THE NINES

Athletes as owners

Three models already in operation, and three structures for the Nines

Thinking document for Dave, Jason and Joe
Tom Vernon, 9 September 2026. Working paper; nothing here is decided.

1. Where this is going

What is clear to me is that this is the future. Athletes are becoming far more aware of the value they bring to the table, and they will want that value represented in better ways than a salary and a boot deal. The PGA Tour has just granted its players more than a billion dollars of equity in its own commercial company. A start-up women's basketball league made its players the largest shareholder group within two seasons. Men's tennis now splits the profit of its biggest events with the players by formula. None of that existed four years ago. The direction of travel is one way, and the athletes who come through the Nines will grow up in a world where owning a piece of what you help build is normal.

Football has not moved. No club or league anywhere gives its playing squad ownership as a system, partly because the regulation makes the football side hard and partly because nobody has needed to. That is the opportunity. Being on the cutting edge of this in football is potentially a real advantage in attracting and retaining athletes, and in building a brand that is seen, by players, families and agents, as player-first in substance rather than in slogan. A 13-year-old's family choosing between academies will not be choosing on facilities alone for much longer. If we get this right, the ownership model becomes part of what the Nines is known for, and part of why the best strikers and their families choose it and stay.

This document is meant to open that conversation, not close it. I have set out what is already working elsewhere and three ways it could be built at the Nines. I have kept my own conclusions out of it deliberately, because I would rather hear what each of you takes from the material first.

2. Why this document

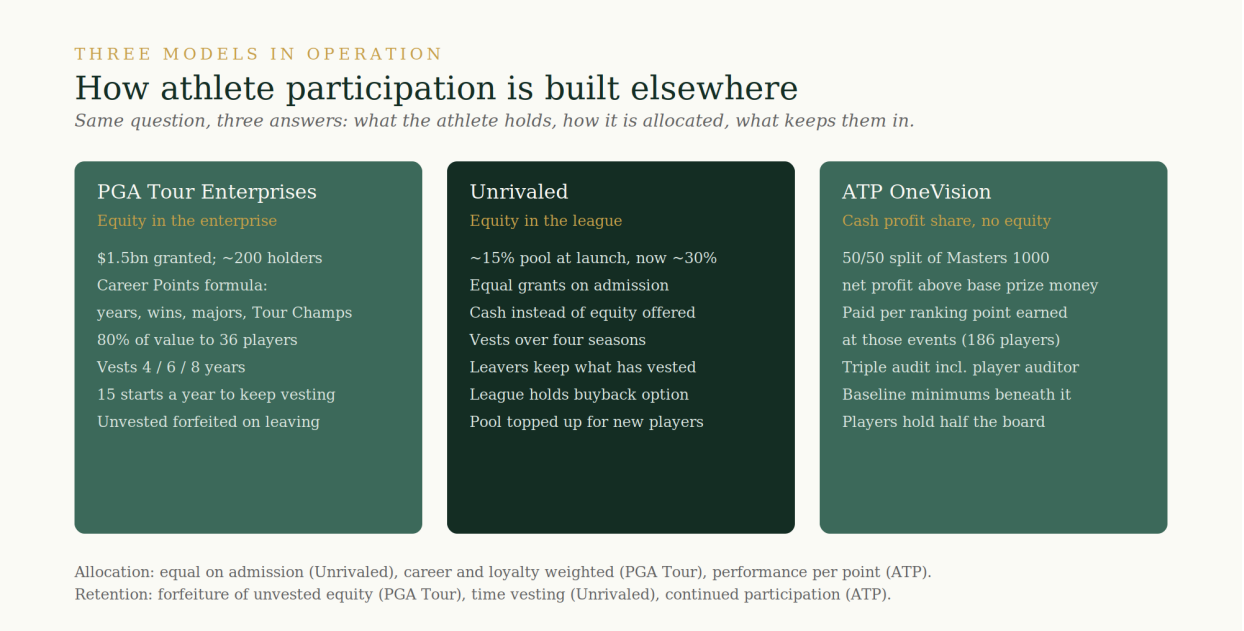
The Nines will develop strikers, build their media businesses alongside them, and in the ordinary course sell them to professional clubs. I want every athlete admitted to the system to own a piece of what the system builds, whether or not he turns out to be the one who is sold for a large fee. The counsel brief already sets out the media side of that (each athlete in a joint venture over his own media rights, and a collective pool in the media company). This paper opens up the football side, where the value is transfer fees, and asks how a pool over player trading could sit alongside the media pool, or replace the need for two pools altogether.

I have deliberately written it as a set of thought experiments rather than a recommendation. Section 3 describes three models that are already operating at scale in golf, women's basketball and men's tennis, because they show three quite different answers to the same questions: what does the athlete hold, how is it allocated, what keeps them in, and how is it paid out. Section 4 draws out those design variables. Section 5 sets out three structures for the Nines and what each would mean. The long-form case studies are in the appendix.

One constraint runs through everything on the football side and is worth stating once. FIFA prohibits any party other than a club from holding an interest in a player's transfer value. So wherever a pool over transfer fees sits, it has to sit where a registration-holding club sits, with every transfer-contingent payment made club to club. The Nines will hold registrations either through a club it owns in each market or through a partner club that holds the licences; the

Nines development and media companies will never hold them. That is the frame for Options 2 and 3.

3. Three models already in operation



PGA Tour Enterprises Player Equity Program

In January 2024 the PGA Tour created PGA Tour Enterprises, a for-profit commercial company, took a $1.5bn investment from Strategic Sports Group (a consortium of American team owners led by Fenway Sports Group) at a valuation of about $12.3bn, and granted more than $1.5bn of equity in the new company to players. The stated purpose was to make members owners of their league. The real purpose was retention: LIV Golf had been buying players with guaranteed money, and the Tour needed a reason to stay that compounded rather than a cheque. Nearly 200 players now hold equity, with more than $1bn of granted value to date and a further $100m a year committed through 2030.

The allocation is the interesting part. Four-fifths of the initial value went to 36 players, allocated by a Career Points formula that counts years of membership (a year only counts at 15 or more starts), Tour Championship appearances and wins, with bonus points for majors and an emphasis on the last five years; Tiger Woods scored 528 points to Rory McIlroy's 199. Three smaller groups covered recent performers, long-serving contributors and living past players. Grants vest 50% at four years, 75% at six and 100% at eight, conditional on 15 starts a year, and are forfeited entirely on leaving for LIV. Players pay income tax on each vested tranche at its paper value with no market to sell into. In January 2026, after players below the top said the design did not reach them, the recurring grants were widened to the top 50 in the FedExCup on performance alone.

Unrivaled

Unrivaled is the 3-on-3 women's basketball league founded in 2023 by Napheesa Collier and Breanna Stewart, two of the WNBA's best players, to give WNBA players a domestic

off-season alternative to playing abroad. It launched in January 2025 with six clubs and 36 players at a single site in Miami, on six-figure salaries at a time when the WNBA minimum was under $70,000, and with a pool of equity in the league set aside for players from day one. Revenue was about $27m in year one and an estimated $45m in year two; a Series C in August 2026 raised over $100m at a $650m valuation, led by a fund backed by the University of California's endowment.

The player pool was reported at about 15% of the league at launch, granted equally to every player on the roster, vesting over four seasons like ordinary start-up equity. Players could take higher cash instead, and a few did. A player who leaves keeps what has vested and the league holds an option to buy it back. By the Series C, players collectively held just over 30%, worth close to $200m and the largest shareholder group, which implies the pool was topped up as new players and clubs were added rather than allowed to dilute. The recruitment pitch is explicit: the players are the group that owns the upside of the league. Nobody has yet been paid out, and the value is a financing mark rather than cash.

ATP OneVision

OneVision is the ATP's strategic plan, adopted in 2022, and its central financial device is a 50-50 profit share between the nine Masters 1000 tournaments and the players. It is not equity. Each tournament has a guaranteed base prize money; any net profit above that base, aggregated across the nine events for the year, is split equally between the tournaments and a player pool. The pool is distributed by performance at those nine events: the season's pool is divided by the total ranking points earned across them, qualifying included, to give a value per point, and each player receives that value times his points. In 2022 that was about $300 a point to 150 players; for 2024 and again for 2025 it was $18.3m to 186 players, roughly a quarter on top of base prize money.

Two things make it work. The ATP is a partnership in which players and tournaments hold half the board each, so the profit share is the economics of a governance split that already existed. And the numbers are audited three times per event, including by an auditor appointed by the players' own board members, which is why distributions arrive the summer after the season. Beneath the profit share sit fixed bonus pools for the top 30, a Baseline programme guaranteeing minimum earnings to the top 250 (from $300,000 for the top 100 down to $100,000 for 176 to 250, conditional on playing 15 events), injury protection and a pension. Players hold no enterprise value and get nothing from the growth in tournament valuations, which is the standing criticism.

4. What the three models tell us

Read together, the three answer the same five questions differently, and those five questions are the ones the Nines has to answer.

What the athlete holds. Equity in the enterprise (PGA Tour, Unrivaled) or a share of cash profit defined by formula (ATP). Equity gives the athlete the growth in enterprise value; profit share gives him money he can spend and a number he can audit.

How it is allocated. Equally on admission (Unrivaled); by a career formula weighted to stars and to years of loyalty (PGA Tour); by current performance at the events that generate the profit (ATP). The PGA Tour's own correction in 2026, moving the recurring grants from a star-weighted formula to broader performance-based grants after the players below the top said the design did not reach them, is the clearest evidence that a star-weighted pool erodes the constituency it is meant to bind.

What keeps them in. The PGA Tour uses forfeiture of unvested equity, a retention bond dressed as ownership. Unrivaled uses time vesting with leavers keeping what has vested. The ATP uses nothing beyond continued participation, because players already co-own the governance. For a cohort of 13-year-olds, forfeiture is exactly the restraint the counsel brief says we will not impose; time vesting is the instrument the brief already contains.

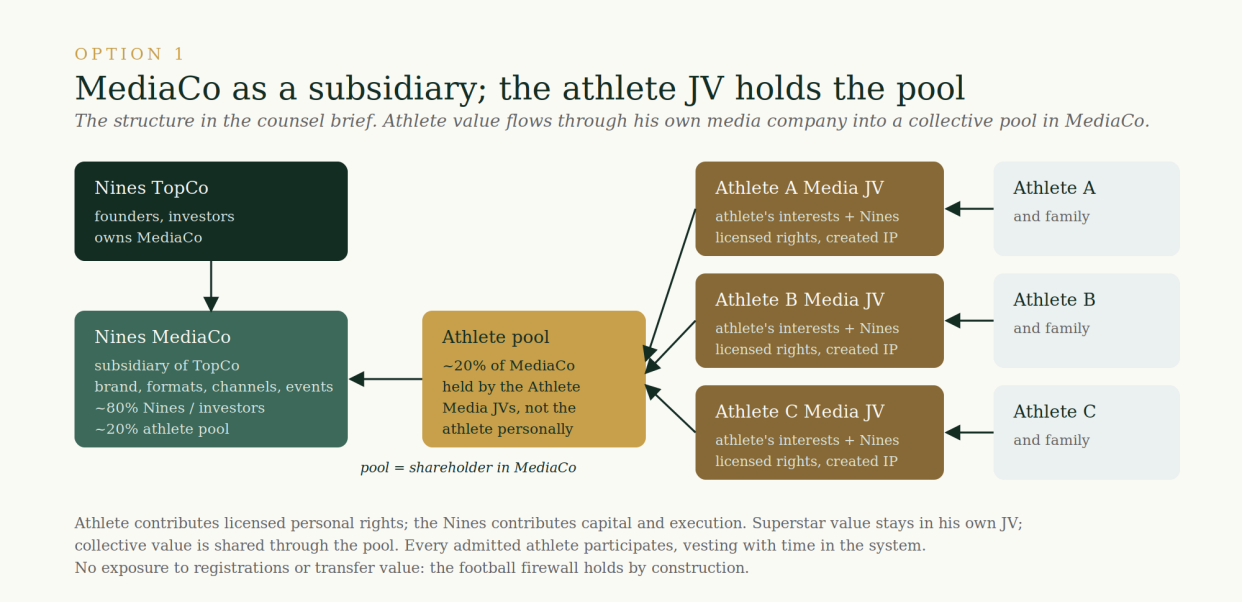
How new entrants are treated. Unrivaled topped up its pool as the roster grew. The PGA Tour committed $100m a year of new grants. A pool described as fixed and dilutable leaves the ninth cohort owning very little, which breaks the promise the whole thing rests on.

How it is paid out and taxed. The PGA Tour taxes players on paper value at each vest with no market. Unrivaled has a buyback option and no exit yet. The ATP pays cash a year in arrears once audited. The Nines should decide early which kind of number it wants to be reporting to families: a financing mark, or an audited distribution.

5. Three structures for the Nines

The three options below are not exclusive and I am not wedded to any of them. They differ in where the pool sits, what the athlete's shareholding actually reaches, and how much of the football regulatory analysis attaches to the pool. In all three, the per-athlete media JV from the counsel brief stays as it is; what changes is the collective layer.

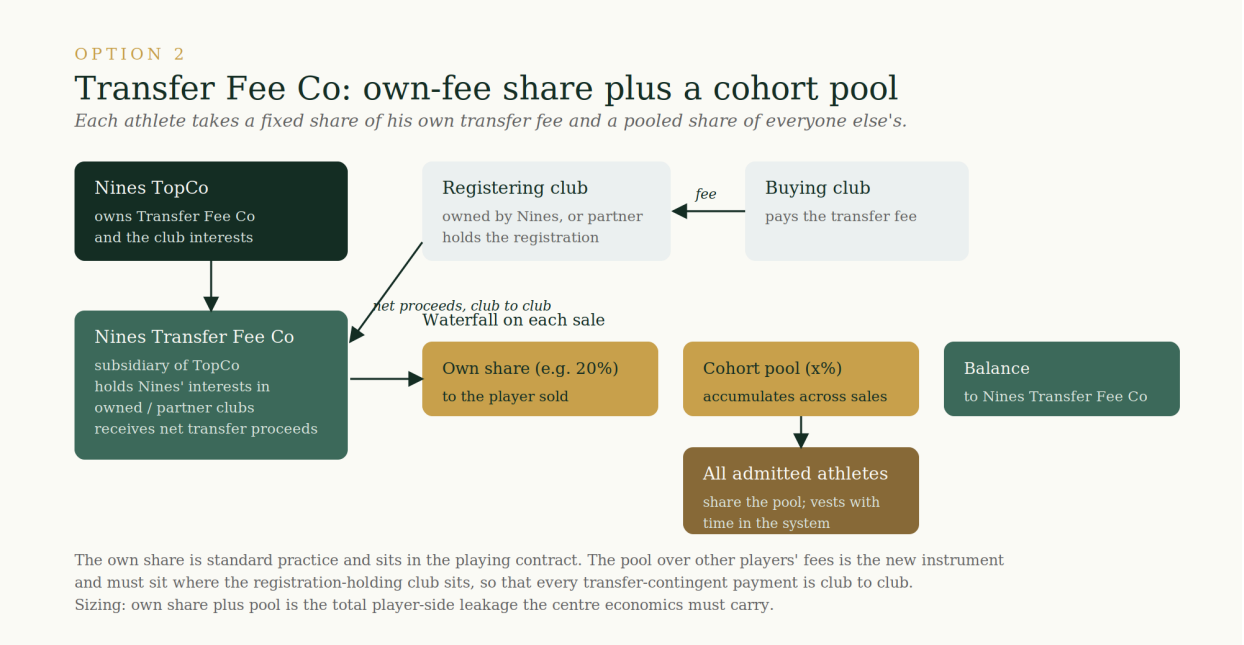
Option 1. MediaCo as a subsidiary of the Nines; the athlete JV holds the pool



This is the structure already in the counsel brief, restated. Nines TopCo owns MediaCo. Each admitted athlete and his family enter a joint venture with the Nines over his media rights; the athlete licenses his personal rights for defined purposes and the JV owns the content, formats, channels and commercial contracts it creates. Around 20% of MediaCo is reserved for an athlete pool, and each Athlete Media JV, rather than the athlete personally, holds its allocation in that pool. Superstar value stays in the individual JV; collective value is shared through the pool. Every admitted athlete participates, vesting with time in the system, and a leaver keeps what has vested.

What it does well: it is the cleanest structure in regulatory terms, because nothing in it touches a registration or a transfer fee, so the firewall between football value and media value holds by construction. It is also the one with the most direct precedent, since it is Unrivaled's model with an individual JV layer added. What it does not do is give the athlete any share of the trading engine, which for most of the cohort will be the larger and earlier source of value. On its own it answers the media question and leaves the football question unasked.

Option 2. Nines Transfer Fee Co: a direct share of your own fee, plus a cohort pool

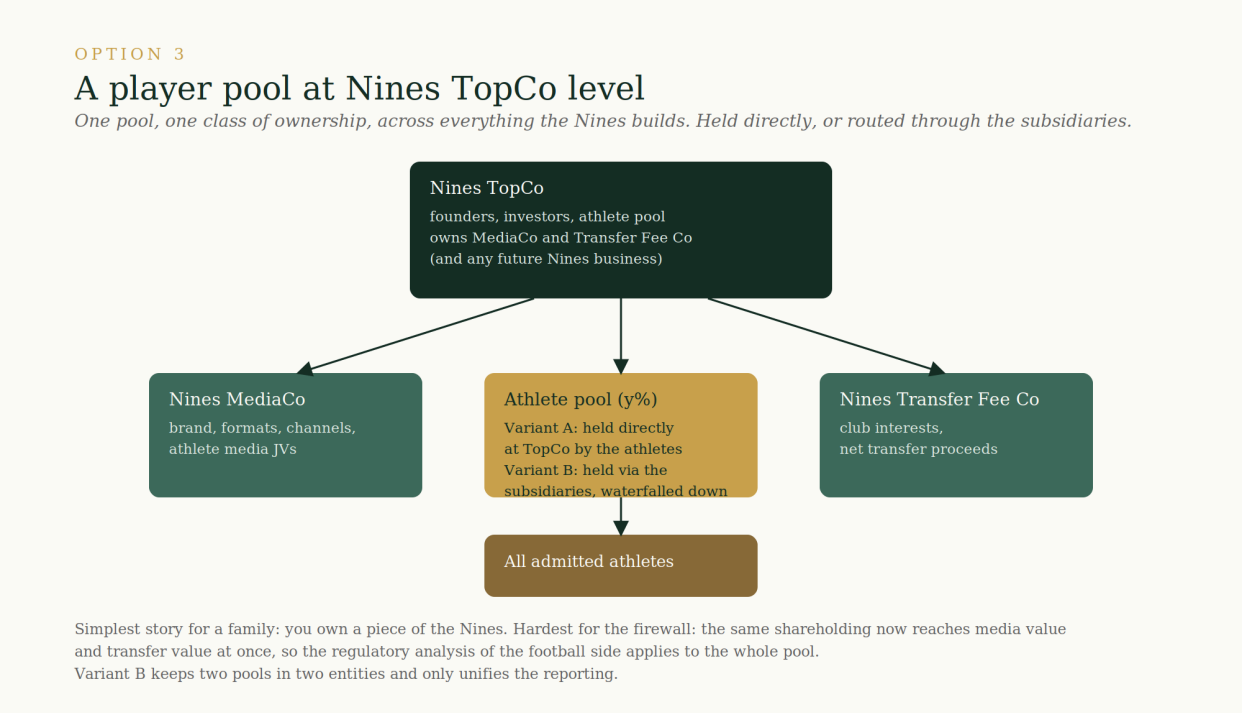


Here the Nines creates a second subsidiary, Nines Transfer Fee Co, which holds the Nines' interests in the clubs that register its players (owned clubs, or stakes and sell-on arrangements with partner clubs) and receives net transfer proceeds club to club. On each sale the proceeds waterfall three ways. The player sold takes a direct share of his own fee, say 20%. A further slice goes into a cohort pool that accumulates across all sales. The balance goes to Transfer Fee Co. Every admitted athlete holds a share of the cohort pool, vesting with time in the system, so a boy who does not become a professional still participates in the fees generated by those who do.

What it does well: it puts ownership where the money actually is, and it makes the collective promise concrete in the currency the families understand. The direct own-share is standard practice and can simply sit in the playing contract. The cohort pool is the new instrument. It

works as a structure only if Transfer Fee Co's income arrives as club-to-club payments, which means the Nines either owns the registering club in each market or holds equity in the partner club; a payment to a non-club entity contingent on a future transfer is precisely what the third-party ownership rules prohibit. This is also where the ATP model earns its place: defining the pool as a share of net proceeds above a cost-recovery base per centre, distributed by a published formula and audited by an appointee of the families, is far easier to explain and defend than discretionary equity in a club-owning company. Two questions attach to it and are in the brief for counsel: whether offering the pool to a 13-year-old's family is treated as an inducement to register, and whether distributions from a pool funded by transfer fees are taxed as employment income.

Option 3. A player pool at Nines TopCo



The third option puts a single athlete pool at Nines TopCo, above both MediaCo and Transfer Fee Co and any future Nines business. There are two variants. In variant A the athletes hold their pool directly at TopCo, one class of ownership across everything the Nines builds. In variant B the pool is held through the subsidiaries, with MediaCo and Transfer Fee Co each carrying their own athlete pool and the value waterfalled down to the same athletes, so that the family sees one holding but the entities remain separate.

What it does well: it is the simplest story to tell a family, which is not a small thing when the family is being asked to trust a structure for a decade. You own a piece of the Nines, full stop. It also means the athlete participates in whatever the Nines becomes, including businesses we have not thought of yet, and it is closest to the PGA Tour's model of ownership in the enterprise. The cost is that a single shareholding now reaches media value and transfer value at once, so the whole football regulatory analysis attaches to the whole pool, and the firewall in the counsel brief becomes a matter of internal accounting rather than structure. Variant B avoids that by keeping two pools in two entities and unifying only the reporting.

Comparing the three

	Option 1: MediaCo pool	Option 2: Transfer Fee Co	Option 3: TopCo pool
What the athlete holds	Share of MediaCo via his own JV	Own-fee share plus share of a cohort proceeds pool	Share of the whole Nines (directly or waterfalled)
Where the value comes from	Media, brand, content, events	Transfer fees, club to club	Everything
Regulatory exposure	None on the football side	Full: TPO, inducement, players' club interests	Full, and attaching to the whole pool in variant A
Tax character	Return on a media business	Risk of employment-income treatment	Mixed; depends on variant
Nearest precedent	Unrivaled with a JV layer	ATP formula, applied to transfer proceeds	PGA Tour Enterprises
Simplicity for a family	Medium: two documents	Medium: a contract clause plus a pool	High in variant A; medium in B
Who gives up value	MediaCo shareholders	Centre economics (own share plus pool)	All shareholders of TopCo

Appendix. Long-form case studies

Facts are from public reporting to September 2026. Valuation figures for the PGA Tour and Unrivaled are financing-round marks, not arm's-length transaction prices.

A. PGA Tour Enterprises Player Equity Program

WHAT IT IS

In January 2024 the PGA Tour created PGA Tour Enterprises, a for-profit commercial company under the Tour's control, and took a $1.5bn investment from Strategic Sports Group, a consortium of American team owners led by Fenway Sports Group, with up to $3bn committed in total. The investment valued the new company at about $12.3bn. Alongside it the Tour launched the Player Equity Program, which granted more than $1.5bn of equity in the company to players. Commissioner Jay Monahan's line was that by making members owners of their league the Tour strengthened the collective investment of players in its success. The unstated purpose was defensive: LIV Golf had been buying players with guaranteed money, and the Tour needed a reason to stay that compounded rather than a cheque that did not.

HOW THE INITIAL GRANTS WERE ALLOCATED

The initial grants, about $930m in value to 193 players, were split into four groups, and the split tells you what the Tour was paying for. Group one, 36 players, $750m, roughly 80% of the initial value, allocated by a Career Points formula that counts years as a Tour member (a year counts only if the player made 15 or more starts), Tour Championship appearances and official wins, with bonus points for majors, the Players Championship, World Golf Championships and FedExCup titles, and with an emphasis on the last five years. Reported point totals give the scale: Tiger Woods 528, Rory McIlroy 199, Jordan Spieth and Justin Thomas around 100. Woods' grant was reported at around $100m. Group two, 64 players, $75m, described as steady performers and up-and-comers, allocated purely by FedExCup points over the previous three years. Group three, 57 players, $30m, described as consistent contributors, allocated by career wins, career money and seasons inside the top 125, so longevity rather than peak. Group four, 36 living past players, $75m, by the Career Points formula; grants cannot be made posthumously, and players competing on LIV were excluded regardless of record, so Phil Mickelson, who would otherwise have ranked second, received nothing.

The formula is therefore weighted three ways at once: towards recent elite results, towards longevity and loyalty, and towards the very top of the distribution. Group one's median grant was in the tens of millions; group three's was well under $1m.

HOW VESTING WORKS

Initial grants vest 50% after four years, a further 25% after six and the final 25% after eight. Vesting is conditional on continued service: fully exempt players must make 15 or more starts a year (Korn Ferry Tour and Champions Tour events count, DP World Tour events case by case), or, where injury or circumstances prevent that, complete service events such as sponsor meetings or documentary filming. A player who leaves for LIV or other unauthorised events forfeits all unvested equity. The equity is both a reward for the past and a retention bond for the future, and the two are deliberately fused. At each vesting milestone the player owes US

federal and state income tax at ordinary rates on the fair market value of what has vested, whether or not there is any liquidity; players can sell only vested equity, and no market or buyback mechanism has been published.

RECURRING GRANTS AND THE 2026 CORRECTION

From 2025 the Tour committed $100m a year in new grants through 2030. The first round went to roughly 20 players on a mix of three-year career points, the prior season's points and the Player Impact Program, a measure of fan engagement and media reach. Recurring grants cliff-vest 100% after six years. In January 2026, after player feedback at the Rocket Classic meeting and the November 2025 board, CEO Brian Rolapp expanded the recurring grants to the top 50 in the FedExCup standings through the BMW Championship, based entirely on performance and dropping the Player Impact Program element, with the first expanded grants to be issued in April 2027. By then nearly 200 members held more than $1bn of granted equity. The original design rewarded the players who had already been paid most, and the players below them, who were the ones LIV could still recruit, said so; the Tour moved the recurring grants from a backward-looking, star-weighted formula to a forward-looking, performance-only one within two seasons.

ASSESSMENT

The programme achieved its primary aim: no top player has left for LIV since it launched, and the eight-year vest with forfeiture makes the cost of leaving explicit. It is a very expensive way to buy loyalty, it concentrates ownership at the top, and it exposes players to tax on paper gains. It has not yet been tested by a downturn: everything is marked to one 2024 investment, and the first vesting milestone falls in 2028.

B. Unrivaled

WHAT IT IS

Unrivaled is a 3-on-3 women's professional basketball league founded on 6 July 2023 by Napheesa Collier and Breanna Stewart. It plays a short January-to-March season, the WNBA off-season, at a single site in Miami. The founding problem was that WNBA salaries were low enough that most players spent the off-season abroad, and the WNBA's prioritisation rule then began penalising them for it. Collier's framing at launch was that women's sport was rising and everyone was benefiting except the women in the sport. The first season tipped off on 17 January 2025 with six clubs and 36 players; the second ran with eight clubs and 54 players; season three starts January 2027 on TNT Sports with travelling fixtures.

THE CAPITAL STORY

The league raised roughly $35m in seed and Series A money to launch, with the Berman family (CardWorks) as lead investor and a Series A of $28m in December 2024 that brought in Giannis Antetokounmpo, Michael Phelps, Coco Gauff and others. A Series B led by Bessemer Venture Partners in September 2025 set the valuation at $340m. A Series C in August 2026, led by Ten Pillars Sports Fund (backed by UC Investments), raised over $100m at a $650m valuation and was larger than every prior round combined. Underneath: season one revenue of about $27m, reported as close to break-even; 2026 revenue estimated around $45m; a six-year Warner Bros. Discovery media deal at roughly $100m in total; sponsorship at around 40% of revenue in year one; a 21,490 crowd in Philadelphia in January 2026; ticket

sales up 249% year on year. Television ratings were reported as softer in season two. The league runs on about 20 full-time staff.

THE PLAYER EQUITY POOL

The inaugural pool was reported at approximately 15% of the league, offered to all 36 season-one players, with public reporting indicating equal grants. The equity vests over four seasons, which president Alex Bazzell described as just like a normal start-up. Players could take a higher cash salary instead of equity, and a small number did; more than 95% of the current roster holds equity. A player who leaves before full vesting keeps the portion already vested (Sabrina Ionescu is the cited example), and the league retains options to buy that equity back or let it ride. By the Series C the players' collective holding was reported at just over 30%, worth close to $200m and up 550% since launch, making players the largest single shareholder group. Public reporting does not say whether the 30% includes the founders' own stakes as player-founders, or how the pool grew from 15% to 30%; the likeliest explanation is top-up grants to new players. Salaries sat alongside: an $8m pool in year one, an average of $222,222 and a six-figure minimum; 2026 salaries ran from about $100,000 to $350,000. The WNBA's new collective agreement (March 2026) moved its minimum to $270,000 and its maximum to $1.4m, so the cash advantage that recruited the first cohort is eroding and the equity is increasingly the thing only Unrivaled offers.

ASSESSMENT

Four things stand out. The equity was a recruiting instrument that let a start-up beat an incumbent for talent without outbidding it indefinitely on cash. The structure removed the misalignment between capital and talent that has historically broken emerging women's leagues. The founders are players, which gave the league credibility that a non-playing founder could not have bought. And the equity was ordinary start-up equity on the same instrument as the investors. What it has not yet proved: no player has been paid out, the $200m is a mark, the first cohort's vest completes after the 2028 season, and the whole model depends on a single-site, short-season cost base that changes with travel in 2027.

C. ATP OneVision

WHAT IT IS

OneVision is the ATP's strategic plan, adopted in 2022 under chairman Andrea Gaudenzi, and its central financial device is a 50-50 profit share between the nine ATP Masters 1000 tournaments and the players. It is not equity; players own nothing and receive cash. But the ATP is itself a partnership in which players and tournaments each hold half the board, so the profit share is the economic expression of a governance structure that already gave players half the votes.

HOW THE FORMULA WORKS

Each Masters 1000 event has a base prize money figure, guaranteed and paid in the normal way. Any net profit before income tax that the event earns above its base prize money, aggregated across the nine events for the year, is split 50-50: half to the tournaments, half to a player pool. The player pool is distributed by performance at those nine events, not by ranking generally and not equally. The season's pool is divided by the total ranking points earned across the Masters 1000 events (qualifying rounds included) to give a value per point,

and each player receives that value multiplied by the points he earned at those events. In 2022, the first year, the pool was $12.2m against 40,758 points, about $300 a point, paid to 150 players and equivalent to a 22.8% uplift on base prize money. For the 2024 season the pool was $18.3m, distributed to 186 players and equivalent to roughly 25% on top of base, within total ATP compensation of $261m; the 2025 figure was again $18.3m across 186 players.

Because it is a share of audited profit, the money arrives late: each event goes through three audits (the tournament's own independent auditor, the ATP Prize Money Committee's auditor, PwC, and a player-appointed auditor, KPMG, chosen by the player representatives on the board), so distributions for a season are finalised the following summer. The triple audit is the price of getting players to accept a formula based on the tournaments' books. ATP 500 events adopted the same audit requirements in 2023 in anticipation of extending the model.

WHAT SITS AROUND IT

The profit share is one of four layers. Fixed bonus pools pay the top 30 in the rankings for the Masters 1000 and Finals ($21.5m in 2026) and the top six for the ATP 500s ($3.07m). The Baseline programme, a three-year trial from 2024, guarantees minimum earnings to the top 250 (for 2025: $300,000 for the top 100, $200,000 for 101 to 175, $100,000 for 176 to 250), tops up players who fall short provided they play at least 15 events, protects income during injury and pays a newcomer investment to players entering the top 125 for the first time; it paid $1.3m to 26 players in 2024 and over $2m in 2025. The player retirement plan doubled its qualifying pool to 300 players in 2024. The ATP pairs an upside share concentrated on those who win at the biggest events with a floor for those who do not.

ASSESSMENT

OneVision solves a different problem from the PGA Tour's. It does not try to retain stars against a rival; it aligns two constituencies that co-own the organisation and had spent decades fighting over prize money. Its strengths are that it is cash, audited, formulaic and therefore uncontestable once the audits clear, and it scales automatically with the business. Its weaknesses are that it rewards only performance at nine events, that the pool is small relative to total compensation (about 7% of the 2024 figure), and that players hold no enterprise value and get nothing from the growth in tournament valuations. The critics' point, that tournaments capture the asset appreciation while players get a slice of operating profit, is fair.

SOURCES

PGA Tour (January 2024 launch, April 2024 programme note, January 2026 expansion); NBC Sports, Golf Channel, Golf.com, ESPN and CBS Sports on programme mechanics; Front Office Sports, Sportico, SportsPro, Fortune, CBS Sports and the Unrivaled Series B and Series C releases; ATP Tour (50-50 profit-sharing formula Q&A 2023, 2024 profit-sharing distribution, Baseline programme, 2025 season review) and the OneVision site. All accessed 9 September 2026.