

Cablefax Daily™

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What the Industry Reads First

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Go Niche: Networks Pursue Underserved Sports Fans

Yes, sports are lifeblood for linear TV viewing—but you don't have to shell out billions for the big leagues to reap the benefits. Networks are whittling their own identity among the passionate fan base for various niche sports. Take **BBC America**, which kicked off a new season of professional darts last month that runs through the Premier League championship in May. "We have found that darts appeals to both traditional sports fans as well as our audience of early adopters and cultural influencers, who love discovering the next interesting thing just ahead of their peers," BBCA exec director *Courtney Thomasma* told **Cablefax**. "Its UK roots, big entertainment value and huge international fan base give darts instant credibility among our viewers." And then there's the fact sports, even those that aren't as well known, are more likely to bring in live viewers. BBCA is capitalizing on the live format by going beyond the linear broadcast and featuring a direct live-feed of the competition on digital and social platforms to serve uber fans, with Thomasma reporting high engagement on both platforms. For a network entrenched in sports like motorsports centric **MAVTV**, stepping up live telecasts has been essential. "When we started off about 10 years ago when [**Lucas Oil**] bought the network, we've gone from offering about 10-12 live events a year to now north of probably 200 hours of live programming," said *Bob Patison*, MAVTV's president and Lucas Oil's evp, gen counsel. "It's a passionate fan base and they're very vocal about what they like and don't like. To satisfy this audience, we had to step up our game and provide more live programming. The viewership keeps getting stronger, and proof of that lies in that we're becoming more attractive to advertisers and for producers who have content. They're knocking on our door now." MAV TV, which is in about 30 million homes, recently signed a deal with **605** for ratings and advanced measurement as it looks to provide more targeted opportunities to advertisers. **AXS TV** has blended music programming and festivals with mixed martial arts for more than 15 years. It recently expanded its niche sports ring to include women's wrestling, launching "WOW – Women of Wrestling," with Season 1 wrapping March 5 and a new season of 24 eps to roll out this fall. AXS doesn't share numbers, but AXS TV Fights CEO *Andrew Simon* said it "is one of the most-watched series live in our network history." Helping the live push are the wrestlers live tweeting during matches alongside WOW & **LA Lakers** owner *Jeanie Buss* and AXS execs. It also opens up new business opportunities. "We plan to talk about the next steps for WOW and where we go

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All areas of discipline are in the running, including PR/marketing, digital, social, technology, HR, finance, legal, regulatory and beyond. There are no age parameters.

BONUS: The Cable Center and Cablefax will select one outstanding People to Watch honoree to become a Cablefax IA Scholar, which includes free attendance of the May 7-June 26 Cable Center Intrapreneurship Academy—a nearly \$6,000 value.



Questions:

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with that. I think ultimately, one day they'd like this to be a touring company where you can watch live events," Simon said. "The future is very bright. They want to give this group of women a platform to succeed and do this full-time." AXS has found other areas it can super serve niche audiences, with it beginning to offer real-time, same-week coverage of the critically acclaimed **New Japan Pro Wrestling** this past fall. "We're never going to pull the **UFC** and **NFL** in, but we have a unique scouting team to find great content that fits AXS TV and the customers that want to see best in class that they might not be able to see anywhere else." Niche networks are constantly looking for ways to super serve fans. Equestrian-focused **RIDE TV** is breaking into bull riding with Tuesday's launch of "PBR Ride to Glory," a produced show featuring the riders in the Pendleton Whisky Velocity Tour and other events. "We think this is going to broaden the scope of people we can target because bull riding is such a fun thing. It's like MMA in that there are super fans all over the world who gather at huge arenas like Madison Square Garden to enjoy bull riding," said *Amanda Morris*, RIDE's director of marketing and PR. "It's what RIDE TV has been doing from the beginning—creating a home for this niche audience that never was able to watch the things they were passionate about before."

YES on Deck: The saga for **Fox's** RSNs took a new turn Friday after a *NY Post* story said an **Amazon**-led group of investors was ready to buy **YES Network** imminently for \$3.5bln. While there were suggestions from the Post and other outlets that a deal could be announced Friday, *Sports Business Daily* reported that a Yankees purchase of the 80% of YES it doesn't already own is still several months out. And *Forbes* reported that the Yankees will be the lead investor, not **Amazon**, though Amazon and **Sinclair Broadcast Group** are to be partners. They would give the RSN an extended broadcast and OTT platform. **RedBird Capital**, **Blackstone**, **Mubadala Investment Co**, **Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan** and the **Michael Dell Fund** are on board as investors, according to *Forbes*. Some of those names may sound familiar with *Bloomberg* reporting back in the fall that the Yankees had lined up the Ontario Teachers, RedBird and Mubadala. RedBird's managing partner *Gerry Cardinale* helped created the YES Network back when he was a partner at **Goldman Sachs**. In another tie to YES, the Yankees are co-owners of the New York City Football Club with City Football Group, whose group chairman is *Khaldoon Al Mubarak*—CEO of Mubadala Investments. **Disney** is still trying to sell the remaining 21 Fox RSNs it would acquire when it purchases 21st Century Fox, with bidders including **Liberty Media** and the **MLB**.

The WOW! Factor: **WOW!** didn't meet analyst expectations with its 4Q18 earnings Thursday, reporting revenues of \$285.4mln (down 2.5% YOY and shy of analysts' \$292.53mln consensus). CEO *Teresa Elder* still found plenty to celebrate, including total subscriber growth of 19K. The provider also saw organic HSD RGUs grow by 5200 in the quarter.

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Elder attributed the positive results to WOW!'s investments in the customer experience throughout 2019. While other providers are dipping their toes into the wireless business, Elder made it clear that isn't the plan for WOW! anytime soon. Instead, it'll keep working to diversify its offerings to cut back on video losses. "We saw a 44% improvement in video losses in 2018 relative to the year-ago period, and that's one of our best video results in the last three years," Elder said. "In terms of HSD, I think it's really the culmination of the many strategies we had, whether it was the improvements we made in customer care, the more targeted and precise sales and marketing approach, launching new products... The combination of all of those things that not only helped impact connects at the top end of the funnel being more positive, but also the churn reduction."

Ratings: "Free Solo" is now the most-watched **National Geographic Documentary Films** premiere ever on **Nat Geo**, bringing in nearly 1.5mln US viewers in L+3 during its debut on March 3 at 9pm.

People: **Fox Sports** upped **Randy Stephens** to svp/gm, **Fox Sports Ohio** and **SportsTime Ohio**. He'll assume the role immediately, overseeing all aspects of both businesses. Stephens took on the role of ep, **Fox Sports South**, **Fox Sports Carolinas**, **Fox Sports Tennessee** and **Fox Sports Southeast** in 2012 and previously spent 17 years with the **NBA**.

Cablefax Dashboard

Tweet Tweet

Bill Maher @billmaher
 Just watched Neverland doc - riveting, as has been so much on HBO with Richard Plepler at the helm, now resigned. I don't usually speak publicly about the inner workings of the/my biz, but just have to say...best boss I'll ever have.
 7:08 PM - 3 Mar 2019

Sandy Weicher @sandyweicher
 I would not be a VP @comcast if not for WICT. 30 Years ago WICT is where I met other women and learned what a career in cable could be. My closest friends and colleagues, skills, brand and confidence came from WICT. Thank you @wictmq @WICTNewEngland @wictchicago. #LeadWithMore
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 Check out this inspirational campaign celebrating the women leaders who transform our industry. Our very own @noopurdavis is featured as part of the #LeadWithMore global launch in honor of @wictmq 40th anniversary.
 4:53 AM - 5 Mar 2019

Up Ahead

- March 8-17: SXSW**; Austin, TX
- March 19-21: ACA Summit**; DC
- March 26:** Free State Foundation Eleventh Annual **Telecom Policy Conference**; DC
- March 27: T. Howard Foundation Diversity Awards Dinner**; NYC
- April 3-4: CableLabs European Conference 2019**; London
- April 4-7: SkiTam Adaptive Spirit**; Vail, Colorado

Research

- US smart speaker owners rose 40% in 2018 to reach 66.4mln with total smart speakers in use rising to 133mln.
- New smart speaker sales vaulted ownership to 26.2% of US adults, up from less than 20% in 2017.
- Amazon Echo maintains a 61% market share among smart speaker owners while Google Home has closed the gap, rising 5.5% to a 24% share.
- Smart speaker ownership is driving more to use voice assistants on their phones.
 (Source: [Voicebot.ai](#))

Quotable

"I was speaking to a group of ladies about my book, **Resilient on Purpose**, and I could tell that they were either fearful of the next thing or waiting for someone to tell them what they needed to do next. So, I asked them, 'Why gamble in Vegas when you receive a greater return on investment by investing in yourself?' Be a risk-taker. Don't be afraid of it. You can't grow your career on the sidelines. You have to get in the game."
 – **Shinese Collins, senior manager, product marketing operations – Internet & Voice for Cox Communications, in A+E Networks'** [SheReports](#)

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