weibo, 69% feature hero athletes (e.g. Wang Chuqin, Sun Yingsha) and generate 79% of total engagements.

Content must be managed carefully, however, as any small mistake or misleading information can often be amplified by fans.



WTT Top 100 posts by engagement on Weibo featured hero athletes, Wang Chuqin and Sun Yingsha.

Chapter 4

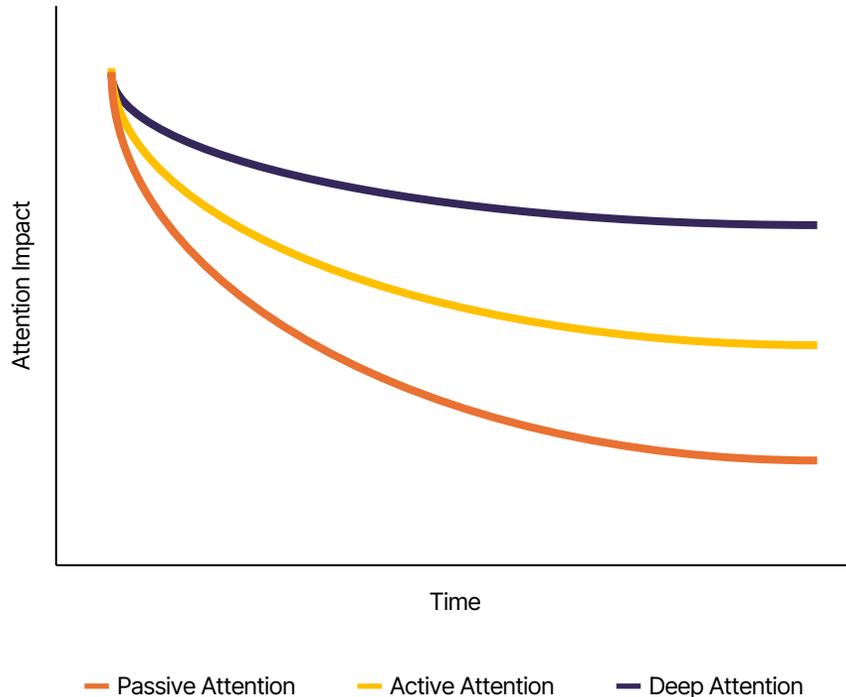
What Creates Lasting Lift

SPORTS
SOCIAL

The Retention Test

What happens after the peak?

Memory Decay Over Time



Ten editions of SportOnSocial tells us a story of growing audiences aligning with market growth and the accumulation of engagements and video views. This demonstrates the strength in formats and the effectiveness of leveraging Olympic cycles to capture attention. The question is how well IFs fare between event cycles.

Engagement rate tells part of the story

Engagement rate measures how engaging published content is to existing fans and its evolution is the first indicator of how well IFs are faring. In 2025, overall engagement rate per post rose from 0.06% in 2016 to 0.11% in 2025, suggesting that relative to audience size, content is resonating with current followers.

Engagement is not, however, one-dimensional. Beneath the performance metrics sits a hierarchy of attention: passive interactions, e.g. scrolling, liking, active engagement, when audiences stop, spend time and engage with purpose, deeper engagement, when moments genuinely resonate and stay with people. Engagement rate tells us that audiences are reacting but tells us less about how deeply.

Volume is keeping IFs visible, not memorable

A plateau in follower growth, combined with publishing volumes running at 11–15 posts per day, suggests that engagements are increasingly driven by output rather than genuine audience connection. At this scale, the strongest posts break through, while the rest generate little measurable reaction. Volume is keeping IFs visible; visibility alone doesn't build the kind of sustained attention that keeps audiences coming back between events. At high publishing volumes, attention concentrates in a handful of over-performing posts rather than distributing across a consistent content experience. The priority needs to shift from reach to retention between Olympic cycles.

Retention comes from content worth returning to

The key is striking a balance between content and publishing format. Engagement and video performance make clear these are the most effective forms of content and yet effectiveness in capturing attention is not the same as effectiveness in retaining it. The formats driving the biggest volume gains, short-form video in particular, are built for speed and passive consumption. They often deliver spikes in performance without creating much that audiences remember. Retention comes from content that gives people a reason to return.

Story-led and emotionally resonant content, such as athlete narratives or culturally relevant moments, tends to deliver higher, more sustained engagement than viral highlight reels, which peak fast and drop off just as quickly. Posts that revisit defining sporting and cultural moments, or that connect current stories to past achievements, hold relevance beyond the event itself. When audiences carry a sporting moment with them – how they felt, who they watched, why it mattered – it becomes something they return to. That shift from passive exposure to active connection is where retention is built and the foundations of year-round relevance are laid.



The Major Event Hangover

Why social media visibility without attribution is a waste of time.



Paris 2024 and Milan Cortina 2026 were both incredible Olympic Games that genuinely cut through and shone a mainstream spotlight on many sports that rarely receive it.

While any major event provides a great stage, the real challenge lies in what comes afterwards.

SportOnSocial data shows a predictable dip in social media interest once an event ends. Most IFs saw a YoY decrease in their engagement in 2025 compared to 2024. Many sports struggle to convert that brief and relatively intense spike into long-term commercial growth. The shift needed by the industry needs to be simple:

Stop chasing reach and start building brand salience

1. The 'When': Building Category Entry Points

Social media is currently treated as a tool to engage as many people as possible. Reach is pointless if your content doesn't connect emotionally to specific moments in a fan's life.

These moments are called Category Entry Points (CEPs). They are the internal cues or external situations that lead a person to seek out sports content.

Think of it this way: If a casual fan thinks of your sport only during an Olympic final, you haven't built the mental pathways to stay relevant on a Tuesday in November.

Any sport must "own" more situations if it is to grow.

Examples of sports content CEPs

- "I have 15 minutes to kill while waiting for a train and want a quick content fix." (e.g. Red Bull's clips).
- "I want to see something of peak human achievement." (e.g. a video of a world record)
- "I want to see my country winning." (e.g. a live score update or a 30-second post-game interview).

It's important to remember that if a user is on their phone and has a void to fill, you're competing with the entire entertainment category – not just other sports content.

2. The 'Who': Leveraging Distinctive Brand Assets

Even when audiences see your content, IFs don't spend enough time analysing whether they can link that content back to you.

If a clip goes viral but cannot be attributed to the source, what's the point? At best, it builds equity for the wider category. At worst, it builds equity for a competitor.

Future and sustained growth depends on sports being instantly recognizable. This requires total discipline with Distinctive Brand Assets, the sensory cues (colours, sounds, shapes) that are unique and that pass the "No Logo Test."

If you removed your logo, would anyone still know it was you?

Examples of sports content CEPs

- **Colour palettes:** The specific "Wimbledon Green and Purple" or the "Tour de France Yellow."
- **Graphic devices:** The specific shapes used in F1 broadcast graphics.
- **Sonic branding:** The UEFA Champions League anthem or the specific "crack" of a bat in a Major League Baseball social clip.
- **Environment:** The unique red clay of Roland-Garros.

Instead of chasing metrics, focus must shift to building and measuring attribution. The goal for sport content is to be the most distinctive, easiest to find option when that entertainment "void" needs filling.

This is the only way to ensure a sport stays in the minds of casual fans long after the buzz of a major event has faded away.





Chapter 5

Shaping Success in 2026

How Strong Brands Are Driving Attention in 2026

Brand systems keep IFs consistent

IFs are finding it harder to stay consistent across a brand world that is becoming wider and more complex.

An increasing number of teams and partners are creating and publishing content, while geographic territories want local relevance, plus platforms need constant feeding. With the list growing ever longer, outputs are harder to manage and the brand consequently begins to lose coherence.

Without a clear brand system to bring everything together, fragmentation is a real risk. From an audience point of view, it makes content not only feel disconnected but makes the brand harder to recognise.

To stand out in 2026, IFs need to be built on a strong brand foundation. This can be done by establishing some core principles. What do you stand for? Do you have a clear personality? Do you have distinctive design assets and practical rules for how their brand can flex across multiple markets, channels and touchpoints? It's all about using that solid base to create visual and verbal synergy so everything feels connected and is unmistakably from a single IF.

Distinctiveness builds memory

Brand growth in 2026 will come from being distinctive enough to be understood quickly and remembered clearly.

In a world of constant output and shrinking attention spans, the brands that grow will be the ones that leave something behind in an audience's mind.

The fundamental challenge is about making what you say easier to grasp and even easier to remember. When messaging, design and storytelling are aligned around a distinctive core; audiences are given something solid to recognise and return to. When they are not given this, even a high volume of content can leave very little in the memory.

Building clarity also requires restraint. The strongest brands are not endlessly reinventing themselves or reacting to every shift in society or culture. They stay focused and repeat the right signals which builds familiarity through consistency. This level of discipline matters – memory is built through repeated recognition.

Distinctiveness is what turns attention into memory and memory into long-term brand value.

Follow trends with clarity & intent

Trends are an important pillar within a content strategy but need to be used with care.

Following trends only works if they serve the brand rather than distract from it. The goal is for IFs to hop on relevant trends but also to use visual shifts and brand identifiers that make the design feel considered and strengthens brand recognition.

The real question is not "does this look on trend?" but "does this help tell people who we are, our personality and set us apart?" This is especially important in sport, where brands must flex across multiple situations from live events to social and broadcast to localised territories around the world.

Expect to see bolder use of typography, more expressive layouts and content that feels more organic and human in 2026. This is partly a response to the synthetic feel of AI, but also a move to reconnect design to the physical world. When used well, IFs can feel more current and memorable.

The best design in 2026 will combine recognisable core elements with enough flexibility to feel fresh in different places and relevant across the whole brand spectrum.



Tone of Voice: The Distinctive Asset for IFs

Tone used in top-performing IF posts reveals how communication style and distinctiveness differs depending on the size of IF.

Formal/Casual

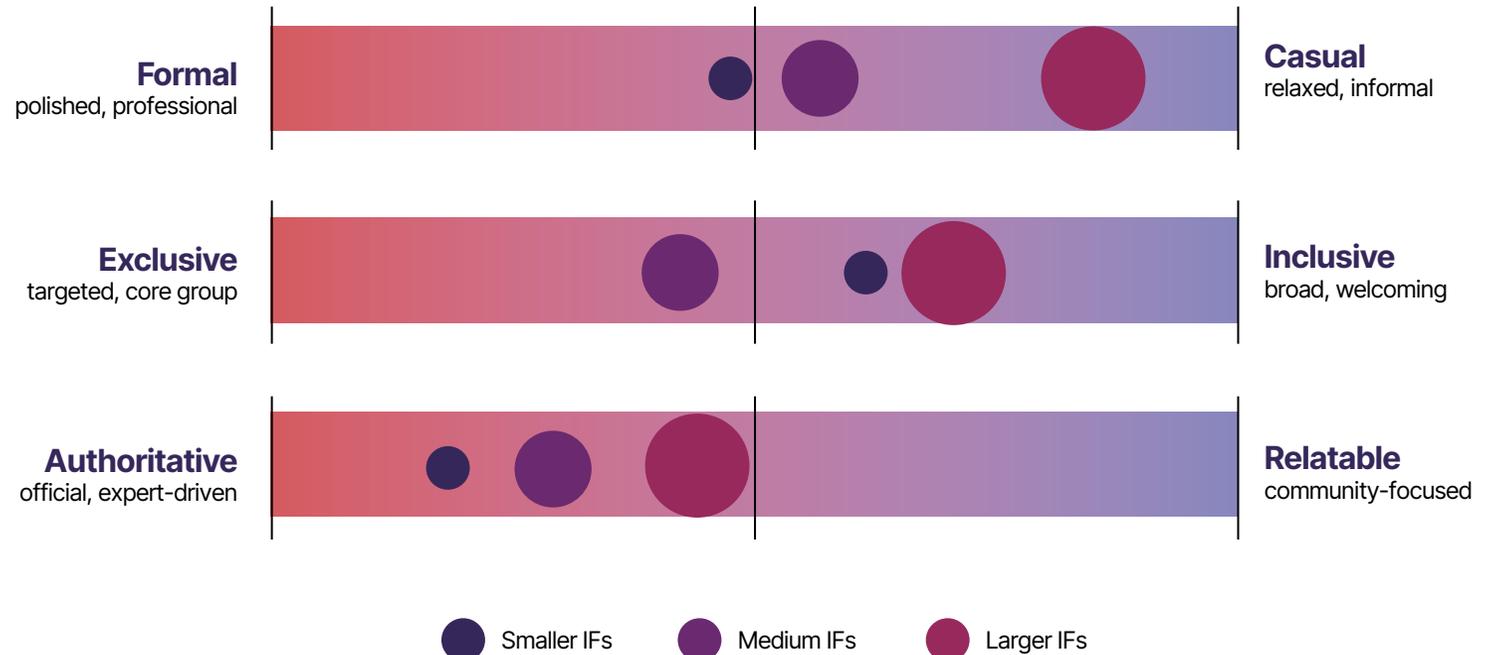
Larger IFs can adopt a more casual tone due to a greater familiarity with their sport and a well-established voice. Smaller IFs often display a more mixed tone as they continue refining their communication style. IFs should aim to shift towards a "Casual" tone on social so posts feel more natural, while also considering the need to have multiple voices ranging from institutional through to "Casual" to allow flexibility in tone across platforms and content.

Exclusive/Inclusive

Larger IFs tend to communicate more inclusively, thanks to wider audience awareness and familiarity with their sport. Smaller IFs (often representing more niche sports) naturally speak more to core fan groups. Medium-sized IFs could become more "Inclusive" by balancing core content for existing fans with messaging that welcomes newer audiences.

Authoritative/Relatable

Most IFs naturally sit towards the "Authoritative" end due to their role as governing bodies of their sports. However, striving for a more "Relatable" tone will help build recognition and memory among fans.



Practical Actions for International Federations

What can IFs do next?

Capturing attention is only the first step. The real challenge for IFs is turning attention into recognition over time through consistent signals, distinctive communication and deliberate choices about where to invest effort.

Different resources require different strategies

IFs operate with varying resources and audience sizes, so actions should prioritise approaches that are realistic for each IF and focus on where it can create the greatest impact.

Consistency builds recognition over time

Attention may be won in seconds, but memory is built through repeated exposure. Consistent visual identity, tone of voice and storytelling help audiences recognise an IF quickly across platforms.

In practice, some actions apply to every IF; others depend on available resources. Extra investment creates further opportunities even when the underlying goal remains the same: to build recognition so the sport stays visible and relevant to fans outside of major events.

All IFs

The biggest opportunity for every IF is to become easier to recognise, regardless of size. Distinctive signals and familiarity help IFs stand out and remain memorable, despite being in a space where attention is difficult to capture and fans scroll rapidly through social feeds.

- **Define and use a clear tone of voice**

Treat tone of voice as a recognisable signal as well as a writing style. Communication should be more conversational and inclusive so that fans find it easier to engage and recollect.

- **Build distinctive signals into content**

Even simple highlights or user-generated clips should contain recognisable visual cues that link the content back to the IF. Consistent colours/overlays help audiences quickly associate content with the IF behind it.

- **Ensure viral moments remain attributable**

Many IFs look for highly engaging pieces of content that can travel far beyond their core fan base. These moments may generate strong engagement without recognisable IF identifiers, but they'll build memory for the sport rather than the IF that created the content.

- **Create content fans return to regularly**

Major events create spikes in attention; long-term growth comes from giving fans regular reasons to return. Consistent content formats help audiences know what to expect and work with platform algorithms to create more feed opportunities.

Medium-resource IFs

IFs with moderate resources can extend their impact by scaling distribution and using tools to reach audiences consistently instead of relying solely on organic reach.

- **Use paid media to build year-round presence**

Using paid media to place content across multiple platforms and placements wins attention that accumulates over time; repeated exposure builds recognition and reduces reliance on event cycles.

- **Use AI tools to scale highlight production**

Clipping tools allow IFs to turn competition moments into short-form highlights - fast. It's imperative to maintain attribution within these clips, so include identifiers that link content back to the IF.

High-resource IFs

IFs with greater resources can focus on long-term brand building by using deeper insights and structured systems to remain consistent and recognisable across all platforms and markets.

- **Use social listening to reflect fan conversations**

Social listening tools help IFs understand what fans are discussing on each platform. Translating these insights into content enables IFs to follow trends with intent and create content that audiences find timely and relevant.

- **Build structured brand systems across content**

As more teams and territories produce content, maintaining consistency becomes harder. Clear brand systems and creative guidelines ensure every touchpoint communicates the same recognisable signals on every platform, market and competition.

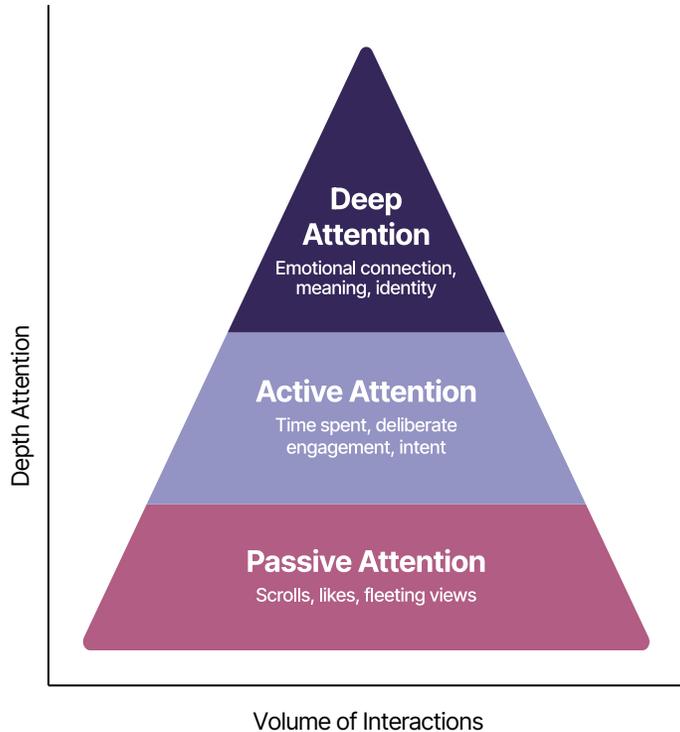


Chapter 6

Future Outlook

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Depth of Connection Will Define Who Wins in 2026



The IFs that build lasting relevance give audiences something that stays with them beyond the moment. Formats might vary, e.g. archive footage that brings back defining moments, reactive posts that pick up live conversations, athlete expression that ties sport to culture, but the effect is the same: content that leaves a trace.

Memorability comes down to how deeply content connects with an audience. Attention works in layers. At the surface, passive attention comes from scrolling and liking; it's easy to generate and as easy to lose. Active attention is earned when audiences take the time to watch something in full or share it because it resonates. Deep attention goes further, when content connects with emotion and identity it lingers long after. The depth of attention at the moment of contact shapes how long content stays in memory.

Not all attention is equal

This offers a way for IFs to plan their content with memorability as well as visibility in mind. The choices made between events define how much future peaks are worth. The IFs that gain most from major moments aren't always those starting with the biggest audiences; but those whose audiences feel most connected to their sport. That depth is built through consistent, intentional storytelling over time.

The opportunity in 2026 is to treat memorability as intentional rather than a by-product. Aim to guide audiences through those layers of attention on purpose: use high-reach formats to win the scroll, then follow up with content that adds story, context or emotion. Moments are then most likely to stick. Content works hardest when posts don't seem isolated but feel connected. Archive footage lands better when it is linked to what is currently happening, making past achievements part of a live story. It's not about results alone. Reactive pieces are more memorable when they echo how fans discuss and feel about the sport. Athlete-led content cuts through when it shows personality and perspective that people recognise in their own lives.

Consistency builds recognition

IFs build familiarity when they consistently use the same athletes, themes and moments. Audiences start to understand what the sport stands for and where it fits within their own interests and identity. Content shifts from something people simply see in the feed to something they carry with them between events. That is how memorability turns into year-round relevance.



Learnings from Milano Cortina 2026

The SportOnSocial International Federations League Table 2026 is based on 2025 data, but the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games has already provided early signs about what captures attention and builds memorability, specifically in the Olympic sports space.

Archive content builds memorability throughout the year

Archive content proved to be a low effort, high reward tactic during Milano Cortina 2026 as, owing to Olympic rules, many IFs turned to archive footage.

We learned an important truth from this: iconic moments are what audiences remember. Reintroducing historic performance throughout the year keeps these moments alive and can draw casual fans deeper into the sport. Archive clips help link memorable moments back to the IF when paired with recognisable visual cues.

Reactive content cuts through when fan conversations are reflected

Some of the strongest engagement during Milano Cortina 2026 came from reactive content and not pre-planned posts. IFs that quickly reflected fan conversations were able to capture attention more effectively because their content aligned with what audiences were already discussing.

IFs were able to join the wider Olympic conversation by responding to ongoing audience reactions in real time – through social listening and/or community interactions. The same principle applies year-round: content that reflects current fan conversations is essential to engage fans and resonate amid crowded feeds.

Pop culture creates new entry points for sport

Milano Cortina 2026 showed how pop culture remains one of the best way to capture attention and pull new audiences into sport. Athlete expression and personality-driven content created powerful category entry points that extended well beyond traditional winter sport fans.

There is an enormous opportunity here for IFs to understand where their sport intersects with culture. In recognising this, and integrating that understanding into content plans, they can attract new audiences and then create ways to keep them engaged beyond the initial moment of entry.



Chapter 7

About SportOnSocial

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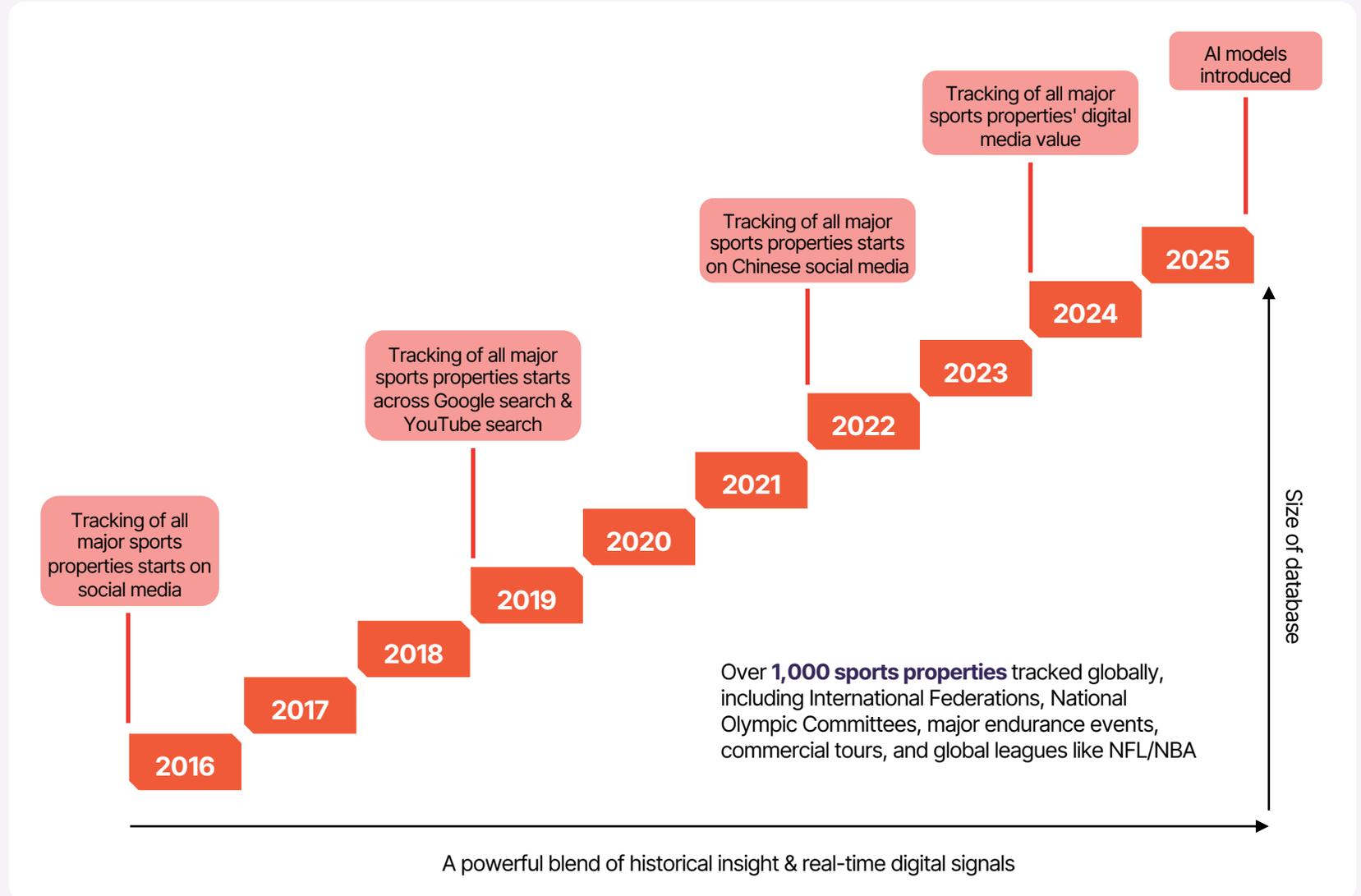
What is SportOnSocial?

SportOnSocial is the world's only platform powered by a decade of exclusive behavioural data from the Olympic movement.

This is critical because we sit on a longitudinal dataset – that we've been building every single day for over a decade – that no other agency or LLM/Ai/Chatbot can access. This immediately gives our clients a unique advantage.

By pairing SportOnSocial with unmatched industry expertise, Redtorch consultants provide the crucial insight needed to turn the noise of global audience behaviour into a clear and actionable roadmap for year-round growth.

In an attention economy where every second is critical, we help to make the choices needed to win.



Redtorch is an independent sports marketing agency dedicated to making sport more relevant

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