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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Pain Points: Fox, ESPN on Improving Live Sports Experience With DTC

It's been a few months since the launch of **Fox One** and **ESPN Unlimited**. While we're still waiting to hear how the DTC apps are performing from a numbers perspective, we learned a bit more about how each programmer is working to improve the live sports watching experience for fans at the **SportsPro NY** conference Thursday. Insights on countering fragmentation, ingestion and personalization felt particularly pertinent just weeks after the **FCC** opened an [inquiry](#) into the state of the current sports media marketplace and whether it's harming consumers.

Nielsen reported this morning that sports accounted for nearly 30% of all ad-supported TV viewing among adults ages 25-54 in 4Q25. Yet, while sports content is dominating viewer attention, media rights are more scattered across broadcast, cable and streaming than ever before. A fear is that the launch of new sports-heavy DTC streamers complicate the problem further by cannibalizing pay TV content and viewers. Confusion around pay TV authentication to watch exclusive ESPN Unlimited content certainly hasn't helped DTC's case, but Fox DTC CEO *Pete Distad* would have you know that Fox One is taking an approach that targets cordless viewers specifically, offering the same programming as on pay TV without sacrificing its distributors.

"The reality of the market was that there were 60+ million households that weren't currently on pay TV," Distad said.

"We basically recognized that these consumers wanted access to our sports, news and entertainment content, so we had to come up with a solution." He reiterated a point we've frequently heard from programmers when DTC apps come up: "Our goal is absolutely not to go after the pay TV ecosystem, and we believe that that's, at least today, the best way for sports customers to get access to everything they're looking for," Distad said.

It's true that in recent months **Comcast**, **Charter**, **DirectTV** and other providers have launched aggregation and content discoverability features designed to ease fragmentation for their customers. Some analysts have even [argued](#) that the traditional cable package could end up being the cure to those illnesses. But Distad said that Fox also acknowledged that there's "another generation" of viewers who are "looking for choice, and they're looking to watch on their own terms, and with it an updated user experience. So we need to sit in both roles." Ultimately, the goal is to give as many people as possible access to Fox's content.

If you think changing consumer habits, especially with younger demographics flocking to short-form highlight content vs watching telecasts, is a complex topic, try tackling the labyrinthine task of solving fragmentation. "I don't think we can solve this on our own. ESPN can't solve this on their own. **Peacock** can't solve this on their own," Distad said. "We're taking some small steps, like our partnership with ESPN to put together a bundle." That bundle offers both DTC services

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and all the sports programming that comes with them for \$39.99/month.

“Others in the industry have said that they want to start doing ingestion,” Distad added, suggesting it could be a way to consolidate sports programming and make it easier for folks to find the games they want to watch in the streaming era. “Amazon’s doing what they can do from a platform perspective to pull this together. The pay TV guys are continuing to do that, even on the digital side.”

Fox One already ingests **Fox Nation** and **B1G+** programming, and it’s open to doing more. “As the industry evolves, the platform is nimble enough to allow us to roll with it. If it starts to become a situation that people start ingesting each other’s services and sell it, we’re there. We built the capabilities to do it,” Distad said.

ESPN VP, Sports Product Management *Brian Marshall* also talked up the benefits of integrating the brand’s content into **Disney+**, calling it a “great delivery vehicle” for distributing sports programming, including in international markets where ESPN Unlimited isn’t available, such as Latin America.

“When we launched DTC, we did bring ESPN into the Disney+ app as well, which was good in a couple places. One, it was good for the ESPN business to be able to reach the fans in Disney+, but much more importantly, it was great for the fans and really continued to show value in the Disney bundle. They are able to watch all of that content in one place, which we think is really important,” Marshall explained.

ESPN is also heavily focused on building [personalization](#) features for the DTC app to better tailor the viewing experience to each user. “Personalization is not optional. It’s not a nice-to-have for us at the scale that we operate. It’s foundational for everything we do,” Marshall said. The reason is that everybody fans differently. There’s no two people who will experience sports the same way.”

One example of this effort is “SportsCenter for You,” a snackable, AI-generated version of the sports program serving news content that is relevant to the viewer’s interests. It’s housed within the short-form “Verts” section that launched with the DTC app. And it’s delivering results: “We’ve been able to see a 65% increase in short-form video [and] we were able to drive additional engagement by creating this personalized experience.”

Personalization isn’t all AI algorithms, though. It also involves ESPN’s content team and plenty of testing based on the content a user is engaging with on the app.

“We try to sample everything. We try to put a piece of content in front of someone to say, ‘Oh, Chris, maybe he’s interested in watching this college soccer game.’ We sample it. Did you click on it or not? And then we try to learn from that,” Marshall said.

GFIBER, ASTOUND NEXT ON CABLE’S M&A LINEUP

We have another cable merger on the books. **GFiber** announced that it’s combining with **Astound Broadband** to create a new, independent fiber provider that’ll be majority owned by the investment firm **Stonepeak**, while GFiber’s parent company **Alphabet** will remain a “significant” minority shareholder. The transaction is expected to close in 4Q26, subject to regulatory approvals and customary closing conditions. Financial terms weren’t disclosed. “This partnership with Astound and Stonepeak is the next step in our decade-long mission to redefine what customers can expect from their internet provider,” GFiber CEO *Dinni Jain* said. “It’s a strategic opportunity to scale our customer-focused approach to connect more households to a truly different type of internet service.” GFiber noted that its metropolitan networks and Astound’s infrastructure “creates a highly complementary, national network platform,” adding that the company “will have the external capital and strategic focus needed to accelerate its next phase of growth.” No word on whether the merged companies will undergo a rebrand once the deal is finalized, though GFiber’s current executive team will lead the combined company. According to **New Street Research**, GFiber held 2.8 million locations across 15 states in 2025, while Astound had 4.5 million in 13 states. A combined GFiber-Astound will see at least one cable competitor in 94% of its footprint. **Charter** and **Comcast** pose as the biggest rivals with an overlap in 43% and 46% of GFiber-Astound’s footprint, respectively. **AT&T** is the largest ILEC and fiber competitor, accounting for more than half of GFiber-Astound’s footprint while **Verizon** follows at around a quarter. NSR also notes that 38% of GFiber-Astound’s footprint has 0 or 1-Gig-capable competitors and 62% offers 2 Gigs or more.

DISNEY+ VERTS LANDING SOON

The vertical video trend is making its way to **Disney+** users in the U.S. this week. The streamer is adding the “Verts” feature after first [announcing](#) the move in January. A new Verts icon will appear within the Disney+ navigation bar on mobile devices, where users can access various scenes and moments from programs that live on the SVOD. Initially, Disney+ hopes Verts will drive discoverability, but it eventually hopes to add user-generated content and other storytelling experiences. Disney’s first move with Verts came on **ESPN** when the refreshed app and DTC product were unveiled in August.

PWHL GOING NATIONAL

The **PWHL** is continuing on its upward trajectory, announcing a partnership with **Scripps Sports** to air the league's first-ever nationally televised game when the New York Sirens face the Montréal Victoire on March 28 (1pm). The contest will be available on **Ion**, meaning it'll be accessible to over 126 million U.S. households via OTA, pay TV, CTV or FAST platforms. It's not the first time Scripps and Ion have made an investment in women's sports. Ion currently airs more **WNBA** and **NWSL** games than any other national broadcaster. In recent years, the network introduced weekly doubleheaders for the WNBA on Fridays and the NWSL on Saturdays, as well as dedicated studio programming for both leagues. The PWHL, meanwhile, has accumulated a 20% YOY gain in average attendance so far this season and could see that number climb after Team USA won gold at the Winter Olympics.

ROKU GRABS MORE SPORTS

The **Roku Channel** is set to get more live sports after **Roku** expanded its multiyear rights deal with **X Games**. The MoonPay X Games League will be exclusive to The Roku Channel platform when it begins its inaugural season this Summer. What's the X Games League? It'll offer a team-based format across sports such as skateboarding, BMX, snowboard and skiing. Roku noted that it has had significant audience growth since partnering with X Games two years ago, as seen by a 149% YOY spike during the most recent X Games in Aspen. Additionally, the first-ever X Games League Draft will be available on The Roku Channel when it streams tonight.

FIBER FRENZY

Comcast completed the Xfinity network expansion in Clark County, Washington. Nearly 500 homes in the area of the county that lies northeast of Battle Ground Lake now have access to high-speed symmetrical internet. – **Charter** is expanding the Spectrum network to Washtenaw County, Michigan, including in the townships of Ann Arbor, Dexter, Lima, Northfield, Salem, Scio and Webster. The project will connect nearly 1,000 addresses in the area.

RATINGS

March Madness is here, but it looks like the college basketball hype has been around throughout the regular season. **ESPN** had

its most-watched season of men's college basketball since 2014-15, averaging 1.1 million viewers across 127 total games while **ABC** finished at 1.7 million across five events. ESPN's networks helped fuel a 25% YOY viewership improvement. It wasn't just ESPN: **Fox** and **FS1** had their most-watched men's college hoops seasons ever. Fox posted 1.22 million viewers and FS1 had 234,000, good for 38% and 25% YOY increases, respectively. Both ESPN and Fox had impressive women's college basketball ratings as well. ESPN's networks averaged 333,000 viewers this season, up 19% YOY and its best mark since 2008-09. A record 20 games had more than 500,000 viewers tune in. For Fox, its WCBB average of 700,000 viewers was its second-most-watched ever, while FS1's 148,000 was the most the network has garnered.

PROGRAMMING

Optimum-owned News 12 is rolling out "Made In," a weekly series that spotlights local businesses and entrepreneurs throughout the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut tri-state area. News 12 anchor *Rebecca Surran* will host the program, with the premiere set for March 16 at 9pm. Repeats will run Wednesdays at 3:30pm and 8:30pm, Sundays at 3:30pm and Sundays at 11am on News 12 New York. – **Fubo's** FAST platform **Fubo Sports Network** is uniting *Matt* and *Phil Simms* for a new, football-focused show called "Simms Complete." The program featuring the former **NFL** QBs debuted Thursday and will continue to release episodes on Thursdays at 11am.

PEOPLE

The team under incoming **Disney** CEO *Josh D'Amaro* is taking shape. *Paul Roeder* was tapped as the company's Sr. EVP/Chief Communications Officer effective next Thursday. Roeder, a 25-year Disney veteran, will oversee worldwide communications and PR strategy and operations, while also serving as Disney's lead spokesperson. His responsibilities include media relations, executive communications, enterprise editorial strategy, employee engagement and corporate social responsibility. Most recently, Roeder led communications for Disney's studios, DTC and international units since 2023.

BASIC CABLE		
P2+ PRIME RANKINGS*		
(03/02/26-03/08/26)		
MON-SUN	MC	MC
	US	US AA
	AA%	(000)
FNC	0.955	3073
MS NOW	0.410	1321
CNN	0.323	1040
ESPN	0.279	898
HGTV	0.194	626
HALL	0.167	539
TLC	0.164	529
HIST	0.160	514
FOOD	0.156	504
TBS	0.155	498
DISC	0.148	477
USA	0.125	402
FS1	0.120	388
TV LAND	0.120	385
GSN	0.119	383
A&E	0.113	363
INSP	0.111	358
ESPN2	0.105	340
NAN	0.098	314
HALLMYS	0.095	304
ID	0.092	297
AMC	0.087	280
BRAVO	0.084	272
LIFE	0.081	261
OXY	0.080	259
SYFY	0.077	249
FX	0.075	243
NWSMX	0.075	241
WETV	0.069	221
BET	0.067	216
REELZ	0.067	216
COM	0.066	212
NWSNTN	0.063	204
TNT	0.062	201
FRFM	0.061	196
TUDN	0.060	194
MTV	0.057	184
ADSM	0.053	171
FXX	0.051	165
TRAVEL	0.049	159
LMN	0.048	156
NATGEO	0.048	156
APL	0.048	155
BBCA	0.047	152
PRMNT	0.046	149
HLN	0.043	140
FETV	0.043	138

*P2+ L+SD rankers are based on national Nielsen numbers, not coverage.