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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Here for Good: NWSL, WNBA Lead Women's Sports' Ascent

The world of sports is a tumultuous space, but one thing that's clear is that women's sports aren't just having a moment—they're having a movement, and part of that movement is giving the growing sector of fans easier access to watch games.

The catalyst for growth in sports is access, and that's currently on full display with the **WNBA** and **NWSL** as the two leagues are in the heat of their respective seasons. The WNBA currently has deals with **Disney, Prime Video, CBS Sports** and **ION/Scripps Sports**, while the NWSL inked a four-year contract with CBS Sports, **ESPN**, Scripps Sports and Prime Video before the 2024 campaign. For the WNBA, its partnerships sans Disney expire after this season, and its next media rights deal could be anchored on what the NBA—which owns roughly 50-60% of the WNBA—does with its next rights agreement.

While other leagues like **MLS** have signed rights deals with one or two partners, both the WNBA and NWSL are of the belief that the more, the merrier. There aren't concerns about fragmentation or having too many places to access games. NWSL SVP, Broadcast *Brian Gordon* said reach was high on the priority list for the league to promote players, brands and clubs.

"The market told us a direction to go," Gordon told **CFX**. "You look at what's happening with the NBA, or what's happening with baseball or even NFL, they're adding different broadcasters and the market is dictating how sports properties are selling

their rights and how distributors are acquiring rights ... We want to be able to spread that reach as much as possible. And the market says 'These networks aren't taking all of the games, they're happy to pay for a chunk of games. That's great. Here's another network that wants to own a night and pay for a chunk of games, and here's another network' and so on."

There are still four years until the NWSL's next media rights cycle, Gordon said the league is working daily to make sure it's in a position to find—or remain with—the right partners to foster growth.

"We're worried about 2028 every day," Gordon said. "We're planning and we want to drive viewership, we want to do the storytelling and we want to make sure that we're driving our revenue, the ratings and the reach for our partners, because we know we're going to be in market in a couple of years. We have to prove ourselves now so that we continue that growth that we had from our previous TV deal to the future TV deal."

Gordon's mantra of "owning a night" is how the NWSL and WNBA have positioned their games to make them feel more like a marquee event for viewers. ION, for example, airs a WNBA doubleheader on Friday nights before broadcasting an NWSL doubleheader on Saturday nights. Prime Video "owns" the NWSL's Friday night slate and ESPN airs most of its games on Sundays.

The other side of that equation is creating storylines for fans to learn about and follow, thus creating an audience that keeps returning to watch future events. Scripps Sports President

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Brian Lawlor said to CFX that it helps to have dedicated studio programming that goes beyond the stats and the standings. He likened it to how **NBC** approaches the Olympics in that viewers learn about athletes they may not have heard of, yet once they hear their stories, they're passionate supporters.

"We've created some incredible storytelling around individuals playing on certain nights, so that you watch our pregame show, you watch the stories and you go, 'Wow, I want to see that person succeed.' And next thing you know, you're a fan," Lawlor said.

Lawlor, who was named to his current position in late 2022 shortly after Scripps acquired ION, noted sports was a big factor in the direction Scripps wanted to take its new network. It wasn't going to be a player in NFL or NBA rights, but the company saw where the trends pointed to, and that was women's sports.

"It was really hard to be a women's sports fan in America because you never knew where you could find a game. You might be able to find a WNBA game in 2022 on a Wednesday night at 7pm on ESPN, and then the next game will be Sunday at 4pm on ESPNU. There's just no consistency," Lawlor said. "Our whole strategy was let's go try and win some women's sports rights, and then make the games visible and consistent so that habits can be developed, people will know where to find the games, they can watch it every week, they become fans and then they stay to it."

That plan came to fruition as early as May when an Indiana Fever vs Los Angeles Sparks game averaged 724,000 viewers on ION, making it the network's most-watched WNBA game to date. That included peak viewership that reached 981,000 viewers.

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AT&T FORCED TO KEEP OPERATING COPPER NETWORK IN CALI

The **California Public Utilities Commission** rejected AT&T's request to withdraw as a carrier of last resort last week after receiving more than 5,000 public comments on the issue. AT&T was hoping to shut down parts of its copper DSL network in the state, but its status as a California carrier of last resort requires it to legally provide access to telephone service to anyone in its service area who requests it. "Despite AT&T's contention that providers of voice alternatives to landline service—such as VOIP or mobile wireless services—can fill the gap, the CPUC found AT&T did not meet the requirements for COLR withdrawal," the CPUC said in its decision. "Specifically, AT&T failed to demonstrate the availability of replacement providers willing and able to serve as COLR, nor did AT&T prove that alternative providers met the COLR definition." It also

held public forums during which commenters criticized those voice alternatives for their lack of reliability. The discussion doesn't necessarily end here though. The CPUC also opened a proceeding to adapt its regulations to evolving market conditions and technological advancements while continuing to meet the needs of the state's residents. There's a potential for revisions not only to the carrier of last resort rules, but also to California's High-Cost Fund programs ahead of the state's implementation of the BEAD program.

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NETFLIX UPDATES CULTURE MEMO

At a time of immense change for our industry that has brought about layoffs and restructuring at some of the biggest players. **Netflix** is doubling down on its culture. The streaming giant published an updated version of its famous Culture Memo Monday structured around the core principles that best represent Netflix in 2024. The Culture Memo is something that was originally introduced in 2009 by co-founder *Reed Hastings*, and its first iteration was a 125-page PowerPoint. The 2024 update takes note of more than 1,500 comments from employees and has been in the making for the last 12 months. "We believe that our culture is key to our success and so we want to ensure that anyone applying for a job here knows what motivates Netflix—and all employees are working from a shared understanding of what we value most," Chief Talent Officer *Sergio Ezama* said in a [blog post](#). "While we've had our share of failures—and a few people have taken advantage of our culture—our emphasis on individual autonomy has created a very successful business. This is because in our industry, the biggest threats are a lack of creativity and innovation. And we've found that giving people the freedom to use their judgment is the best way to succeed long term."

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PARAMOUNT PRICE HIKES

Paramount+ is the latest streamer to raise its prices. Beginning August 20, Paramount+ with **Showtime** will cost customers \$12.99/month, a \$1 increase over its previous price point. The Paramount+ Essential plan will move up by \$2 to \$7.99/month. All new customers after that date will see those prices on their monthly bills, but all existing Paramount+ with Showtime subscribers will see the new rates on their next billing date on or after September 20. Existing monthly subscribers to Paramount+ Essential will see their prices remain unchanged at \$5.99/month, and the pricing of both annual subscription plans will also stay where they are.

COMCAST BUSINESS LURES IN CUSTOMERS WITH PRICE LOCK

Comcast Business is now offering a five-year price lock guarantee for qualifying new business internet and cybersecurity customers. The offer allows customers to lock in their monthly service charge for those five years, and the promotion will be available through August 21. The guarantee will be available to those subscribing to the Internet Advanced (800 Mbps), Gigabit Extra (1.25 Gbps) and 2 Gigabit speed tier customers with Comcast Business SecurityEdge and a one-year term agreement.

PARAMOUNT WORKS WITH DCMP TO MAKE NICK ACCESSIBLE

Paramount Global and **The Described and Captioned Media Program** struck a partnership Monday ensuring hundreds of hours of **Nickelodeon** content will be accessible to young viewers with disabilities. Nickelodeon series like “Bossy Bear” and “Tiny Chef Show” will air and stream with captions and audio descriptions on DCMP’s free streaming service for schools and families. Additional Nickelodeon series will be made available on DCMP services on a rolling basis through 2029.

LATMAN LAUNCHES PRODUCTION LABEL WITH WHEELHOUSE

Jane Latman, most recently head of **HGTV** and **Food Network** at **Warner Bros. Discovery**, has launched a crime and investigation production group at **Wheelhouse Entertainment** called **Twist**. *Deadline* had the exclusive report. During her tenure at Discovery, Latman was also part of the team that transformed **Discovery Times** into **Investigation Discovery**. She’ll serve as President of the new company and remain based in NYC.

BALLY SPORTS+ ON THE MARLINS

The fate of **Diamond Sports** and its **Bally Sports** RSNs is being decided in the courtroom, but **MLB’s** Marlins are stepping in to help fans in the meantime. The team is offering fans two months of **Bally Sports+** for free, compared to the normal \$19.99/month rate that the service offers.

LONGHORN NETWORK RETURNS AHEAD OF TEXAS’ SEC MOVE

As the University of Texas gets ready to join the SEC, the school is rolling out a reimagined **Longhorn Network** as a live and on-demand streamer on July 1. The service will offer Texas fans access to original content, live programming, classic games and more. The free app will be available on phones, tablets, the web and CTV devices. All live content will still be shown on the conference’s respective rights holders’ platforms, but the Longhorn Network will still be able to offer highlights and Texas Athletics’ original content.

FIBER FRENZY

Breezeline will begin providing homes and businesses in Laco-
nia, New Hampshire, access to fiber internet next month. The launch is part of a wider network upgrade operation across Breezeline’s 13-state footprint.

RATINGS

The season debut of **Discovery Channel’s** “Expedition Unknown” on Wednesday at 9pm recorded over 2.1 million viewers, which ties the 2020 season premiere as the highest-rated premiere ever for the series. The episode was the No. 1 cable telecast excluding sports for the night with a .84 L3 rating among A25-54. That L3 rating is an 8% improvement compared to the prior season premiere and a 282% increase over the prior six-week timeslot average in that demo.

PROGRAMMING

National Geographic greenlit “JAWS @ 50,” a feature documentary that will celebrate the 50th anniversary of “JAWS.” It’ll have archival footage and photography from author *Peter Benchley* and director *Steven Spielberg* as well as new interviews from folks in film, literature, pop culture and ocean conservation. It’ll premiere next summer and stream on **Disney+** and **Hulu**. – **One America News** is joining the list of networks simulcasting Thursday’s **CNN** Presidential Debate between President *Joe Biden* and former President *Donald Trump*. The debate begins at 9pm. – Fox News will have patriotic-themed programming to celebrate July 4. *Carley Shimkus*, *Lawrence Jones*, *Aishah Hasnie* and *Johnny Joey Jones* will have a two-hour program “The Big Independence Day Special” from NYC starting at 8pm. **Fox Nation’s** **Abby Hornacek** will be stationed in Bristol, Rhode Island, for the “Oldest Independence Celebration in the Nation” Parade. Other bits include messages from veterans and viewers as well as segments from the “Proud American” franchise series.

PEOPLE

Jerald Fritz, EVP, Strategic and Legal Affairs at the **Sinclair** subsidiary **ONE Media**, is retiring come July 1. Fritz—who was the Chief of Staff for former **FCC** Commissioner *Mark Fowler*—has spent over 55 years being involved with the broadcast and communications industries. During the past decade, he’s overseen the long-term strategic planning and public policy for ONE Media, which entailed support of the adoption and deployment of ATSC 3.0 in addition to national and international spectrum use and intellectual property positions. While at the FCC, Fritz helped the push to deregulate the broadcasting and telecommunications industries. Fritz also spent nearly 30 years as General Counsel/Director of Strategic Affairs for Allbritton Communications Company and *Politico*.