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ALTERNATIVE SPORTS BROADCASTS

# *Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management*

*Case Analysis – Sport, Entertainment*

## **From Andy’s Room to Big City and Nickelodeon: Extending the Brand to New Consumers through Alternative Broadcasts of Live Sports Entertainment**

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### **Abstract**

The Walt Disney Company aired the *Toy Story Football Funday* on Sunday, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023. A live game between the Jacksonville Jaguars and Atlanta Falcons played in London, England aired on ESPN+ while the *Toy Story*-themed alternate broadcast aired on Disney+. This game followed multiple alternate broadcasts of NFL games by Nickelodeon and an NHL game themed after *Big City Greens* on the Disney Channel, Disney XD, and Disney+. This analysis paper discusses the use of these alternate broadcasts to attract younger viewers and expand consumers for leagues and live sports entertainment. A brief history of sports organizations participating in fan outreach programs, including contests and alternate broadcasts is provided before an analysis and discussion of how such presentations may impact viewership, competition among studios, and the future of consumer entertainment.

**Keywords:** Live Sports; Alternative Broadcast; Disney; Nickelodeon; Brand; NFL; NHL

## ALTERNATIVE SPORTS BROADCASTS

On Sunday, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, the National Football League (NFL) and the Walt Disney Company teamed up to air an alternate broadcast of a football game between the Jacksonville Jaguars and the Atlanta Falcons. The game was played in Wembley Stadium in London, England as the first of three games in the *2023 NFL International Games* schedule<sup>1</sup>. The fact the game was played in London does not make it stand apart from other broadcasts, as the NFL has played a total of 44 regular season games and 53 preseason games outside of the United States in an effort to extend their brand and attract more international fans<sup>2</sup>. What made the broadcast of the game unique is that the game was also set in *Andy's Room* from the Disney/Pixar *Toy Story* franchise<sup>3</sup>. The game marked the second time an alternative broadcast of a professional sporting event aired on Disney+, with the National Hockey League (NHL) participating in an alternative broadcast of a 2023 game in the fictional *Big City* from Disney's *Big City Greens* show (Sim, 2023).

This analysis paper will discuss the use of alternative broadcasts by the NFL and NHL in an effort to reach younger audience members and attract additional fans. Specifically, a brief history of alternative broadcasts and outreach events meant to engage younger audiences will be discussed. Next, the use of alternative broadcasts such as the NFL's cooperation with Nickelodeon and Disney, and the NHL's partnership with Disney will be analyzed to better understand their impact on viewership. Finally, avenues for future cooperation among leagues and

platforms, and areas for future research will be provided.

### Background and Issue at Hand

In consumer culture, it is a common refrain for marketing professionals and companies to *take your product to your customers*. This is typically seen with pop-up stores, kiosks, and business offering products at different types of community events. Companies engage in this type of outreach in an effort to sell more product while also potentially attracting new customers (Mullin et al., 2014). The sport industry is no stranger to this practice<sup>4</sup>, as many leagues and teams from the United States and beyond play games in different locations<sup>5</sup>. In 2023, the Nebraska Women's Volleyball team played a game in the Cornhuskers football stadium in front of 92,003 fans, a world record for attendance at a women's sporting event (Olson, 2023). Additionally, the Iowa Hawkeyes Women's Basketball team set a women's basketball attendance record with 55,646 fans watching at the Iowa football stadium (Bohnenkamp, 2023).

Sport teams and league engage in a range of community outreach programs through caravans (e.g., team touring events to engage with fans in different locations), fan fests, and even through touring play similar to the *barnstorming* practice. For example, the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball League (NBA), and Major League Baseball (MLB) all play games and series internationally as a way to reach more fans (Dubin, 2023; Irving, 2022; Verducci, 2023). Further, Major League Soccer (MLS) features

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<sup>1</sup> The *2023 NFL International Games* schedule also includes an October 8<sup>th</sup> game between the Jacksonville Jaguars and Buffalo Bills and an October 15<sup>th</sup> game between the Baltimore Ravens and Tennessee Titans, both in London's Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. In Weeks 9 and 10, the NFL will feature a November 5<sup>th</sup> game between the Miami Dolphins and the Kansas City Chiefs, along with a November 12<sup>th</sup> game between the Indiana Colts and New England Patriots, both played in Germany's Frankfurt Stadium (Dubin, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The NFL played 40 preseason games titled the *American Bowl* in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, Germany, Canada, Japan, Mexico, and Australia (The NFL International Series, n.d.). The NFL has played international regular season games in London, Germany, and Mexico (Gosling, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> The *Toy Story* franchise follows the adventures of Andy's toys Woody, Buzz Lightyear, and friends

through various adventures that currently spans 4 feature length movies and several animated short stories.

<sup>4</sup> Pete Sampras and Andrea Agassi shot a commercial for Nike Tennis where they played a point in the middle of a Manhattan intersection in New York City. In 2015, they held a rematch in similar fashion during the US Open Tournament (Bradley, 2015). The iconic commercial was meant to symbolize the game could be played anywhere players chose, with access to a net of course.

<sup>5</sup> The NBA played three preseason games at Indian Wells tennis stadium from 2008 to 2010 (Bohannon 2019), the NCAA has hosted basketball games on US Air Carriers (Kenney, 2022), and the NHL plays games in outdoor stadiums each season (Murphy, 2023).



an international team in their all-star games (Nikolic, 2023), and began a relationship with Liga MX from Mexico to form the Leagues Cup, which sees teams from the two leagues play a World Cup-style tournament during the summer months (Straus, 2023). Wrexham, the Welsh football club owned by Rob McElhenney and Ryan Reynolds toured the United States playing teams in summer 2023 (Caldwell, 2023).

Another way for teams and leagues to engage with potential fans is through alternative broadcasts. In particular, this analysis focuses on sport leagues' attempts to use alternative broadcasts as a way to attract younger or non-traditional audiences in hopes they may be able to move these consumers up the escalator toward loyalty (Mullin et al., 2014). The analysis of this paper specifically focuses on these types of broadcasts, using examples from Nickelodeon's NFL Game, Disney's *NHL Big City Greens Classic*, and Disney's *Toy Story Football Funday* productions.

## Findings and Analysis

Leagues host special games, and events to attract younger fans<sup>6</sup>. However, Nickelodeon and Disney stand out as two brands that produce kid-friendly broadcasts. Nickelodeon's NFL games feature a live game with graphics superimposed over the playing field. Examples include slime being shot into end zones when a team scores, computer-generated characters appearing on the screen and sometimes interfering with the game, and popular Nickelodeon characters joining the broadcast. These games started in 2020 (Cohen, 2023a), and have become so popular that the league used the Nickelodeon Game technique during multiple Wild Card Playoff Games (AlBaroudi, 2022; Draper, 2021). CBS and Nickelodeon are even planning the first alternate broadcast of Super Bowl 58 to reach younger viewers (McCarthy, 2023).

In 2023, the Walt Disney Company took a step forward by employing technology developed in large part by Pixar to produce live games in computer generated settings. First, Disney produced the *NHL Big City Greens Classic* (Wyshynski, 2023). The alternative broadcast was an important step to not just the NHL and Disney, but to consumer entertainment

as a whole. The production was a success; 765,000 viewers recorded over the Disney Channel, Disney XD, and ESPN, made up of many younger and female audience members (Sim, 2023).

With the success of the NHL game, Disney and ESPN put the technology to test again to produce the *Toy Story Funday Football* game during the 2023 season (Reedy, 2023b). A computer-generated production of a game between the Atlanta Falcons and Jacksonville Jaguars held in London, England; the alternate broadcast<sup>7</sup> took place in Andy's Room from the popular franchise. Andy's toys such as a Woody, Buzz, Jessie, and others appeared at various times throughout the game to celebrate touchdowns and important moments in the game. The broadcast also showed Slinky Dog acting as the 10-yard first down chain, a green alien working the skycam, and the claw placing the football on the field for plays. The popular Duke Kaboom provided the halftime entertainment, and commercial breaks were filled with one or two age appropriate advertisements and NFL or *Toy Story* trivia. At times, it was evident that the alternate broadcast experienced technical difficulties, but overall, the production was a success for the NFL and the Walt Disney Company. Following the production, it was announced that the *Toy Story Funday Football* game broadcast attracted the most viewers to date for an ESPN+ broadcast and was the most watched live program on Disney+ (Kamal, 2023)<sup>8</sup>.

## Discussion and Future Investigation

Discussions about how live sports will be included in the future of consumer entertainment are ongoing, with an important question being how sport leagues will remain relevant to current and future generations. Producing such content as the three alternate broadcasts discussed above seem to be a helpful and entertaining way to make the sport product more engaging to younger audiences and other fans. The next sections briefly discuss how alternate broadcasts may be used by companies to attract future consumers, compete in a changing landscape, and navigate the future of consumer entertainment.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2023, MLB held the Little League Classic, featuring a game between the Philadelphia Phillies and the Washington Nationals. The game was played at Bowman Field, a short distance from the site of the Little League World Series to give fans attending the tournament a chance to engage with the MLB product.

<sup>7</sup> The traditional broadcast was available on Fox and ESPN+ in the United States.

<sup>8</sup> An international game was chosen based on the fact that it would air in the United States early in the morning hours, rather than primetime or late night so more younger viewers could watch the game.

## ALTERNATIVE SPORTS BROADCASTS

**Attracting Consumers**

With the rising costs of media rights required to carry live sport entertainment, it is incumbent that studios find ways to help ensure their investments see positive returns<sup>9</sup>. In a rare move, the Walt Disney Company revealed the financial figures for ESPN October 2023, potentially to attract strategic partners that may be interested in investing in the sport entertainment brand (Canal, 2023)<sup>10</sup>. The move comes at a time when it has been rumored that the Walt Disney Company would potentially sell off a percentage of ESPN to help navigate the current financial burdens of producing live sports content and also build relationships that may help the company operate in an ever-changing media landscape (Fischer, 2023). Sources have the Walt Disney Company possibly working with Apple and a tele provider to sell 10% of ESPN, thereby potentially paving the way for the sport entertainment content to be included on Apple and other mobile products (McCaskill, 2023).

Discussion surrounding the alternate broadcast of the NFL game indicated that more leagues are interested in working with the Walt Disney Company on alternate broadcasts (An animated, 2023). Brett Yormack, commissioner of the Big 12 Conference in United States college athletics has even shown interest in alternate broadcasts for games on the ESPN+ platform (Decker, 2023). Further, the history of success of the Nickelodeon NFL games suggest that more live sport events may begin to receive attention for producing alternate broadcasts to attract new and younger audiences. To reiterate, if leagues can attract someone at an early age to their product, they can potentially engage with the individual in ways to generate interest and consumption that may lead to loyalty throughout the life cycle (Funk, 2008).

**Competition among Services and Leagues**

Competition and rivalry influence many aspects of consumer society, and the entertainment industry is no different. The efforts of competitors to outdo each other can push individuals to perform at higher levels (Kilduff, 2016; Kilduff et al., 2010), and influence the

strategic decisions organizations make (Havard, 2018), even pushing some unfair and unethical practices (Kilduff et al., 2016). Further, attempting to keep up with competitors can lead organizations and companies to spend large amounts of resources that could be used elsewhere (Hutchinson et al., 2015). For example, the Walt Disney Company and Comcast Corporation share a long competitive rivalry in entertainment, ranging from theatrical releases to theme parks and direct-to-consumer entertainment (Havard, 2020). When the Walt Disney Company was negotiating to purchase a large amount of the Fox Corporation, Comcast Corporation made a late bid in order to make Disney increase the amount they paid for the transaction (Rao & Lee, 2018), and the two companies agreed that Disney would have controlling interest of Hulu based on a price decided at a future date (Bradley, 2019)<sup>11</sup>.

Competition and rivalry can also influence the way group members view and behave toward favorite and rival brands, and supporters of such brands (Havard, 2014; Havard et al., 2013). Competition for personnel and resources play an important role in a relationship between groups and their supporters (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015; 2017). We see this competition as consumers every time a league has new media rights to negotiate and among the types of broadcasts we consume. The three direct-to-consumer streaming services most identified by consumers are Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ (Havard, 2021; Havard et al., 2021), and each have ventured into the live sports entertainment landscape<sup>12</sup>. Further, there is evidence to suggest that these and other services will continue to broadcast live sports entertainment on their streaming platforms, with examples such as NFL games on Peacock and CBS, the MLB and MLS on Apple TV+, and NHL along with several United States college conferences on ESPN+. As we move forward in an ever-competitive and changing media landscape, how much of a role alternate broadcasts play in the future of consumer entertainment will be determined.

<sup>9</sup> Live sport entertainment acts as a form of *loss leader* to allow studios to bring in revenue from advertisers and promote their own content to viewers.

<sup>10</sup> At time of writing, the Walt Disney Company owns 80% of ESPN, with 20% held by Hearst Communications.

<sup>11</sup> Disney and Comcast hired an independent firm to evaluate the price of Hulu, which Disney will be

required to pay Comcast for their remaining stake in the streaming service (Sherman, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Examples include the aforementioned broadcasts on Disney+ and ESPN+, the partnership between Amazon and the NFL for Thursday Night Football (Havard & Ryan, 2022), and the agreement between Netflix and Formula One to broadcast events based on the success of the docudrama *Drive to Survive* (Asmalash, 2023).

### Future of Consumer Entertainment

The state of consumer entertainment is always in flux, and companies are charged with navigating a path toward attracting and retaining more consumers in this volatile environment. The introduction of direct-to-consumer streaming with Netflix and Hulu (Lamare, 2018; Littleton & Roettgers, 2018) saw more people begin the *cord cutting* practice. The launch of several new streaming services in the late 2010's, and the lockdown measures implemented during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in large amount of consumers streaming more content (Alexander, 2020; Spangler, 2020). This was followed by retrenchment among companies, as profitability over subscriber growth became the most important metric of success (Contreras & Sakoui, 2023). As companies continue to navigate the future of consumer entertainment, where does live sports entertainment fit in, how does it differ from sports-adjacent entertainment such as docudramas such as *Drive to Survive*, *Welcome to Wrexham*, and others, and how important will alternate broadcasts be in attracting potential consumers?

An important question facing both entertainment companies and sport leagues is the willingness of consumers to pay for live sports entertainment. As media rights continue to increase, will studios and entertainment companies continue to pay increased broadcasting fees? There is little evidence to suggest otherwise pertaining to professional and high impact college sports, a reported breakdown in the media rights negotiations between the Pac 12 Conference and ESPN being an exception (Cohen, 2023b), but will media companies share the increased fees with customers? Max (previously HBO Max) launched the Bleacher Report Sport add on for sport fans<sup>13</sup>. Most major league sport leagues have launched league-specific streaming and/or broadcast services of games and content. Apple TV+ and Major League Soccer (MLS) agreed to a 10-year broadcast deal that made the service an exclusive partner of the league in 2023 (Reedy, 2023a). There has also been much discussion of a potential all-inclusive sports app coming from ESPN and the Walt Disney Company where different providers can pay to have their broadcasts included in the service (Bouma, 2023). It is yet to be seen how much this service will cost the consumer.

With the existence, and future potential of such services, how willing will consumers be to pay for the content? Further, will alternate broadcasts such as the ones discussed above entice people to sign up for services, even if for short periods of time to watch? A major question in need of discussion regarding

alternate broadcasts is the associated cost. For example, in an era where companies are looking to cut costs and show strong return on investment, do alternate broadcasts attract enough consumers to offset the expense in producing such a program? Further, while team sports may translate well to an alternate broadcast, there are presumably sports which would not (i.e., figure skating, diving, and other events where attention to competitor movement is needed). How will such practices impact subscriber churn? Finally, will live sports entertainment, including alternate broadcasts play a role in the further debundling of content or will it push consumers to look for more bundled services? These are all questions that loom over the entertainment and sports industries, and future research and discussion is needed to better understand the role of live sports and alternate broadcasts of live sports on the future of consumer entertainment.

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<sup>13</sup> The service is free from October, 2023 to February, 2024, and then \$9.99 a month after (Zucker, 2023).

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The logo for FinsHEEM is located at the bottom right of the page. It features the word "FinsHEEM" in a bold, blue, italicized serif font. The letters are blue with a white outline, and the overall style is reminiscent of classic sports branding.