

Why it matters South Carolina-UConn women's championship game was most-watched in 18 years

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The NCAA women's national championship game between South Carolina and UConn was the most-watched title game in nearly two decades, ESPN announced Tuesday. It reached 4.85 million viewers, peaking at 5.91 million. South Carolina shot out to an unreachable lead and [defeated the 11-time champion Huskies, 64-49](#), at a sold-out Target Center in Minneapolis. It's the most-watched final since 5.58 million watched UConn and Tennessee, then the great powerhouses, in the 2004 title game the Huskies won, 70-61.

It's an 18% increase from 2021 and up 31% from 2019. The 2020 tournament was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year's semifinals (South Carolina/Louisville and UConn/Stanford) were also up from last year and rose [nearly 50% from 2019](#).

For a same-channel perspective, the 31 non-New Year's Six college football games averaged 2.57 million viewers, per Sports Media Watch (H/T [Rachel Bachman of the Wall Street Journal](#)).

The gains in viewership are not surprising. They continue to prove the assessment that women's basketball should sell its media rights individually and [could use it to hand out "units,"](#) or payments to conferences and teams that make it to the tournament. That was a big talking point for coaches over the past month since without earning money for good finishes, colleges have no financial incentive to invest in the women's program vs. the men's.

In short, there's money being left on the table in women's basketball.

South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley cuts the net after winning the title in Minneapolis. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

Championship viewership furthers media rights point

After the [inequity controversy surrounding the 2021 women's and men's basketball tournaments](#), the NCAA hired law firm Kaplan Hecker & Fink LLP to investigate disparities. [There were many.](#)

[As part of that report, Ed Desser of Desser Sports Media](#) conducted a media and sponsorship addendum and projected the women's tournament to be worth between \$81 million to \$112 million per year beginning in 2025 when the current deal ends.

That current deal is basically nothing money-wise for ESPN. The [broadcaster paid \\$500 million in 2011](#) for a 14-year deal to air the women's college basketball tournament, the

constantly [growing Women's College World Series](#) and 22 other NCAA championships. It breaks down to \$35 million a year, and \$1.49 million per sport.

Few broadcast companies would want to bid on that because they wouldn't have enough space to air all of the championships like ESPN does with four-plus linear channels and a paid streaming service.

Desser also recommended more games on national channel ABC, adding a Megacast for the title game and moving the championship to prime time between 8 and 9 p.m. ET. A few early tournament games aired on ABC, but the Final Four slate was left on ESPN on Friday and Sunday night.

ESPN added a Megacast hosted by Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi that was met with wide acclaim. Fans at weekend events in Minneapolis were even enamored by it and their rapport created viral social media moments for ESPN. The game was also put in prime time this year, but with a technicality. It was pushed [back from a 6 p.m. ET tip because the MLB season](#) was delayed by a couple of weeks due to the lockout. "Sunday Night Baseball" was scheduled to air at 8 p.m. ET.

Viewership numbers help sponsorship asks

The sponsorship program set up between the NCAA and CBS/Turner also hurts women's basketball and other well-viewed NCAA properties.

[All of the marketing partnerships](#) are sold together with men's tournament rights to CBS/Turner, which creates an inflated value and stream of money toward the men's tournament. For 2021-21, "barely one-tenth of one percent" of NCAA official sponsorship revenue went toward NCAA championships other than the men's tournament.

Sponsors want to be aligned with women's basketball, and viewership numbers that continue to climb only further their reasoning for it. On-site, sponsors hosted events at the Minneapolis Convention Center where kids could play different skills-and-drills type activities and take home branded gear like hair scrunchies and arm sleeves. WNBA and Team USA stars, who were across the road at the Mayo Clinic for training camp, made appearances there and at the Party on the Plaza outside the arena.

There were opportunities for 360-degree videos with four-time WNBA champion and icon Sheryl Swoopes as well as photo-ops hanging on rims and celebrating as if they won the championship. All of these were branded, and fans could and did post on social media. But smaller brands that might align well with the game and participants can't afford to get in if it's being brokered by the men's tournament and channel.

Better media deals — and more respect from the media rights holder — as well as individualized sponsorship partnerships would only boost the women's game more and keep pushing those viewership numbers higher. As it is, they're growing on their own and as that continues it will create more worth for everyone involved.