

Learning From the Pros - Lessons from 100+ Episodes of the Digital and Social Media Sports Podcast

A labor of love. Building connections. Learning from the best. It has been four incredible years of the doing the Digital and Social Media Sports Podcast, now up to 100 episodes and counting. It's hard to put into words the gratitude I have for those willing to speak to me. My goal has always been simply to learn, to have great conversations, and to hopefully help share the insights and lessons with others.

CHAPTER 1

- **Social media ROI goes beyond numbers**

Social media is the most consistent, authentic way to reach and hear from fans. There is great ROI just from gleaning the insights of listening and of conversations that can inform and improve all aspects of the organization. There is true value there when it's harnessed and communicated well.

- **Interaction in any form is the name of the game**

Ever had a celebrity or star athlete or team 'like' your post on Instagram or Twitter. Ever felt the rush of having a star you look up to reply directly to you? The smallest engagements and interactions can increase a fan's avidity from surface-level to emotionally transcendent. And it can happen with a single click.

- **Re-allocate resources based on goals**

Social media didn't really exist 20 years ago. For decades, teams had established departments, responsibilities, budgets, and manpower. Then social came along and teams either resisted or adapted. But then some started to realize that what used to feel like obligations years ago weren't the best use of their resources today. Changing times means evaluating whether your allocation of resources is best suited to get bag for the buck, given how things are today. Fight inertia.

- **Build brand ambassadors – superfans**

Not all fans are created equally. There are a select few that, while not employed by the team, might as well be. They're always talking about the team, talking them up, suggesting others go to the game or watch the game. The more super

fans you can build, through engagement and empowerment, the biggest your base of brand ambassadors can become. Focus on fangelists and you'll have voluntary marketers all over talking up your product. And they're not on the payroll.

- **Collaborate with data folks**

We all now realize that data can improve decision-making, processes, and outcomes in just about every aspect of the organization (from player performance to your most recent post on social). But it's not easy. The key is to be willing and ready to welcome those that do analyze the data and be willing to listen, even if it's not what you expected or wanted to hear. Data don't lie.

- **Make the team cool**

This is a goal that was true four years ago and remains true today - you want to build a brand that fans want to be associated with. That fans want to be proud of. You want to be cool. It's one thing to say it, it's another to actually execute. Being cool means having confidence, not attacking others, associating with other cool people and things, and creating stuff that fans would describe as 'cool.' Then, fans will want to come hang out with you more often!

- **Earn the right to market to fans**

This sage statement came from James Royer, who now oversees digital and social for the Kansas City Chiefs. Social media is not a marketing channel. It can serve marketing goals, but fans don't follow you or come to you to be marketed to. That right must be earned by winning trust. Give fans content they want, first and foremost, and don't undermine the value of their attention with blatant marketing messages. Fans know how to buy and that's not the first thing on their mind when they're flicking through your feed.

- **Embed social throughout the organization**

Remember, it's not about being good at social media. It's about being good at business and using social to help do that. Look at every department of the organization, enumerate their goals, and figure out how social media can effectively help serve those goals. Fan development, sales, service, sponsorship, CR, game operations, PR, marketing, and the list goes on. Social isn't a tactic, it's a new way of doing business.

- **Partnership = all parties win**

The word partnership often gets used interchangeably with sponsorship. But there are clear differences. A sports partnership is one in which everybody benefits - the team/organization and their fans, along with the partner. If an

activation doesn't satisfy these criteria, then reevaluate it and adjust it until it does. That's how you can pile up partnership wins.

- **ROO is just as important as ROI**

We always focus so much on ROI, return on investment, and not enough on ROO, return on objective. These are two distinct things, yet are often treated as one in the same. It's not always a tangible, set number and equation. Focus on the 'goal' of the partner or the campaign and how you can help accomplish that objective. We are getting increasingly better at quantifying, well, just about everything, but the important thing to be cognizant of is that an objective is not just a number.

- **Identify ownable elements and assets**

It used to be easier with sports sponsorships. You have so many billboards and media timeouts to fill. But now social has forced us to kind of blow up the rate card. But old habits die hard and most brands and salesmen find it understandably difficult to go out and 'sell social.' But there are content and activities taking place every day in sports. The key is to identify and enumerate these things. Then you'll have something for a salesman to sell and for a sponsor to eye.

- **Go beyond the score**

It's always funny to see a score go final or an injury get announced and tons and tons of social media feeds all echo the same news. Information is more accessible than ever, but more transient and diluted in value than ever. The trick for a sports media is to go beyond just the information and give something more - context, fun content, multimedia. It's so much more than just the stats and scores.

- **Dominate a couple places > stretching thinly everywhere**

It's hard for teams and media not to want to chase every channel. The more eyeballs the better, right? The answer is not so black and white. It's certainly not the case if it means more eyeballs on substandard content. One is better off being known as great or the best on a couple platforms than being seen everywhere, reeking of mediocrity. It sounds logical enough, but many still find it hard to resist the siren call of being, well, everywhere.

- **The goal is not to turn every fan into a STHer**

We know season ticket holders are the most valuable fan to a brand, in the most basic sense. But it's simply not feasible for every fan, for every sales lead to become a season ticket holder, whether for lack of time, money, or imply being located too far away. It sounds simple, but too often the sales process and sales

spectrum still aspires to turn that single game buyer into a season ticket holder. Focus on the optimal outcome for each fan and each lead, informed by data, and not some arbitrary goal that is not appropriate for all.

- **Fan data goes beyond that tied to sales and numbers**

We're deluged with data, and that's a beautiful thing. But that just means the non-quantifiable "fan data" is more valuable than ever. It's great to know that a fan went to 'x' games last month and usually buys beer at every game. But how about knowing their kid is about start playing soccer at college next year or their wife is allergic to gluten? It's the type of "data" we take for granted in every day relationship with friends and family that can vastly enhance the relationship of fans with the team (and their account reps).

- **Tech as a differentiator and revenue producer – more screens, more integrated tech**

We're in the midst of an arms race when it comes to stadium and arenas - more and faster WiFi, more screens, and more apps. A key factor is to consider how tech CAN differentiate your experience from the alternatives, how it can make your team stand out for the better. The difficult maze continues when it comes to not making investments in tech in a silo - make it integrated into more aspects of the fan experience, to add value. More integrated screens and tech can optimize sponsor activations, as well - more extensive and effective takeover, a greater ability to enhance the fan experience, and the chance to reach more eyeballs and leave an effect on fans.

- **Social holds the keys to what fans want the most, it has the most consistent eyeballs – monetize it**

The revenue pie hasn't changed as dramatically as the fan attention pie has. But the ones trying to stay ahead are paying attention to this shifting paradigm more and figuring out how to effectively monetize. This was an early insight four years ago and one that is more acknowledged, if not fully realized today.

- **Promoting promotions in an engaging way**

Marketing/promotional messages and engaging, quality content for fans do not have to be mutually exclusive. All those content:marketing ratios can be thrown out the window when content exists to get fans excited about the players, the teams ,and the games.

- **Understand the platform audience and the culture, across the world**

It's easy to click once and cross-post on all social media channels all over the world. But it's naive to think these audiences are all the same, consume content the same, way, and even get excited about the same memes. The stories and messages can remain consistent, but it's not just important, but more effective to

post the way fans on the platform want to consume the content and how they speak to each other. These principles remain important as teams expand their social media to foreign audiences on Sina Weibo and WeChat.

- **You can crush it between 7pm-2am if you want it bad enough**

Gosh, this sentiment and line from my chat with Peter Robert Casey (which he was relaying) has stuck with me. While it's tempting to binge on Netflix and sit back and relax each night, there is nothing stopping you from working toward a passion and a dream. Stay tuned for more parts of lessons I learned in four years of doing the podcast!

CHAPTER 2

- **Brand perception can start on social media and then go beyond; articulate your persona**
- In many ways, social media is the front porch of the organization. Where fans most frequently and consistently encounter the team and engage with it. It is, therefore, the place where a personality is perpetuated, a brand is built, and a look and feel is fostered. The power of the platform must be acknowledged and utilized. The best guests I talked to could clearly and thoughtfully describe the voice and the brand behind who they wanted to be on social media. Can you?

- **Make content easy to consume and digest**

Take the time. Take the time to eliminate any effort or friction for your fans, when it comes to content consumption. (Well, everything, really) That may mean using the proper specs for images, not squeezing in text that necessitates a pinch and zoom, not making a 5-minute video that would be better as a 45-second video. Those that take the time to consider this with their content are making it easier for fans to engage.

- **Your players are your brand ambassadors – issuing mini press releases daily**

This came from my conversation with Kevin DeShazo, who is thankfully leading the crusade against social media fear tactics, while espousing the need for us all to realize the power of the platforms, for good and bad. Whether it's the 10-year veteran in the pros or the freshman hotshot in college, everyday players are representing their team, issuing mini press releases, as DeShazo put it in one response on our podcast. This is not something to fear, but to be harnessed.

- **Focus and foster the good on social, don't use fear and focus on the bad**

The above very much relates to this concept, as well – the perils of the platforms are vastly outweighed by the good and the value. This idea, in many forms, has come up in my conversations over the years, and oftentimes, like in social media, it comes back to stories and FOMO. Convey to those uneasy about the power of social and win them

over with examples – stories of how others are using it (and how you can) and instilling a little FOMO can move the needle in the office, too.

- **Focus on use cases and the path to wins**

If there's one piece of actionable advice for any social/digital and sports pro to take from many of my podcasts, it's this one. You want to prove social media is worth caring about and investing in? Show it. Because not everybody 'gets it,' and not everybody can believe in metrics and reports that are new to them. Celebrate the small wins, showcase the success stories, and boast and brag when something blows up in a good way.

- **Teams are providing content fans seek**

This seems so simple now. But it wasn't that long ago that teams were still mostly glorified PR houses. Then the content improved, but in many ways still remained 'close to the vest' [and still does in a lot of places]. But a fascinating trend from teams has been them becoming the primary content destinations for fans. Many realized they were losing engaged eyeballs to other sites that were willing to entertain reports and rumors, and content that wouldn't typically come from a team. Some hired insiders, others aggregated links. It's one thing to produce awesome content, another to be a resource for fans, too.

- **Novelty doesn't last long**

Remember when Snapchat revolutionized social media with 'Stories?' Or when Meerkat made it so easy to go live on mobile? Ever wonder why it feels like nary a month goes by without a new feature being introduced to your favorite platform or app? Fans expect incremental improvements and newness now. They expect 'updates' all the time. It's no longer good enough to bank on a singular innovation, a culture of progress and improvements and breaking things quickly prevails now more than ever.

- **Capture data to provide value**

Perhaps no field has grown more in social and digital in sports than data and analytics over the last handful of years. All of a sudden it became feasible to collect all sorts of fan data. But the theme that prevails among the best in the business is that data is not just a source for measurement and quarterly charts – it leads to adding value for the fans and for the organization. It's important to diagram it out and design the path from data to action to value, and not just 'doing big data' just to say you are.

- **Start with objectives and reverse-engineer; empower**

It's always easier to define social media ROI when you ask the question about the factors that comprise the 'R.' A major reason a lot of the pros I spoke with have success in their roles – they talk to their colleagues. They determine the objectives of every department in the organization, they learn what others value, so they can use the social and digital tools at their disposal to help and create and drive that value. Particularly in the college space, where there are several teams and hands in the social media cookie jar, along with coaches that each their idea of objectives, it's just as important to empower others, teaching them to use the tools.

- **Value the deep connections and engagement**

Engagement as a catch-all term has always given me pause. There are so many varying degrees of engagement that it all can't be captured with just a single word. But it's easy to recognize a deeper connection with a fan when it happens. Something you know will stick with them and become a part of their identity. Chasing the deep engagements can be just as valuable, if not more so, than trying to maximize that nebulous engagement rate. Cultivate super fans with deep engagements.

- **Social has led to more thirst for content and information, led to 365 nature of sports**

I've had the chance to speak with folks in the media about how social media crept up on them and then vastly changed and amplified the way media and content producers live and work. When it became easy to get the score, fans wanted stats and play by play and audio. Then headlines came with a click, so fans wanted to know the rumors and the instant reactions and analysis. Then that came about, so fans wanted video and even more details into the dealings of the day and the lives of athletes. If it feels like pro sports are all relevant 365 days/year, that's because they are. The content firehose of social media has made it such, because fans always want more.

- **Not every team has the same goal**

Ask three social media managers for sports teams for the list of goals on social media and there's a good chance each will be different. It should be. The teams that turn the lights on and fill out a stadium or arena have far different needs than the team constantly under pressure to put more butts in seats. It's so important to realize that, and to operate and learn and emulate appropriately. The key is to appreciate and understand the objectives and to realize that, as one's career or the team's status quo grows, the goals will change, too.

- **It's hard to get an increase from 'free' when it comes to sponsored social**

It's really not that long ago when social media sponsorship meant deals that included 'x' number of Facebook posts (yes, that generic) over the course of the contract. Social media was, and for some still is, a throw-in. The icing on the cake for a partner already paying plenty for more traditional inventory. Well, a common theme and lesson is that it's easy to dilute the value of social media when one treats it as more a bonus than an asset.

- **Leverage social and UGC to amplify the team's own brand**

Creating a brand is not just coming up with a catchy slogan and hashtag. It all doesn't amount to much unless the fans get it and if the fans propagate it. That's a big reason why user-generated content is so integral. Fans trust real fans, and are affected by them, so much more than brands and the official team account (though that is evolving, too). When you can drive a fan to participate, to proselytize, and to perpetuate, that's a brand being built.

- **Twitter is a snapshot, not the entire universe**

While it's so cool to be able to hear from fans, it's important to realize that the social media sentiment on each and every platform is a subset and a small sample. That doesn't make it insignificant or not insightful, it just means, you have to remind yourself, that is only a fraction of the whole. Small things can seem like a big deal, generalizations can be made from a couple tweets. It's important to find the balance of following what active fans are saying and doing on social media, and studying the fan base as a whole on all platforms with which they connect, engage with, and encounter the team or the story or the brand.

- **Social media gives everyone their own distribution channel**

This thought has obviously come to the forefront over the last few years, in which players and teams and bloggers and personalities have been able to disseminate their content and messages seamlessly, to a worldwide audience. It means there is a lot of incredible content being produced, it also means there is a lot of "absolute shit" content (as Richard Deitsch put it in our chat) being produced, as well. While the crowd is bigger, the best still stand out. Standing out with quality content is a necessity, even as it becomes more difficult every day.

CHAPTER 3

- **Fans want to know you feel it with them**

Multiple conversations over the years have centered around emotion, namely that it's ok for team social media accounts to express and convey emotion. In good times and bad. In many ways, the official account can be the voice of the fans and fans won't trust an account that treats everything as honky-dory when it's not, nor will they appreciate when an epic moment sounds like a matter-of-fact report from the social voice. While it's a given these days that team accounts need not sound like formal press release robots (the additional arguments around omnipresent snark, notwithstanding), there are still teams that don't experience the highs and lows with their fans. This is a lost opportunity to make genuine connections.

- **Good partnerships involve KPI's and effort on both sides**

Successful sports corporate partnerships aren't easy. They're not supposed to be. If the goal is to come out of a partnership feeling like both sides have won, it takes a little work from both sides. Make sure each side knows what success look like, and establish the goals and KPI's. And determine what each side needs to do to assure that success. When both sides pull their weight, it's obvious. It's so much better for the organization, the sponsor, and the fans.

- **Sponsorships must not operate in a silo; it's gotta be across channels**

When there are innumerable ways to reach fans, it's not just naïve, but perhaps irresponsible to restrict a partnership to a single channel. Brands are demanding it now and sponsorship teams are becoming better equipped to package, activate, and sell that

way. A partnership can be built around KPIs and a goal, and each channel can be effectively tapped to further those objectives. It's an omni-channel world now!

- **Athletes have the platform to transcend sports**

One of the salient and interesting trends of the last several years has been the rise of the athlete as a cultural icon. It led me to a conversation with Heather Zeller, who is part of the burgeoning intersection of pro sports and fashion. *Sports Illustrated* just came out with its most fashionable athletes list, the post-game NBA podium is now must-see TV for fans of basketball and fashion alike, and many sports stars are looking at apparel lines and more beyond the field or the court. With social media giving a direct line for athletes to share their lifestyles and the clout to move and mold many minds, the opportunity, too, is incredible now for athletes to further just about anything.

- **Social is an overall marketing message, and sales can happen when done right**

This sentiment summarizes a big part of the social media ROI conversation so well. Social media – the ability to reach fans every day with news, content, messaging, and conversation – IS marketing, even if not a single click to buy is ever made from the platform. We used to have to pay for attention (save your nostalgia or the old-days of easy massive organic Facebook reach), to budget for any opportunity to reach fans. While this is still an aspect of sports biz, simply being part of the conversation and thoughts of fans every day is a hugely invaluable win for marketing. The trick is to use the ad platforms on those channels, where fans expect to see more direct sales messages, to then turn that love into transaction. There is no marketing:content ratio, it's 100% always an indirect form of marketing, of making fans love you more.

- **Learn from content performance on social and apply it across channels**

Social media is a treasure trove of important insights. And, when applied well, such insights about the content that is moving and affecting fans, can improve every department of the organization and every fan touch point. Did a graphic really take off on Twitter, a video go viral on Facebook, a player who's consistently driving big reach – don't just use it for social media strategy, use and share that knowledge for all aspects of the team. For emails, for posters, for radio ads, for TV ads, for sponsor campaigns, and, well you get it. Social media is a free focus group where fans tell you what they like and want to see. Use it.

- **The importance of a unified voice**

There are so many messages being disseminated in so many places in so many ways when it comes to social media and sports. Whether it's one of several teams at a university or one of many accounts for a pro team or even a website, in-game, and social media presence as a combination. The organizations that have that consistent look, feel, sound, tone, and brand reinforce how well a fan can connect with and

appreciate and understand it. Years ago, it may have been common to not even have consistent social handles, let alone everything else. But the value of a unified voice is now unquestioned and spreading.

- **Data and analytics are only as good how well the insights are communicated**

Whether it's deeper stats to augment fans' understanding of the game or a dive into content performance and sales efforts, data and analytics can penetrate, and in many ways have, all parts of sports organization, on and off the playing surface. But it's no secret what the key is to an effective analytics presence – communicating it to inform and inspire action based off of it. This has been a common refrain over the years and why a data analyst who can also write, speak, and present is essential. And that anyone acting based on a data-infused insight can understand why.

- **Anticipate what fans are looking for**

When it comes to social media as a second screen, this idea remains on the minds of pros in the space as they seek to supplement, not regurgitate, what fans are watching. This is a combination of preparation and reaction – whether it's lending context to a play, augmenting the story behind a player, or giving fans something share-able in the moment – it's the job of the social media person to listen, react, and come prepared to help make the experience of being a fan more fun.

- **Make it easy for fans to find you**

You want to get your content in front of fans? Don't make them come to you, go to them and earn their attention. There's something to be said for having fans want to come to you, but it's far better to know where your fans are spending their time, to know how to create content on those platforms to engage on it, and to understand where your fans of tomorrow may be. It's why teams are embracing mediums like mobile and OTT, and they're innovating with more convenient, more effective ways to get their content to fans.

- **Learn from and collaborate with others**

This is simply a way of life for the social media and sports community, and it was one that has been reinforced again and again. There may be healthy competition to outdo each other on social in the sports community, but the collaboration is unlike any other industry. Innovation is applauded and it's best practice to, well, learn about practices. It's why this podcast has been so valuable and has been key to those with whom I've spoken. Be the person that reaches out in your industry; to learn and to share.

- **Be prepared for success**

We always talk about how it's impossible to control what happens in the games. The wins and losses may affect social media metrics and strategy, but it's simply another

factor to account for. But good times full of wins or titles do happen. The best know how to maximize the pot when they're dealing a winning hand, they're ready for it. This piece of advice has stuck with me and rings as true now as it did then. How will you be ready for your moment in the sun?

- **Getting your fans more engaged through transparency**

Picture the superfan. The one that wakes up thinking about that night's game, who wears the team's apparel a few times per week or more, and the one anxious to see whatever video or picture you post next. The question, then, is: are you serving the superfan and cultivating the next one? This intriguing topic came up in a conversation over transparency with fans with Jesse Agler of the San Diego Padres. They shared the (reputable) publications putting out reports on them, even if the official Padres media wasn't reporting it. Fans that care the most are thirsty for the rumors, the stuff the team can't or won't spread, and if the team isn't serving it, fans will go elsewhere. It's a slippery slope, but if fans come to trust your channels as being the only destination they need to worry about, more fans will come and more superfans will develop. It's not so black and white, of course, but it's an idea worth considering.

- **The fan experience on game day is a series of (connected) moments**

We used to think about making every aspect of fan experience the best it can possibly be. And while that of course remains the goal, the difference nowadays is we think about the journey that comprises the fan experience. Game operations and venue designers are now thinking about how one part connects to the next, and increasingly using data to tie it all together and make it progressively more precise, and even personalized. So don't just prioritize optimizing ingress, set fans up for the next step in their journey, about what they will want and will need next.

- **The stadium is a social epicenter, full of peripheral activity**

I remember going to the Detroit Tigers new Comerica Park back in the early 2000s, and being awestruck by the mini carnival, complete with a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round that was inside the stadium. Now going to a game is even more about having a unique experience worth talking about and sharing – other activities, unique food and drinks, opportunities to mix and mingle. There's so much more going on while fans are watching the game now, and this will only continue.

- **Know who your promotion is trying to reach**

When a promotion is conceived, it's sometimes tied to a sponsor, sometimes to a celebrity appearance, a holiday, and sometimes just out of a brainstorm meeting. Promotional nights are a key way to drive attendance, especially for games on weekdays or against lesser opponents. But the secret behind effective promotions is to know who you're trying to reach with each promotion. Then, tailor the message and even

the audience and the platform. In other words, if you're promoting a Social Media Night or a Star Wars Night, know who your target audience is.

- **ABC – Always Be Creatin'**

A recurring theme among some of the best social media pros I've talked to is that they're constantly creating. Whether it's a new media form or celebratory GIF, personalized visuals for players, or capitalizing on a meme (or creating a meme). Content and currency and if you make a commitment to it, it pays off in spades. And if a piece of content works well – see how you can iterate it, extend the idea to other players or part of the game day coverage and experience. Keep creating and you'll build up some valuable folders that'll keep fans loving your [fire] all year long.

CHAPTER 4

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When it comes to social media as a second screen, this idea remains on the minds of pros in the space as they seek to supplement, not regurgitate, what fans are watching. This is a combination of preparation and reaction – whether it's lending context to a play, augmenting the story behind a player, or giving fans something share-able in the moment – it's the job of the social media person to listen, react, and come prepared to help make the experience of being a fan more fun.

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You want to get your content in front of fans? Don't make them come to you, go to them and earn their attention. There's something to be said for having fans want to come to you, but it's far better to know where your fans are spending their time, to know how to create content on those platforms to engage on it, and to understand where your fans of tomorrow may be. It's why teams are embracing mediums like mobile and OTT, and they're innovating with more convenient, more effective ways to get their content to fans.

- **Learn from and collaborate with others**

This is simply a way of life for the social media and sports community, and it was one that has been reinforced again and again. There may be healthy competition to outdo each other on social in the sports community, but the collaboration is unlike any other industry. Innovation is applauded and it's best practice to, well, learn about practices. It's why this podcast has been so valuable and has been key to those with whom I've spoken. Be the person that reaches out in your industry; to learn and to share.

- **Be prepared for success**

We always talk about how it's impossible to control what happens in the games. The wins and losses may affect social media metrics and strategy, but it's simply another factor to account for. But good times full of wins or titles do happen. The best know how to maximize the pot when they're dealing a winning hand, they're ready for it. This piece of advice has stuck with me and rings as true now as it did then. How will you be ready for your moment in the sun?

- **Getting your fans more engaged through transparency**

Picture the superfan. The one that wakes up thinking about that night's game, who wears the team's apparel a few times per week or more, and the one anxious to see whatever video or picture you post next. The question, then, is: are you serving the superfan and cultivating the next one? This intriguing topic came up in a conversation over transparency with fans with Jesse Agler of the San Diego Padres. They shared the (reputable) publications putting out reports on them, even if the official Padres media wasn't reporting it. Fans that care the most are thirsty for the rumors, the stuff the team can't or won't spread, and if the team isn't serving it, fans will go elsewhere. It's a slippery slope, but if fans come to trust your channels as being the only destination they need to worry about, more fans will come and more superfans will develop. It's not so black and white, of course, but it's an idea worth considering.

- **The fan experience on game day is a series of (connected) moments**

We used to think about making every aspect of fan experience the best it can possibly be. And while that of course remains the goal, the difference nowadays is we think about the journey that comprises the fan experience. Game operations and venue designers are now thinking about how one part connects to the next, and increasingly using data to tie it all together and make it progressively more precise, and even personalized. So don't just prioritize optimizing ingress, set fans up for the next step in their journey, about what they will want and will need next.

- **The stadium is a social epicenter, full of peripheral activity**

I remember going to the Detroit Tigers new Comerica Park back in the early 2000s, and being awestruck by the mini carnival, complete with a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round that was inside the stadium. Now going to a game is even more about having a unique experience worth talking about and sharing – other activities, unique food and drinks, opportunities to mix and mingle. There's so much more going on while fans are watching the game now, and this will only continue.

- **Know who your promotion is trying to reach**

When a promotion is conceived, it's sometimes tied to a sponsor, sometimes to a celebrity appearance, a holiday, and sometimes just out of a brainstorm meeting. Promotional nights are a key way to drive attendance, especially for games on weekdays or against lesser opponents. But the secret behind effective promotions is to know who you're trying to reach with each promotion. Then, tailor the message and even the audience and the platform. In other words, if you're promoting a Social Media Night or a Star Wars Night, know who your target audience is.

- **ABC – Always Be Creatin'**

A recurring theme among some of the best social media pros I've talked to is that they're constantly creating. Whether it's a new media form or celebratory GIF, personalized visuals for players, or capitalizing on a meme (or creating a meme). Content and currency and if you make a commitment to it, it pays off in spades. And if a piece of content works well – see how you can iterate it, extend the idea to other players or part of the game day coverage and experience. Keep creating and you'll build up some valuable folders that'll keep fans loving your [fire] all year long.

- **Take pride in genuine engagement**

Just about everybody measures engagement. But everybody also understands that the term 'engagement' can be a bit of a nebulous term. Sure, tout the engagement rate, which equate double taps with comments and 3-second views with completions, with likes and with retweets or shares. Bu we know genuine engagement when we see it, so pay attention to the content pieces and themes that elicit more of that true engagement, that gets fans' juices going.

- **The advanced level of social media is to tie it to business goals**

The best in social media understand the end goals of the organization and know how success in social can tie to it. The social platforms, themselves, are increasingly taking a larger role in helping teams map social media and integrate it translate to measurable goals. This is the value proposition offered by the Facebooks and Twitters of the world, so as they command more of the budget, it's important that marketers can justify the spend. Every goal can have KPI's that can tie back to social media. Start with the goals and understand the metrics that the team values that contribute to those goals.

- **Twitter has a unique power to bring influencers together**

Most social media and sports pros will say Facebook is their MVP. Instagram is the shining younger star that's moving toward the top of the ranks, too. But with influencers and celebrities dominating social media, there is no platform that showcases and allows for direct communication between better than Twitter. It's where an athlete can quote Donald Trump with a snide comment, where an All-Star learns a celebrity is coming to their game and is a fan so they make sure to hook them up with a jersey, where major power brokers connect via DM. While many say Twitter is kind of stuck in neutral, no one can deny the power it has to connect everybody, including those with great influence.

- **The most valuable use of social media is building relationships**

It's easy, in the midst of chasing reach and engagement and clicks, to forget about the power of social media to build relationships. But the majority of the interviews I've had originated from a Twitter relationship. Many guests have talked about meeting others and learning, or getting their jobs, through social media. This is not just a valuable use for any pro seeking to advance their career and enhance their skills and knowledge. It's also reverse-engineering relationship building when thinking about cultivating communities of engaged fans. What comprises the foundation of a relationship? Mutual interests, easy communication, fun, personalities clicking, etc. etc. Consider how those same factors can be fostered with fans.

I continue to be amazed at the insight and foresight offered through conversations on the podcast over the years. It has been a privilege and pleasure to connect with smart, seasoned pros, and my attempt at summarizing at all keeps going. It is my best attempt to distilling down four years and 100 episodes of the podcast.

[See part 1 here](#), [part 2 here](#), [part 3 here](#), [part 4 here](#), [part 4 here](#), and stay tuned for more! Here is part 5:

- **Find opportunities to increase engagement and consistency**

One of my favorite podcast interviews was with Tom Halls, then with British Tennis and now with esports conglomerate Gfinity. He has helped multiple organizations mature digitally and part of the strategy was around creating engagement for fans, which informed future content and engagement. Fans of any avidity level are interacting with teams in innumerable ways on countless platforms – this represents tons of opportunities to drive engagement. Even better is to create consistent relationships, which can transform of a casual fan to a superfan.

- **What can we provide that others can't? What unique value can we offer?**

Information used to be the currency, but the speed of social media and the democratization of, well, everything, has meant it's harder to attract fans to your channels. So the question becomes what you can offer that does stand out from others. This can come up with a team late to the party after finally being able to announce a trade, an official entity competing with so many others. But there's gotta be a unique value proposition, find that and you'll win fan attention over time.

- **Different 'conversions' for different fans**

It's hard, often overwhelming work managing tons of different fan journeys and fan demographics. The challenge and the important truth is that these journeys are diverse and divergent – not every fan engaging on social or visiting a website or opening an email is the same. It's vital to study, understand, and map out these journeys, to optimize them ending in goals – moving fans up the spectrum, one mini goal at a time. With the increasing ability to personalize through digital, optimizing the journey is easier than ever for those that practice it.

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It's an interesting time for the dwindling sports industry media (though far from dead) because advertising is not as tolerated and 'free' content is easier to come by. But the ability of fans to recognize and appreciate quality content remains strong and growing.

And fans are willing and wanting to support those producing content they enjoy ‘for free.’ This theme stood out in my conversation with Ross Tucker, an ex-NFL player, who, among other endeavors, has built a sizable, engaged fan community through his writing and podcasts. And he has built such loyalty in the community that they want to buy things through his partners and some even make a straight donation to Amazon. In exchange, Tucker keeps churning out content and constantly converses with his fans, a two-way street in so many ways.

- **Know who you’re talking to on each platform**

We’ve come a long way over the years and for, for many, this idea is now a given. But especially for those that use a social media management platform, it’s just so easy to check off the box and send the same content to several platforms. It’s naïve and borderline disrespectful, however, to think your fans are homogenous across platforms. The best are studying, and can articulate, the differences of their fan bases on each platform, and know the voice, presentation, content, and promotions that will work best on each. Can you do this?

- **What can this new platform allow us to do that we couldn’t do before?**

As platforms emerge, and as others come and go, one of the interesting topics I’ve discussed is how social media and sports pros treat the shiny new toys. How they know when it’s worth the investment of time, content, and resources. A great piece of advice that consistently came out is the idea of what unique value or opportunity it presents. Many practice, not quite as many preach, about wanting to be good at every platform they serve, not mediocre on all (but at least *on* all). Whether it’s a unique way to present or create content, a new audience, a new way to engage – there has to be a reason to jump on what you think may be the next big thing.

- **Plan your stories and events**

Over the last several months, stories have become ubiquitous – starting with Snapchat, then Instagram, and then WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, and even Skype. And the social media and sports pros I’ve been lucky to learn from are all master storytellers. The trick is, well, creating a story. It means building a narrative, even storyboarding, in advance of the event. The shots you’ll want, how you’ll get it, the graphics you may need, the copy you want to have ready to paste. That doesn’t mean you’re not ready to react and create in the moment, but the best stories are thoughtful and thought-out.

- **Know your social media game plan and priorities**

I always swoon when I hear a pro clearly lay out their priorities for each platform and fan touch point, and know how they want to use each. It's a simple, but powerful exercise to actually write it down. What does each social platform mean to you and mean to your fans? Which is most important and why? If you could invest more in one, how and why? Because, when amazing happens or big news breaks, you have to be ready to go, and it could cause one's head to explode if they don't which platform to hit first and how.

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There are so many places a fan can go for their news, content, opinions, and insight. It's something that not just writers and bloggers face, but teams and leagues, too. A great theme that has emerged in many conversations was the need to be the place fans go when something is happening or has happened – they want your stats or commentary during games, they know you'll have an informed column after a big transaction, they simply enjoy getting the news delivered from your voice more than others – make the fans want to come to you, over all others. This also applies to teams almost never being able to break big stories – when you finally can announce a deal, what additional content or insight, in your special seat and view, can you deliver that fans can't get elsewhere?

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Going back to Babe Ruth, athletes have always held a certain sway over society. But social media has empowered athletes more than ever before, and follower count and engagement rate is the new social capital. Athletes are seizing opportunities more and more, chiming in on conversations on the platforms, and working with their teams to maximize their social game. There is a related market growing of agencies and platforms to connect athletes to endorsers and the way teams and media and league are utilizing their athletes and alumni are becoming more creative and strategic nowadays.

- **Timelines are as constrained as ever**

If there is one element that has become even more important over the last four years in social media and sports, it's speed and real-time. It's not just in sports, but for all social media marketers. But it doesn't mean you just react in the moment and rely on instinct. The best teams are using tools to streamline their content creation and preparation,

brands are preparing campaigns on timelines that are a fraction of what they once were, and real-time video, GIFs, and clever graphics and one-liner are ruling the day. It's an awesome opportunity, but it's not easy.

- **Translating stories effectively to social is essential**

Sports creates stories every day, by nature. There are also tons of athletes with incredible stories that transcend what they do in competition. The trick for a social media and sports pro, and the content team, is to effectively take a great story and turn into something powerful and digestible and engaging on social media. This is an acquired, practiced skill that must be honed over time, and it's why social media and sports pros need to have storytelling skills (writing helps), creative skills (watching YouTube tutorials help if you're a one-person team), PR skills (know how to spread the story and the desired messaging), and curiosity (to go and uncover the best stories). This theme comes up especially in college – with so many great stories of student athletes and the importance of the message of the university.

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It used to be much harder to build a portfolio of work. But the platforms on digital and social now allows anyone to publish their content – images, videos, written work, quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis – and to prove you got some chops. Many folks I've talked on the podcast got started with self-publishing or blogging. And NHL hockey photography legend told me he'll gladly check out the flickr or Instagram account (no filters preferred) of an aspiring photojournalist. There is nothing stopping anyone from building an online portfolio and get their own experience and work to show off.

- **There's a difference between Vicodin and vitamins**

The last four years have seen the sports business progress with incredible speed. There are so many innovative companies coming up in this space, and it can be a whirlwind to make sense of it all. I had an interesting conversation in which my guest, Anthony Vassallo, used this analogy. Vassallo played a big role with Dodgers Accelerator, a collaboration between the Los Angeles Dodgers and the firm R/GA, and their work was a study in identifying companies worth investing in and paying attention to in sports. The analogy Anthony invoked was meant to illuminate the difference between solutions that alleviate pain points (Vicodin) and those that just make you a little better off than you were (vitamins). It's an important consideration as you think about where to invest that innovation budget – is a Vicodin solution only going to be temporary? Is the vitamin go to

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One of the less talked about, but still interesting and evolving space are the stadiums and arenas themselves. Setting up your venue for a valuable, social, versatile experience is all the rage. It's multi-purpose buildings, community areas, social media photo opps, areas for sponsor activations or kids activities, and table tops to rest a drink while charging your phone. The building itself is an avenue for fan engagement.

CHAPTER 5

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CHAPTER 6

- **Stand out and know what makes you different**

Teams always resonate with their diehard fans. For them, the team is part of their identity. And the job of the social media and sports world is to convey that brand to others, to make them want to be part of the community, too. Teams and brands and universities want to have a well-understood message – so it is through visuals, video, voice, and content that the message can be carried and activated. This comes up again and again, as social channels are oftentimes the front porch.

- **OTT will dramatically alter the monetization structure in sports media**

OTT, over-the-top, is quickly penetrating live sports across the board and, with it, will come evolution in how it's all monetized. Consumers are willing to pay for content, that is, to pay for it in lieu of sitting through ads – commercials, pre-rolls, mid-rolls, surveys, and pop-ups. Some prefer the ads, and when it's via OTT, the ads can be increasingly

personalized, actionable, targeted, and measurable. And there may be so many hybrids and price points and restrictions and security questions and, well, this world is going to change quickly. It has been interesting to get a taste of it from the podcast over the years, most poignantly when I spoke with EverSport Media's Wayne Sieve.

- **Be aware of everything going on in the organization**

Social media has never truly 'fit' into a single department. That social media touches every part of the organization, and can help it, has been a motif over the years, and one that must not just be appreciated, but acted upon. It means intra-communication is essential, conveying the how and the why and the 'ROI,' and the social media person truly understanding the goals and mechanisms of the others. The social media pro may have more knowledge than any of everything the team or organization is doing, when done right. Go to lunches, establish a regular meeting, walk in doors, ask questions, give ideas, and always be listening and sharing.

- **Get messaging across through content**

There's a lot of messaging organizations want to get across through social media. But the bar for fan attention is high, and it takes strong content. The good news is that quality content and content that resonates with messaging is not mutually exclusive. This came out in several conversations over the year, but really stood out when I spoke with Chris Dion, who heads up social media for the NCAA Championships and Alliances, focusing a lot on March Madness that drives a lot of the content, coupled with the messaging the NCAA wants to get across. When you know what the organization stands for after consuming content you enjoy, that's a sweet spot for many a social media and sports pro.

- **Build measurable goals**

Social media and sports grows more strategic by the day and for it to get the credibility and investment it merits, goals must be set and reached. There are plenty of less tangible benefits, but it's key to measure success in some, well, measurable way. Then reverse-engineer the path to getting there, and develop content and campaigns and tactics that'll fuel those goals. Social media is a series of moments and content pieces that make up a season – when you have a clear destination in mind, it can really increase the precision and purpose of the posts.

- **Content can be marketing and marketing can be content**

There are measurable goals and there are emotions, steps, and pathways that lead fans to those goals. Social media is a long game. Sure, last touch can happen on social, but the best, I've come to learn, is to create content that also taps into an emotion that leads fans to want to sign up, to buy, to attend, to share. Content about the team, about the fans, about the game need not contain a direct sales message; it merely gets fans excited about it all, strengthening ties, while leading to revenue-producing results in the end. It's an evolution, still, but many social media pros now have the trust of the business and marketing and sales team to deliver a meaningful message that'll ultimately affect the bottom line more.

- **We don't want to be first, we want to be right**

It can be so tempting to be the early mover. To get noticed and perhaps written about because you were on a new platform or using a new technology before your peers. But a consistent piece of wisdom that the pros have stated in interviews with me is the need to learn about a platform, watch others use it, see what works, and evaluate if it's a fit for the team or league or brand from a goals and resources perspective. Some take great pride in being first, many others (even if they're first in sports), are constantly observing, taking notes, and understanding the platform before jumping on it haphazardly.

- **Micro conversions can be just as important as traditional conversions**

The term 'conversion' typically stands for the ultimate goal of any campaign, the success in the equation that determines ROI. But while most conversions end with an exchange – of money or information, we can go so much deeper now and track and achieve so many smaller conversions on the way to the big one. The pros that have lived in the social space get it, and it came out quite a bit that the pathways are not leaps from 1 to 2, but from 1 to 1a to 1b and so on. Seek micro-conversions every day and understand the pathways that can lead to the big conversions. This can and does play out in social media every day.

- **The brand and voice of your content affects who wants to work with you**

This was a unique insight that has come up quite a bit, but was particularly prominent in part of my conversation with Jamie O'Grady, then of the Cauldron (which is no longer around), a sports site built on crowd-sourced and professional and even active athlete writers. But, oh boy, does it apply across the board. Every single social media post,

every insertion of voice, of personality, of wit and snark, all builds a brand and perception that can not only affect how fans feel about you, but also, not insignificantly, the corporate partners that want to work with you. So while your fire content, engagement-inducing voice, and epic trolling may win on social media, one must always be aware of the bigger picture, for better or worse.

- **Social media can level the playing field**

Take away the handle or the Page name, the logos and the names, and put social media content and creative side-by-side and all of a sudden it becomes much more difficult the big brands from the small ones, the minors from the pros. Whether battling with other college athletics programs or bigger pro teams, one of the best insights that has come out in several conversations has been the idea that anyone can look big-time on social media, with just a little effort into how they present themselves there through their content. A polish on a graphic, a great use of live, a sweet GIF – social media has nothing of a Power Five factor; anybody can win.

- **Nothing you put out should ever be by chance**

These days, the importance and value of social media – the eyeballs and the engagement, among other factors – is well-acknowledged and accepted. And, with this power comes opportunity and responsibility. The top social media and sports pros appreciate and understand this value and know that every detail with their content and presentation can, does, and should matter. Whether it's making sure a photo or video is grabbed with a sponsor billboard salient in the background, taking a pic from the right angle so no empty seats are visible, or making sure a quote being posted can't be misconstrued – there are so many intentional decisions made with every post, every day.

- **Know the goals of your internal clients**

Because social media can amplify everything all parts of an organization are doing, it becomes helpful to sometimes think of coworkers leading each department as clients – what will help them achieve what they're trying to do? This can be a challenge, at times, when social media pros are measured on their raw numbers and engagement rates and reach, but the best are walking in doors and understanding how others envision success in their roles. This not only builds trust, but fosters a more welcomed, trusting relationship, which ultimately ends up in better content, crafted by the social media pro, and better results. I've often stated, and heard through interviews, that nobody understands the ins and

outs of an organization better than the head of social media. They have to, because social touches everything.

CHAPTER 7

- **Overprepare and be ready for some content to go unused**

A story I've heard often, and have lived myself many times, is of the tons of content, carefully crafted, thoughtfully produced, and at the ready, can often end up on the cutting room floor, a folder of tears, if you will. But the best are always ready, knowing this is a necessary reality of being prepared. Social media moves so quickly and real-time is so important to truly capitalize, and therefore it is paramount to have content and a plan for any outcome. Ask any social media pro about their folder of tears, and you'll no doubt get a story about a sweet graphic, campaign, post, or video that never saw the light of day.

- **Resources follow revenue**

The next social media and sports pro that says they have ample resources and wants of nothing will be the first. (Insert sarcastic joke about the Clemson Athletics department here). There are so many platforms to serve, so much content you want to produce, and so much analytics and analysis to do. And it's all accelerating faster than organizations can keep up with, and certainly faster than revenue paradigms typically evolve, as well. But just about any request for more – budget, staff, equipment – is going to be met with a demand to show how it'll lead to more revenue (even if there are multiple steps along the way). The monetization of social media question doesn't have a single right answer, but the best are taking the time to analyze and model how it *can* lead to social media, justifying the question of resources. The answer, at the end of the day, is always revenue.

- **If it doesn't match your brand, you shouldn't be doing it**

The old saying goes (to paraphrase) that brand is what people say about you when you're not around. Well, many brands in sports have largely been built over decades, long before Twitter was even a gleam in Jack Dorsey's and Ev Williams's eyes. Yet, Twitter has become a place where brands in sports are established, where voices, look, and feel are being cultivated. And many social media and sports pros I've spoken to over

the years not only recognize this reality, but take the responsibility to be caretakers of that brand quite seriously. More than dropping a tweet to fish for numbers, at the expense of a brand value that is priceless and perpetual.

- **Make an effort to integrate sponsors organically**

The holy grail for social media and sports sponsorship is authenticity, content that both involves sponsors, but doesn't feel forced. It's not easy. It takes effort. But while we all recognize the desire to do this, not everybody makes the effort and sticks to it. Many of the top social media and sports pros have developed a sixth sense for it, though, understanding how to identify and how to create organic opportunities for partners to play. There are a lot of opportunities for exposure, for engagement, for content and sponsored content or integration need not be an idea with questionable connotations. Do better.

- **Celebrate the little victories when the big victories aren't coming**

If there's one thing every social media and sports pro can agree on, it's the inability to control what happens in the game or match or race. There will be wins and there will be losses. There will be highs and lows. But it doesn't change the charge to continue to drive engagement and emotion on social media among the fans. It has been instructive to speak to several sage social media specialists over the years who have helmed teams that have gone through periods of losing. I have learned a ton from them and it starts with still finding ways to celebrate what fans love, to make the smaller victories feel a little bigger (carefully), and to foster fans that care and can still enjoy the team. It's not always easy, and not recommended, to be the eternal optimist. But it's paramount to continue to find reasons and ways to celebrate all those moments and reasons every game, every day that fans have to stand and cheer.

- **Align athletics with the greater mission and goals of the university**

I've had the opportunity to pick the minds of several sports pros in the college athletics space, from big brands to small schools and many in-between. Athletics is, for many, the front porch for the university to many, so it's imperative that messaging and brand is aligned. When sports can draw the attention of many potential students and donors all around the world, it's an opportunity to further promote not just awareness of the school, but more about what it stands for and what they can offer beyond the sports. There is a grand mission for every university to get their values conveyed, and the savvy social

media and sports pros in college appreciate it, and communicate with the university to represent it on that front porch.

- **How can you look big-time?**

Everybody wants to be in the cool kid group when it comes to the competitive world of social media and sports. It's where many fans form their perceptions, so it can be important to stand out from the crowd. And to find a way to stand out. It can be darn near impossible to be on every platform and to do it well, especially at the smaller level, but focusing on what you can do well, and on what will ultimately lead to accomplishing the primary goals – that can be the game changer. On the level playing field of digital and social, anyone can stand out for doing something special.

- **Consistency of quality content is a challenge for social media and sports pros**

This can be tough in the pros, with varying degrees of time to put together content, but even more so in college, with so many handles, so much content, and such disparity in resources across sports and across schools. Conference content conglomerates can suffer if the stream from one school, for example, is far superior to another's. And while the football team may have slick graphics and video, the tennis team may not have the resources to create such quality, let alone doing so while maintaining a consistent brand. One of the things many social media and sports pros in college hold dear is that consistency in look, feel, and messaging across all its accounts and every sport. Every team comprises the whole of the university's athletics, and that institution should have a consistent, powerful message.

- **Your platforms can and should be a dynamic space**

Every day brings something new in sports. That's the beauty of it. And yet, too often, the presentation remains the same. That is not to say something for consistency, but different scenarios can call for different content, emphases, and visuals. While this emanated from a conversation with West Virginia Athletics's Grant Dovey about the dynamic nature of the Mountaineers website, the idea can apply across social media and sports. While templates can help and can hold value, sometimes the special situations give cause to deviate from the norm, to surprise and delight.

- **Building trust and buy-in by recognizing goals**

Dovey also brought up the importance of realizing that the goals of some of the most important people when it comes to creating content – the coaches – is paramount. For the coaches, it was about reaching recruits, and reaching recruits, and then reaching recruits. This same principle applies across the board – how do you win trust? By understanding exactly what the goals are of others – driving donations, collecting leads, selling groups, creating sponsor assets, getting sign-ups, and, well you get the picture. It can be easy to get stuck in the KPIs of social media, but every day, it's important to take stock, talk to others, and think about how you can show there's something in it for them and it's worth the time and attention.

- **Focus on building a community, not just a fan base**

Of the stories I've heard or lived in social media and sports, some of the best and most heartwarming are when there is such a community, that fans become friends. When Facebook or Twitter or Instagram can lead to meetups at a game or an event, or relationships form from seeing the same faces at each game. Social media should create a community that feels together, that wants to physically and digitally high-five each other when something exciting happens. A community with stronger ties is a more engaged invested fan base, the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

CHAPTER 8

- **Defining fan cohorts can be instrumental to effective strategy**

Many are wise enough now to realize that generalizations about large swaths of people like Millennials are often foolhardy, if not irresponsible. But it doesn't mean recognizing common traits among your fans to better create and position content and marketing doesn't matter. Because not all fan or customer bases are created equally. There are different reasons they come to you, different motivations and interests. This was clearly spelled out in an enlightening interview with Kurt Stadelman of EA Sports, who laid out the ideas behind the way they create content and marketing, looking at a few well-defined cohorts the company targets and serves. This is not just a good concept for EA Sports, but can be applied to anyone in social media and sports, evaluating the cohorts amongst their fans.

- **Traditional PR still matters for sports businesses**

As much as we recognize the value of what happens on digital and social media, there is something to traditional media, particularly linear TV, that establishes legitimacy, even if greater reach can be achieved on digital platforms. You know something has made it when it hits a TV broadcast or show, and it's still a coveted platform to reach fans and consumers. It's something important to keep in mind, even as it diminishes, and was a key insight from a chat with SportTechie's Diamond Leung.

- **Driving sales on social is not just posting links and Buy Now CTA's**

News flash: the majority of ticket sales do not happen on or from social media. But there are a lot of fans on social media that will buy tickets. It has been a motif in many interviews I've had over the years, and that is the notion of how social media is used best – as a tool to drive interest in the team and the games – not as a tool to post endless sales messaging and glorified ads. There is something to be said for making ticket sales a single click away, to eliminate friction, but too often the expectation that the path from social media engagement to purchase is linear, and downright irresponsible to think more sales will come from posting more sales messages. Create that makes fans excited about the game and the team and the atmosphere and the giveaways – and they'll buy tickets, with or without you posting that daily link.

- **Social should be relevant for fans everywhere**

Fitting in the category of good problems to have, several social media and sports pros face the challenge and the opportunity of engaging fans that live within minutes of the stadium or arena or track, and fans that live in another state, country, or continent and who may never attend a game. While social media is becoming more localized, which is another subject altogether, it remains a charge of the pros to create content everyone can enjoy and to make everybody feel like they can be close to the team and part of the community. How are you relevant to fans next door? How are you relevant to the fan miles away? Ones at the game and not at the game? Important questions to consider.

- **Learn from what doesn't work as much as you learn from what does**

It's natural to celebrate the social media successes, the posts you circle, screenshot, and showcase. The ones that get engagement rates worth talking about. But not every idea is a winner, nor should it be. Experimenting and failing is part of the game when trying to innovate. And a key insight I've picked up over some conversations with smart people is to pick out the failures, and learn from them. Was it the way content or the idea was presented, a player or type of content not getting love, a time of day that never

seems to work well, or whatever it may be. It's often said to do more of what works and less of what doesn't. But the first step is identifying and learning from both sides of the coin.

- **Show up for the moments**

So much of success in social media can be speed, but more importantly it's about being ready at the right time, when emotions are flying, to deliver. Anticipate the moments and prepare for them – visualize, game plan, imagine the perfect scenario unfolding and what you would have at the ready for it. Consider all angles and goals, all creative and platforms, and all the PR-minded and marketing considerations to take into account. It's not easy to be ready for the moments, but the best consistently are.

- **There is value in reaching a unique, coveted audience**

We're all often chasing the highest number in the most efficient manner. There's nothing particularly wrong with that. But it gets more strategic when you think about the actual audience you're engaging and if it's right and, therefore, the best use of resources. Not every platform is the next big thing, but any platform that gets an engaged, considerable user base is worth evaluating to determine if the users there right for you. Everyone is chasing the same thing – attention – but not everybody covets the attention of each audience equally. This is a key consideration, I've learned from many, when looking at where to spend time and resources in an increasingly crowded social and digital world.

- **Learn from outside sports**

It's easy to get immersed in sports – the daily routine, the fact that most of your own feed and network is all about sports. But there's a lot of smart, innovative stuff happening outside sports on social media, as well as a treasure chest of lessons to learn. It may be a new way to use a platform, a clever engagement technique, a marketing campaign that is driving good results, eye-catching creative, and so much more. The best in social media are constantly learning, on the hunt for knowledge and ideas and insight. You can never stop being a student of social media – in and out of sports.

- **Understand the sponsor's goals when creating sponsored content**

A lot of stories start with sponsor deals that call for “x” number of social media posts. But, thankfully, much has evolved since then, sponsor teams are now working more in tandem with social to assure better content for the fans and, just as importantly, the sponsors. But it’s not just about a creative play on words or a branded top play. The best truly understand what the sponsor is looking to accomplish, what their digital and social strategy and is like, and what success will look like to them. Doing social media sponsorship means being a student and doing the homework of researching and understanding the partner, and then thinking about what their objectives and how to drive metrics to accomplish them.

- **Relationships, relationships, relationships**

It’s no surprise that the topic of relationship building – what networking should be about – has been a common motif over the years on the podcast. I am particularly struck by those that seek relationships and relationship-building opportunities, whether in-person or via social channels, especially for the more timid. The hardest part is just doing it – and you’ll find, much like how I get generous people to come on the podcast, most pros in this space, this community, are open and eager to help. But the best relationships, too, are not about taking. Don’t always network with ulterior motives, meet smart and cool people in your space, learn from them and let them learn from you, and make relationships with people that would call you for coffee if they were in town. You’ll always get further with people than with business cards.

- **The value of ‘accidental’ exposure**

While it’s always important to engage your avid fans, there’s certainly value with those moments or that content, which reach beyond – to the casual fan that may take notice and begin a journey on a spectrum to increasing interest and avidity. It is a goal on the minds of social media pros – not the only goal, but certainly one of them. Some call it virality, but it’s more about finding content that’ll make someone say wow, make someone feel the need to share it or tell a friend about it, and make someone want to come back and sample some more. It can also go to another magnitude when an influencer, or at least someone with a large reach, shares your content. It’s always welcomed, but can’t be expected to achieve great levels of accidental exposure. But you can certainly tip the scales in your favor.

CHAPTER 9

It has been a privilege and a pleasure to attempt to cull down insights and wisdom gained from over four years and 100+ episodes of the Digital and Social Media Sports

podcast. The learning is a never-ending process, there is more innovation and experimentation and change happening daily, and all we can do is keep up, enjoy the ride, and navigate this wild but fun world together.

- **Creating emotional connections between fans and players is powerful**

It's always powerful to hear about content and campaigns that transcend the game. Content that fans connect with on a deeper, emotional level. It's not easy to produce and takes earning trust and buy-in from the team and the players. The best way to do that, I've learned, is to clearly communicate what you'll be doing and why and to let the athlete dictate, at times, some of the creative direction. The social media pros that have had success here have that connection with players and have earned that trust. They help all sides realize that everybody is on the same team, with mutually beneficial, and intersecting, goals in mind.

- **If fans don't engage with your content, they're engaging with somebody else's**

There is still a lot of strategy revolving around the tune-in. But there sure is a lot of content consumption happening on digital and social channels and the days of only saving your best stuff for the linear broadcast are ebbing, if not over. But fans want content before, during, and after the broadcast, they want the content that isn't always candy-coated. A sometimes divisive theme over the years has been the conflict of wanting to drive fans to specific channels versus offering content on any preferred channel (and packaging it properly). It can sometimes mean challenging an executive or a traditional way of thinking, but FOMO typically wins out in the end.

- **Look for insights that come with the wins and the losses**

While it particularly stood out in a conversation with Washington Redskins Digital Media Analyst Geoff Blosat, a compelling insight that has arisen in conversations over the years has been to learn from the tougher times. Learn from the good times, too, of course, but the different atmosphere around a fan base after a loss can often reveal what keeps their attention and affection, regardless. Experiment, find positive emotions and reinforce their devotion to the team. No matter what tactic a team takes, and no strategy is necessarily the right nor the same, it's important to look at the data – not just from the big ones with the big metrics, but the ones that stand out, too, even in the down times.

- **Content that follows fan interests**

Social media can be a place to cultivate a community, but also to learn from the community. Be aware and proactively listen. What are fans talking about, retweeting, commenting on the most, reacting to? Remember that social media can be your free focus group. Don't take everything on social media as gospel, but it is a direct channel to fans and a place to discover what fans are saying and thinking about you, the team, the experience, and the brand.

- **Make the most of all of your content. All of it**

One of the best and most interesting evolutions of social media over the years has been the rising popularity of raw, previously cutting room floor content. The side stuff, the making of the polished story, the in-the-moment video that is captured and shared seemingly on a whim. Another area to watch in this ecosystem is trying to maximize the value of great content, including amplifying an Instagram Story, or developing something that starts serendipitously on social media into a wider, multi-channel theme or campaign.

- **Creating evergreen videos often needs to be a puzzle built with pieces**

There's a lot of content created in the moment, but also a lot of content in the can for future use. And the best content creators make the most out of everything they have, while also remaining ready to pivot on a dime and react to news or changes. I've been able to have some fascinating chats with pros specializing in video for digital and social and in-game. If a player gets traded, if marketing wants to promote a certain player, if you want to be able to re-package content – it can help to create content in an organized, cohesive manner, where pieces fit together, but can also be repurposed apart and interchanged.

- **Not all content should look produced**

So many times we've heard on the podcast about creating content for platforms, and knowing what fans expect there and how people use the platform and speak on it. The best put in the effort and do not just press send simultaneously to fire content to a number of places. And a polished piece of produced content isn't always what fans want. It should look like it belongs there. And as we simultaneously serve so many different

channels, it's important to remember how content is supposed to look here, and deliver it.

- **Different platforms require different measures of success**

Engagement rate, views, shares. These terms comprise common KPI's for social media and sports pros, but a key insight emphasized to me by some of the smartest pros over the years is that measurements across platforms are not apples to apples. A view on YouTube vs. web vs. Facebook or any other channels is not the same thing or same level of engagement, and it would be foolhardy to treat it as such. Comments on Facebook and Instagram are not the same thing as replies on Twitter. Screenshots on Snapchat, quote tweets, retweets, snapbacks, and, well, there is a lot of metrics out there and, while all agree it's essential to measure social media, it's just as important to understand the context of the metric, and to allow it to inform strategy and content appropriately. I've heard many definitions of engagement over the years – there is no single magic metric.

- **The value of benchmarking your social media content**

With all that said in the above point on data, another compelling idea brought up has been benchmarking. That doesn't mean going by the book with every eMarketer report, especially in the unique world of sports and social, but it does mean one can and should benchmark against their own content (and the content and success of one's peers). Sports is often a work of routine, but if you can tweak some variables each week, as you go through the next routine, you can really get actionable insights about what's working, what's not working, and what adjustments are moving the needle in the right direction, and therefore worth iterating or building upon. If there's one goal we can all share, it's to beat yourself every day and every week on social media, set new records, and find new things that work.

- **Making sure fans get quality when they come to you and your content every day**

The consumer is in the driver's seat now more than ever, and the paradigm isn't reverting back anytime soon. With so many posts in the feed, so many videos to watch, stories to swipe through, and content to click, fans are making economic decisions as they decide whose content to engage with. This not only means there is a need to make fans want to come to you, but also to make sure, when they do decide to look at your content, the experience is always awesome. Go mediocre once, or worse, and that weighted variable in the equation with which fans sub-consciously decide what to do with

their time, whose content is worth clicking on, can decrease. Many feel the compulsion to post something always, to not forego reach. But the long-term must always be considered. Give fans crap once and many may never come back.

- **Always coming back to content fans want**

There is no content that falls into the compulsory category anymore. Users have too many choices and more power over what they consume. Most pros that work in the space develop an intuition for content and for how their fans will engage with, or not engage with, content. But when all content – every post, every graphic, every video – meets the standard of content fans want to see and not content they have to see in order to get the good stuff – that’s a win for everybody, and the new standard today. A key question I’ve heard again and again is whether this content is quality, and understanding fans will sniff out the crap.

After all the conversations, all the lessons learned, the deep dives and real-life anecdotes, it all just comes back to the fans. If it’s using a specific platform, creating a content campaign, integrating or activating a sponsor, imagining a game experience, one will always be steering in the right direction if the answer is yes to the question of is this the best thing for the fan? Something they would want or enjoy? The trick is to be brutally honest, and not let bias or a gut feeling gone wrong get in the way. And to be a student of it all, to obsess over every way a fan touches the team and the brand, and how to enhance it and deepen it. A constant curiosity has led me to dive into the generous and smart social media and sports community to pursue this podcast and the incredible interviews I’ve been lucky enough to do and people it’s been a privilege to meet.

Who knows where we’ll be four years from now. But I can guarantee we’ll still be obsessing over the fan. There will be more creative content, more knowledge about what fans want, a higher standard for innovation and execution, and the acceleration will only continue. All we can do is share more, have more conversations, connect with others, and do something that matters every day. That’s the best kind of engagement.