

PROJECT 99

Fan reactions to the
season of baseball
that almost wasn't

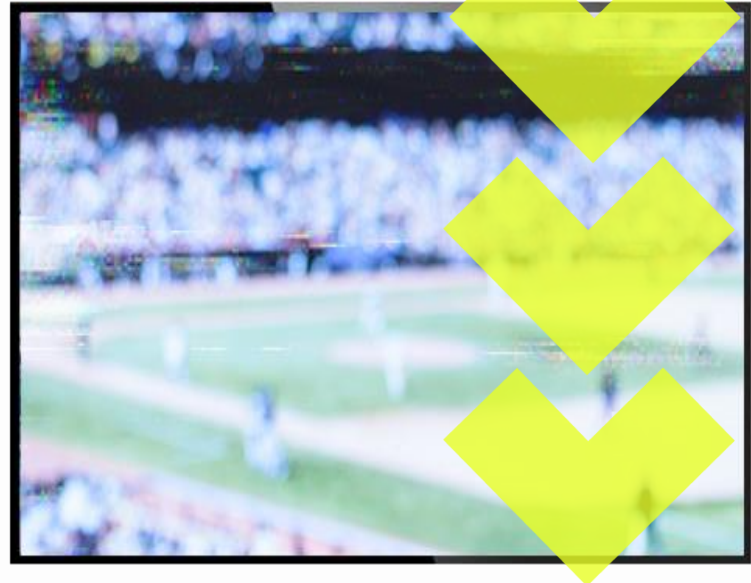
SCOUT
360

the
why
group

May 2022



Fans agree the game they love needs to change – just not in the way you may think



99 days after it began, the Major League Baseball lockout ended on March 10, 2022.

With a full regular season ahead, what lasting impact did this ‘almost lost’ season have on baseball fans? Are they relieved, excited? Did the sport lose its casual fans? And more troubling, *do they even care?*

Conversations stemming from the lockout led us to discover areas of opportunities for baseball and their partnering brands. To gain insight into the status of Major League Baseball, Scout Sports & Entertainment in partnership with Horizon Media’s WHY Group conducted a social media sentiment analysis measuring attitudes toward the league from pre-and post-lockout.

This analysis highlights the reactions and intentions of highly passionate fans engaging on Twitter and Reddit between December 2021–April 2022. While these online natives are not wholly representative of the average MLB fan, they represent the voice of a modern audience and may be indicative of where fan mindsets are heading.

Prior to the 2022 season, professional baseball was already plagued by low viewership and attendance. In a time where “online is everything,” the league now has a big challenge in front of them.

We uncovered **5 fan truths** with implications for baseball & brands:

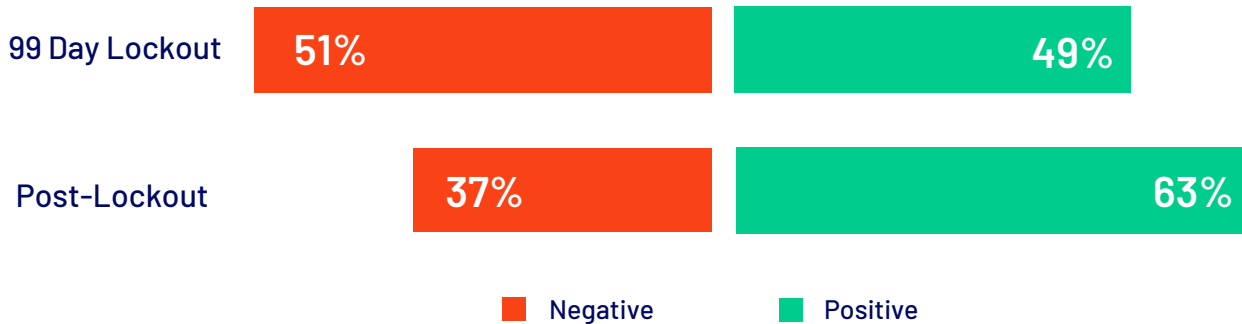
1. **Fan Attention is a Moving Target**
2. **MLB Still Has Fences to Mend With Fans**
3. **New (MLB) Rules = New Energy for Baseball**
4. **Reimagine the View From Fan Seats**
5. **Time to Turn up the Volume**



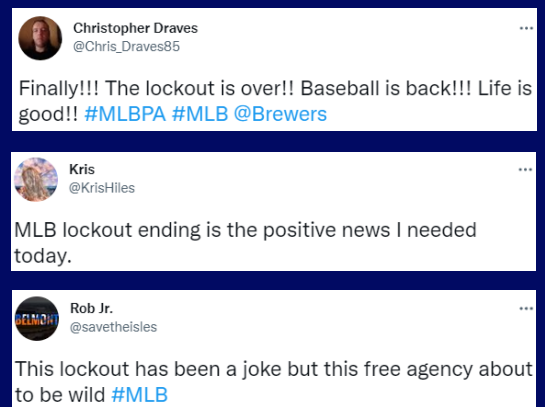
1.

Fan Attention is a Moving Target

Social Sentiment in MLB Conversations



When the MLB and Players Association reached their March 10 agreement, social conversations saw a spike in positivity. Fans quickly turned their attention toward free agency, with the term “Free Agency” becoming a driver of positive sentiment. Many fans were excited to see an influx of the offseason news they crave – player movement. It was the first step towards reigniting fan engagement with a new season of storylines, player matchups, and records to be broken.



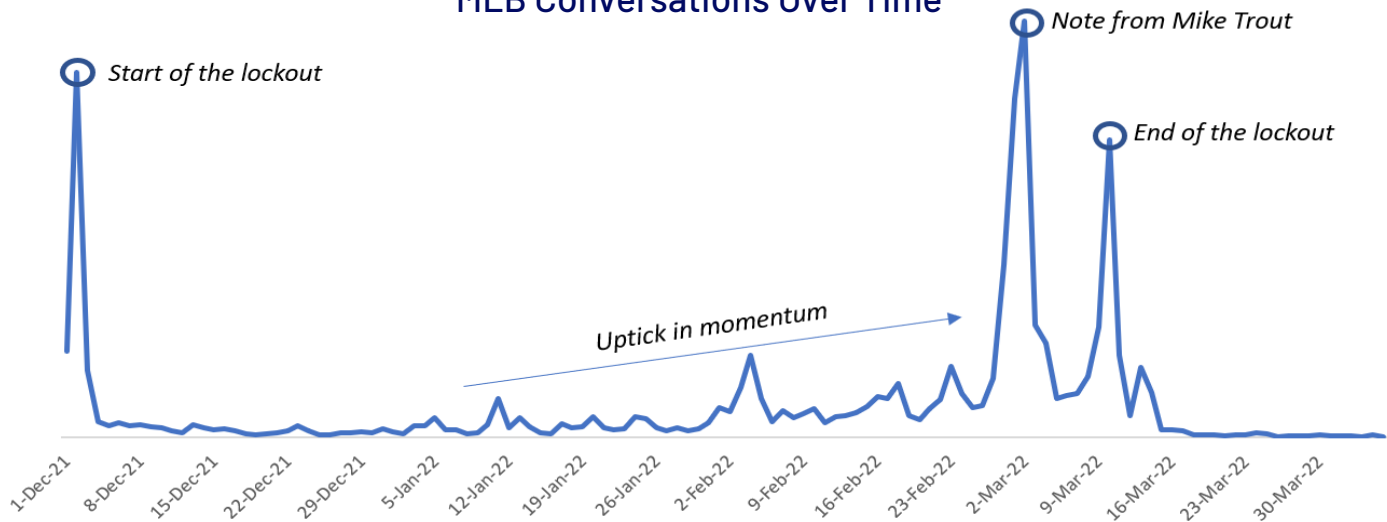
Industry Impact:

Brands need to be additive and participate in baseball storylines to fully embed themselves within the game’s culture. Baseball is inherently community-driven, and brands must adopt a hyper-local approach by tapping into unique fanbase traditions across different ballparks. Messaging needs to amplify community and fan love at a local level, not rely on branded CTAs in isolation.

2.

MLB Still Has Fences to Mend With Fans

MLB Conversations Over Time



For most, the lockdown is water under the bridge – a difficult situation professional sports leagues, most notably MLB, are susceptible to. The business side of baseball has always been a contentious topic among fans and heading into the 2022 season, 37% of remaining lockdown conversations are negative in sentiment.

The previous offseason left lingering cynical feelings towards the league, and conversation around the lack of marketing efforts for star players had some fans feeling discouraged.

Industry Impact:

Baseball may still be America's pastime, but MLB is challenged with reigniting fans' passion to increase *brand* love. The league needs to consider placing a greater emphasis on the unique players and personalities who make MLB special.

Spotlighting individuals can generate more meaningful relationships between casual fans and the league. Additionally, brands can support this initiative by co-producing content with MLB to showcase players and their personalities, creating positive halo effects for all stakeholders involved.

Ben W.
@mntwins020733

so during this whole lockdown.. do we think the MLB has figured out how to promote and let their top stars promote themselves and let their players have a personality

Theo Oldfield
@Three3Yooo

Replying to @MFW29 and @JFull78

Agree to an extent. It's the perfect storm. MLB doesn't do -- to market players, the team rebrand flopped and the lockdown isn't going to help. Fans can only do so much. Why spend all your money one year to go to a lot of games when the next year you know they won't spend?

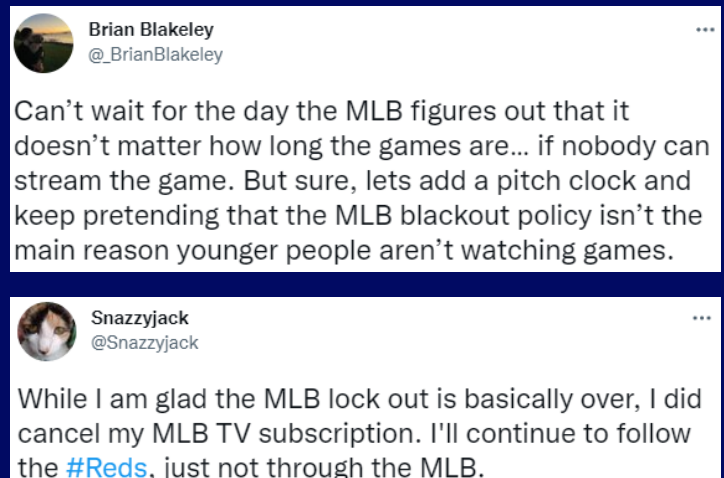
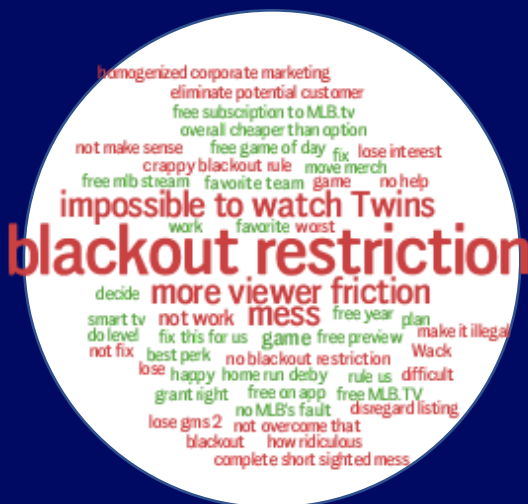
The Great Bribino
@BGSports365

Hey Michael...I love BASEBALL, not the MLB. Without the MLB I'd still love baseball. MLB is ruining its relationships with me. Coaching, watching my family members, watching other levels of school baseball is how I get my main fix @RealMichaelKay @TMKSESPN @TMKsonYES

4. Reimagine the View From Fan Seats

It's great that baseball is back, but with it comes lasting viewership issues, and blackouts continue to cause problems in connecting new fans to the sport. Over the last 365 days, there were 34K mentions of the MLB blackout policy on social media, with approximately 1k mentions of "blackout" on the day the MLB announced its partnership with Apple. In baseball's current state, blackout games are negatively affecting viewership, and MLB's stringent policies are bringing fan sentiment down even further.

eMarketer projects that digital live sports viewership in the US will reach 90M viewers by 2025. Both the NFL and NBA sought innovation when enhancing viewership among fans – a move the MLB is behind on. Ultimately, brands have a clear opportunity to supplement viewership. According to Nielsen, 50% of sports fans are more likely to engage with brands that enhance their experience of live sports watching.



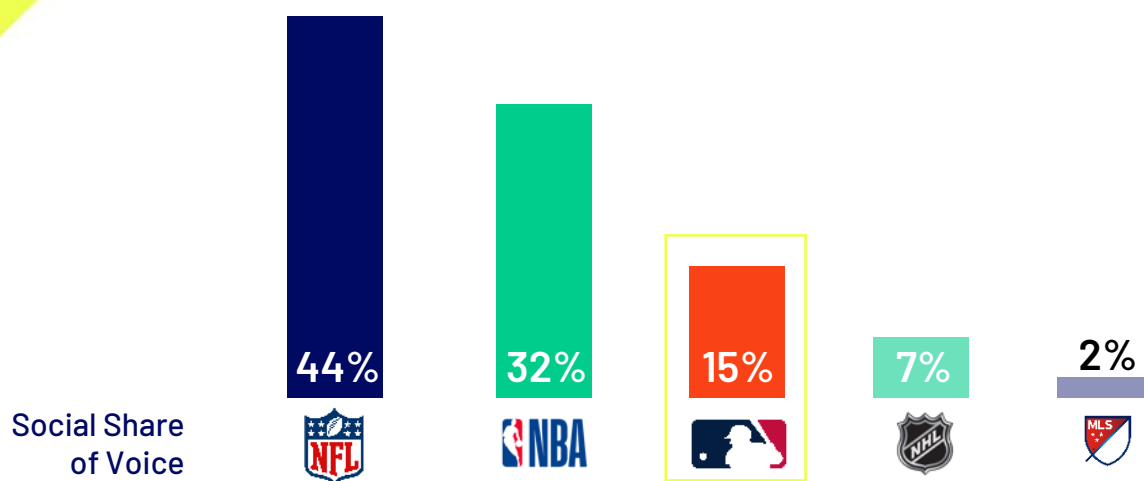
Industry Implication:

It is important for MLB and the brands involved to understand the impact of blackouts. However, viewership does not have to be linear – create unique experiences to build attention.

Partnering with Apple TV+ to create mobile experiences that supplement viewing for fans is a great opportunity for MLB. As streaming viewership continues to mature, the complexity of fan journeys increases. If brands can find ways to supplement these journeys, winners stand to benefit from higher quality fan interactions that drive tangible business outcomes.

5.

Time to Turn up the Volume



Pound for pound, professional football and basketball have more clout online than baseball, at least through the eyes of sports netizens. Digital accessibility breeds cultural relevancy and popularity, and the NBA and NFL have both tapped into today's age of influence by enabling players to create their own personal brands. Enhancing players' personal brands is a crucial way to stay ahead of the attention economy everyone now participates in.

Post-lockout, the MLB is at a breaking point – games are longer than ever in a world moving faster than ever. Younger fans are increasingly elusive and distracted. Focusing on community engagement (both IRL and digital) can build cultural relevance. MLB needs to expand the league's digital presence if it wants to close the gap of influence with competitors. And if the sport of baseball wants to stay relevant in today's landscape, it needs to win a greater share of online conversations. Create moments that intersect pop culture and sport (such as "MLB at Field of Dreams presented by GEICO") – drawing a wider audience, capturing more attention online.

Industry Implication:

In the world of sports, where the noise gets louder and attention spans get shorter, both the league and brands are competing for deep relationships with fans. The core of baseball doesn't need changing, but the wrapping does.

Stoppage time during the game offers tons of untapped whitespace. Not only does it offer key moments for human connection, but it gives a chance to showcase the distinct microculture of each MLB team and spark conversation (both IRL and digitally).

Innovative media partners must play a role in amplifying the sport to connect fans across the spectrum. Ultimately, fans are drawn to playful and interactive brands that are authentic to today's sports culture.