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Sports-Centric Web Sites Expand, and Bias Is Welcome

By JOSEPH PLAMBECK

Last Thursday, [Kobe Bryant](#) tallied 30 points in Game 1 of the [N.B.A.](#) Finals. That night, Silver Screen and Roll, a blog dedicated to the [Los Angeles Lakers](#), racked up more than 3,500 comments.

The popular site is just one of more than 250 unapologetically biased sports sites owned by SB Nation, most of them dedicated to a single team. The sites, written by fans for fans, do not claim to break news or have an inside scoop, but they often serve as a digital water cooler for the like-minded.

So far, that service has been enough to draw eyeballs. According to [comScore](#), in April, the network drew 3.6 million unique visitors to its 21 most popular sites, the only ones tracked by the market research firm.

Now the company is getting into the regional sports business, introducing 20 new sites in the next several weeks that are dedicated to all of the sports in a particular city, as varied as New York and Kansas City.

The new sites add to a growing list of competitors to midsize daily newspapers, which once enjoyed a near-monopoly on local coverage. Many papers have been forced to cut staff in recent years, and sports sections are usually not spared.

“Newspaper sports sections are being squeezed from every conceivable angle,” said Timothy A. Franklin, the director of the National Sports Journalism Center at [Indiana University](#) and a former editor of The Baltimore Sun.

“There’s less of an emphasis being dedicated to regional sports coverage, and we think we’re filling an important need and doing it in a different way — ground up, grass-roots, instead of top-down,” said Jim Bankoff, the company’s chairman and a former executive at [AOL](#).

The company, now based in Washington, has come a long way since its first site, [AthleticsNation.com](#), went live in 2003. Tyler Bleszinski and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga (the creator of Daily Kos, the popular liberal blog) founded the company, expanding it slowly at first. Investors include Accel Partners, [Comcast](#) Interactive Capital and Allen & Company.

The pace has picked up in recent years. Last year, revenue increased fourfold, Mr. Bankoff said. Oddly, having the writers keep some distance from the team — they rarely interview the players, for example — is one of the keys to their success, Mr. Bankoff said.

That distance allows sports to be less “of a profession than a passion,” he said. “We want to stay on the fan side of things.”

They are doing that at a relatively low cost. The company has 29 full-time employees, including people on the advertising and technology side, while most of the contributors to SB Nation’s sites are paid a monthly stipend.

Each of the new regional sites will have its own editor. Al Yellon, for example, who has run Bleed Cubbie Blue, a site devoted to the [Chicago Cubs](#), will oversee the Chicago site.

One formidable competitor is [ESPN](#), the sports media juggernaut, which started its first regional site last year for Chicago and has since moved into other cities. Official team sites, particularly those run by Major League Baseball, also provide their own articles, images and video.

Many papers have cut back on the time and space devoted to high school sports, as well. Some Web sites have started to step into that vacuum, like [DigitalSports.com](#) and [HoosierAuthority.com](#).

DigitalSports, which is based in Ewing, N.J., largely relies on user-generated content — often from school administrators, parents and students themselves — to provide coverage of high school sports.

Angela Watts, a content editor for DigitalSports and a former reporter at The Washington Post, said the coverage was different from that of a professional reporter, “but if we can get 20 people at every school to write, then, yes, it is competition” for newspapers.

Sports sections historically have been loss leaders for newspapers, often with sporadic advertisements for tires, cars and niche products. Large retailers usually prefer to be in the paper’s main section and feature sections. But the coverage is a lure for readers, both in print and online. When a local team is doing well, readership often increases.

Mr. Bankoff said that newspapers do not have to fear their work and that they would be happy to work with any newspaper.

“We are actually complementary from what newspapers do. We embrace fan bias,” he said. “Newspapers focus on objective coverage — and when you combine the two, you get both perspectives.”

For one thing, he said, SB Nation rarely sends its writers on the road to cover a game. That helps keep costs down, of course, but Mr. Bankoff said it also helps preserve the fan perspective.

“As long as we have the reporters to cover the teams better than anyone else, we’ve got a place in the future,” said Marty Kaiser, editor of The Journal Sentinel of Milwaukee and a former sports editor for The Chicago Sun-Times. “Places like us, we have to wake up, we can’t just sit back and say, ‘We own this stuff.’ ”

The SB Nation sites sometimes do get access to team officials. Mr. Bleszinski, a former reporter at The Orange Country Register and a devoted [Oakland A’s](#) fan, has sat down for extended interviews with [Billy Beane](#), the team’s general manager. He posts the entire transcript on AthleticsNation.com.

But the most important thing that SB Nation sites provide, Mr. Bankoff said, is a place to gather. He hopes that the brand will be able to extend that offline, too.

As part of an introduction effort, the company is hosting events in each of the cities with new regional sites. Mr. Bankoff said it was not just a celebration party but part of the product offering.

“We wear our hearts on our sleeves,” said Mr. Bleszinski. “We’re looking for people to gather ’round.”