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Twitter going from smart asides to big league sports

Twitter's bidding war with Amazon, Yahoo and Verizon for the right to stream "Thursday Night Football" games was a competition as closely watched as any game the platform will stream this fall.

San Francisco-based Twitter bested rival media giants to be the NFL's exclusive partner to deliver free, live over-the-top streaming video to a worldwide audience via the Twitter platform on mobile phones, tablets, PCs and connected TVs.

The partnership includes game highlights and pregame broadcasts from players and teams.

The New York Times reported that Twitter paid the NFL approximately \$10 million to stream 10 games.

The NFL estimates the livestreams will reach more than 800 million registered and non-registered Twitter users worldwide. There is a "massive amount" of NFL-related tweeting during games and tapping into that audience will help extend the reach of "Thursday Night Football" reach, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell recently pointed out in a statement.

While rivals like Yahoo seemed well-positioned after it acquired the global streaming rights to one midseason NFL game last year, Twitter has been on a mission.

The NFL deal is just one of several significant agreements Twitter has reached in recent months to stream professional and college sports content. Social media industry watchers say Twitter's big push to stream live sports events is a bid to help shore up its flagging finances by broadening its appeal to consumers and video advertisers alike.

Twitter's role in "second screen" viewing, in which viewers are actively using a mobile device or tablet to post on social media platforms like

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



**DOUGLAS N. MASTERS
AND SETH A. ROSE**

Douglas N. Masters is a partner at Loeb & Loeb LLP, where he litigates and counsels clients primarily in intellectual property, advertising and unfair competition. He is deputy chairman of the firm's advanced media and technology department and co-chair of the firm's intellectual property protection group. He can be reached at dmasters@loeb.com. Seth A. Rose is a partner at the firm, where he counsels clients on programs and initiatives in advertising, marketing, promotions, media, sponsorships, entertainment, branded and integrated marketing, and social media. He can be reached at srose@loeb.com.

Twitter or Facebook while watching a program or sporting event, may have helped it secure the NFL deal.

Launched in 2006, the platform has developed from its early days as a fairly simple microblogging platform that allowed users to communicate in 140-character "tweets" to a multimedia platform with video capability.

As of late June 30, Twitter had approximately 313 million monthly active users and 1 billion unique visits monthly to sites with embedded tweets.

Twitter has also become an integral part of the sports world. Athletes, coaches and teams in the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL and NCAA all have Twitter accounts. So much sports-related tweeting goes on that Sports Illustrated created the Twitter 100 in 2011, a list of the must-follow Twitter accounts in the sports world.

And, as the NFL's Goodell noted, much of sports-related tweeting occurs during the games.

It's really no surprise then that Twitter is entering the already-crowded sports-streaming arena. Sports-specific "over the top" streaming services offered by MLB.TV, WWE Network and NFL Game Pass have cracked the list of Top 10 streaming services with the

most U.S. subscribers.

To keep up, satellite TV, cable providers and gaming console makers have begun streaming sports events in the last year.

So what exactly does streaming sports on Twitter look like? In July, Twitter did a test run, streaming the Wimbledon tennis tournament on Wimbledon's official Twitter account. Twitter included content from ESPN, which obtained the exclusive live TV rights for Wimbledon in 2011. The setup involved a video stream on a dedicated Twitter page with a scrollable list of Wimbledon-related tweets below.

Over the summer, Twitter entered into a number of partnerships to stream professional and college sports games and other content. Twitter will stream live, weekly MLB games and NHL games. In addition, the social media giant gained a foothold with the NBA, striking a deal to stream two live programs produced by the NBA, although it won't be streaming any games.

On the college sports front, Twitter entered into a digital media rights partnership with Campus Insiders, a digital platform that offers live and on-demand coverage of more than 3,000 games and events from college conferences across the country.

Campus Insiders will stream

live college games on Twitter, covering football, basketball, lacrosse, soccer, baseball, volleyball, field hockey, water polo and swimming. Campus Insiders and the ACC Digital Network, the official YouTube channel for Atlantic Coast Conference programming, will also provide breaking news and on-demand video of game highlights for top-ranked schools.

Twitter also is teaming up with the Pac-12 Conference, composed of 12 universities in the western part of the country. Pac-12 Networks and Twitter announced the launching of Pac-12 Plus, a broadband network that will offer more than 150 live games on the social media platform.

Twitter users will have access to exclusive content from "The Rally," a nightly program produced by 120 Sports that will include highlights and analysis of multiple professional and college sports as well as a customized format designed to integrate with Twitter's platform, which will use Twitter-based data to determine live trending topics and create other interactive elements.

A number of sports media giants are partners in 120 Sports, including Time Inc./Sports Illustrated, MLB Advanced Media and Campus Insiders.

Twitter isn't just sticking to mainstream sports. Up-and-coming professional e-sports organization ELeague also made a deal with Twitter to live stream its inaugural semifinals and championship video gaming matches, which were held at the end of July.

The agreement makes sense, according to Twitter, because gamers are one of the largest and most engaged audiences on the platform. The deal involves a partnership between Twitter, Turner Broadcasting System Inc. and sports and entertainment management agency William Morris Endeavor-International Management

Group. Twitter provided live event coverage as well as highlights, memes, statistics and score updates.

Twitter's flurry of sports deals may be a strategic move to boost advertising and users. The company reported its worst quarterly revenue growth in its 10-year history this July. It also

indicated that its fortunes were unlikely to improve in the near future, according to The New York Times.

Its second-quarter revenue of \$602 million was up 20 percent from 2015 but below analysts' estimated \$607 million. The number of Twitter users grew 3 percent from a year ago, to 313

million, Twitter reported to the Securities Exchange Commission.

Live streaming a broad selection of sports events could help Twitter attract a broader audience and present new opportunities to sell video advertisements geared toward a variety of platforms.

More deals may be on the horizon. Twitter is reportedly in talks to bring its sport streaming content to Apple TV. After a decade in the social media business, Twitter is seeking a fresh infusion of users and a new source of ad revenue and its new sports streaming deals could be the answer.