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TV sports programs look for new generation of sports nuts

Television is in the middle of a sports-related programming renaissance, with several athlete-centric series on the air and another crop on deck.

The most notable of the lineup may be "Pitch" on Fox, not because it's a breakout success — the freshman series is actually struggling — or that it's the story of the first woman to play in the major leagues, but because of the strong support for the show from Major League Baseball, the San Diego Padres and Fox Sports. "Pitch" is produced in partnership with MLB, and uses the Padres' uniforms and stadium as well as Fox Sports' news graphics.

This kind of "product placement" is an interesting move for MLB, since sports-related series have not historically done well on network television.

So why the interest in sports-themed TV shows now?

The answer may lie at the intersection of a number of developments in the entertainment industry.

First of all, entertainment production companies are battling for audience attention — not only on network and cable television, but on emerging streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon that are offering an increasing amount of original content.

At the same time, a handful of star athletes, like basketball superstar LeBron James, are looking for new ways to extend their careers by leveraging their experiences and personal fame in the entertainment world. Further, the sports industry is looking for new ways to reach out to fans and to attract new audiences as the competition among sports media outlets intensifies and evolving technology changes the

way fans access live events.

Sports personalities and narratives have always been a rich source of entertainment. In the right hands, sports stories go beyond the actual athletic competitions — and the fans that love them — appealing to a wider audience with universal themes like personal sacrifice, overcoming obstacles and winning against all odds.

Add complications from relationship demands, unforeseen events and the impact of money and fame, and you might have a hit — at least on the big screen. Movies about sports form an entire genre, from "Pride of the Yankees" and "The Natural" to "Bull Durham" and "Moneyball." Classics like "Rudy" and "Rocky" have gained an almost cult-like following.

But that kind of success hasn't translated to the small screen; historically, sports-related television series haven't lasted long on the traditional networks. Exceptions include the award-winning "Friday Night Lights," based on the 2004 movie and 1990 book of the same name.

The show ran from 2006 to 2011, first on NBC and then on DirecTV. Or the critically acclaimed "The White Shadow," which aired on CBS from 1978 to 1981. However, with the notable exception of the two-season "Sports Night," a slew of other series never made it past one season, such as: "The Bad News Bears," "Bay City Blues," "Phenom," "A League of Their Own," "Clubhouse," "Lights Out" and "Back in the Game."

On cable, sports-centric series have fared better, probably due to bigger budgets and looser standards when it comes to language, violence and sex. HBO got in the game early and dominated with "1st & Ten," which aired

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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from 1984 to 1991, followed by "Arliiss" from 1996 to 2002, and "Eastbound & Down" from 2009 to 2013.

Recent cable efforts are also doing well. In 2015, HBO premiered "Ballers," a show about the lives of current and former football players starring actor and professional wrestler Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, who is also a producer on the series.

In addition, "Survivor's Remorse," a Starz series about a pro basketball player and his family produced by LeBron James, was recently renewed for a fourth season. Audience, a channel available on DirecTV and AT&T U-verse, renewed "Kingdom," its show about a retired mixed martial arts fighter who trains MMA fighters at his gym, for a third season.

Audience is also the home of a new documentary series called "Religion of Sports," which examines the cultural impact of sports around the world. The co-creators of the new series include New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and for-

mer New York Giants defensive end Michael Strahan.

NBA star James, whom Sports Illustrated just named Sportsperson of the Year for the second time, has been racking up credits in the entertainment industry and showing the way for other athletes. In addition to "Survivor's Remorse," his SpringHill Entertainment company is developing a new sports-medicine drama for NBC and previously produced an animated web series called "The LeBrons." Among other projects, James also appeared in the 2015 movie "Trainwreck."

Additional network shows involving current and former professional athletes include a comedy for CBS based on the life of Arizona Cardinals' starting defensive end Calais Campbell and an ABC drama about a Heisman Trophy winner-turned-cop from Strahan, the football defensive end-turned-talk show host.

Sports fans can also look forward to projects in development including "Apollo Park," a drama about the rise of a basketball player from Detroit

being developed by Skydance Media, and a Fox comedy about synchronized swimming being brought to TV by entertainment heavy-hitters including “Juno” screenwriter Diablo Cody, “American Idol” creator Simon Cowell and “Glee” co-creator Ian Brennan.

Netflix is banking on sports fans’ love of a good underdog story with “Last Chance U,” the streaming service’s first sports documentary series. The original series follows new football recruits at East Mississippi Community College, a successful but little-known athletic program in junior college sports. Competition from outside the United States demonstrates how much

compelling content sports lovers have to choose from, like The Olympic Channel, a Madrid-based site and mobile app that offer a slate of original programming about sports around the world.

Original shows include “Generation Rise: Middle East and North Africa,” a 12-part series on athletes in those regions, and “The Z Team,” a show about struggling sports teams that get potentially game-changing guidance from an Olympic coach.

While the entertainment industry is creating new sports content to lure viewers, the sports industry is looking for ways to make sports more entertaining. But instead of fighting

for ratings, sports leagues are facing declining live attendance at events, in part due to new and more affordable ways to watch a game in the comfort of one’s own home. For example, the MLB is reportedly seeking fresh ideas to get the public more excited about going to live games. Throwing its resources behind TV shows like “Pitch” is an innovative bid to engage fans.

Even sports media outlets are looking to create original content to appeal to new audiences. ESPN earlier this year reached a deal with Vice Media in which the latter will produce original, millennial-friendly programming for the sports network’s multiple platforms.

According to a report by the website DigitalTrends, ESPN is in a precarious position, having lost more than 7 million subscribers between 2013 and 2015.

The competition for viewers is only going to increase as the entertainment and sports industries look for new ways to work together. Innovations in media platforms’ technology will likely fragment the market for sports-related programming even further.

And yet, programming with even the strongest sports credentials doesn’t necessarily translate into ratings. The current crop of sports-themed TV series and programming has a lot to prove and success is nowhere near a sure bet.