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The Business of Sports

LYDIA MURPHY-STEPHANS LAUNCHES TV GUIDE FOR SPORTS STREAMING AGE



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Sports [media](#) fragmentation has made it increasingly difficult for fans to find and watch “the game.” [SportsBubble](#), an internet-based technology company, is trying to simplify the content [discovery](#) and access process with the recent release of its WatchSports app, a universal, live sports and esports event guide for the streaming era.

“[The app is] a product that every single sports fan needs,” said Octagon global media rights consultant Dan Cohen, who is also on the SportsBubble board. “There has never been a more challenging time to discover live sports on screen, and WatchSports is the solution.”

JWS' Take: SportsBubble founder Lydia Murphy-Stephans, who was formerly the president of Pac-12 Networks, decided to take aim at the difficulties associated with streaming sports after trying to tune in to a 2018 NBA Finals game. The process of locating an app that was streaming the game (which was blacked out on the ABC app), trying unsuccessfully to authenticate her cable subscription (Comcast Xfinity did not offer in-app authentication at the time) then logging back into the ESPN app, where she was ultimately able to watch, took eight minutes of actual time.

“That was my epiphany moment,” she said. “I knew if it took me, a seasoned media executive and sports fan, eight minutes huntin’ and peekin’ on my iPad, that it was a missed opportunity for so many fans who would [have liked] to watch but weren’t going to spend that much time [searching for the game], and for the sports stakeholders who own or license events.”

Since 2018, live sports content and media rights have only become more scattered (see: MLB adding Amazon, Apple and Peacock to the mix). Technological improvements have “made it a little bit easier for the fan to connect to the event, if they already know where it is available to watch and they subscribe to such service,” Murphy-Stephans said. But when it comes to fans finding the content, the issues have been exacerbated.

The 2022 Beijing Olympics was a prime example. Comcast NBCUniversal touted thousands of hours of live programming across all of its networks and platforms, and yet, the Games were the [“least-watched”](#) in the network’s history. “A big issue was people complaining they could not find or connect to the event that they wanted while it was available,” Murphy-Stephans said. The time difference, ongoing human rights concerns and the pandemic were also factors that influenced viewership.

Murphy-Stephans said SportsBubble set out to create a global sports connection services to help solve the content discovery and access problems that plague sports fans. The WatchSports app lists all the sports and esports events taking place at a given time and the networks or streaming services that carry the event. And if SportsBubble has a partnership with the rights holder, it gives the fan the ability to directly connect to the game. DAZN, the Pac-12 Conference and Networks and the NWSL are among the app’s founding partners.

The WatchSports app can be a useful tool for fans who know what event they want to watch and need to figure out where and how to quickly access it. Additionally, with all events across networks and viewing platforms listed, WatchSports can also serve those looking for something entertaining to watch. “[Users will] come across events that [they] didn’t even know are available, and they’re live and accessible in [three] clicks,” Murphy-Stephans said.

Well, at least the ones that do not reside behind a paywall. If the event is being broadcast through a cable network, the user will have to authenticate through their provider, though Murphy-Stephans says users will soon be able to authenticate in the app and connect directly. And if the fan does not subscribe to the service the event is on, they will be presented with the opportunity to do so at that time. “That’s part of our business model,” Murphy-Stephans said.

In addition to serving as an affiliate for both streaming services and sports betting operators (connect-to-wagering functionality is in the plans), WatchSports will generate revenue as a listing service. “It costs money to list events and keep the event live 24/7. The app itself is a marketing tool for leagues, event owners, TV networks and streaming services,” Murphy-Stephans said.

The business roadmap calls for the introduction of a premium service soon, too.

This kind of broad discovery enabled by the WatchSports app should, in theory, benefit women’s sports. “Even now, with the success of women’s sports evolving and great athletes, less than 5% of sports on network television is dedicated to women’s sports,” Murphy-Stephans, a former Olympic speed skater, noted. A large portion remain on platforms like YouTube and Twitch and remain far from the average fan’s consciousness.

WatchSports believes it will help to level the playing field. “We are able to showcase and list all women’s sports events that have a live feed and let fans know where they can watch those events and in most cases, connect to them directly [since they reside on free platforms],” Murphy-Stephans said.

Rights owners and networks would also seemingly benefit from the WatchSports app becoming a household staple, like TV Guide once was. DAZN Group EVP Joe Markowski said in a press release, “This app is not only a new way for fans to easily find and access live sports, but will serve as another great partnership for DAZN to continue to grow its subscriber base.”

Cohen agreed that WatchSports is capable of driving meaningful viewership and subscriptions. But streaming companies will need to alter how they package and sell rights to maximize the potential. “Mini subscriptions. Partial plans. Individual game plans. [WatchSports] is going to be a catalyst for distributors to change [their offerings] to better reflect what the consumer today demands—which is choice.”

SportsBubble is not the only company looking to solve the content discovery challenge. Buzzer, a mobile application, exists to help ensure fans experience “the best live moments in sports.” The startup raised a [\\$20 million Series A](#) last summer.

SportsBubble has not raised any money to date. Murphy-Stephans has self-funded the R&D and early seed stages through her media company, LMS Media Ventures. She is now initiating a \$5 million seed raise that will be used for “build and growth”—hiring additional team members, adding partners and increasing the size of the user base.