

Why This Sports Festival Might Be the Most Ambitious Live Event in America

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“Compared to a digital marketing campaign, live events may reach fewer people,” says Fanatics Events CEO Lance Fensterman. “But digital is shallow. It’s a quick scroll and move on. Live events are deep and immersive. They allow you to truly interact with fans and give them experiences they’ll never forget.”

Fensterman put that philosophy into action in his first year at Fanatics, leading the launch of Fanatics Fest NYC in 2024, a three-day festival that blends sports, culture and entertainment into one in-person experience. The inaugural event drew over 70,000 attendees last summer.

This weekend, Fanatics Fest returns to the Javits Center, with Fensterman at the helm once again, bringing together more than 500 athletes, celebrities and artists – including Tom Brady, LeBron James, Travis Scott and Kevin Hart – from June 20–22.

Fanatics Fest is an ambitious undertaking, but it’s in experienced hands. Before joining Fanatics, Fensterman served as president of ReedPop, where he helped turn niche gatherings into major pop culture events like New York Comic Con,

ComplexCon and Star Wars Celebration.

“If you think about the early days of Comic Con, these were people who didn’t have a place,” Fensterman recalls. “We built this world where they were not just safe, but they were stars.”

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Focus on the fans

The sports world brings its own set of challenges, but Fensterman’s mission remains the same: bring people together around a shared passion.

“A consistent theme throughout my career has been giving fans what they want,” he says. “When you can do that, you create moments and experiences they’ll never forget.”

That fan-first mindset is especially important when navigating the diverse and often divided landscape of sports culture.

“Sports fans are tribal,” Fensterman says. “They group around specific teams or leagues.”

The self-described nerd likens it to Harry Potter houses, tight-knit communities with distinct identities. WWE fans, for example, are fiercely loyal but may be less inclined to engage with fans of other sports.

“When you look at other sports events, they’re largely organized by team or sport,” he notes, pointing to NBA All-Star Weekend and the NFL’s Super Bowl Experience. “We’ve tried to zoom out and show people there’s an entire world where sports, entertainment and culture intersect—regardless of tribe.”

Think of it like a music festival. You might show up for the headliner but end up discovering two side-stage acts you fall

in love with – or years later, brag that you saw a breakout band before they made it big. That's the kind of atmosphere Fensterman wants to create at Fanatics Fest.

"What you're hoping is, someone comes because they wanted to see the New York Greats panel, but then they rediscover their love of card collecting, or they catch a simulcast of the Club World Cup and realize European soccer is actually really cool," he says. "Those kinds of cross-pollination moments are exciting – when fans come for one thing and end up connecting with something entirely new."

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Control the chaos

The flip side of planning something this all-encompassing is knowing when to stop.

"Fanatics is the most ambitious organization I've ever been around," Fensterman says, noting he was still making tweaks to the schedule the morning of our interview. "But we have to go pencils down at some point, because we have to physically build all of this."

Once they've finalized the schedule, Fensterman and crew face the daunting challenge of escorting A-Listers through a raucous crowd of avid sports fans without incident.

"It's all about giving fans a frictionless experience to access the things they love," Fensterman says. "We don't want talent or athletes sneaking through back corridors– we want them moving through the crowds. But the challenge is, how do you do that without someone like LeBron James getting overrun?"

No matter how meticulously Fensterman and his team plan, the only way to understand the logistics of a behemoth like this

is to experience it. And after last year, they know what to expect.

“My focus is on making new mistakes,” Fentsterman says. “It’s about constant innovation—fixing what didn’t work last year, trying bold new ideas and creating a culture where people feel safe to experiment, take risks and push boundaries.”

Elevate the experience

This year’s Fanatics Fest is set to be four times bigger than last year’s event, with twice the staff – and with that growth comes a small bump in ticket prices. But Fensterman says the added cost is well worth it.

“We raised prices slightly this year because we felt there was room to do so,” he explains. “Even during economic downturns, it’s still a great value. Compared to the cost of a movie per hour, 10 to 12 hours of immersive entertainment is an affordable way for a family to spend the day doing something special.”

One of this year’s biggest additions is Fanatics Games, where a lucky group of fans will get the once-in-a-lifetime chance to compete against 50 of the biggest names in sports and entertainment in a series of skill challenges, with prizes up to \$1 million in cash. The star-studded lineup includes LeBron James, Tom Brady, Kevin Durant, DJ Khaled, John Cena, Joe Burrow, Kai Cenat and many more.

Fanatics Fest 2025 is unlike anything the sports world has seen. From its star-studded lineup, to its mission of uniting fans across all sports, to its unique offerings like Fanatics Games, Fensterman and his team are ushering in a new era of sports events.

The only question now is how they’ll top it next year.

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