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Sports marketing has created new world last decade, but what next

As the year 2020 ushers in a new decade, it's evident that the past decade has seen numerous game-changing developments in sports and sports marketing, including unprecedented evolution in communication, technology and analytics to promote athletes, teams, leagues and brands.

The savviest sports organizations used every marketing tool at their disposal to engage fans by publicizing athlete statistics, ground-breaking innovations, emerging personalities and feel-good stories. At the rate technology is developing, these tools and practices provide a solid jumping-off point for the next 10 years.

Here are, in our humble opinion, the 10 most far-reaching developments and trends in sports marketing in the last decade:

Fueling Cubs fever

The biggest feel-good story of the decade was — obviously — the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series for the first time in 108 years, with an epic victory over the Cleveland Indians in Game 7. The team went all-in on new technology to whip up fans and improve player performance.

The team embraced social media to fuel the fire of Cubs fever, notably making its iconic Flying W logo a Twitter sensation with a marketing campaign featuring the hashtag #FlyTheW. Fans who didn't attend the games also had plenty of options to experience the series, from streaming video on Fox Sports Go and MLB.tv, to play-by-play action on the MLB At Bat app, to real-time commentary on media sites and social media platforms.

Of course, strategic trades and draft picks, and a new manager, helped get the Cubs back to the World Series in the first place. But the Cubs also adopted wearable tech in 2016 to collect and analyze data on player performance and health vitals and improve pitchers' performance and prevent injury.

Data, data, data

In the 2010s, a truly eye-popping amount of sports statistics became available to



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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media and technology companies seeking to satisfy the appetites of analysts and fans hungry for real-time and historical sports data.

For example, sports data and digital content provider Sportradar US made deals with the National Football League, the National Basketball Association and the National Hockey League to collect, analyze and distribute player, team and league data to the leagues and in-house media outlets.

Meanwhile, MLB Advanced Media, a digital media company owned jointly by the 30 baseball teams in the league, partnered with the sports data and content company STATS LLC to distribute real-time and post-game stats on MLB games to broadcast, print and digital media outlets.

MLBAM also launched a new player performance-tracking initiative to capture data on the movements of every single player's actions on every single play through high-definition cameras installed at every major league ballpark.

In college sports, Google Cloud became the official Cloud Partner of the National

Collegiate Athletic Association in a partnership that delivers an avalanche of facts and stats about March Madness, the NCAA's Championship Tournament and its 80-year history as well as competition data across 90 NCAA championships and 24 sports.

Athletes as entrepreneurs

The past decade saw sports stars take their business endeavors to the next level. At the same time, new opportunities opened up for less-famous players.

A few players moved beyond sponsorships and created their own media platforms. Brooklyn Nets forward Kevin Durant launched Thirty Five Media to create and distribute content about his career and outside projects. Former New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter founded The Player's Tribune, an influential platform that publishes content by other athletes to connect directly with fans.

Athletes outside the celebrity stratosphere are building their own business brands as well. The athlete marketing platform called opendorse enables individual athletes at all levels to become content creators and distributors for sponsors.

Launched in 2012, opendorse helps athletes build their own personal brands and attract business opportunities.

Athletes, brands and social issues.

Athletes speaking out about social issues is nothing new, but the 2010s saw an emerging trend in sponsors backing outspoken athletes specifically for their activism. Nike went all-in by featuring controversial former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick in a national advertising campaign. Kaepernick began taking a knee during the playing of the "The Star-Spangled Banner" before NFL games in 2016 to protest racism and police brutality against African Americans.

The move defined Nike's corporate values and drew both positive and negative attention to the company, which happens to be the league's official apparel sponsor. One athlete who followed Kaepernick's

lead was Megan Rapinoe, co-captain of the 2019 World Cup-winning U.S. women's soccer team and an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights and equal pay for female athletes. Sports drink manufacturer BodyArmor snapped up Rapinoe to star in an ad that embraced both individualism and patriotism.

Other athletes have started making their social justice views part of their sponsorship deals. Simone Manuel, the first African American woman to win an individual Olympic gold medal in swimming, negotiated a groundbreaking agreement with a swimwear apparel company TYR Sport Inc. Manuel's rider ensures that diversity will be reflected in the projects Manuel pursues with the brand.

Social media explodes

Since the beginning of the 2010s, sports figures and organizations have leveraged the growing power of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms to build their brands, gain followers, interact with fans and create new opportunities. Today, an active social media presence is an essential part of nearly every athlete, team and league's brand marketing plan.

Star athletes who consistently post on their accounts and engage with fans can rack up millions of followers and become great ambassadors for their sport and their sponsors. Consider pro basketball's LeBron James, who, with more than 97 million followers across Instagram and Twitter, can just as easily rile up Premier League fans abroad (King James has owned a minority share in Liverpool F.C. for nearly a decade) as he can influence fans at home to enjoy some good Mexican food on #TacoTuesday.

While teams and leagues benefit from players' social media popularity, they may take issue over athletes' personal social media activities conducted on their own accounts and their own time. How damage control and privacy concerns are navigated is a question for the next decade.

Streaming outside the box

"Over the top" streaming, dominated by Netflix, Amazon Video and Hulu, gained momentum middecade when sports-specific OTT streamers joined the party. Three sports OTT services led the charge — MLB.TV, WWE Network and NFL Game Pass — and offered subscribers content they couldn't get anywhere else, such as out-of-market game coverage.

The flexibility of being able to watch programming through internet-connected devices, new content and lower fees had consumers flocking to the subscription-based streaming services. Cable, satellite and broadcast TV, which had been the go-to outlets for sports coverage, found themselves playing catch-up and began launching their own streaming services.

Then, social media platforms jumped in, bringing their own brand of community-based interactivity along. Twitter launched its own 24/7 streaming video network and became the NFL's exclusive streaming partner, while the MLB struck a deal with Facebook to stream games nationally. Twitch secured the rights to stream a range of sports programming and led the way for followers to post real-time feedback and comments.

Esports revolution

Who knew in 2009 that the competitive video gaming industry, known as esports, would be a \$1 billion global business by the end of 2019? Esports revenues have soared due to sponsorships, media rights and advertising. At the same time, the esports fan base is approaching a staggering 300 million worldwide.

Professional sports team owners and leagues have invested in esports organizations to capitalize on the phenomenon. In 2018, for example, the NBA sponsored a new eSports league centered on the popular NBA 2K, a game created by Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. The virtual league mirrors the NBA's real-world franchise format. In addition, colleges and universities across the country have launched their own e-sports teams and conferences.

Game makers Riot Games Inc. and Blizzard Entertainment Inc. have their own city-based leagues with franchises across the U.S. and around the world. Game makers are in a unique position to control the esports landscape going forward because they own the intellectual property underlying their esports games.

A new virtual world

Virtual reality technology, which captures 180-degree and 360-degree views of sports action or an event, gained traction in just about every aspect of sports, but it remains to be seen whether virtual reality has staying power or will be eclipsed by the next cool tech in town. Virtual reality broadcasts require a lot of technology, including virtual

reality headsets for viewers, multiple cameras at sports venues and powerful computers to produce the 3D experience.

Intel partnered with the MLB, NFL, NBA and NCAA to broadcast events in virtual reality, while NextVR broadcast major sports events including the Daytona 500. The NBA uses virtual reality to help players improve their performance by simulating the first-person playing experience during training in order to hone their skills in a protected environment. Additionally, the NFL developed a training program using virtual reality simulators for its referees to reinforce their accuracy.

Professional sports leagues are also exploring the idea of virtual season tickets for a more convenient and affordable alternative to attending a game. At least one sponsor has even toyed with the notion of a virtual athlete as a spokesperson. In 2017, Coca-Cola introduced game character Alex Hunter as its brand ambassador for the new Coca-Cola Zero Sugar in FIFA 18.

AI comes to life

When Wimbledon introduced a chatbot called Fred in 2017 to help fans navigate the tennis tournament's grounds, it proved to be just the start of what artificial intelligence can do for sports.

Powered by Watson, IBM's artificial intelligence platform, Fred soon became fans' go-to resource to enhance their in-person experience. IBM also programmed Watson to improve Wimbledon's media content and output by learning to recognize and analyze the human component of sports, including competitors' emotions and body language, spectator reactions and player interviews and social media posts.

In its first year, Watson collected and analyzed an astonishing 4.5 million data points during Wimbledon. The platform then used the data to create highlight videos from the tournament's qualifying and main draw matches to air on broadcasts and websites, and through apps and social media. With up to 11 hours of play filmed each day for two weeks, an enormous amount of human labor was saved.

And ... the Cubs win!

Did we mention that the Cubs won the World Series for the first time since 1908? Here's hoping the next decade sees another championship title and myriad new ways for sponsors and fans to promote and celebrate the team and sports in general.