

# POLITICS IN SPORTS MEDIA IN 2022

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On February 17, 2022, WNBA superstar [Brittney Griner](#) was detained in Russia for her alleged possession of cannabis oil. News of her detention overlapped with the [2022 Winter Olympics](#) in Beijing, and then the [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#), which commenced only one week later. Over the course of the year, Griner's fate reflected the intersection of sports and politics in at least three ways. First, it spotlighted the ongoing geopolitical tensions between the United States and Russia, with many concluding that [Vladimir Putin found Griner to be a useful pawn](#). Second, it amplified the "culture wars" within the United States, raising questions about the nation's resolve to secure the safe [release of a Black, openly queer woman](#). Third, it directed attention to [the reason Griner was in Russia in the first place](#)—that is, women professional athletes in the United States often find their most lucrative opportunities on foreign soil. Griner was finally [released on December 8](#) in an exchange that allowed arms dealer Viktor Bout to return to Russia. Despite the good end-of-year news, the details of the release also [exacerbated existing political tensions](#) within the United States.

Brittney Griner's story was bookended by two of the largest spectacles on the planet, beginning during the Winter Olympics and concluding during the [FIFA Men's World Cup](#).

Few events could better encapsulate the convergence of politics and sports than the World Cup, and the list of issues is long. Critics balked at [FIFA's 2010 decision](#) to award the tournament to Qatar, a nation with little soccer tradition and a climate that made playing in the summer impossible. In the years after the announcement, the construction of stadium facilities relied on the exploitation of migrant laborers, [thousands of whom have perished](#). By the time play commenced in 2022, attention turned to [Qatar's regressive policies](#) toward women and the LGBTQ+ communities, symbolized by the [stifling of any expression](#) of solidarity with such groups.

The oppressive summer heat in Qatar shifted the [World Cup calendar](#) to November and December, making it all but impossible for us to account for it substantively in this report. Moreover, our focus remains primarily on the United States. To be sure, the group play game between the United States and Iran evoked the legacy of a strained relationship between the two nations



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**Above:** U.S. Soccer Federation logo.

**Right:** FIFA President Gianni Infantino flanked by Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2018



Left: United States Soccer Federation, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons; Right: Kremlin.ru/Wikimedia Commons

and spotlighted the [unavoidable political terrain](#) athletes must navigate on the global stage. Thus, even if the Men's World Cup occupies little space within these pages, it nevertheless reminds us of the inseparability of politics and sports.

Back within the United States, soccer still provides an especially relevant context for situating our evaluation of sports and politics in 2022. Consider the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), a young organization both bolstering its prospects for long-term success and managing an ongoing scandal in which coaches and team leaders have engaged in or facilitated the abuse of athletes across the league. Following up on reports in 2021 of abusive behaviors from two coaches, about which [we reported last year](#), former U.S. Attorney General Sally Yates produced a report in October 2022 detailing a stunning lack of protection of the NWSL's players. As [Yates described](#), "They did not institute the most basic of workplace protections. For most of the League's history, there was no anti-harassment policy, no anti-retaliation policy, and no anti-fraternization policy. Nor were there independent reporting lines, coaching codes of conduct, or any guidelines regarding the due diligence necessary to hire a coach."

The fallout from the Yates report has been wide ranging. NWSL Commissioner Lisa Baird had already resigned after the initial accusations were leveled in 2021. A year later, [Merritt Paulson stepped down](#) as the CEO of the Portland Thorns (and the MLS's Timbers) and subsequently announced [plans to sell the Thorns](#), the Board of Directors of the Chicago Red Stars [removed chairman Arnim Whisler](#) (who later [announced his plans to sell his stake](#) in the team), and the Orlando Pride [fired head coach Amanda Cromwell](#). In December, the NWSL issued a [report based on a joint investigation](#) with the NWSL Players Association, confirming "widespread misconduct directed at NWSL players." The full effects of these reports are likely to reverberate in the years to come, and star players such as [Alex Morgan](#) and [Becky Sauerbrunn](#) have led calls for more substantial consequences.

The details of the Yates Report are troubling reminders that women in sports continue to face barriers and pressures that men do not experience in similarly systemic ways. More than being subjected to emotional and physical abuse, these athletes have been victimized by the lack of organizational resources and political capital required to facilitate their

health and success. At the same time, however, the NWSL has forged ahead with resilience and some reason for optimism. The league appears sustainable in ways that [previous professional soccer leagues](#) in the United States have not been, evidenced by steady growth in attendance and television ratings. In Kansas City, the KC Current [broke ground on a new downtown stadium](#), which will be the first stadium dedicated only to women's soccer. And, just weeks after the release of the Yates Report, the NWSL championship game between Portland and Kansas City [boasted the largest television audience](#) in the league's history. In other words, the news for the NWSL, much as it is for other sports in the United States, is a variable and volatile mix of communities, identities, and representations, all of which show us sports' ability to reflect and shape our politics.

As with our inaugural report last year, we define politics broadly, focusing on the ways power and resources are acquired, distributed, and limited in and around sports in the United States. Thus, we are interested in both formal political contexts, such as elections and legislative debates, and the equally important deliberations concerning race, gender, sexuality, class, labor, economic development, the environment, and more. We also retain our focus on "mainstream sports media," meaning that we are attending to electronic and broadcast outlets with the widest reach. For this report, we offer four sections:

- 1) Survey data that show how sports media consumers define and react to political content in sports.
- 2) Survey data that show how sports media consumers perceive leading sports media brands and their mix of sports and political content.
- 3) Content analysis of ESPN and Yahoo websites that reveal which political topics are most frequently featured in mainstream sports media.
- 4) Case study commentaries that provide critical evaluations of five stories featuring politics and sports.

Our research continues to identify a full spectrum of topics, issues, and controversies that define the relationship between politics and sports. We hope you will find them as engaging and thought-provoking as we have. ■

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