

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 164, No. 6

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

## Streaming experience takes next step with NBA G League

**T**witch, the eSports streaming platform that commands 15 million active users a day, has started live-streaming the National Basketball Association's G League games, in a first-of-its-kind partnership between one of the major sports leagues and an over-the-top streaming service.

Twitch began streaming the NBA G League, the NBA's developmental league, on Dec. 15. The platform plans a heavy schedule of live games — up to six each week during the 2017-2018 season — and will also make past games available on-demand.

Twitch is also bringing its own brand of interactivity to the NBA through its unique community of content creators and viewers. With the NBA G League partnership, Twitch is striking out in a direction that's both novel and familiar at the same time. The platform is becoming known as an innovator in sports streaming at a time when sports fans are increasingly moving away from cable channels like ESPN to watch traditional sports.

Designed to leverage fan commentary and a passionate online community, Twitch is uniquely positioned to serve the exploding eSports industry, which industry watchers predict will generate \$1.5 billion by 2020. According to the company, every major video game publisher and developer has its own Twitch channel.

Launched in 2011, Twitch showed such promise that Amazon.com acquired it in September 2014 for \$970 million. More than merely a video-streaming platform, Twitch serves as a community platform for content created by more than 2.2 million individuals a month, who interact in real-time with their own followings about subjects including video games, pop culture and their own lives.

### SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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Twitch's initial experience with professional basketball came in streaming NBA 2K, a basketball simulation video game created in 1999 by Take-Two Interactive Software. The market for the game has grown to the point that the NBA 2K eSports League will debut in mid-2018 and feature professional eSports players competing on teams operated by NBA franchises.

Twitch is just one player of many in eSports streaming, however. A number of familiar names in the social media, video game development and sports worlds are also jostling for space in the increasingly crowded market, including Google (with YouTube Gaming, launched in 2015), Microsoft (with its Mixer platform, launched in 2016) and Facebook live (chosen in 2017 by Hi-Rez Studios and the World eSports Association to be the exclusive streaming partner for their new Paladins Premier League).

Twitch signed a two-year deal in mid-2017 with game developer Blizzard Entertainment Inc. for the streaming rights to some of its games' biggest events, but it will share the rights to stream the highly anticipated inaugural season of Overwatch League, a

12-team, city-based franchise built around Blizzard's popular "Overwatch" game with Major League Gaming, a streaming platform in which Blizzard owns a majority stake. Blizzard also granted Major League Gaming the exclusive rights to stream the Overwatch League's preseason games.

Meanwhile, the cross-over between live-action sports and eSports has already happened — in reverse — with BAMTech, Major League Baseball's video-streaming service agreeing in 2016 to pay a reported \$300 million to Riot Games to stream its "League of Legends" competitions through 2023. As part of the deal, BAMTech will also distribute the content to other streaming platforms, including Twitch.

Disney, which previously owned a minority share of BAMTech, last year upped its stake to 75 percent and announced plans to launch a direct-to-consumer service that will reportedly offer streaming of more than 10,000 live games and events yearly, including MLB and NHL games, Major League Soccer, Grand Slam tennis and a variety of collegiate sports. At

present, it does not appear that the ESPN-branded platform will include eSports, however.

Offering viewers access to live-action sports isn't the first move Twitch has made to expand its content and its viewership. Recognizing that its community has interests outside of eSports, Twitch has introduced content that goes beyond gaming.

The platform provides outlets for community members to show off their creativity, from drawing to cooking and making videos about whatever subject is on their minds. The platform hosts live streams across a variety of categories, including its most-popular (nongaming) category IRL (In Real Life), featuring streamers who chat with viewers in real-time, Talk Shows, which includes live panels, podcasts and other shows, Cooking, which includes cooking and food shows and "Creative," where artists and others live-stream their creative efforts. There's even a "social eating" category, in which content creators share a meal with viewers.

Twitch's groundbreaking partnership with the NBA G League, combined with its unique, community-driven model and the development of certain live-streaming features, could help the streaming service stand out from the pack and give it an advantage over its rivals, however.

Twitch is positioned to benefit from introducing new talent and innovative developments that come out of professional basketball's 26-team minor league to NBA fans.

Significantly, Twitch noted that 44 percent of all NBA players during the 2016-2017 season spent time in the G League. Twitch may also be able to tap into a new market, converted from fans who attend G League games seeking a more affordable and family-friendly experience.

Twitch also offers a variety of streaming features to enhance the viewing experience and engage fans in new ways.

“Costreaming” from selected established Twitch personalities and basketball fans provides additional commentary during the game. According to Twitch, costreaming lets content creators join a channel’s stream and add their own commentary, giving their community a more personalized, social experience.

Viewers can choose which personalities they want to follow and chat with them during the game. Each game offers multiple costreamers to choose from, each with a unique point of view or specialty.

For example, one personality may focus on analytics while another concentrates on statistics. One costreamer may take a comedic tone, while someone else may offer serious, straightforward commentary.

Twitch is also creating original programming around its costreamers. The platform is currently auditioning costreamers to compete in its upcoming series “Stream On,” which will put content creators through their paces to find the most entertaining personalities.

Viewers will be able to help decide who advances to the next round each week. The winner will be awarded \$5,000 per month for a year, along with the opportunity to take his or her streaming career to the next level, according to Twitch. “Stream On” is scheduled to premiere in March.

A lot is riding on costreamers’ success, and Twitch is giving them tools to help them succeed. Content creators have access to statistics on viewership, chat activity and their progress toward becoming a Twitch affiliate or a partner. Both levels offer perks including the ability to earn revenue.

For example, those that reach the partnership level have opportunities to earn revenue from the ability to run commercials on their channel and have viewers pay a fee to subscribe to their channel and get additional subscription benefits. The platform also offers ways for content creators to share their communities with each other by driving traffic to another streamer and promoting new content.

Twitch is also taking advantage of the cord-cutting wave, but in a way that further distinguishes the platform. Unlike more traditional streaming providers that require a paid account or package to access content, Twitch users don’t need anything except an Internet-connected device to watch and comment.

In fact, viewers don’t need to log in to view content, and the moderated but otherwise unfettered fan commentary is one of

the reasons Twitch has been able to build a huge community that watches more than 100 minutes of content on average every day. Some say that Twitch, by encouraging hourlong sessions, offers an experience that is very much like watching traditional TV, which may make the transition away from cable TV easier, especially for those accustomed to watching content on cordless providers like Netflix and YouTube.

Of course, Twitch is banking on a number of assumptions. It remains to be seen whether people will watch the NBA’s minor league reality show and whether Twitch’s nonsports-related, community-building efforts pay off. But Twitch has already proven its ability to listen to what its users want while trying out new ways to transform traditional viewing experiences. Its main challenge may be simply continuing to do so.