

Playing Catch-up

As *Sporting News* attempts to relaunch its venerable brand, critics wonder if time has run out

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Ten men sit around an eight-foot-long mahogany table inside a well-lit conference room for a late-morning meeting in May. A man named Jeff D'Alessio, who's wearing a green V-neck sweater, sits at one end of the table and leads the meeting.

They've gathered, these editors, to plan the next day's issue of the digital sports newspaper called *Sporting News Today*. They skim through five-page memos titled "Page Breakdown 5/21 for USA's Best Sports Section."

One speaks up. He outlines a story about Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb. Others debate how best to feature the New York Yankees' resurgence since star Alex Rodriguez returned to the lineup. Should the reporter in New York talk to the visiting Baltimore Orioles' pitchers? Manager? Others?

Out the window of the second-floor office at Morehead and Church streets, you can see the outer edges of the skyline. This is the new home of *Sporting News*, an ageless American sports media brand, which moved here recently after more than a century in St. Louis.

D'Alessio, in his late thirties with blue eyes and light skin, mostly listens. Occasionally he interjects in a soft-spoken tone, massaging his face with his fingers as he talks. Yes, McNabb is a good story, he says. And interviewing the Orioles' pitching staff would be a good way to go.

After a half hour, the meeting breaks up. D'Alessio has the lineup for the May 21 issue of Today. It will also include stories and box scores from Major League Baseball games, notes from the Carolina Hurricanes–Pittsburgh Penguins NHL playoff series, as well as stories from the Associated Press. It will look like a newspaper. It will publish in the morning like a newspaper. But it's not a newspaper, because it will publish in a digital version only. It will not be shipped, but e-mailed to nearly 200,000 subscribers nationwide.

This is the product that *Sporting News* is counting on as it tries to transition from a struggling brand into a sustainable sports media player once again. Of course, all print publishers are trying to overcome the double whammy of the recession and the online migration. But *Sporting News* faces an even larger challenge: even when the economy was humming, its dated brand was falling behind. Now, it's gambling on an old-school product repackaged into a modern outfit. And *Sporting News* may be too far behind to catch up.

The first issue of *Sporting News* published around the time Abner Doubleday started playing baseball: 1886. The weekly was known as the "Bible of Baseball"; it was full of box scores, statistics, and baseball news. Printed in newspaper format, it was a leading

national sports publication for much of the twentieth century, and because the model was successful, the product changed little.

But by the late 1990s two glossy, feature- and photo-driven magazines had surpassed it — the weekly *Sports Illustrated* and biweekly *ESPN The Magazine*. *Sporting News* didn't move to a glossy format until 1997, the year before ESPN The Magazine launched — a few decades after SI and the once-thriving, now-defunct monthly Sport had.

The ESPN revolution happened, *Sports Illustrated* just got bigger, and *Sporting News* completely missed it.

But the glossy mag niche wasn't the only area where Sporting News got overpowered by sports behemoths. ESPN.com (<http://ESPN.com>) and SI.com (<http://SI.com>) are considered among the best and most successful media Web sites on the planet. And while ESPN.com (which boasted 21.4 million unique visitors in April 2009 versus SportingNews.com (<http://SportingNews.com>)'s 608,000) and SI.com recently debuted their revamped sites within a few months of each other, with a heavy emphasis on video clips, *Sporting News*'s site remains barely changed, further widening the gap between the sports-media bigwigs and the century-old brand.

"They're in a difficult place competing with *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN," says Mike Persinger, *The Charlotte Observer*'s sports editor. "Those are two monsters in this business and they morphed a lot faster than Sporting News did."



Advertising revenue tells the story best. Paul Allen, one of the co-founders of Microsoft, bought the company in 2000 for a reported \$100 million. Revenue dropped by double digits in 2000 and 2001, according to Magazine Publishers of America. In 2006, Allen sold all operations to American City Business Journals Inc. for less than half what he paid for it. The Sporting News brand overall, which also includes a Web site, sports annuals, and a radio network, was floundering, and things have only become worse. In 2007, the last full year the magazine published weekly, ad revenue (\$41.5 million) fell 14.2 percent while SI and ESPN The Magazine enjoyed ad revenue jumps of 10.3 percent and 18.2 percent, respectively. And last year, when the recession hit, The New York Times reported that Sporting News's ad revenue dropped about 50 percent, compared to an average magazine ad drop of 26 percent.

"Sporting news was a pretty antiquated brand when we picked it up," says publisher Ed Baker. "You're talking about a 122-year-old brand that needed reinvention and needed new life."

American City, which is headquartered here, launched a makeover rivaling the Boston Red Sox's appearance on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* in depth and breadth. The plan: move here, launch *Today*, and reshape the magazine. The new *Sporting News* magazine debuted last summer. The biweekly is heavy on content produced by, rather than about, the people it covers. The May 25 issue included a list of the fifty best baseball players today, as chosen by former players; columns by San Diego Padres pitcher Jake Peavy and New York Giants defensive end Osi Umenyiora; scouts' insights on the upcoming baseball draft; and more.

The question was and still is: is it enough to keep the fading brand from vanishing? That's where *Sporting News Today* comes in.

***Today's* launch was smart.** It was as if management collectively agreed that it was too late to compete — in readership and revenue — with *SI* and ESPN, the magazines and Web sites. Instead, *Sporting News* focused not on what it couldn't do, but what it could do ... and do better.

Enter *Sporting News Today* — a digital newspaper. *Today* is part of an effort to remake *Sporting News* as the brand for serious, smart sports fans — to give it an identity different from the edgy ESPN *The Magazine* or the more literary *SI*. The idea is to give readers a comprehensive national glance at Major League Baseball, the NBA, NHL, NFL, college football, college basketball, and NASCAR.



Today, which launched on July 23 last year, is usually thirty-plus pages and, to the chagrin of editors with social lives, has a 3 a.m. deadline so it can include almost every game's result. It publishes at 7 a.m. daily, zipping to subscribers' e-mail inboxes. It features a cover page with lead stories and teasers for inside stories. Readers can scroll through like they scan an actual paper. They can also click links and read more dynamically. It's full of headlines, briefs, short features, and pictures — much like an *Observer* sports section. It has no newsprint and little distribution costs. Subscribers pay nothing.

"While everyone else is cutting back, we had the opportunity to start something new," says D'Allesio, a former newspaper sports editor in Atlanta and Florida, who is now editor of both the magazine and *Today*.

"In the ESPN age, it took [*Sporting News*] a while to react to [ESPN and *SI*] in the way they should have," says Persinger. "*Sporting News Today* is an attempt to catch up."

Baker and D'Allesio point out positive early returns. Baker says *Today* has added advertisers and is approaching 200,000 subscribers, who spend about twenty minutes perusing it each day. D'Allesio says he's received dozens of grateful e-mails from readers,

who are presumably the same readers of the biweekly magazine: engaged, affluent men with a median household income of \$82,000 and who spend sixty-three minutes with the biweekly magazine, according to Mediamark Research & Intelligence.

"ESPN is appealing to a young and young-adult demo," says Tim Franklin, director of the National Sports Journalism Center. "Sporting News is appealing to a little older demographic."



"What they smartly did is say, 'How do we create a [product] that's totally different?' " Franklin says. "Some have tried to write [Sporting News] off before. I think it'd be foolhardy to try to write it off. ... There will continue to be a market for it. Is it a market the same size as ESPN? Right now, no."

It's unclear if *Sporting News* is making much money. Baker declined to divulge revenues because American City is a privately owned company. But Today has few paid ads, and information obtained from Magazine Publishers of America and Internet ratings agency comScore show that the magazine and Web site are small players in sports media. The magazine drew one-ninth of the advertising revenue that *ESPN The Magazine* earned in the first quarter of this year, and SportingNews.com is not among the top ten sports sites in unique U.S. visitors. In an online review on Society for News Design by Steve Cavendish, associate subject editor of presentation at chicagotrib.com (<http://chicagotrib.com>), he bashed Today, saying "All in all, I was disappointed. The content is good and there is a lot of potential, visually. I'm just not sure SN Today represents an improvement in the reading experience over the Web or a printed newspaper."

Adds Persinger: "I'd like to see it succeed, but I haven't seen any evidence yet that it will."

Today's editors have a hard time containing their enthusiasm for the product. One explains that it would take an individual reader forever to gather that much information on his own, just by surfing the Web. And Baker is confident the new product will be the one to save the *Sporting News* brand.

"That's why I signed on — to change it. And I think we're seeing liftoff. ... It's taking an old brand that didn't die and could have and giving it a lot of life."

Ryan Basen is a former reporter for The Charlotte Observer. This is his first article for this magazine.

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