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TV SPORTS

All Hockey All the Time at NHL Online

By **RICHARD SANDOMIR**

On Wednesday, the N.H.L. will turn to its newest creation, a seven-channel digital network on its Web site, to excite its existing fans and perhaps convert more of them to love all of the league, not only their favorite teams.

“We’re focused on things that get to the heart of activating the avid fan,” said John Collins, the league’s senior executive vice president for business and media. “We’re the premier league in an international sport — what’s missing in this \$2.5 billion business is the national scale.”

It’s not that the league is saying that its national television deals do not work or that it wants to escape from them. The league spent decades in the desert without lucrative network deals. But the NBC and Versus relationships provide, at best, modest platforms. NBC’s games average 1.5 million viewers, up 11 percent from last season, and Versus’s games snag 272,417 viewers, up 28 percent.

Still, it is not enough when you consider what happens when hockey fans get truly excited, like for the New Year’s Day game, played in the snow between the [Pittsburgh Penguins](#) and the [Buffalo Sabres](#) at Ralph Wilson Stadium in Orchard Park, N.Y. That game attracted 3.75 million viewers.

“The Winter Classic was one day, one event,” Collins said. The seven-channel NHL Network Online, he added, “is our next event, to light the fire, to say, there’s new energy, that we’re understanding our fans.”

The broadband network’s lineup on [NHL.com](#) will include “The Hockey Show,” a live 15-minute studio show offering highlights, updates and interviews that will be repeated throughout the day; a second channel, LiveWire, with live news conferences, morning skates and other live events; and a third, the seasonal Playoff Channel, with news, highlights and features. The three each have sponsors: Bud Light, Cisco and Dodge.

The other four channels will offer current highlights and oldies going back two and a half years, podcasts, radio programming and archival features.

“We have 53 million avid fans that we know of,” said Andre Mika, the league’s vice president for broadband and new media. “If we can attract anyone outside those 53 million, that’s icing on the cake. But the experience is to expose them on a more national level to the game.”

Mika believes the league’s broadband effort is significantly different from those on the Web sites of Major League Baseball, the National Football League and the National Basketball Association. All do things different ways, with baseball’s considered the deepest and most encompassing.

One difference, he said, is the video generated by the 30 teams that is intended to go beyond goals, assists and

brawls — from the [Islanders' Rick DiPietro](#) reviewing hot dogs at Nassau Coliseum to the [Capitals' Alex Ovechkin](#) shopping in a mall.

“We’re creating original content on ‘The Hockey Show’ and weaving it with content from the clubs,” Mika said.

Bobby Tulsiani, an analyst for Jupiter Research who was offered a sneak preview of the site, said: “I thought it was really engaging. It draws you in. For a video product, they’ve raised the bar on the experience.”

He called it a “branded and rich experience for the top 1 to 5 percent of passionate fans.”

“It is not for everybody,” Tulsiani said. “It is immersive, but as a huge traffic driver to acquire new customers, I’d be skeptical.”

The N.H.L.’s deals with NBC and Versus let the league keep all its digital rights, enabling it to use its highlights as it chooses on the Web. The highlights will not only be on the new online network, but are already syndicated to sites like YouTube, Joost, iTunes, [AOL](#) and Hulu.

“In a converged world, this is how you’ll get the programs you want,” N.H.L. Commissioner [Gary Bettman](#) said.

Mika, who has held numerous jobs in TV production and new media, regularly attends N.H.L. games, wearing the jersey of the home team (he married into a [Red Wings](#) family), to listen to what fans are saying.

“My job is to replicate the fan experience online,” he said.

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