

Which college football team has the most fans? Why (we think) Michigan edges Ohio State



By **Matt Baker** and **Austin Meek**
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Editor's note: This is the first in a semi-regular series attempting to answer unanswerable questions and solve mysteries in college sports. Have a rabbit hole you want us to go down? Leave your unanswerable college sports questions and mysteries in the comments.

What's the most popular college football team in the country?

No single metric can measure something as complex as college football fandom, so *The Athletic* analyzed nine distinct, quantifiable categories, from TV viewership and attendance figures to StubHub ticket sales to Google searches. There were a few individual surprises, like BetMGM’s most bet-on team (thanks, Lincoln Riley?) and a specific social media spike around Deion Sanders and Colorado.

We didn’t compile numbers for every Power 4 team in every category. We didn’t need to. We were able to quickly eliminate outliers and focus on a top tier of 12 teams appearing across multiple categories. The data then collectively and quickly pointed to a clear top five.














Here’s how we got there and why Michigan beat out rival Ohio State to rank No. 1:

TV viewership

We can’t measure how many viewers are hate-watching Notre Dame or tuning in to pull for an Alabama loss. But it’s reasonable to conclude that teams with large fan bases draw larger TV audiences than teams with smaller fan bases. Archived data from [Sports Media Watch](#) over the past four seasons can help us rank TV viewership in two ways.

First, which teams had the most games that [hit the milestone number of 4 million viewers](#)?

Games with 4 million+ viewers, 2021-24

TEAM	GAMES
 Alabama	37
 Georgia	36
 Ohio State	34
 Michigan	31
 Texas	19
 Penn State	19
 Tennessee	19
 Notre Dame	15
 Oregon	14
 Florida State	13
 Colorado	13
 Florida	13
 Texas A&M	13

To eliminate the numbers being skewed by extra postseason games, we also tracked how many times each team played in a game that ranked among the 20 most watched of a regular season over the past four years:

Top-20 regular season viewing, 2021-24

TEAM	GAMES
 Alabama	22

 Ohio State	15
 Georgia	14
 Michigan	10
 Penn State	9
 Texas	8
 Tennessee	7
 LSU	6
 Notre Dame	5
 Florida	5
 Florida State	5
 Auburn	5
 Oregon	5
 Oklahoma	5
 Texas A&M	5

Alabama and Ohio State were the only programs that played in at least three of the top 20 regular-season games in each of the past four seasons.

Google searches











Internet searches fluctuate, and what’s trending depends on elements unrelated to a team’s popularity, like news events. The most-searched time frame for Alabama’s football team was January 2024 — the month Nick Saban retired.

Regardless, more fans should lead to more searches. We used [Google Trends](#) to gauge each team’s search history in the U.S. since 2004 relative to other power programs. Here are the top 10:

- Alabama
- Ohio State
- Georgia
- Michigan
- Notre Dame
- LSU
- Florida
- Texas
- Auburn
- Clemson

Social media

We added the number of followers for teams’ official accounts on Facebook, Instagram and X. The Crimson Tide have the most followers on X and Instagram and are tied with Michigan for No. 1 on Facebook.

TEAM	TOTAL	X	FACEBOOK	INSTAGRAM
 Alabama	4.2 million	1.3 million	1.5 million	1.4 million
 LSU	3.4 million	1 million	1.3 million	1.1 million
 Michigan	3.3 million	1 million	1.5 million	794,000
 Ohio State	3.0 million	803,200	917,000	1.3 million
 Georgia	2.9 million	1.2 million	581,000	1.1 million
 Tennessee	2.4 million	902,900	752,000	740,000
 Texas	2.3 million	487,600	742,000	1.1 million
 Clemson	2.3 million	1 million	456,000	795,000
 Notre Dame	2.0 million	699,400	763,000	579,000
 Oklahoma	2.0 million	785,200	654,000	591,000



We looked at TikTok and YouTube but excluded them because schools treat them differently. While Ohio State has a football-specific account on both platforms, Alabama uses one for the entire athletic department. Including TikTok also would not have meaningfully changed the final rankings. The Buckeyes have more followers than Michigan but not enough to move them into third.

Tennessee has the largest TikTok following (867,000) among football programs we checked. Colorado was an outlier. Deion Sanders' Buffaloes have the same number of Instagram followers as Georgia (1.1 million) but one-fourth as many followers on X.









Home attendance

The [Big House at Michigan](#) is the largest stadium in the country, so it's no surprise the Wolverines always lead the nation in average home attendance. To account for varying capacities, we also looked at what percentage of their stadium was full, then averaged both sets of figures over the past four seasons. The top three teams were the same either way:

Attendance rankings, 2021-24

TEAM	COMBINED RANK	AVG ATT RANK	% CAP
 Michigan	1	1	2.25
 Penn State	2	2	4.75



 Ohio State	3	3.5	7.25
 Texas	4	6	7.5
 Nebraska	4	11.25	2.25
 Alabama	6	6.5	8.75
 Georgia	7	8.5	7.5
 Oklahoma	8	13.25	3.25
 Texas A&M	9	5.75	11.5
 Tennessee	10	6	11.5

Alabama didn't sell out every game in 2021 or 2022, but Oklahoma ranked in the top two in attendance relative to capacity in each of the past three years. Notre Dame was the lowest among the 16 schools we looked at. Even considering its relatively small capacity (77,622) in this group, this metric hampered the Irish.

StubHub ticket sales



StubHub pulled the number of tickets sold and the number of unique buyers for each team since 2022. Michigan won in a landslide. The Wolverines were responsible for 30 percent more ticket purchases than No. 2 Alabama.

The top seven teams were the same in both categories:

1. Michigan
2. Alabama
3. Texas
4. Georgia
5. Auburn
6. Ohio State
7. Penn State

Texas A&M and LSU were next — the Aggies had more total sales, but the Tigers had more unique buyers. Notre Dame was No. 10 in both.

Merchandise sales

There's no easy way to add up the millions of jerseys, hats, hoodies, T-shirts and [blonchos](#) (it's a combination blanket/poncho) sold each year, but we gave it a shot.

We started by reaching out to Fanatics, which operates the official online team stores for many top programs. Its list of best-selling schools doesn't tell the whole story, for several reasons. A few schools, including Michigan and Ohio State, partner with a different company for their official team stores, and teams with large followings in other sports will naturally rank higher. Still, the schools that showed up in the Fanatics rankings were the same ones that showed up in most of our other metrics.

Fanatics best-selling schools (2024 regular season and CFP):

1. Notre Dame
2. Ohio State
3. Georgia
4. Texas
5. Tennessee
6. Alabama
7. Michigan
8. Oregon
9. Penn State
10. Florida

We also reached out to [Homefield Apparel](#), the internet start-up known for its retro designs and passionate online following. Homefield founder Connor Hitchcock is an Indiana graduate and the company is based in Indianapolis, which explains why Indiana is Homefield's top-selling school. Factoring rankings from both companies (and giving a bump to schools on both lists), we came up with this aggregate list:

Fanatics/Homefield aggregate rankings:

1. Notre Dame
2. Michigan
3. Tennessee
4. Texas
5. Penn State
6. Florida
7. Ohio State
8. Georgia
9. Alabama
10. Oregon

Football revenue (2022-23)

This is perhaps our shakiest metric for two reasons: Small, deep-pocketed booster groups can have outsized impacts, and separate schools don't always track money the same way. But generally, we'd expect popular programs to make more money in ticket sales, donations and everything else than less popular ones. Conference affiliation also skews budgets, but the large fan bases in the SEC and Big Ten are one reason why those leagues (and their members) are financial heavyweights.

We used the most recent figures [submitted to the U.S. Department of Education](#) because it publishes data for every public and private school and breaks numbers down by sport.

Football revenue (2022-23)

TEAM	REVENUE
Texas	\$180.6 million
Georgia	\$152.7 million
Michigan	\$142.8 million

 Notre Dame	\$141.1 million
 Tennessee	\$137.1 million
 Oklahoma	\$134.7 million
 Ohio State	\$127.4 million
 Alabama	\$125.8 million
 Auburn	\$125.6 million
 Nebraska	\$120.8 million











Texas, Georgia and Michigan were 1-2-3 in the two seasons before the pandemic, too, which gives us some confidence in their order. Other spots ebb and flow, but Ohio State ranked ahead of Alabama all three years.

Online wagering











Online sportsbooks provide another way to track which college football programs have the largest followings. According to BetMGM, the teams that garnered the most action in 2024 included many of the usual suspects: Georgia, Alabama, Texas, Ohio State and Penn State.

However, the most bet-on team during the 2024 regular season was USC. Though not a massive upset, USC’s place atop the list was notable for a few reasons. California is one of 12 states where online sports betting remains illegal, meaning USC’s total wasn’t propped up by hometown fans. While the Trojans play in a major media market and have one of the sport’s biggest national brands, they didn’t crack the top 10 in any of the other metrics we evaluated.

Top 10 most bets, % of total bets

TEAM	% TOTAL BETS
 USC	3.2
 Georgia	2.5
 Alabama	2.3
 Tennessee	2.3
 Texas	2.3
 LSU	2.2
 Ohio State	2.2
 Oregon	2.1
 Penn State	2.1
 Miami	2.0

Top 10 most bets, % of money wagered

 Georgia	3.7
 Ohio State	3.6
 USC	3.3
 Alabama	2.9
 Texas	2.8
 LSU	2.6
 Tennessee	2.4
 Oregon	2.4
 Penn State	2.0
 Colorado	2.0

John Ewing, public relations manager for BetMGM, theorized that USC’s move to the Big Ten contributed to bettors’ interest. The Trojans played conference games against Michigan, Wisconsin and Penn State and bookended the regular season with games against LSU and Notre Dame. While the Trojans finished a disappointing 6-6, they were 7-5 against the spread, providing a modest return-on-investment for fans who wagered on them.











“In general you’d expect them to be highly bet given that they’re a brand name, especially this year coming to the Big Ten and having all those matchups that we don’t traditionally get,” Ewing said. “They also had more favorable times for some of their games. The Pac-12 would sometimes get overlooked by bettors just because they would come on later.”

Living alumni

Attending a school doesn’t automatically make someone a diehard college football fan. Similarly, programs like Michigan, Notre Dame and BYU have large international fan bases that aren’t limited to alumni of those schools. However, it stands to reason that attending a school makes it more likely someone will become a fan, meaning the schools with the most living alumni deserve a bump.

Based on available data for programs we searched — which is admittedly inexact — the Power 4 school that claims the most living alumni is Indiana, which boasts 790,033 graduates worldwide. Penn State isn’t far behind at 775,000. The Nittany Lions have a higher percentage of those graduates in the stands on football Saturdays, but Indiana closed the gap a bit thanks to a surprising 2024 season that included a trip to the College Football Playoff.

“All boats rise when football does well,” said Patricia Riveire Stumpf, CEO of the IU Alumni Association.

SCHOOL	ALUMNI
 Indiana	790,033
 Penn State	775,000
 Michigan	668,000
 UCLA	662,000
 Texas A&M	604,530
 Ohio State	600,000
 Illinois	600,000
 Arizona State	600,000
 Rutgers	600,000
 Purdue	600,000

Among the programs that did well in other metrics, Penn State, Michigan, Texas A&M and Ohio State benefited most from large alumni bases. Notre Dame’s enrollment as a private school is relatively small compared with massive public universities. Alabama was another notable omission with an alumni base [closer to 200,000](#).









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So who’s the most popular college football team?

Teams had to place in multiple categories to be included so as to eliminate outliers, which left us to focus on 12 schools that separated themselves from the pack.

With those teams selected and data assembled, we assigned point values for each category: 10 points for first place, 9 for second and so on. In categories with multiple sets of related rankings, we averaged the two. Here’s how each category was scored:

Scoring by category













TEAM	TV	STUBHUB	GOOGLE	SOCIAL	AVERAGE
 Michigan	7	10	7	8	8
 Ohio State	8.5	5	9	7	8
 Alabama	10	9	10	10	9
 Georgia	8.5	7	8	6	7
 Texas	5	8	3	4	6
 Penn State	6	4	0	0	5
 Tennessee	4	0	0	5	5
 Notre Dame	2.5	1	6	2	6

 LSU	1.5	2.5	5	9	0
 Texas A&M	1.5	2.5	0	0	2
 Florida	1.5	0	4	0	0
 Oklahoma	1	0	0	1	3

Texas A&M (12 points) edged Florida (10.5) and Oklahoma (10) for 10th, but there wasn’t enough separation to feel confident ranking that tier.

The top nine, however, are fairly clear using our unscientific methodology:

Most popular CFB teams

RANK	TEAM	POINTS
1	 Michigan	67
2	 Ohio State	57
3	 Alabama	56.5
4	 Georgia	55
5	 Texas	49.5
6	 Penn State	36
7	 Tennessee	29.5
8	 Notre Dame	28.5
9	 LSU	23
	 Texas A&M	12
	 Florida	10.5
	 Oklahoma	10

Not surprisingly, the Big Ten and SEC dominated the list; Notre Dame was the lone outsider.

The Wolverines weren’t merely a decisive No. 1 in points. They ranked in the top four in every category except sports betting. Even with our imperfect categories and metrics, the across-the-board performance gives us enough confidence to call Michigan the most popular college football team in the country.

Knowing college football fans, that won’t settle the debate — nor should it. So let the arguments begin.

— The Athletic’s Scott Dochterman contributed to this report.

(Photo: Ezra Shaw / Getty Images)

National

- Boxing
- Bundesliga
- Champions League
- Championship
- College Football
- College Sports
- Copa America
- Copa del Rey
- Culture
- Europa League
- European Championship
- FA Cup
- Fantasy Baseball
- Fantasy Basketball
- Fantasy Football
- Fantasy Hockey
- Fantasy Premier League
- FIFA Club World Cup
- Formula 1
- Gaming
- Global Sports
- Golf
- International Football
- La Liga
- League Cup
- League One
- League Two
- LNH
- Memorabilia & Collectibles
- Men's College Basketball
- Men's World Cup
- Mixed Martial Arts
- MLB
- MLS
- Motorsports
- NASCAR
- NBA
- NFL
- NHL
- NWSL
- Olympics
- Opinion
- Peak
- Premier League
- Scottish Premiership
- Serie A
- Soccer
- Sports Betting
- Sports Business
- Tennis
- Top Sports News
- UK Women's Football
- WNBA
- Women's College Basketball
- Women's Euros
- Women's Hockey
- Women's World Cup
- The Athletic Ink
- Podcasts
- Headlines

US

- Arizona
- Atlanta
- Baltimore
- Bay Area
- Boston
- Buffalo
- Carolina
- Chicago
- Cincinnati
- Cleveland
- Columbus
- Dallas
- Denver
- Detroit
- Houston
- Indiana
- Jacksonville
- Kansas City
- Las Vegas
- Los Angeles
- Memphis
- Miami
- Minnesota
- Nashville
- New Orleans
- New York
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- Orlando
- Philadelphia
- Pittsburgh
- Sacramento
- San Antonio
- San Diego
- Seattle
- St. Louis
- Tampa Bay
- Utah
- Washington DC
- Wisconsin

Canada

- Calgary
- Edmonton
- Montreal
- Montréal (français)
- Ottawa
- Toronto
- Vancouver
- Winnipeg

Partners

- Collectibles by eBay
- Odds by BetMGM
- Streaming by Fubo
- Tickets by StubHub

Subscribe

- Start Subscription
- Buy a Gift
- Student Discount
- Group Subscriptions

HQ

- About Us
- Careers
- Code of Conduct
- Editorial Guidelines
- Business Inquiries
- Press Inquiries

Support

- FAQ
- Forgot Password?
- Contact Us
- Terms of Service

Newsletters

- The Pulse
- The Bounce
- The Windup
- Prime Tire
- Full Time
- Until Saturday
- Scoop City
- The Athletic FC
- MoneyCall
- Red Light