

BLOG REPORT

AI Search for Sports Monetization: Be Seen Securely or Lose to the Past



AI's Dual Impact – Unlocking Sports Monetization While Navigating Emerging Threats

The digital landscape for sports is undergoing a profound transformation driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI). For sports properties, clubs, leagues, and talent agencies, pivoting to **AI Search is no longer optional; it is a critical imperative for achieving monetization at scale with the globally dominant Gen Z and Gen Alpha fan segments**. These digital natives increasingly rely on conversational AI for sports information, news, and even direct merchandise purchases, bypassing traditional search engines. Data indicates AI-driven e-commerce traffic is surging, and AI recommendations are highly trusted, leading to significantly higher conversion rates compared to legacy search methods. Brands that fail to optimize their content for AI readability risk becoming invisible and losing out on substantial revenue and lifelong fan loyalty.

However, this powerful AI-driven ecosystem presents a **double-edged sword**. The very platforms enabling unprecedented growth also create fertile ground for sophisticated cybercriminal activities. Sports properties and stars face escalating threats from **AI deepfake proliferation, AI voice cloning, AI copyright infringement, AI-powered ransomware attacks, AI reputational extortion, and AI disinformation campaigns**. Alarming, most in the sports industry currently lack adequate AI cybersecurity monitoring and litigation enforcement to counter these damaging threats effectively. Therefore, while AI Search offers a mechanism for exponential digital revenue growth, it simultaneously provides a platform for rapidly scaled AI-powered attacks against sports entities and their personnel. A dual strategy focusing on both aggressive AI monetization and robust AI threat mitigation is essential for future success and survival.

The Game Has Changed: Why Traditional Search Is Losing the Next Generation of Fans

For decades, the internet's gateway was the search bar. Google became synonymous with finding information, connecting fans to their favorite teams, players, and merchandise. But a seismic shift is underway, driven by the digital-native generations of Gen Z and Gen Alpha. These younger fans, who are rapidly becoming the dominant force in the global sports market, no longer find the traditional, link-based search experience compelling or even relevant.

The critical imperative for sports properties, clubs, leagues, and individual athletes in 2025 is clear: **pivot to AI Search, or risk being forgotten**. This isn't a futuristic prediction; it's the present reality. The pathway to scaled monetization and sustained global growth lies directly within the personalized, conversational, and transactional capabilities of AI-driven search.

The New Daily Go-To: AI as the Sports Information Hub

Imagine a world where your primary source for sports news, player stats, game highlights, and even merchandise purchases isn't a list of blue links, but an intelligent conversational agent. For Gen Z and Gen Alpha, this isn't imagination; it's their daily routine. They are growing up with AI assistants, chatbots, and generative AI tools that provide instant, synthesized answers, not just pointers to websites.

This shift fundamentally alters the fan journey. Instead of navigating multiple websites, clicking through ads, and sifting through search results, the modern fan expects a seamless, integrated experience. They want to ask a question and get a direct, trustworthy answer, often followed by an immediate opportunity to act on that information – whether it's buying a ticket, a jersey, or subscribing to a content package.

The Unseen Loss: When Your Brand Doesn't Even Get a Chance

Consider this all-too-real scenario, illustrating the immediate and profound impact of this paradigm shift:

A father and his football-mad son and daughter twins are excitedly planning their upcoming trip to Leeds. They've been immersed in Leeds United highlights for months and are excited about the recent promotion to the Premier League. The dad's goal is to make this visit truly unforgettable – securing tickets to a Premier League game at Elland Road, perhaps even with a special hospitality experience.

He doesn't reach for Google. Instead, he opens his preferred AI search platform, like Gemini, and types:

"What are the best family-friendly ticket options for a Leeds United game at Elland Road in September?"

The AI processes this nuanced request. It doesn't just return a list of links; it synthesizes information from structured, visible, AI-friendly listings. High up on the recommendations are Leeds United's official family packages or hospitality options that clearly articulate their suitability for children. The AI might highlight specific sections, amenities, or even pre-match activities tailored for younger fans. Satisfied with the immediate, curated options, **the dad proceeds to book the Leeds United tickets directly through an integrated purchase flow, powered by integrations with e-commerce solutions like Shopify and payment platforms like Klarna.**

What about other Premier League clubs, or even other ticket vendors for Leeds United, whose offerings weren't structured for AI, or whose content wasn't optimized for such conversational, family-focused queries? **They never even had a chance to be considered. They didn't just lose a significant sale; they lost the opportunity to capture a lifetime of loyalty, merchandise purchases, and memories from a family, including two young, passionate fans. And perhaps most critically, no one at those clubs or vendors even knows it happened. The transaction occurred entirely outside their traditional marketing funnels, invisible to their conventional analytics dashboards.**

This isn't a hypothetical future. It's happening now. AI platforms are rapidly integrating with e-commerce giants and payment solutions. Soon, fans will be able to ask about tickets, kits, or travel – and complete the entire purchase inside the chat interface. Furthermore, the influence extends to social commerce: if a fan asks AI about the latest Leeds United kit, the **'AI Search' can direct them to seamless purchase experiences on platforms like TikTok Shop, Instagram Shopping, or YouTube's integrated shopping features, where Gen Z and Gen Alpha are already making impulse buys.** The new consumer journey is becoming: **ask → answer → buy.**

The Data Demands Attention: AI's Unprecedented Monetization Power

For an industry often characterized by its conservatism, the hard data on AI's impact on consumer behavior and e-commerce conversion rates is the most compelling argument. The numbers paint a stark picture, demonstrating why AI Search is not just an incremental improvement but a transformative force for monetization.

Recent research highlights this dramatic shift:

- **Fan Engagement & Trust:** According to Capgemini's 2025 report:
 - **54% of sports fans now use AI as their main source for sports information.** This indicates a massive migration of attention away from traditional web browsing. If fans are getting their information from AI, that's where sports properties need to be present.

- **59% of fans trust what AI recommends.** This is a monumental figure. Trust is the bedrock of conversion. When an AI recommends a product, a ticket, or an experience, nearly six out of ten fans are predisposed to believe and act on that recommendation. This trust translates directly into higher conversion rates.
- **67% of fans want all their data in one place.** This speaks to the desire for integrated, seamless experiences that AI Search naturally provides. No more jumping between apps or websites; everything is consolidated, making the purchase journey frictionless.
- **E-commerce & Purchase Intent:** Beyond general information, AI is proving to be a powerhouse for direct commerce:
 - **Adobe reports a staggering 1,200% Year-over-Year (YoY) surge in AI-driven e-commerce traffic.** This isn't just growth; it's an explosion. Businesses leveraging AI for their online sales are seeing traffic multiply by more than tenfold. For sports, this means a massive new channel for driving fans directly to purchase.
 - **42% of shoppers now rely on AI for purchase advice.** This stat is perhaps the most critical for monetization. Nearly half of all online consumers are actively seeking AI's guidance before making a buying decision. If your sports product, merchandise, or ticket offering isn't surfaced and recommended by AI, you are missing out on nearly half of the potential purchasing audience.

Monetization Conversion Rates: Traditional Search vs. AI Search

While direct, universally comparable "conversion rates for sports" specifically comparing traditional Google search versus AI Search are still emerging as the market matures, the aggregated data points and observed behavioral shifts provide a clear directional trend and allow for strong inference:

- **Traditional Legacy Google Search (E-commerce for Sports):**
 - Across the broader e-commerce landscape, average conversion rates typically hover between **1.4% and 3%**. For the "Sports and Recreation" industry specifically, benchmarks generally fall within the range of **1.18% to 1.72%**. This means that, on average, for every 100 visitors arriving via traditional organic search to a sports e-commerce site, only 1 to 2 will complete a purchase.
 - This conversion rate is influenced by the multi-step journey: users search, click a link, navigate a website (which may have slow load times, poor mobile optimization, or distracting ads), and then finally decide to purchase. Each step presents a potential drop-off point.
- **AI Search (Inferred Conversion Potential for Sports):**
 - AI Search offers a fundamentally different, and demonstrably more efficient, conversion pathway. The "ask → answer → buy" model, facilitated by direct integrations with e-commerce platforms, drastically reduces the steps to conversion.
 - **Direct Answers & Recommendations:** AI provides immediate, curated answers, often with direct links or integrated purchase flows, eliminating the "search and sift" process.
 - **High Trust Factor:** With nearly 60% of fans trusting AI recommendations, the pre-purchase barrier of skepticism is significantly lowered.
 - **Frictionless Transaction:** The seamless nature of in-chat purchases, as seen with platforms integrating Shopify and Klarna, removes significant friction points traditionally associated with online shopping.
 - **Personalization:** AI can tailor recommendations based on past interactions, stated preferences, and implicit signals, leading to highly relevant offers and increased purchase likelihood. McKinsey reports that AI-powered personalization can drive a **10-15% revenue lift** in retail, a principle directly applicable to sports.
 - **Real-World Sports Impact:** Crucially, sports properties have already reported **"substantial increases in ticket sales and conversion rates after implementing AI-powered**

personalized marketing campaigns." This concrete feedback from within the industry underscores AI's direct impact on monetization.

Inference on Conversion Rate Superiority: Given the 1,200% YoY surge in AI-driven e-commerce traffic and 42% of shoppers relying on AI for purchase advice, it is highly credible to assert that **AI Search is delivering monetization conversion rates that are several multiples higher than traditional legacy search.** Where traditional search might yield a 1-2% conversion for sports, AI-driven pathways could realistically achieve **5-15% or even higher** for well-optimized, AI-readable content, simply due to the reduced friction, increased trust, and direct transactional capabilities. This isn't just about more traffic; it's about **higher quality, higher intent traffic** that is primed to convert.

Regional and League-Specific Monetization Nuances

The global sports market is diverse, with varying digital maturity and fan behaviors across regions and sporting codes. AI Search presents unique opportunities to address these nuances:

- **USA (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, MLS):** North America leads in AI adoption within sports, holding a **35% share of the global AI in sports market in 2024.** This is driven by high digital adoption rates and the early integration of AI in major professional leagues. While traditional e-commerce conversion rates in North America are generally higher than other regions (around **3.4%** across industries), the potential for AI to further elevate these is immense. Leagues like the NFL (e.g., Dallas Cowboys topping \$1.2 billion in revenue) and NBA are already exploring AI for optimal ticket pricing, fan sentiment analysis, and personalized sales processes, which directly contribute to higher conversion rates for tickets and merchandise. The MLS, with its rapid growth and high valuation multiples, is also ripe for AI-driven fan engagement and monetization.
- **Europe (Premier League, Cricket, various Football Leagues):** Europe is projected to be the **fastest-growing region for AI in sports,** driven by extensive use of performance technologies and league-level innovation programs. While general e-commerce conversion rates in Europe average around **3.2%** (or 2.1% for EMEA), the highly passionate and digitally engaged football (soccer) fan bases, like those of the Premier League, offer a massive opportunity. Clubs are increasingly focusing on digital transformation to capture revenue beyond traditional matchday income. AI Search can bridge the gap between fan interest and direct purchase for merchandise, streaming subscriptions, and unique fan experiences, transforming casual interest into tangible revenue.
- **Asia (Cricket, various Football/Basketball Leagues):** Asia Pacific is experiencing rapid growth in AI in sports, fueled by significant investments in smart infrastructure and government-initiated digitalization. Despite general e-commerce conversion rates tending to be slightly lower (around **2.9%** across industries, with India at 1.1%), the sheer scale of the online population and the fervent fandom for sports like Cricket (especially in India) and various football leagues present an enormous monetization opportunity for AI-driven commerce. AI can help personalize offerings to diverse cultural preferences and payment methods, overcoming geographical barriers and unlocking new revenue streams from a vast, digitally savvy audience.

The Gen Z & Gen Alpha Imperative: Capturing the Future Fan Base

The global sports market is undergoing a generational shift. Gen Z (born roughly 1997-2012) and Gen Alpha (born 2010 onwards) represent the future of sports consumption and, crucially, sports monetization. These generations are:

- **Digital Natives:** They have never known a world without the internet, smartphones, and instant information. Their expectations for digital experiences are inherently higher.
- **Experience-Driven:** They value personalized, and interactive experiences over static content.

- **Authenticity Seekers:** They connect with brands and personalities that feel genuine and accessible. AI, when implemented correctly, can foster this sense of direct connection.
- **Attention-Scarce:** Their attention is highly fragmented across numerous digital platforms. AI Search offers a way to cut through the noise by providing direct, relevant value.

Traditional marketing and search strategies, designed for an older demographic and a different digital landscape, simply do not resonate with these groups. If sports properties fail to meet Gen Z and Gen Alpha where they are – which is increasingly within AI-driven environments – they risk alienating the very demographic that will fuel their growth for decades to come. Capturing their loyalty now, at a young age, translates into a lifetime value that is immeasurable.

The AI-Readiness Imperative: Structured Content is King

The core mechanism behind AI Search's effectiveness is its ability to understand and synthesize information from **structured content**. Unlike traditional search engines that primarily index keywords and links, AI models thrive on data that is organized, categorized, and semantically rich.

If your sports property's offerings – whether it's ticket availability, merchandise details, player bios, or hospitality packages – are buried in unstructured text, PDFs, or complex navigation paths, AI simply won't find them, or won't present them effectively.

If your offer isn't AI-readable?

You remain unseen.

You won't be chosen.

You lose the revenue.

This is the harsh reality. AI is surfacing results based on clarity and structure.

This means sports organizations must invest in:

1. **Semantic SEO & Structured Data:** Implementing schema markup (e.g., Schema.org for products, events, organizations) to explicitly tell AI what your content is about.
2. **Clear, Concise Product & Service Listings:** Ensuring all offerings (tickets, merch, hospitality, subscriptions) are described in a standardized, easily parseable format.
3. **Comprehensive FAQs & Knowledge Bases:** Building rich, AI-friendly repositories of common fan questions and answers.
4. **API-First Approach:** Making data accessible via APIs that AI systems can query directly for real-time information (e.g., live scores, ticket availability).
5. **Conversational Content Design:** Crafting content that directly answers questions and anticipates user intent, as if it were part of a dialogue.

The Double-Edged Sword: Mitigating AI's Dark Side in Sports

While the potential for AI Search to drive unprecedented monetization is clear, it is crucial for sports properties and stars to recognize that AI is a **double-edged sword**. The same powerful content ecosystem that enables rapid digital revenue growth also provides a fertile ground for sophisticated, rapidly scalable attacks.

The proliferation of advanced AI capabilities creates significant new threats:

- **AI Deepfake Proliferation:** The ability to generate highly realistic, yet entirely fabricated, video and image content of athletes, coaches, or executives. These deepfakes can be used to spread false narratives, create embarrassing or damaging scenarios, or even manipulate public opinion, severely

impacting reputation and brand value.

- **AI Voice Cloning:** Similar to deepfakes, AI can replicate voices with startling accuracy. This poses a threat for scams, impersonation, or creating fake audio recordings that could lead to reputational damage or financial fraud.
- **AI Copyright Infringement:** Generative AI models, trained on vast datasets, can inadvertently (or intentionally) produce content that infringes on existing copyrights, including sports media, logos, or unique artistic expressions associated with properties and stars. This can lead to costly legal battles and brand dilution.
- **AI-Powered Ransomware Attacks:** AI can enhance the sophistication and targeting of cyberattacks. AI-powered ransomware can adapt to defenses, identify critical vulnerabilities, and execute highly personalized attacks against sports organizations' sensitive data, disrupting operations and demanding large sums.
- **AI Reputational Extortion:** Leveraging AI to gather vast amounts of personal or sensitive information, bad actors can then use this data to create compelling, believable narratives (even if false) to extort money or concessions from sports properties or individuals, threatening to release damaging AI-generated content or disinformation.
- **AI Disinformation Campaigns:** AI can generate and disseminate vast quantities of highly convincing, targeted disinformation across social media and news platforms. This can be used to undermine fan trust, spread false rumors about players or teams, influence betting markets, or damage sponsor relationships.

The alarming reality is that most sports properties and sports stars currently have **very little AI cybersecurity monitoring and litigation enforcement** in place to effectively identify and neutralize these increasingly sophisticated and damaging threats. The very platform that offers immense monetization potential – the AI content ecosystem – also provides the mechanism to rapidly scale these AI-powered attacks against sports properties, sports stars, and even their families.

Actionable Steps for Sports Properties and Stars in 2025: Balancing Growth and Security

The time for observation is over; the time for action is now. Here's how sports properties and stars can strategically pivot to leverage AI Search for unprecedented growth, while simultaneously building robust defences:

1. **Audit Your Digital Content for AI-Readiness (Monetization):**
 - Start by assessing how easily an AI could understand and synthesize information about your tickets, merchandise, player stats, and fan experiences.
 - Identify unstructured data and prioritize its conversion into structured formats.
 - Utilize tools like Peec AI (AI Search Analytics) to understand how your brand is currently perceived by AI search engines and identify gaps.
2. **Invest in Structured Data & Semantic SEO (Monetization):**
 - Work with your web development and content teams to implement robust schema markup across all digital assets.
 - Develop comprehensive knowledge graphs that map out your organization's entities (teams, players, events, products) and their relationships.
 - Optimize content not just for keywords, but for conversational queries and user intent.
3. **Explore Direct AI Integrations (Monetization):**
 - Investigate partnerships with leading AI platforms (e.g., large language model providers, e-commerce AI solutions).
 - Explore creating custom AI agents or chatbots that can directly answer fan queries and facilitate

- purchases on your official platforms or within third-party AI environments.
- Prepare for seamless integration with e-commerce platforms like Shopify and payment solutions like Klarna, enabling in-chat purchases.
- 4. **Develop Conversational Content Strategies (Monetization):**
 - Shift from traditional web copy to content designed for conversational interfaces. Think about how a fan would *ask* for information, and structure your content to directly *answer* that question.
 - Create dynamic FAQs that are constantly updated based on real-time fan queries.
- 5. **Embrace AI-Driven Fan Analytics (Monetization):**
 - Beyond traditional web analytics, focus on understanding AI search behavior. What questions are fans asking about your brand? What recommendations are AIs making?
 - Use these insights to refine your content strategy and optimize for AI visibility and conversion.
- 6. **Implement Robust AI Cybersecurity & Monitoring (Threat Mitigation):**
 - **Proactive Threat Intelligence:** Invest in AI-powered monitoring solutions that can detect deepfakes, voice clones, and disinformation campaigns targeting your brand, athletes, or executives across various platforms.
 - **Digital Forensics & Attribution:** Develop capabilities to trace the origin of AI-generated malicious content and identify the actors responsible.
 - **Legal & Litigation Preparedness:** Establish clear legal frameworks and partnerships with law firms specializing in AI-related intellectual property and defamation to pursue swift litigation against perpetrators.
 - **Reputation Management Protocols:** Develop rapid response plans for managing reputational crises stemming from AI-powered attacks, including public statements, fact-checking, and counter-narratives.
 - **Employee & Athlete Training:** Educate all personnel and talent about the risks of AI-generated content and best practices for personal cybersecurity and online presence.
- 7. **Educate Your Stakeholders (Monetization & Threat Mitigation):**
 - The "traditionally conservative" nature of the sports industry requires proactive education. Present the compelling market data and real-world examples (like the Fulham case) to internal teams, sponsors, and investors, *alongside* a clear understanding of the AI threat landscape.
 - Frame AI adoption not just as a tech trend for growth, but as a fundamental business imperative that requires a dual strategy of offensive monetization and defensive cybersecurity for future growth and competitive advantage.

The Choice: Monetize Growth, Mitigate Threats - Be Seen or Lose

The message is unequivocal: the future of sports monetization, particularly with the globally scalable Gen Z and Gen Alpha demographic, is inextricably linked to AI Search. The traditional pathways are diminishing in relevance, and the new pathways are demanding a proactive, AI-first approach. However, this powerful new frontier comes with significant risks.

The question for every sports organization, every league, and every star is no longer "Should we consider AI?" but "**Are we ready to be seen, monetize growth, and *critically*, mitigate the emerging AI threats – or risk being lost to both missed opportunities and devastating attacks?**" The brands that embrace this critical imperative now, with a balanced strategy for both growth and security, will unlock unprecedented monetization at scale, secure the loyalty of the next generation of fans, and solidify their position in the evolving landscape of global sports. Those that hesitate risk being invisible in the very conversations that drive the future of the industry, and vulnerable to its darker side. The game has changed, and AI is the new playing field, demanding both ambition and vigilance.

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David is the Founder & Managing Partner at TIAKI, a niche consulting practice helping executive leadership in sport make confident, informed decisions on their risks, investments and business outcomes powered by secure 'data-at-scale'. He collaborates with bold and determined leaders in the sports ecosystem to define their data, AI and cybersecurity strategies to deliver sustainable value.

David's vision for TIAKI is to empower sports franchise CEOs, leadership teams, sports media broadcasters and investors in the global sports industry with strategic advisory frameworks to deliver secure, pioneering digital fan experiences and new ecosystem business models to achieve breakthrough returns.

David has over 20 years of strategy and technology enabled business transformation experience, providing consulting expertise in cloud native technologies, data strategy, digital business enablement and cybersecurity strategy. He is passionate about helping talented leadership teams succeed in securely growing their differentiated business models in the data-driven, digital sports economy.

Based in Stockholm, David previously worked for IBM Consulting, EY, Accenture Strategy and Orange Business. He studied Chemistry at Durham University and holds an MBA from Trinity College, Dublin Business School.

