

Cablefax Daily™

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

On Deck: Sinclair Ready to Put Bally Sports Networks in Starting Lineup

Rebranding a network is no small feat in the best of times. Throw in a pandemic and a clock ticking down to Opening Day, and it's going to be a photo finish for **Sinclair** to flip the **Fox Sports RSNs** to **Bally Sports** this week.

Sinclair's partnership with Bally's was finalized in November, with the goal always to have the relaunch ready when baseball returned. "That essentially gave the team four or five months to make all these changes. [COVID] caused production delays because the teams that we have in place couldn't go and do site visits as they normally would. All of those timelines were compressed. Then there were loads of delays with getting materials and supplies due to COVID," explained *Dana Feldman*, Sinclair Broadcast Group's svp, marketing and promotions. "It's a whole rebuild... It's all encompassing so that when you look at it, it's not going to look like Fox Sports with just the new Bally name. Everything is completely different."

By the numbers, the rebrand entails creating more than 2800 network, team and player animation graphics, more than 3000 new sponsorship graphics, 500+ new pieces of artwork, eight studio updates, 74 desks with new technology and two brand new studios. There's new music, in-park signage, Bally Sports swag, and so forth. All of this to have the Fox Sports RSNs ready to make the switch to Bally Sport at 6am ET Wednesday—the day before MLB Opening Day.

The pandemic also prevents Sinclair from doing a big blow-

out launch event for affiliates (we're still hearing about 2019, when Sinclair took over Wrigley Field at **NCTC** and **ACA Connects'** Independent Show for the launch of **Marquee Sports Networks**, its jv with the Cubs). The Bally Sports team is doing its part though to help MVPD partners prepare for the change-up. That includes creating a one-sheet to help customer service reps deal with any subscribers confused about why their Fox Sports network has a new name and is decked out in red instead of blue. Electronic programming guides will be updating to the Bally Sports name on a rolling basis.

"We're hoping that maybe by All-Star break things potentially could really open up to maybe have an in-person event," Feldman said. With experiential marketing out the window, Sinclair is leaning on its broadcast networks, along with **Tennis Channel** and **Stadium** to spread the word. It's doing paid media buys, but even those look a little different in the age of coronavirus.

"We're not doing a whole lot of outdoor billboards because, again, COVID. People aren't back to work. Their normal traffic patterns are not in place. Same with radio," Feldman said. "We've really had to shake things up. We're where the people are. They're on cable. They're on OTT. They're on streaming right now. We've really had to shift a lot of our focus for getting the name out."

The RSNs will kick off MLB Opening Day coverage Thursday at 11am ET with "Bally Sports Big Opening Day," a national show that will leverage all the RSNs to offer fans a live, whip-



Who Deserves to Rank Among Cablefax's Annual Top Power Players?

The Cablefax 100 salutes the most influential executives whose leadership continues to take the industry to new heights. We will rank the top professionals in the media, cable & broadband industry and publish the list in the June edition of Cablefax: The Magazine.

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around-style Day 1 telecast that will also feature NHL, NBA and pro-tennis highlights. The program will originate from Stadium's studio in Chicago and air across all 19 Bally Sports regional networks.

The 10-year Sinclair-Bally's partnership of course sets up the RSNs for sports wagering, but none of those elements will be in place for the rebrand. Sinclair bought the Fox Sports RSNs in 2019 from Disney for around \$10 billion. It's betting on the gaming side of the business, which is huge for Bally's. Bally's was formed in 2004 as Twin River Worldwide Holdings, changing its name to Bally's Corporation in November after buying the brand from **Caesar's Entertainment** and launching on the New York Stock Exchanges as BALY. In addition to its national gaming footprint, Ball's has made a number of interactive acquisitions, including US sportsbook tech platform **Bet.Works** and B2B free-to-play game provider **SportCaller**.

While COVID certainly adds some obstacles to the rebrand, Feldman said there is a bit of a silver lining. "There's this pent-up excitement for a lot of reasons. One, sports is back, hopefully, in a somewhat normal cycle. People are excited about sports, but also maybe it's a little bit more normal if there's opening of the stadiums. People can watch with other people outside on in their house or at a bar," she said. "Hopefully this year will be getting back to normal. I think that's all anybody wants."

T-MOBILE CLOSING TVISION STREAMING

T-Mobile is shuttering its TVision streaming service after just 5 months, instead opting to strike partnerships with **Google** and **Philo** to help customers cut the cord. "This shift may surprise

some given last year's TVision streaming services launch. But innovation seldom follows a straight line," T-Mobile CEO **Mike Sievert** wrote in a blog post. "This industry is incredibly fragmented, with new streaming services launching all the time, and we've concluded that we can add even more value to consumers' TV choices by partnering with the best services out there, negotiating incredibly streaming media deals for T-Mobile customers, and helping our customers navigate the increasingly complex streaming world." The streaming service was initially revealed in October, and T-Mobile received pushback from several programmers on the way their networks were being carried in TVision packages. To appease them, T-Mobile offered what it said was a temporary promotion in November that put the 33 channels in its \$10/month streaming service into its larger \$40/month and \$50/month packages. The promotion never ended. TVision LIVE and VIBE customers can get \$10 off **YouTube TV** and/or **Philo** every month. Existing LIVE customers will get a free month of YouTube TV to start and can get three free months of YouTube Premium. VIBE Customers will receive a free month of Philo. Starting April 6, all T-Mobile postpaid wireless and **Sprint** consumer customers are also eligible for the \$10 discount. T-Mobile's multi-year deal with Google goes beyond video, including a number of promotions across the Android marketplace. The wireless provider will establish Messages by Google as the default rich messaging solution for T-Mobile customers with Android smartphones, promote Google Pixel and Android devices and tout Google One as the preferred phone backup and cloud storage solution.

EVOCA DIVES INTO EDUCATION

Next-Gen TV service **Evoca** launched an educational pro-

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gramming initiative, called Evoca Learn. It will see the curation of 24-hour educational programming. The first program to launch under the Evoca Learn umbrella is the Field Trip Channel, which will feature live educational events, competitions and festivals as well as experts from a variety of fields. The Field Trip Channel will be offered free in markets where Evoca operates and will partner with local institutions and organizations for custom programming. The ATSC 3.0 powered pay TV service is launching in its second market, Twin Falls, Idaho, within the next few months and plans to add another 4-5 markets by the end of 2021. Evoca launched in Boise, Idaho, in August.

FREEWHEEL CHARTS 10 YEARS OF VIEWING

Consumer behavior has changed significantly over the last decade, and **FreeWheel** has laid it all out in its H2 2020 edition of the US Video Marketplace Report. Amongst other things, the report covers how customers have embraced connected devices as means to view their favorite content. In the second half of 2020, non-desktop devices made up 84% of ad views. Connected TV now makes up 62% of all measured ad views with **Roku** and **Fire TV** contributing 72% of ad views. TV Everywhere also grew, making up 40% of ad views while streaming was just behind with 38%. Speaking of streaming, Netflix is still leading among streamers, but its market share is on the decline as more competitors begin to crowd the market. In 4Q20, **Netflix** claimed 34% of the overall market, down 6% YOY. **Hulu** counted 20% (-4%), **Disney+** had 18% (+3%) and **HBO/HBO Max** had secured 10% (+3%). Others claiming share in 4Q20 included **Starz** (6%), **CBS All Access** (6%), **Showtime** (4%), **Apple TV+** (1%) and **Peacock** (1%).

DRAFTKINGS, WWE STRIKE DEAL

DraftKings will become an official gaming partner of **WWE**, thanks to a new deal between the pair. DraftKings will receive an exclusive license to media assets and in-game branding for WWE pay-per-view events. Both WWE fans and DraftKings customers will be able to participate in integrated free-to-play pool games and products. The gaming company will also launch a free-to-play pool game at WWE's "Wrestlemania." The two-night event will take place April 10-11 and will stream exclusively on **Peacock** at 8pm ET in the United States and on **WWE Network** everywhere else.

AT&T URGES CAUTION ON FCC BROADBAND SPEEDS

AT&T is the latest company to caution the **FCC** about radically changing its 25/3Mbps definition of broadband. In a blog post, AT&T evp, federal regulatory relations *Joan Marsh* said that while the growing consensus is that there needs to be an update to that metric, hasty decisions could place more obstacles in the path to closing the digital divide. "When zooming, streaming and tweeting is combined in an average household of four, it's easy to conclude that download speeds must increase," Marsh said. "What is less clear is whether we need to increase upload speeds to the same level as download speeds for the purpose of defining 'unserved' ar-

eas." Like others, she said a definition built on symmetrical speeds could dramatically expand the number of locations deemed unserved, leading to overbuilding of some areas and the continued lack of broadband availability in others. She also urged the FCC to continue to be technology-agnostic in terms of what is used to serve a community. While fiber is the most future-proof approach, it isn't a cost effective choice in many hard-to-reach areas. She also said that while the speeds provided by fiber are great, they also cost a pretty penny. That opens the door for the nation's availability challenge to become an even greater affordability one.

ON THE CIRCUIT

NAB is hosting a 10-day virtual event during the time period usually owned by the NAB Show. The event, called NAB Show Premiere, will feature product launches, demonstrations, awards presentations and networking opportunities. **Sony**, **Panasonic** and **Grass Valley** are among the companies scheduled to make appearances. The association will also present the TV Chairman's Award and the Crystal Radio Awards during the event. The 2021 NAB Show is scheduled to take place in person October 9-13 in Las Vegas.

DISTRIBUTION

Disney+ and **ESPN+** are starting to roll out to **Xfinity Flex** and **X1** customers. Disney+ is expected to be available on both platforms within the next few days. ESPN+ is already available to Flex customers via the ESPN app and is expected to launch on X1 in the coming weeks. – **Comcast** expanded broadband service to 600 homes and businesses on tribal and non-tribal lands in and surrounding the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe's community campus in Washington state. Comcast and the Tribe have invested nearly \$3 million over the last two years to bring service to underserved homes, and full deployment is expected in the coming months.

PROGRAMMING

CNBC teamed up with investment platform **Acorns** for special coverage during April's Financial Literacy Month. The network's *Sharon Epperson* will moderate three virtual town halls for financial education geared towards students and teachers in secondary and higher education. The first is scheduled for April 14. CNBC will produce vignettes with key takeaways from interviews with well-known business figures. – **National Geographic Documentary Films** acquired pandemic doc "The First Wave." The movie will be released theatrically later this year. – Seven-episode home renovation series "Inside Out" premieres on **HGTV** April 26 at 9pm. – Anthology series "Wild West Chronicles" will premiere on **INSP** April 11 at 5:30pm ET.

EDITOR'S NOTE

It's that time of year! Nominations are open for the **Cablefax 100**. We are looking for the industry's most influential executives whose leadership and acumen makes them worthy of this list of power players. Nominate by April 9 at www.Cablefax100.com.