

dakota insights

SPORTS INVESTING

A monthly look at sports through the lens of alternative investments

D E C E M B E R 2 0 2 5

A MAJOR MOVE IN MADRID, AND MORE...

Welcome back. The past month's sports investing activity was punctuated by a statement move in Madrid, where **Apollo's** majority bid for **Atlético** reset the tone of the European club market. It also set the theme for the month: operators stepping into true control positions across leagues, franchises, and emerging formats. Add steady activity in youth sports, rec participation, and women's leagues, and the deal flow never really slowed.

This issue also digs into a quieter force shaping all of it – private credit – which has become the financing engine behind many of the sector's biggest ambitions.

Operators Take the Wheel

The headline move this month came from **Apollo Sports Capital**, which agreed to [acquire](#) a majority stake in **Atlético de Madrid** at a reported €2.5B valuation – one of the largest European club transactions in years. CEO **Miguel Ángel Gil** and President **Enrique Cerezo** will remain in place, but Apollo becomes the controlling force as the club pushes forward with long-planned infrastructure projects.

That operator-led theme carried across the rest of the market. **Global Sports Capital Partners** [committed](#) \$100M to Mexico's **Liga de Fútbol Americano** and assumed day-to-day control of the league – a significant shift for a competition that has historically operated with limited commercial structure.

In England and Spain, **Cynosure Checketts Sports Capital** made its own move, [investing](#) \$200M into **ALK Capital**, the parent of **Burnley FC** and **RCD Espanyol**. It marks **David Checketts'** return to European football and reinforces ALK's multi-club strategy at a time when cross-border ownership is becoming the industry's norm rather than a novelty.

Stateside, **Lone Star Sports & Entertainment** – the **Houston Texans'** event marketing arm – [acquired](#) **LOVB's** Houston franchise ahead of the volleyball league's second season. It's another entry in the growing list of major sports operators planting flags in women's sports and developmental leagues, where operational know-how may matter as much as capital.

And even the talent pipeline is adjusting. **Caldwell's** [launch](#) of a dedicated Sports & Entertainment practice is a sign of the times: private equity, venture firms, and family offices now need not just capital partners, but executives who can actually run the platforms they're buying or building.



Challenger Leagues & Global Formats

The competition for athlete talent and offseason attention is getting more organized – and more expensive.

Project B, the new global women's basketball league backed by investors including **Mangrove Capital**, **Quiet Capital**, and **Sequence Equity**, is moving quickly. The league begins play in late 2026 but has already started [signing](#) WNBA stars to seven-figure contracts. With **Unrivaled** operating in a similar window, women's basketball suddenly has the early makings of a multi-league marketplace.

Elsewhere, emerging formats continue to attract institutional money. **Global Sports Capital Partners'** aforementioned \$100M [commitment](#) to Mexico's **Liga de Fútbol Americano** is the first US PE investment into a Mexican sports league, putting a spotlight on whether American football can scale commercially outside the US and Europe.

The **European League of Football** and the **European Football Alliance** [agreed](#) to merge into a unified competition beginning in 2026. With governance reorganized under a team-led board and backed by investors such as **885 Capital** and **Oakvale**, the combined league aims to streamline costs, stabilize scheduling, and create a more marketable product for broadcasters and sponsors. The move is notable, as consolidation in challenger leagues usually comes after distress, not as a proactive strategy.

And in one of the most unconventional deals of the month, **Enhanced** – a performance-enhanced sports league backed by **Peter Thiel** and **Christian Angermayer** – [announced](#) a \$1.2B SPAC merger, with plans to launch an inaugural Las Vegas event in 2026 across athletics, swimming, and weightlifting.

Innovation & Youth Sports Infrastructure

Youth sports tech continued its march toward a more consolidated, professionalized market. What used to be a patchwork of registration tools, league apps, and scheduling software is now attracting investors who want full-stack platforms, not point solutions.

Frontier Growth's [investment](#) in **Sprocket Sports** reinforced that direction. Sprocket remains one of the few founder-led, independent platforms in the space, and the new capital is aimed squarely at product depth and customer support — two areas youth clubs have historically struggled to find in legacy systems.

Similarly, **Scorability's** [acquisition](#) of **Ryzer** created a combined stack spanning athlete discovery, evaluation tech, event management, and registration.

Fastbreak AI's \$40M [Series A](#) adds another dimension. Its scheduling engine already supports more than 50 pro leagues, and the new funds target the \$55B youth market – where tournament logistics, facility allocation, and referee scheduling are still often handled by spreadsheets.

The biggest potential catalyst sits upstream: **Comcast's** planned **Versant** spinoff is [exploring](#) a \$400–\$500M sale of **SportsEngine**, one of the largest youth-sports platforms in the US. A deal of that size would reconfigure the entire landscape, accelerating the shift from point solutions to a more unified, professionalized youth-sports tech stack.

This month also brought international expansion: India-based **Sports for Life** [raised](#) \$2.6M to scale livestreaming, analytics, and multi-sport programming across major metro regions – a reminder that youth-sports infrastructure is globalizing as quickly as participation.



TOP 5 DEALS OF THE MONTH

TRANSACTION	INVESTORS / BUYERS	WHAT'S NOTABLE
Atlético de Madrid – majority stake acquisition (~€2.5B / \$2.9B)	Apollo Sports Capital	ASC gains control while existing leadership remains.
Enhanced – SPAC merger (\$1.2B valuation; up to \$200M cash proceeds)	A Paradise Acquisition Corp.; backers include Peter Thiel & Christian Angermayer	Takes the performance-enhanced sports league public; funds launch of its 2026 Las Vegas debut.
Liga de Fútbol Americano – up to \$100M multi-year investment	Global Sports Capital Partners	First US private-equity investment into a Mexican sports league; GSCP also assumes day-to-day operations.
Topgolf – majority stake purchase (60% stake at ~\$1.1B valuation)	Leonard Green & Partners	Positions Topgolf for its next growth phase as Callaway rebrands.
Riyadh Shooting Range & Entertainment Complex – \$131M project commitment	Saudi Arabia's Events Investment Fund	EIF's first major sports/entertainment build in Qiddiya City; combines elite shooting infrastructure with broader entertainment development.

IN FOCUS

A closer look at the forces shaping sports capital

The Credit Underpinning Sports Growth

Major sports organizations are operating in a financial environment that looks nothing like the one they relied on even a decade ago. Where bank lending and long-term media contracts once handled most capital needs, today's landscape is defined by stadium projects with billion-dollar price tags, ownership transitions that require bespoke financing, and technology and media ambitions that outstrip traditional underwriting boxes. The gap is increasingly being filled by private credit.

That shift mirrors trends across the broader alternatives market. Global private credit AUM is approaching \$2T, per **Akin Gump's** 2025 [analysis](#), after roughly quadrupling over ten years. At the same time, sports borrowers are asking for larger, more specialized financing solutions than regulated banks typically provide.

Managers have responded with sector-specific strategies. **Ares**, for example, has invested \$11B across sports, media, and entertainment since 2007 and launched its dedicated Sports, Media & Entertainment Finance platform in 2020. Presentation materials from the group's [second fund](#) indicate a credit-first approach designed around long-dated contracted revenues, structured downside protection, and flexible capital solutions. Its first SME fund reported no losses or defaults through 2024 – a data point that explains why more managers are taking the category seriously.



Why Financing Needs Are Expanding

Rising valuations and more complex commercial models.

Franchise values across the major US leagues continue to increase, supported by full stadiums, strong viewership, and expanding international audiences. **Andalusian Credit Partners (ACP)** [estimated](#) that US leagues generated nearly \$40B in revenue in 2023 from media rights, ticketing, sponsorships, licensing, and merchandise. Those valuations create both opportunity and pressure: new owners need larger balance sheets, and incumbents need more flexible capital to recapitalize or invest.

Evolving media-rights structures.

ACP notes that media deals remain long-dated and generally renew at higher values, but the distribution landscape is no longer as simple as a single broadcast partner. Rights are split across linear networks, streaming platforms, direct-to-consumer products, and league-owned ventures – all of which create new revenue streams but introduce timing and structuring challenges.

The emergence of college athletics as a borrower class.

The financial model in college sports continues to shift as direct athlete compensation becomes a recurring obligation. The [launch](#) of a \$500M private credit fund by **Elevate**, **Velocity Capital Management**, and the **Texas Permanent School Fund Corporation** shows how quickly lenders have moved into the space. Schools facing year-round expenses, facility upgrades, or NIL-related cash needs increasingly view private credit as a viable tool.

A growing middle market.

Youth-sports operators, data companies, production firms, scheduling platforms, and betting-technology providers now resemble the type of recurring-revenue businesses that private credit knows well. Their growth plans often outpace cash flow, which makes credit facilities or hybrid structures a natural fit.



RECENT PRIVATE CREDIT & MEDIA RIGHTS DEALS

Direct Credit Facilities & Hybrid Rounds

» **Pixellot** — \$35M (incl. \$20M venture debt)

PSG Equity provided the debt portion to scale AI commentary, analytics, and automated production.

» **Outlier** — \$5M revolving credit facility

House Advantage Fund backs expansion for the sports-betting analytics platform.

» **DealMaker** — \$20M hybrid (equity + debt)

CIBC Innovation Banking participates; capital supports the platform's growing sports division and AI products.

Media Rights

» **Telefónica** — €1.5B UEFA rights (2027–2031)

A 14% uplift from the prior cycle; reinforces long-term rights inflation.

» **MLB** — ~\$800M/yr national rights (2026–2028)

New deals with ESPN, NBCUniversal, and Netflix highlight the durability of top-tier US media revenue streams.

Why Private Credit Fits This Environment

Sports organizations produce reliable contracted revenue but often lack the corporate collateral banks expect.

Media-rights payments, sponsorship deals, naming rights, and premium-seat revenue are predictable but too specialized for many traditional lenders. Private credit allows the financing to be built around those assets directly.

A **Voya Investment Management** [report](#) highlights this shift. The firm argues that sports teams often fit better into asset-based structures – especially for media-rights and stadium financings – than into standard corporate debt.

Borrowers increasingly isolate long-term contracts in SPVs, giving lenders clear cash-flow visibility and avoiding issues tied to on-field performance or broader enterprise value.

Private lenders can also tailor structures to league-specific rules. European clubs face relegation risk, but Voya's case studies show that segregated cash flows and conservative leverage can insulate lenders from those swings. In North America, revenue sharing, league consent rights and borrowing limits shape covenant design. In the college ranks, nonprofit rules and state-level oversight add additional constraints.

Borrowers typically pay a premium for this customization, but speed and flexibility matter. For investors, the appeal is the visibility of long-dated contracted revenues – a profile that can look more like infrastructure credit than typical middle-market corporate lending.



Where Private Credit Is Being Deployed

Stadium and venue financings.

These remain the most capital-intensive projects in the industry. Voya reports that it has completed 60 stadium and media-rights transactions totaling \$2.7B over 15 years, underscoring consistent lender appetite for deals secured by naming rights, sponsorships, and premium-seat revenue.

Media-rights and league credit programs.

Borrowing against national media contracts has become a mainstream financing approach. According to Voya, these league-level programs stayed stable through events as varied as 9/11, the financial crisis, and the early pandemic – largely thanks to centralized revenue pooling and long-term broadcast agreements.

Working-capital and growth facilities.

Teams, leagues, and sports businesses increasingly rely on credit for operational liquidity, offseason investment, marketing and technology initiatives. Sports-tech and production companies often use credit-backed facilities as they scale beyond what equity alone can support.

Considerations for Institutional Lenders

Sports financing comes with unique constraints. League constitutions can limit collateral enforcement. Akin Gump notes that lenders often need bespoke security structures to comply with asset-pledge restrictions. Revenue volatility can stem from competitive performance, scheduling dependencies, sponsorship churn and renewal timing. College sports face shifting regulations as compensation models mature.

Still, underlying demand for sports content is exceptionally durable. ACP highlights that NFL games accounted for 93 of the top 100 US broadcasts in 2023. Media rights, naming rights, and premium seating contracts typically span multiple years and renew upward. Many transactions feature structural seniority or cash-flow isolation that strengthens creditor protections, and returns can exceed comparably rated public credit.

The Outlook

As teams build multi-asset business models, college programs formalize new financial structures, and technology companies scale across fan engagement, data, and production, private credit is becoming a core feature of sports finance rather than an edge case. The borrower base is expanding, and the sector's blend of long-term contracted revenue, asset-backed structures, and resilient demand makes it increasingly attractive to institutional lenders looking for differentiated exposure.



CAPITAL ROSTER

More than endorsements: athletes shaping the business of sports

This month's athlete capital clustered around three areas: ownership, youth pathways, and data-driven performance – with a few strategic partnerships that show how players are extending influence off the field.

Ownership & Investments:

MADE Hoops raised new funding from **SC Holdings** and **LRMR Ventures**, joined by **Kevin Durant**, **Paolo Banchemo**, and **Boardroom Sports Holdings**. Durant backing a youth platform is on-brand – he's always been invested in the next generation, occasionally so invested that he'll jump into Twitter replies to explain himself directly.

USC's **JuJu Watkins** became the first college athlete to buy into a women's pro team, joining the investor group behind **Boston Legacy FC**. The club debuts in 2026, and adding one of the most marketable college players in the country gives the expansion team a head start in relevance.

Cristiano Ronaldo added an MMA investment to his portfolio with a stake in Madrid-based **WOW FC**. It's a logical pairing: Ronaldo has spent two decades turning brand-building into a professional sport, and WOW FC wants to scale across Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. It's hard to imagine a better stress test for global ambitions than attaching your logo to someone with 600 million Instagram followers.

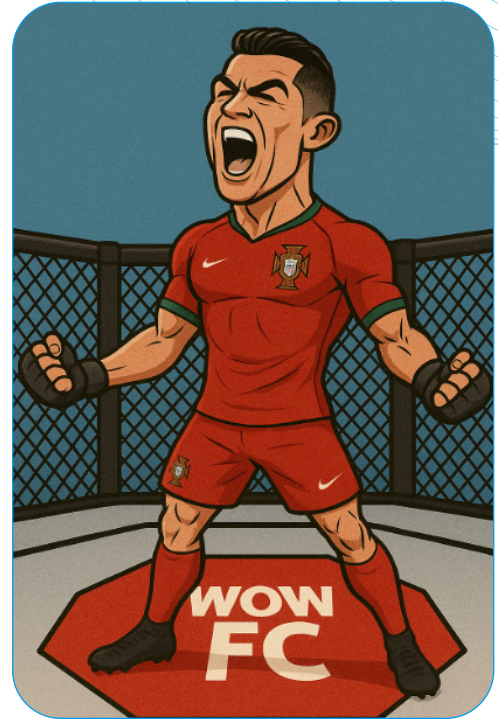
Tennis star **Casper Ruud** joined the \$3M raise for **SportAI**, a computer-vision platform that automates technique analysis for coaches, players, and broadcasters. Ruud's investment reflects the broader push toward data-driven training tools in individual sports.

Advisory & Platform Roles:

CVC's Global Sport Group and **Roc Nation Sports International** introduced an Athlete Advisory Board including **Siya Kolisi**, the World Cup–winning captain of South Africa; **David Villa**, Spain's record goal scorer; and **Skylar Diggins**, a seven-time WNBA All-Star. The group is designed to inform league strategy and commercial decisions – part of a broader push to bake athlete voice into private-capital models rather than tacking it on after the fact.

Mainstreet Media partnered with **Caplight** to give athlete investors access to institutional-grade private-markets data. With more players writing checks into late-stage companies, reliable information is quickly becoming table stakes.

VestGen launched an athlete-focused practice headed by **Athlete Collective** co-founder **Cole Dow**, building a single lane for financial planning, brand work, and family advisory support. As NIL accelerates earnings for younger athletes and career timelines stay unpredictable, more players are treating real planning as a core part of their careers rather than a side task they get to when things slow down.



BEYOND THE BIG LEAGUES

Where passion meets portfolio: investments in the sports you already play

Pickleball didn't dominate the headlines this month – it merely shared them. Snow, dance, golf clubs, and shooting complexes all drew capital alongside the usual racquet activity, a reminder that the rec-sports market is now broad enough to behave like its own asset class.

Deals to Know:

- The M3M India family office **acquired** the **Capital Warriors Gurgaon** franchise in the inaugural **Indian Pickleball League** and committed to building 50 pickleball courts nationwide, positioning itself early in India's fastest-growing participation sport.
- The **Grass League** – a semi-pro, full-contact adult football league – **sold** its new **Las Vegas Action** franchise for \$1M to a group including **SG Ellison**, former NFL center **AQ Shipley**, developer **Brandon Stein**, and former TaylorMade CEO **Mark King**.
- The **Snow League**, a professional snowboarding and freeskiiing circuit, **raised** \$15M from **359 Capital**, **BITKRAFT Ventures**, and **WISE Ventures** to scale global events and strengthen media production.
- The **International Dance League**, a new professional team-based dance competition **launching** in 2026, secured a \$7M seed round led by **Elysian Park Ventures** to build out team operations, event production, and core tech.
- **Concert Golf Partners**, the operator of 39 private golf and country clubs, **received** new investment from **Bain Capital** as **Clearlake** exited.
- **Topgolf** sold a 60% stake to **Leonard Green & Partners** in a **deal** valuing the business at \$1.1B as **Callaway** prepares a corporate rebrand.
- **US Squash** **sold** a majority stake in **Club Locker** – its tournament, ratings, and facility-management software – to **Artisan Ventures**, with plans to expand the platform across racquet sports.
- **Saudi Arabia's Events Investment Fund** **announced** a \$131M shooting range and entertainment complex in Qiddiya City, designed to meet international competition standards while serving broader recreational demand.

Trendlines to Watch:

Investors will be watching follow-through: do these early-stage leagues run dependable calendars, do facility operators reach sustainable utilization, and do digital platforms gain adoption outside their core sport? The answers will determine which categories mature into investable niches over the next couple of cycles.



WOMEN'S SPORTS CHECK-IN

Our [inaugural issue](#) highlighted women's sports as an asset class. Here's a quick look at some recent news in the space.

- ▶▶ **Monarch Collective** [expanded](#) to Europe with a 38% stake in **Viktoria Berlin Women**.
- ▶▶ **Project B** [signed](#) WNBA stars to seven-figure offseason deals.
- ▶▶ **LOVB Houston** acquired by **Lone Star Sports & Entertainment**.
- ▶▶ **JuJu Watkins** became the first college athlete to [invest](#) in a women's pro team.
- ▶▶ **NWSL Atlanta** [landed](#) a record \$165M expansion fee under **Arthur Blank**.
- ▶▶ **WSL Football** [hired](#) **Goldman Sachs & Deloitte** to evaluate external investment options.
- ▶▶ **Sunderland AFC** is in [talks](#) with multiple groups about selling a stake in its women's team.

ON DECK

Tracking the next moves in sports capital

- **West Ham United Women: Monarch Collective's** first European deal is done, and the next question is whether it completes a [reported](#) bid for up to 49% of West Ham United Women.
- **Mercedes-AMG F1: George Kurtz**, **CrowdStrike's** co-founder and CEO, is in [talks](#) to acquire roughly 5% at a \$6B valuation.
- **Big Ten capital strategy: UC Investments** has [paused](#) its proposed \$2.4B purchase of a 10% stake in the conference's commercial rights after several member schools pushed back. How – or whether – the conference revisits outside capital remains one of the key governance questions in college sports heading into 2026.
- **Real Madrid: Florentino Pérez's** [proposal](#) to sell around 5% of the club to establish a market-based valuation above €10B remains under internal review. Approval would mark a major break from Real's long-standing member-owned structure.
- **San Diego Padres ownership review:** The **Seidler family** is [exploring](#) a sale that could top \$2.75B, with **BDT & MSD Partners** advising.



About **dakota**

Dakota is a financial, software, data and media company based in Philadelphia, PA. Dakota's flagship product, Dakota Marketplace, is a database of LPs, GPs, Private Companies and Public Companies used by thousands of fundraising, deal, and investment teams worldwide to raise capital, source deals, track peers, and access comprehensive data—all in one global platform. For more information, [book a demo of Dakota Marketplace!](#)

