The Financial Playbook of the NBA

Sponsorships

LeBron, Steph, Giannis, KD, Wemby. The National Basketball Association has plenty of multi-million-dollar athletes who can be labeled as the face of the NBA in their own right. Due to the mounting expenses from players like these, the NBA and its teams must collect sponsorship deals to help turn the product into a profit, because in the end, the league is a business. I will lay out recent developments in sponsorships including which companies spend the most on advertising, jersey patches, arena naming rights, and individual player deals. In order to grasp the full scope of the season, I will examine the historic 2026 NBA Finals which pitted the San Antonio Spurs against the New York Knicks and brought a record-setting amount of viewers and revenue to the league. In total, the NBA sponsorship market crossed the $1.8 billion mark this past season, boasting 2,452 sponsorship deals with 1,661 unique brands. There are many different layers to such enormous numbers. First, let's explore the specific brands that leverage NBA publicity most frequently.

SponsorUnited's 2025-26 NBA Sponsorship Intelligence Report offers a clear visual breakdown of the league's financial landscape. One of the first rankings revealed is the "Top 10 Categories by Estimated Brand Spend." The financial category leads the way, spending $318 million on NBA sponsorships and demonstrating the significant commitment banks and financial institutions make to leverage the league's global reach. Far behind in second is the technology category at $173 million, showcasing the industry's continued emphasis on sports partnerships for brand awareness and engagement. The top five individual brands by spend are Rakuten, AB inBev (beer producer), JPMorganChase, Hyundai, and Honda. Two of the top three are financial

companies, with Rakuten holding the largest singular brand deal in the whole association with the Golden State Warriors (Figure 1).

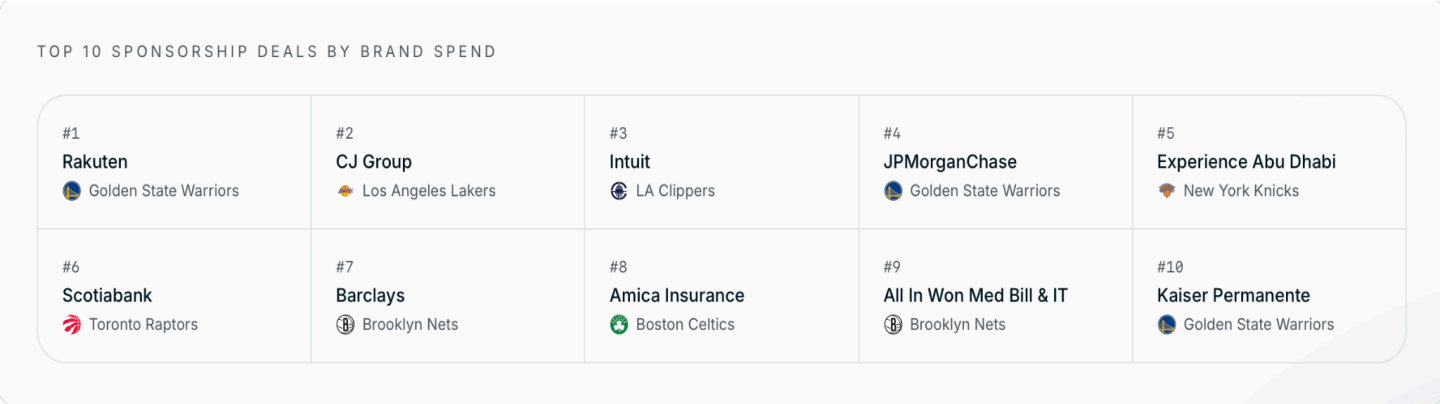


Figure 1

In addition, financial brands now hold 10 of 29 jersey patches since jersey patches were introduced in 2017.

In the 2024-25 season, 27 teams had patches on their jerseys, but this past season that number increased to 29. The league generates upwards of $300 million a year from jersey patches alone (globaldata). In 2025-26, there were seven new jersey patches, five of which were from companies that had never previously held a deal with the league. Those five companies make up a much larger group of 417 new brands that entered into a deal with the league this past season, 44 of which are technology brands.

In contrast to a sponsorship deal that usually lasts three to five years, a naming rights agreement can last five to twenty years. Over 90% of the teams in North America's five largest professional sports leagues have signed a naming right agreement; in the NBA, that figure reaches 97%. The largest publicly disclosed naming rights agreement is held by Crypto.com

Arena in Los Angeles, home of the Lakers (NBA), Sparks (WNBA), and Kings (NHL). In 2021, Crypto.com agreed to pay approximately $50 million annually for 20 years (Lexpert).

Individual teams aren't the only ones who profit by partnering with major brands; players sign lucrative endorsement deals, adding to the millions of dollars they already earn. Jared McCain, who aside from being a NBA player is a social media influencer, leads the way with a whopping 35 sponsorship deals at only 22 years old. He's not the youngest star to lock in deals, either, six of the top 25 most-endorsed NBA athletes are first-year players. According to the intelligence report, brands now sign athletes during the draft, before they ever play an NBA game. Companies see the value in locking up long-term contracts with rising stars and are pouncing on the opportunity as early as possible.

In contrast to those heavily pursued rookies, there is one pipeline that remains significantly underpriced inventory, international players. Out of ten international players that broke out over the course of last season, seven have zero current-season brand sponsorship deals. This stems from the perception that international rookies may not resonate as strongly with the American audiences. However, as the NBA continues to expand overseas, brands are likely to tap into these global athletes more frequently. Figure 2 displays the 10 players with the most sponsorships last season, nine of whom are American.

#	ATHLETE	FOLLOWERS	SPONSORSHIP DEALS	YOY Δ	KEY PARTNERS
#1	Jared McCain	2.1M	35	+5	Sally Hansen, CeraVe, DoorDash
#2	Karl-Anthony Towns	6.4M	19	-4	Fortnite, Gatorade, Airbnb
#3	Stephen Curry	96.6M	18	0	Unanimous Media, Rakuten, Underrated Golf
#4	Giannis Antetokounmpo	29.4M	14	-2	IM8 Health, Arena Club, Google Pixel
#5	LeBron James	232.8M	12	+2	DraftKings, Indeed, Nike
#6	Josh Hart	1.9M	12	-7	Heineken, Marathon, Mike & Ike
#7	Donovan Mitchell	6.3M	12	+4	CarMax, adidas, NBA 2K
#8	Cooper Flagg	2.1M	11	+1	New Balance, AT&T, Chime
#9	Jimmy Butler	15.2M	11	+1	Alo Yoga, BigFace Brand, Essentia Water
#10	Damian Lillard	18.2M	11	-2	Move, Oakley, adidas

Figure 2

Why do companies decide to pay millions of dollars for something as simple as their name on an arena, a court, or a jersey? The NBA has a global reach unlike any other league. Approximately 30% of opening night rosters were made up of international players from 43 unique countries across six continents (NBA.com). Driven by an expanding audience, the game's growth is clear, “The average in-game delivery for the NBA in 2025-26 was 1.78 million viewers per outing, up 16% versus the previous season’s 1.53 million” (Sportico). By simply placing their logo alongside a franchise, companies market themselves to millions of engaged fans. Although it comes with a high price tag, brands are eager to roll the dice on the potential return.

The Finals

The NBA Finals, a best-of-seven, all out war between the top two teams in the entire association. Averaging millions of viewers across the globe for each bout, it is comparable only to events like the Super Bowl or the World Series. Sponsorships pour in, fans pack the stands, and revenue climbs to peak levels. This season, the San Antonio Spurs were pitted against the New York Knicks. The combined population of both cities exceeds 10 million people. While eyes from all across the country are glued to their screens during the Finals, the home markets of the competing teams played a massive role in driving viewership records.

Officially, it was the most watched Finals in 28 years averaging 20.6 millions viewers. Game 5, which saw the Knicks secure their first title in 53 years, peaked at 33 million viewers. On social media, “The five-game series generated a record 15 billion views and counting…the most ever for an NBA Finals and nearly triple the previous record set in 2025” (NBA.com).

To put the statistics in perspective, the 2025 Finals averaged just over 10 million viewers per game. Game 7 of the 2025 Finals was the most-watched Finals game in six years, averaging 16.6 million viewers and peaking at 19.6 million, figures lower than the average of *every single game* in this year's series (pr.nba.com). A major factor in that surge was market size. The 2025 matchup between the Pacers and Thunder are both considered small-market organizations; NYC alone has a population six times larger than Indianapolis and OKC combined.

That massive audience doesn’t just drive ratings, it drives revenue. The NBA thrives financially when big market teams square off on the ultimate stage, driving massive spikes in advertising, merchandise, and ticket sales. And the league wasn’t the only beneficiary; the Knicks earned over $70 million more this spring than they did during their 2025 conference finals run (sportsnaut.com). On top of ticket sales, sponsorship revenue rose by $1.7 million and food, beverage, and merchandise numbers increased by $1.5 million. The postseason run

generated an estimated $380 million in economic activity during home games, however the actual economic effect is almost likely even higher (inc.com).

The National Basketball Association reaches far beyond the court. Its teams and players serve as global icons for kids and adults alike who dream of playing under the bright lights of iconic arenas. Yet beneath all the spotlight and spectacle, the NBA is a business first, and like any successful enterprise, profit drives the machine. Coming off a record-breaking season, the league will look to build on this momentum as it pushes toward future seasons.

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(naming rights)

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International players