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Sports Law Trends and Developments (USA — Illinois)

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Introduction

The past year saw a transformative acceleration of the integration between the real estate and sports industries across the United States. Gone are the days when stadiums and arenas simply served as home venues for teams. Many teams in professional sports and numerous universities are pursuing cutting-edge stadiums, arenas and practice facilities to elevate the fan experience, achieve a competitive edge and unlock revenue-generating events beyond home games, among other motivations.

A team's home venue has evolved into the centrepiece of neighbourhood revitalisation. Teams seek to strategically control areas around their stadiums and arenas to generate revenue not only during the game, but also before and after the action on the field. Cities are capitalising on this momentum to engage in long-term multiphase developments of underperforming urban areas.

Illinois has been a hotbed of activity, illustrating these trends and developments associated with the real estate and sports industries.

- The Chicago Bears of the National Football League (NFL) have been pursuing a new domed stadium as one component of a mixed-use entertainment district.
- Chicago Fire FC of Major League Soccer (MLS) is developing a new soccer-specific home venue in the to-be-developed 78th neighbourhood of Chicago, The 78.
- The Chicago White Sox of Major League Baseball (MLB) are evaluating options for the future of their home venue, as its lease at Rate Field expires in 2029.
- The owners of the Chicago Bulls of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the Chicago Blackhawks of the National Hockey League (NHL) are preparing to break ground on the first phase of The 1901 Project, a multi-year sports-anchored mixed-use development surrounding the United Center.

- The Chicago Cubs of MLB continue to benefit from their previous development of Gallagher Way, a mixed-use development adjacent to the Cubs' historic Wrigley Field.
- The Chicago Sky of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) will be opening their practice facility in 2026.
- In 2027, Chicago Stars FC of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) expects to open a newly constructed, ten-acre, purpose-built performance centre in Bannockburn, Illinois. In 2026, Chicago Stars FC will also have a new home venue along Lake Michigan at Northwestern Medicine Field at Martin Stadium, a stadium in Evanston, Illinois that served as the temporary home venue of the Northwestern University football team.
- In 2026, Northwestern University is scheduled to open the new Ryan Field, its newly constructed football stadium in Evanston, Illinois.

This article highlights these trends and developments in the areas of new stadium and arena construction, sports and entertainment districts, women-specific sports venues and sports-related developments by universities.

New NFL Venues

The Chicago Bears currently play at Soldier Field, with its lease expiring in 2033. Soldier Field is an open-air stadium along Lake Michigan in the City of Chicago and has the smallest capacity among all NFL stadiums.

The Bears are pursuing a new, modern, domed stadium to upgrade their home venue through enhanced fan experiences, including better amenities, protection from extreme weather and amplified crowd noise. The dome also enables the stadium to host and generate revenue from year-round marquee global events such as the Super Bowl, Final Four, global soccer games and concerts.

The Bears are currently evaluating locations for the new stadium. One option is a former racetrack they already own, Arlington Park in the Village of Arlington Heights, Illinois. Another option is a golf course in Hammond, Indiana, a city located near the border of Chicago.

The following list includes new NFL stadiums across the United States in various stages of development, with most including a roof.

- The Cleveland Browns began excavation for the construction of the new 67,500-seat Huntington Bank Field in Brook Park, Ohio, which borders the City of Cleveland. The facility will have a unique sloped roof for snow removal and natural light, with a target opening for the 2029 NFL season.

- The Washington Commanders are pursuing development of a new 65,000-seat roofed stadium at the former RFK Stadium site in Washington, DC, with construction anticipated for completion in 2030.
- The Tennessee Titans plan to complete construction of the new 60,000-seat Nissan Stadium for the 2027 NFL season. The downtown Nashville facility will have an enclosed, translucent roof and seats that are 38% closer to the field than the team's current home venue.
- The Kansas City Chiefs are in the design stages of a new domed stadium to be constructed in Wyandotte County, Kansas. The plan is for games to be played at the new facility starting with the 2031 NFL season.
- The Buffalo Bills will be hosting their inaugural season at the new Highmark Stadium during the 2026 NFL season. The 60,000-seat stadium is open-air but has a canopy that will prevent snowfall on most seats.

New MLS Venues

Chicago Fire FC currently plays at Soldier Field under a lease that is scheduled to expire in 2028. The current home of Chicago Fire FC was not designed for soccer matches.

In March 2026, Chicago Fire FC broke ground at The 78 on the construction of a privately funded stadium, a new soccer-specific venue designed to create an environment geared towards improving the fan experience. Front-row seats and suites will be closer to the pitch than in matches currently played at Soldier Field. The 22,000-fan-capacity facility will include a 2,000-person standing supporters section, which will be the steepest in MLS when constructed. These sections oftentimes serve as the "heartbeat" of the crowd at soccer matches.

Additional soccer-specific MLS stadiums in the United States under construction include the following.

- The 2025 MLS Cup champion Inter Miami CF will host its first match in April 2026 at Nu Stadium, a newly constructed 26,700-capacity venue in Miami, Florida, that includes a 360-degree, open-air concourse with panoramic views of downtown Miami.
- New York City Football Club (NYCFC) is constructing Etihad Park, a 25,000-seat stadium in the Queens neighbourhood of New York City. NYCFC currently plays home matches at MLB baseball parks, including Yankee Stadium and Citi Field.

New MLB Venues

The Chicago White Sox currently play at Rate Field in the Armour Square neighbourhood of Chicago. The team's ownership is exploring options for the location of their home venue, whether that is continuing at Rate Field beyond the 2029 expiration date of their current lease or constructing a new

ballpark. The park first opened in April 1991, although it has undergone multiple phases of renovations.

New MLB ballparks typically reduce traditional seating in favour of social zones, feature local food options, incorporate technology, improve sightlines of the game and enhance player amenities to attract talent.

Below is a list of other MLB ballparks that are currently in various stages of development.

- The Athletics team is in the process of relocating from Oakland, California, to Las Vegas, Nevada, constructing a new ballpark in the heart of the Las Vegas Strip on the historic site of the former Tropicana Hotel. The 33,000-person capacity ballpark is scheduled to open for the 2028 MLB season. The Athletics are temporarily playing in a Triple-A ballpark in Sacramento, California, until the opening of the new venue.
- The Tampa Bay Rays have located a site for their new planned ballpark to fit 31,000 fans, desiring to open a new facility at the new site in Tampa, Florida, for Opening Day of the 2029 MLB season.
- Kauffman Stadium, which is the home ballpark of the Kansas City Royals, is located in Kansas City, Missouri, next to Arrowhead Stadium, the current home stadium of the Kansas City Chiefs. The Royals' lease expires after the 2030 MLB season, and the team is evaluating potential new locations in Missouri and in neighbouring Kansas.

New NBA Venues

Whether through significant renovations to existing home arenas or the construction of new home arenas, teams in the NBA desire modern arenas that aim to maximise crowd noise, promote fan engagement, incorporate "smart" technologies such as enormous video boards and frictionless food and beverage service, and include player-focused locker rooms, training areas and other facilities.

NBA teams that are currently pursuing new arenas include the following.

- In 2026, the Oklahoma City Thunder will be breaking ground on a new arena scheduled to open in 2028. The downtown Oklahoma City arena will have a 360-degree glass curtain wall offering panoramic views from all interior concourses.
- The Philadelphia 76ers are developing a new arena in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, targeting completion in 2030. The 76ers will share the arena with the NHL's Philadelphia Flyers and a WNBA expansion team that will debut in 2030.

- The San Antonio Spurs are developing a new arena in downtown San Antonio, Texas, within Project Marvel, a proposed sports and entertainment district of more than 25 acres seeking to revitalise the downtown area.

Sports-Anchored Mixed-Use Developments

Each team's pursuit of its new home venue, discussed earlier in this article, involves integration into a larger mixed-use development. Sports venues are now serving as the catalyst for the creation of whole neighbourhoods.

Chicago Fire FC's new stadium will serve to anchor development of The 78, the 62 acres of currently undeveloped riverfront land in downtown Chicago pegged to become the city's 78th neighbourhood. The private investments by Chicago Fire FC and the developer of The 78 will contribute to the acceleration of infrastructure investments needed to attract new developments, including additional housing.

Stadiums provide economically resilient energy and vitality to the surrounding mixed-use development, and such a development provides year-round activation beyond game day. This symbiotic relationship is evidenced by the success of Gallagher Way, comprising a boutique hotel and 14 restaurants and retail establishments, adjacent to the Cubs' Wrigley Field.

The 1901 Project is another transformative development on Chicago's West Side. Owners of the Bulls and the Blackhawks are spearheading the $7 billion private investment into over 55 acres around the United Center. The land to be developed largely consists of surface parking lots.

The long-term multiphase project is planned to include over 1,000 transit-oriented affordable housing units, five acres of park and open space and a 6,000-person capacity venue for entertainment.

Additional examples of current sports-anchored mixed-use developments in underutilised areas include the following:

- Inter Miami CF's Nu Stadium serves as an anchor in the 131-acre Miami Freedom Park development, which will include a 5,000-person performance venue along with 200,000 square feet of additional entertainment outlets, over ten restaurants and bars, and a 58-acre public park;
- NYCFC's Etihad Park serves as a component of the 3.3-million-square-foot Willets Point Project, which will include 2,500 units of 100% affordable housing, a 650-seat public school, 115,000 square feet of open space and 250 hotel keys; and
- State Farm Arena, home of the NBA's Atlanta Hawks, and Mercedes-Benz Stadium, home of the NFL's Atlanta Falcons, serve as entertainment draws adjacent to Centennial Yards Atlanta, a $5

billion urban revitalisation project with more than 50 acres that includes a 5,300-seat venue, a 70,000-square-foot three-level immersive entertainment venue, a 292-key hotel and a 304-unit apartment tower.

Facilities Specific to Women's Teams

The rise of women's sports revenue, attendance, investment and broadcast viewership have increased the attention of the real estate industry. Significant sports-related real estate activity over the last year has also involved facilities specific to women athletes.

WNBA player-focused performance centres can be a competitive advantage for teams by impacting player development and free agent recruitment.

In Illinois, the Chicago Sky plans to open their Bedford Park practice facility in the spring of 2026. The 80,000-square-foot facility will be the largest in the WNBA.

Numerous other WNBA teams are pursuing development of their own performance centres.

- In 2027, the Indiana Fever plans to open a 108,000-square-foot facility within walking distance of Gainbridge Fieldhouse. Once opened, the Fever's facility will claim the title of the largest practice centre in the WNBA.
- The Portland Fire, which begins play in the 2026 WNBA season, is opening the Kaiser Permanente Performance Center in 2026. The multiphase facility will serve as home to the Fire and NWSL's Portland Thorns, integrating training environments, advanced sports medicine, recovery and rehabilitation stations, and collaborative medical infrastructure, with each focusing on the needs of women athletes.
- The Dallas Wings are pursuing a 70,700-square-foot practice facility in the West Oak Cliff neighbourhood of Dallas, Texas.
- The New York Liberty is developing a 75,000-square-foot practice facility in the Greenpoint neighbourhood of Brooklyn, New York.
- The Golden State Valkyries, which began play in the 2025 WNBA season, unveiled their newly renovated 31,800-square-foot practice facility in Oakland, California.
- In 2027, the Los Angeles Sparks are scheduled to open a 55,000-square-foot training and practice facility in El Segundo, California.

In addition to Chicago Stars FC's new performance centre, other NWSL teams are pursuing significant projects involving dedicated stadiums and sports and entertainment district developments.

- Kansas City Current has embarked on a multiphase $1 billion project to transform the Missouri waterfront, anchored by CPKC Stadium, which is the Current's home venue and the first stadium in the world purpose-built for a women's professional team. The $200 million first phase includes 429 multifamily homes, as well as 48,000 square feet of retail and over two acres of riverfront gathering space.
- Denver Summit FC, which begins NWSL play in 2026, is building a new 14,500-seat stadium as part of the Santa Fe Yards mixed-use entertainment district in Denver, Colorado's Baker neighbourhood.
- Boston Legacy FC, which begins NWSL play in 2026, has announced renovation of White Stadium, an existing stadium in Boston, Massachusetts.

Collegiate Real Estate

The US collegiate sports landscape is radically changing, based in part on the In re College Athlete NIL Litigation landmark settlement. The settlement allows universities to share a portion of athletic revenue with athletes, with a total cap of approximately $20.5 million per school for the 2025–26 school year, potentially rising to nearly $33 million per school in the next decade.

Universities are facing immediate strain on their budgets, and mixed-use real estate development offers one source of potential revenue to offset the additional expense. Universities can tap into their extensive land holdings to increase revenue through team-driven sports-anchored mixed-use developments, typically in partnership with real estate developers.

Northwestern University in Illinois plans to increase revenues at the new Ryan Field through the ability to charge higher ticket and premium experience pricing and hosting events beyond football.

Examples of other universities evaluating real estate as a potential revenue source include the following:

- The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is exploring plans involving potentially renovating the current Dean E. Smith Center, home of the men's basketball team, or building a new arena potentially as part of a mixed-use development;
- Oklahoma University is considering advancement of the Rock Creek Entertainment District, which would involve a new arena, restaurants, hotels and apartments on 240 acres;
- Wake Forest University is developing The Grounds, a 100-acre mixed-use development adjacent to the football stadium and arena that will include a retail village, student housing, an office building and a new community green space; and

- Iowa State University is constructing CyTown, a multi-use district bookended by the football stadium and the basketball arena, and including a health clinic, a non-student housing suite product, food, retail, offices and an amphitheatre.

Conclusion

The convergence of the sports and real estate industries represents a paradigm shift in how teams, cities and universities approach venue development. Rather than viewing stadiums and arenas as standalone facilities, stakeholders have recognised these assets as anchors for broader mixed-use developments that generate revenue before, during and after events.

This evolution benefits multiple constituencies:

- teams gain diversified revenue streams and enhanced fan engagement;
- cities secure long-term commitments for the revitalisation of underperforming areas;
- universities find new funding sources to meet rising athlete compensation demands; and
- communities receive housing, retail and public amenities integrated into vibrant neighbourhoods.

As women's sports continue their meteoric rise and collegiate athletics navigate the revenue-sharing landscape, expect this trend of sports-anchored real estate development to accelerate further, reshaping urban environments across the United States.

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