

Digital Accessibility and the ADA: What the New Website Rule Means for Sport Organizations

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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is best known for removing physical barriers to public life, but its guarantees of equal access extend into the digital realm. In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice issued the first comprehensive federal rule requiring state and local governments, including public universities, municipal recreation departments, and publicly funded sport facilities, to meet defined website and mobile application accessibility standards under Title II of the ADA. Anchored in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA, this rule transforms longstanding policy expectations into enforceable legal obligations. This article examines the legal foundations of the rule and its emerging application to sport organizations. First, it explores the operational importance of sport websites and the accessibility barriers commonly found in digital content. Next, it analyzes the statutory and regulatory requirements. Finally, it offers a practical compliance framework grounded in established best practices in digital accessibility. The goal is to equip sport managers, athletic administrators, and facility professionals with a clear and actionable guide to begin the process of meeting federal requirements, reducing legal exposure, and ensuring inclusive access for all patrons.

Keywords: ADA, WCAG, website accessibility, sport organizations, Title II, Title III

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Introduction and Background

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is best known for removing physical barriers to public life, but its guarantees of equal access extend fully into the digital realm. In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice issued the first comprehensive federal rule requiring state and local governments, including public universities, municipal recreation departments, and publicly funded sport facilities, to meet defined website and mobile application accessibility standards under Title II of the ADA. Anchored in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA, this rule transforms longstanding policy expectations into enforceable legal obligations with defined compliance deadlines. For sport organizations relying on websites and mobile apps to deliver ticketing, scheduling, registration, and safety communications, the implications are immediate and significant. Yet many sport administrators remain unfamiliar with their digital obligations or the practical know-how to meet the federal standard.

The purpose of this article is to examine the legal foundations of the 2024 ADA web accessibility rule and its application to sport organizations, and to provide an actionable compliance framework grounded in current best practices. The methodology used in this study follows an approach consistent with legal analysis in sport management scholarship: identifying and analyzing relevant federal statutes, implementing regulations, and judicial decisions that have shaped the application of the ADA to digital services, as well as the regulatory history leading to the 2024 final rule. Primary legal sources, including Title II and Title III of the ADA, The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) implementing regulations codified in the Code of Federal Regulations, and landmark federal court decisions were examined alongside the technical standards of WCAG 2.1, DOJ guidance documents, and empirical data on web accessibility litigation trends.

This article is organized in four parts. First, it examines the digital accessibility landscape in sport, including the types of barriers users with disabilities commonly encounter on sport-related websites. Second, it traces the legal foundations of the 2024 rule, from the original ADA statute through judicial expansion and the resolution of the prior regulatory gap. Third, it analyzes the key principles and technical requirements of WCAG 2.1 that public sport entities must now meet. Finally, it offers a practical, phased compliance roadmap to help sport managers, athletic administrators, and facility professionals reduce legal exposure and ensure inclusive access for all patrons.

The Digital Accessibility Landscape in Sport

Public sport facilities increasingly rely on websites and mobile apps as primary digital entry points for ticketing, event scheduling, reservations, emergency alerts,



and program registrations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024a). This digital shift improves operational efficiency and patron engagement but creates substantial barriers for people with disabilities, highlighting the pressing need for inclusive design in publicly governed venues amid evolving regulations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024c).

Approximately 1.3 billion people worldwide (roughly 16% of the population) live with significant disabilities (World Health Organization, 2023). For many, sport-related websites and apps remain functionally inaccessible (WebAIM, 2025). Users who are blind or have low vision rely on screen readers and keyboard navigation, whereas others require captions, transcripts, voice commands, or other assistive technologies (World Wide Web Consortium, 2024). These incompatibilities limit equitable participation in venue programs and services for people with disabilities.

Public assembly facilities, such as stadiums, arenas, amphitheaters, and community recreation centers, fall under Title II of the ADA when owned or operated by public entities, such as municipalities, counties, or special districts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024c). These venues provide essential digital services, from event information and registration to safety policies and communication.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are designed to keep the internet accessible to everyone. These guidelines come from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), specifically developed by their Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). The W3C is the main international standards organization for the Internet. They create these technical standards through a collaborative global process involving disability advocacy groups, governments, and accessibility researchers. While WCAG are not inherently laws themselves, they are the internationally recognized gold standard for digital accessibility. They are frequently adopted as the baseline requirement for legal compliance such as the Americans with Disabilities Act in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024c).

The Department of Justice's 2024 ADA Title II web accessibility rule requires conformance to WCAG 2.1 Level AA for content provided directly by the entity or through third-party arrangements, with public entities retaining full responsibility, even in contracted cases (U.S. Department of Justice, 2026). WCAG is structured around three tiers of accessibility. Level A is the minimum baseline and covers fundamental features such as ensuring all images have text alternatives. Level AA includes all Level A requirements plus additional criteria designed to address the most common and significant barriers for users with disabilities. Level AAA is the highest level of conformance, providing the most comprehensive accessibility standards. These levels define how digital content must be designed so that people with visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the web (World Wide Web Consortium, 2023).



Compliance deadlines tier by entity size, based on the U.S. Census Bureau population data. Entities serving populations of 50,000 or more must comply by April 26, 2027. Entities serving fewer than 50,000 or classified as special district governments have until April 26, 2028. Special districts—independent local governments that often manage recreation centers, amphitheaters, stadiums, or similar venues—receive this uniform, later deadline regardless of the population served (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024c).

Unfortunately, accessibility violations remain widespread online. More than 3,000 ADA web accessibility lawsuits were filed in federal court in 2025, accounting for 36% of the total number of ADA Title III lawsuits filed in federal court in 2025 (Launey & Vu, 2026). The WebAIM Million 2025 report, which analyzed the homepages of the top one million websites via automated WAVE (Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool) detection in February 2025, found that 94.8% of them contained at least one detectable WCAG 2 failure (WebAIM, 2025).

In sport facilities, legal barriers include complex venue maps lacking descriptive alternative text and screen capture (SC) (WCAG 2.1/2.2 SC 1.1.1); promotional or informational videos without captions or audio descriptions (SC 1.2.2 and 1.2.5); unstructured PDF event guides or schedules that are incompatible with assistive technologies such as portable document files (PDF) and Universal Accessibility (UA) (SC 1.3.1; PDF/UA standards); third-party ticketing/reservation portals with inconsistent conformance (e.g., non-keyboard-navigable elements, poor contrast); and dynamic real-time interfaces for scheduling and updates that impede keyboard navigation or impose problematic timing and motion constraints (SC 2.2.1–2.2.3).

Additional challenges include inaccessible forms, outdated accessibility page links, mobile app issues (e.g., real-time tracking), and performance drops during peak demand. These issues stem from the sports sector's reliance on multimedia, layered technologies, plug-ins, and external vendors, which are common across ticketing, live streaming, promotions, and youth/fitness registrations in stadiums, arenas, amphitheaters, and recreation centers. Vendor claims of compliance do not absolve public entities of their Title II responsibilities.

Such inaccessible tools hinder access to core services. Unreadable seat maps or poorly labeled forms can prevent users from joining public programs. Image-based content, autoplay videos, or uncaptioned multimedia exclude people from game recaps, athlete features, or updates. As venues adopt mobile ticketing, app navigation, and real-time alerts, these gaps create obstacles to equitable participation.

Despite clearer federal requirements under the 2024 rule, many public sport facility managers show limited awareness of their full digital obligations (Lower-Hoppe, 2021). Compliance has historically emphasized physical elements such as ramps, restrooms, and seating (Mahoney, 2020; Mahoney & McMillen, 2011);



however, the ADA's non-discrimination principle applies equally to digital services. With the final deadline approaching, entities risk heightened litigation and enforcement if technical standards are unmet (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024c).

When accessible to all, public assembly facilities such as stadiums, arenas, amphitheaters, and community recreation centers actively promote health, enhance social inclusion, and strengthen community life by providing equitable opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and engagement (Mahoney & McMillen, 2011; Trust for Public Land, 2023). Inaccessible recreation center registration forms widen participation disparities, while barriers to independent ticketing or information in stadiums and arenas limit equal engagement. Uncaptioned content, for instance, systematically excludes hearing-impaired audiences from cultural and entertainment events.

Accessibility Challenges Unique to the Sport Sector

Sport organizations face emerging digital accessibility hurdles. Unlike typical service websites, sport-related digital platforms often involve complex challenges with physical venues and live events. Real-time content demands such as live scores, injury updates, game-day alerts, dynamic ticketing and seating interfaces, live-stream integrations, and high-volume fan engagement create ongoing accessibility challenges that exceed those faced by most other industries. Sport websites also rely heavily on multimedia content including video highlights, athlete interviews, and promotional material, all of which require captions and audio descriptions to be accessible to users who are deaf, hard of hearing, or who have visual impairments. Third-party vendor ecosystems present a further complication as sport entities routinely outsource ticketing, registration, streaming, and scheduling to external platforms, yet under both Title II and Title III of the ADA, the responsibility for accessibility remains with the contracting entity, not the vendor (28 C.F.R. § 35.200(a)). These common website characteristics, multimedia intensity, vendor dependency, real-time demands, and physical-to-digital integration make sport organizations uniquely and persistently vulnerable to digital accessibility failures and the litigation that follows.

The sport industry has a growing history of ADA litigation that foreshadowed the stakes of the 2024 rule. In *Feldman v. Pro Football, Inc.* (2008, 2011), deaf and hard-of-hearing fans sued FedEx Field, home of the then Washington Redskins NFL team, for failing to provide captioning of public address announcements, referee calls, and other aural content broadcast during games. The United States District Court for the District of Maryland ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in 2008, finding that the ADA required the Redskins to provide auxiliary aids ensuring equal access to all aural information at the stadium. The Fourth Circuit affirmed on appeal in 2011,



holding that the obligation extended to the full entertainment experience, including music with lyrics, establishing a broad standard of “full and equal enjoyment” for sport venues (*Feldman v. Pro Football, Inc.*, 419 Fed.Appx. 381, 2011).

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) subsequently pursued captioning agreements with *Sabino v. Ohio State University* (2009), which resulted in a 2010 consent decree requiring the university’s athletic department to provide captioning at Ohio Stadium and the Schottenstein Center for football and basketball games. The NAD then used the agreement as a model, writing to all other Big Ten universities demanding similar accommodations (National Association of the Deaf, 2010). The University of Maryland’s athletics program faced a parallel complaint in 2013, which highlighted that the university’s athletic department website also lacked captioning for digital content, extending the accessibility obligation explicitly into the digital domain (Jaschik, 2013).

Digital accessibility litigation in sport soon moved onto sport websites and mobile apps in the years that followed. Major League Baseball resolved accessibility barriers in its websites and mobile apps, including issues with dynamic content and interactive features, through Structured Negotiation, a collaborative, pre-litigation process, resulting in WCAG-based commitments (Feingold, 2010, 2012). In *Jahoda v. National Basketball Association* (2015), a legally blind individual filed suit in the Western District of Pennsylvania alleging that the NBA’s website was incompatible with screen reader technology, preventing independent use by blind users. The case drew national attention to the accessibility of professional league websites and underscored that major sport organizations regardless of revenue or public profile were not immune to digital accessibility claims.

In *Price v. Escalante – Black Diamond Golf Club LLC* (2019), a blind plaintiff alleged that a Florida golf club’s website was inaccessible to screen reader software, preventing him from accessing tee time reservations, membership information, and event programming, a pattern that mirrors the access barriers now prohibited under the 2024 rule for public entities. Lower-Hoppe (2021) analyzed this case specifically for sport management practitioners, concluding that sport administrators responsible for website content must treat digital accessibility as a core legal obligation, not an optional enhancement.

Collectively, these cases confirm that sport organizations, from professional leagues to university athletics to recreation-oriented sport businesses, are susceptible to ADA digital accessibility enforcement and that accessibility obligations in sport cannot be delegated entirely to vendors and that ongoing remediation, rather than one-time fixes, is essential to achieving meaningful access. To that end, the 2024 DOJ rule does not create a new legal exposure for public sport entities; it codifies and clarifies one that courts and advocates have been building for nearly two decades.



Legal Foundations of the 2024 ADA Website Rule

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a landmark civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in many areas of public life (42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.). Although it was enacted in 1990 before the internet went mainstream, it was drafted using technology-neutral language. As a result, courts and regulators have consistently interpreted its access guarantees as applying to evolving forms of communication, including websites and mobile applications.

This section traces the legal history from the original statute to the U.S. Department of Justice’s 2024 final rule, which established WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the enforceable accessibility standard for state and local governments under Title II. It also clarifies how digital access fits within the ADA’s broader framework, explains the implications for sport managers, and highlights the ongoing legal obligations facing both public and private sport entities.

Title II and Title III of the ADA

While the 2024 final rule applies specifically to public entities under Title II, both Title II and Title III are relevant to sport organizations. Title II governs “public entities,” including state and local governments and their departments, agencies, and instrumentalities, such as municipal recreation centers, public universities, and stadium authorities, and prohibits exclusion from “services, programs, or activities” on the basis of disability (42 U.S.C. § 12132). Title III applies to “places of public accommodation,” including private sport businesses, professional teams, commercial leagues, and entertainment venues, and requires that individuals with disabilities be provided the “full and equal enjoyment” of goods, services, and facilities (42 U.S.C. § 12182). Because sport organizations frequently operate across both categories and because private vendors often contract with public entities, this section addresses both titles, with particular emphasis on Title II as the subject of the 2024 rule. While these provisions were initially applied to physical spaces, their broad wording allowed for doctrinal expansion to digital platforms as they became central to the delivery of public and commercial services.

Prior to the 2024 rule, digital accessibility litigation under Title II was limited, as the absence of a codified technical standard made enforcement difficult. As a result, the case law that shaped courts’ understanding of digital accessibility developed primarily under Title III, and those precedents have informed the regulatory framework now applied to public entities.

DOJ Regulations: From Physical Barriers to Digital Communication

Over time, the DOJ’s implementing regulations clarified how Title II and Title III applied in practice. Under Title II, public entities are required to ensure that their



communications with individuals with disabilities are “as effective as communications with others” (28 C.F.R. § 35.160; U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). This regulation also mandates the use of “auxiliary aids and services,” a term that includes accessible electronic and information technology (28 C.F.R. § 35.104). Together, these regulations created a conceptual bridge between physical and digital access.

In the sport context, this means that if a public university, stadium authority, or recreation department disseminates information about ticketing, prohibited items, parking, or safety procedures through a website or mobile app, those communications must be accessible to people with disabilities. Otherwise, the digital platform functions as an accessibility barrier, akin to stairs without a ramp.

Judicial Recognition of Digital Access Barriers

A series of landmark court cases helped solidify the application of the ADA to digital services, even before the 2024 rule. In *Rendon v. Valleycrest Productions, Ltd.* (2002), the Eleventh Circuit held that a phone-based selection process for a game show could violate Title III, even though the phone system was not located at the place of public accommodation. The court reasoned that an inaccessible access mechanism could unlawfully screen out individuals with disabilities from participating in a service regardless of its physical location.

Rendon’s reasoning was extended to websites in *National Federation of the Blind v. Target Corp.* (2006), where the court held that Target’s website could be subject to the ADA if it prevented individuals from accessing services offered in-store. The website functioned as more than a passive display—it was a critical link to the retail experience.

Most notably, in *Robles v. Domino’s Pizza, LLC* (2019), the Ninth Circuit concluded that Domino’s website and mobile app must be accessible because they facilitated access to the goods and services of a physical location. The court rejected the argument that the ADA applies only to brick-and-mortar barriers and emphasized that digital interfaces are now essential components of commerce and public life.

For sport organizations, the implications are clear. A mobile ticketing app, seating map, or waiver form that is inaccessible may function as a gatekeeping mechanism, preventing participation in a game, league, or event. The ADA prohibits such exclusion, whether it occurs at a stadium gate or on a digital screen.

The Standards Gap Prior to 2024

Despite mounting case law and DOJ enforcement actions, one key issue persisted: there was no officially codified technical standard for website accessibility under Title II. While the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines had become the de facto standard in settlements and court orders, they had not been formally adopted into federal regulations (World Wide Web Consortium, 2018).



This regulatory gap caused confusion for public entities. Some organizations relied on outdated practices or assumed that good-faith efforts were sufficient to avoid liability. Others deferred digital accessibility altogether, believing the law was too vague to enforce (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016).

The situation became more uncertain in December 2017, when the DOJ formally withdrew its previously announced rulemaking efforts on web accessibility under both Titles II and III (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Although the DOJ continued to assert that the ADA applied to websites, the absence of a uniform standard left entities guessing at their legal obligations.

The 2024 Final Rule: Codifying WCAG for Public Entities

On April 24, 2024, the DOJ published a final rule titled *Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities* (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024c). This rule formally amended Title II regulations (28 C.F.R. pt. 35) to require that public entities ensure their web content and mobile applications conform to WCAG 2.1 Level AA (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024c).

The rule applies broadly to all state and local government entities, including public universities, municipal recreation departments, stadium authorities, and special districts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024a). The rule establishes WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the enforceable technical standard for evaluating the accessibility of web content and mobile applications. The rule further clarifies that accessibility obligations extend to digital content provided directly by a public entity as well as content made available through contractual, licensing, or other arrangements (28 C.F.R. § 35.200(a)). As a result, public sport entities remain legally responsible for the accessibility of third-party services such as ticketing platforms, registration systems, and streaming services. The rule also adopts a staggered compliance timeline based on population size, requiring entities serving 50,000 or more people to comply by April 26, 2027, and less than 50,000, or any special district government, by April 26, 2028 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2026).

WCAG 2.1 Level AA is an internationally recognized set of technical criteria developed by the World Wide Web Consortium that specifies how web content must be designed to be accessible to people with disabilities. At Level AA, organizations must meet a defined set of success criteria addressing four core principles: content must be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust, commonly referred to as P.O.U.R. (World Wide Web Consortium, 2018). In practical terms, this means ensuring that images have text descriptions, videos have captions, pages can be navigated by keyboard alone, and content works with assistive technologies such as screen readers. The specific requirements of these principles, and what compliance looks like in a sport context, are examined in detail in the following section.



Public Sport Entities' Compliance

For public sport organizations, the rule's application is mandatory. Athletic departments at public universities, city or county recreation agencies, and publicly funded sport venues all fall within the definition of a public entity under Title II. These entities regularly use websites and apps to deliver core services, such as scheduling, registration, participant waivers, facility rentals, and emergency alerts. For example, if a recreation department posts a youth sports schedule via a PDF that is unreadable by screen readers, or a university uses an inaccessible online ticketing portal, these digital experiences may now constitute ADA violations under federal law. Seating selection is a particularly relevant example. If a digital seating chart is rendered as an image without appropriate alt text or structure, it becomes unusable for patrons who rely on screen readers. Under the new rule, this constitutes a failure to provide "effective communication" and may exclude individuals from services in violation of the ADA (28 C.F.R. § 35.160).

Title III Implications for Private Sport Organizations

While the 2024 rule governs only public entities under Title II, private sport organizations remain subject to ADA requirements under Title III. These include professional teams, private stadium operators, commercial leagues, and third-party ticketing or registration vendors. Courts have consistently held that when a website or mobile app is closely integrated with a physical venue or place of public accommodation, it must be accessible under Title III (*Andrews v. Blick Art Materials, LLC*, 2017; *Gil v. Winn-Dixie Stores, Inc.*, 2017; *Robles v. Domino's Pizza, LLC*, 2019). As sport organizations increasingly depend on digital channels for ticketing, seating, event updates, and customer service, inaccessible interfaces can pose significant legal risk, even in the private sector.

Additionally, private organizations often serve as vendors to public entities. Under the new Title II rule, the public entity remains responsible for accessibility, meaning that vendors may be asked to meet WCAG conformance as a contractual condition. This has the potential to accelerate industry-wide adoption of WCAG standards, even among private sport providers.

Legal Implications

The DOJ's 2024 rule represents a turning point in digital accessibility enforcement. The DOJ's rule provides a long-awaited technical standard and compliance timetable to enforce rights that have existed for decades.

For public sport organizations, the legal obligation is now clear. Websites and mobile apps must conform to WCAG 2.1 Level AA by 2027, or 2028 depending on population size. For private entities, the regulatory spotlight is likely to intensify as digital services become inseparable from the in-person sport experience.



Inaccessible digital content is no longer just a best-practice concern. It is a civil rights issue. The ADA's promise of equal participation now extends fully to the digital front door of every sport organization.

What Makes Digital Experiences Accessible: Key Principles and Considerations

When organizations consider how to make an accessibility initiative sustainable and successful, it can be helpful to view compliance efforts as a part of a broader commitment to usable, high-quality online experiences for fans. Sustainable accessibility implementation calls for intentionality and a long-term commitment to an inclusive user experience.

This section examines the foundational principles of web accessibility within the context of the ADA and considers how these principles shape fans' digital experiences. It also highlights common misconceptions about accessibility implementation that can limit the effectiveness of otherwise well-intentioned accessibility strategies.

Accessibility as a Strategic Investment in Fan Experience

Although the early years of the Americans with Disabilities Act primarily focused on access to physical spaces and public programs, the scope of the law has evolved alongside technology. In 1996, the U.S. Department of Justice determined that the civil rights protections to have access to public spaces provided by the ADA extend to the internet (Moreno & Martinez, 2019). The DOJ's Final Rule in 2024 officially established WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the technical standard for web accessibility that public organizations must meet under the ADA (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024a).

At first glance, the 78 success criteria outlined by WCAG 2.1 may seem overwhelming for an organization to begin to implement. To more easily understand the components of an accessible web experience, these guidelines can be broken down into a framework of four core accessibility principles: perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust, often referred to as P.O.U.R. (Shah, 2024; World Wide Web Consortium, 2025).

The P.O.U.R. principles provide a framework for addressing barriers faced by individuals with disabilities accessing web content. However, accessibility improvements can benefit a broader range of users by creating a digital environment that is easier to understand, navigate, and access (World Wide Web Consortium, 2016).

The first element of P.O.U.R., perceivable, refers to a user's ability to access and interpret information as intended. Perceivability is important because design choices can impact a user's ability to receive the information communicated by web content. Other areas that relate to perceivability include how users can adapt layouts or access text alternatives. A common example of perceivable content in practice is the use of captions on video content. For example, coach or player interviews without captions



displayed on a sport organization's website or social media presents information that cannot be perceivable to deaf or hard-of-hearing viewers (World Wide Web Consortium, 2016). Captions also support users who are accessing video content in an environment where audio is unavailable or impractical (Henry et al., 2014).

The principle of operability relates to how users can navigate content on the web. It addresses issues related to keyboard accessibility, sufficient time to complete tasks, and navigation mechanisms that support users who need alternatives to demand for precise or rapid physical interaction with the interface (Giraud et al., 2018). An operable interface enables users to interact with web content using various input methods, allowing individuals with different mobility needs to engage with a website in the manner that works best for them. For example, if the seat selection feature on an organization's website requires a mouse to click on a seat map or is difficult to navigate with keyboard alternatives, some users may not be able to buy tickets at all. A customer should be able to move through seat options using only their keyboard, clearly see which seat they are selecting, and hear or read helpful descriptions if they use assistive technology like a screen reader.

Understandability ensures that a digital interface is predictable and easy to understand. This reduces the possibility of user error by ensuring content is readable, consistent to navigate, and behaves as expected (Carvalho et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2014). Consistent navigation on a sports organization's site, for example, helps all fans quickly and predictably find information like schedules, scores, and tickets. This means that investing in understandable content can also be an investment in providing frictionless experiences for website users.

While the first three principles focus on the user's direct experience, the robust principle focuses on the underlying technical integrity of the web content. Designing for a robust digital experience ensures that content can remain compatible with technologies that users may rely on to participate in the digital environment, such as screen readers or magnifiers. Robustness also ensures that digital content continues to function well on new browsers and devices (World Wide Web Consortium, 2025). For a sports organization, robust web design helps ensure that essential features such as live game updates, ticket purchasing systems, and interactive schedules remain functional and accessible for all fans regardless of the technology they use. Prioritizing the user web experience helps future-proof web content against technological changes.

The framework created by the P.O.U.R. principles support improved clarity, flexibility, and reliability for web content. These practices are necessary to ensure that users with disabilities can access and enjoy an organization's website. However, these core principles also support higher quality online experiences for everyone. Being strategic and intentional about accessibility implementation can be a strategic investment in high-quality digital fan experiences.



Misconceptions That Undermine Accessibility Efforts

Although WCAG 2.1 provides a well-established framework, it is important to recognize that these guidelines are not intended to serve as a one-and-done checklist. Understanding common misconceptions can illustrate how compliance-focused approaches, limited evaluation methods, and organizational structures can undermine the effectiveness of accessibility efforts.

At the heart of accessibility improvement is human interaction. Separating WCAG 2.1 from the user experience can create web content that might pass an automated accessibility scan from software that checks web pages for technical accessibility issues but still fails to function appropriately for users with disabilities (Manca et al., 2023; World Wide Web Consortium, 2016). For example, a team's web-page may technically include alternative text for images, yet the descriptions of those images may be vague or meaningless for screen reader users. When a user-centered approach is missing, developers may overlook how different disabilities interact with an interface (Giraud et al., 2018). For instance, fans with low vision may struggle with cluttered layouts even when color contrast requirements are technically met.

The human interaction component is also essential in the evaluation process. Overreliance on automated tools to detect accessibility issues can lead to missing potential barriers for users. Companies marketing automated evaluation tools may not be transparent about their products' limitations or disclose the techniques for which they are testing. This can lead to organizations believing their site is accessible because they relied on the software and achieved a "clean" scan with an automated tool, even if accessibility barriers continue to exist (Federal Trade Commission, 2025). Automated tools can miss serious accessibility issues, especially more subtle ones like appropriate alternative text for images (Manca et al., 2023). While automated evaluation tools can be helpful components to an organization's accessibility workflow, human input through manual accessibility testing is still necessary to ensure that the resulting website is functionally accessible. This includes randomly selecting and examining web content to ensure compliance.

Organizations should also be cautious of "quick fix" promises that claim instant compliance without meaningful changes to the underlying design or content. Overlays are third-party scripts that are added on top of an existing website to address accessibility concerns. They are a means of adding certain accessibility features such as manipulation of font size or colors without editing the original website's script. These tools are often marketed as a simple solution for web accessibility (Makati et al., 2024). While at its surface, this may sound like an easy and straightforward solution, not everyone believes that these solutions are adequate; it may even be the case that they cause additional barriers to their web experience. For example, the



European Disability Forum and International Association of Accessibility Professionals (2023) states that the features of accessibility overlays can be redundant or even interfere with a user's existing accessibility tools by overriding them or their preferred settings.

Sustainable accessibility improvements require commitment to accessibility at the organizational level. Especially considering that organizations may have multiple individuals creating or contributing content to the web, making accessibility the responsibility of only one person or a few people can create bottlenecks that hinder operations. While different organizations may use different models for implementing an accessibility strategy, Sinclair (2019) identifies organizational investment in training, resources, leadership, and shared processes and accountability as common elements of successful and sustainable initiatives. Organizational investment ensures that an organization's web accessibility strategy remains proactive rather than reactive to user issues or lawsuits.

Conclusion: The Road Ahead

Websites and mobile applications are essential gateways to participation, safety, and community engagement. As digital content continues to evolve, maintaining accessibility requires sustained effort. Websites should be designed with accessibility in mind from the outset with regular testing against WCAG 2.1 Level AA to ensure ongoing compliance.

For many sport organizations, the immediate challenge is identifying where accessibility barriers exist. No single universal tool works for every organization. The right approach depends on the platforms an organization uses, the digital services it offers, and the resources available. However, several free, publicly available tools can help sport managers begin assessing their digital accessibility without needing technical expertise. WAVE, developed by WebAIM, and Google Lighthouse are browser-based tools that can scan web pages and flag common barriers such as missing image descriptions, low color contrast, and form labeling errors. These are useful starting points, but they are not the finish line. Research suggests automated tools detect only 30–40% of accessibility failures (Manca et al., 2023). Human review, either by staff trained in accessibility or an external consultant, is still necessary to identify barriers that automated scans miss. Solutions that promise instant compliance through automated overlays or widgets may be tempting, but they rarely offer the comprehensive remediation needed to meet the federal standard, and may even interfere with the assistive technologies users already rely upon (European Disability Forum & International Association of Accessibility Professionals, 2023).



Practical Compliance Roadmap for Sport Organizations

Achieving WCAG 2.1 Level AA is not a one-time project, it is an ongoing commitment. The following four-phase approach (ARTS = Audit, Remediation, Transparency, Sustain) is designed to help sport managers begin and sustain that process, regardless of technical background.

Phase 1: Know What You Have (Audit)

Before anything can be fixed, an organization needs to understand the current state of its digital accessibility. Start by making a list of every digital touchpoint—the main website, mobile app, ticketing portal, registration system, social media pages, and any PDFs or forms patrons use. Run free automated scans using tools like WAVE or Google Lighthouse on key pages. If budget allows, hire an accessibility consultant to conduct a more thorough audit that includes manual testing with screen readers. The goal of this phase is a prioritized list of barriers ranked by how severely they affect users and how central the content is to accessing your programs and services.

Phase 2: Fix What Matters Most (Remediation)

Start with the highest-impact barriers, the ones that block users from completing core tasks like buying tickets, registering for programs, or finding safety information. Work with your website vendor or developer to address these issues. Remind vendors that under the 2024 rule, your organization remains legally responsible for the accessibility of any third-party platform you use, so accessibility must be a contractual requirement, not an assumption.

Phase 3: Tell People Where You Stand (Transparency)

Publish an accessibility statement on your website. This is a short page that explains your commitment to accessibility, identifies the standard you are working toward (WCAG 2.1 Level AA), and provides a contact method for users who encounter barriers. This step costs nothing, demonstrates good faith, and gives patrons with disabilities a way to communicate access needs before they become complaints or lawsuits.

Phase 4: Keep It Going (Sustain)

Accessibility is not a project with an end date. Every time your website is updated, new content is added, or a vendor changes their platform, new barriers can emerge. Assign someone in your organization to own accessibility as an ongoing responsibility. Build accessibility into your internal content policies. For example, require captions on all video uploads and alt text on all images so that staff creating content understand the standard from the start. Conduct a brief review at least annually to catch new issues before they accumulate.



Inaccessible websites are increasingly viewed as civil rights violations and courts are enforcing those standards. If a sport organization's website is not accessible, it is likely only a matter of time until the organization faces legal action. Taking proactive steps toward accessibility helps reduce this legal risk and shows a genuine commitment to inclusion.

The 2024 ADA website rule serves as an important turning point in digital accessibility enforcement. The rule provides clarity where ambiguity once existed: WCAG 2.1 Level AA is now the required legal standard for public entities under Title II. This gives sport organizations a concrete benchmark to assess their digital presence and a clear timeline for compliance. For private sport organizations, the rule reinforces the broader legal trend: accessibility obligations are expanding, and digital platforms are now firmly within scope.

Ensuring digital accessibility is not just about avoiding lawsuits, it is a core component of modern, inclusive sport management (Cotten & Wolohan, 2017). It reflects a commitment to equity, community access, and public service. Proactive compliance enhances the patron experience, reduces legal exposure, and demonstrates leadership in an increasingly digital landscape. Sport administrators who begin preparing now through audits, training, and strategic practices will be best positioned to meet federal deadlines and serve all members of the public with dignity and fairness.

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