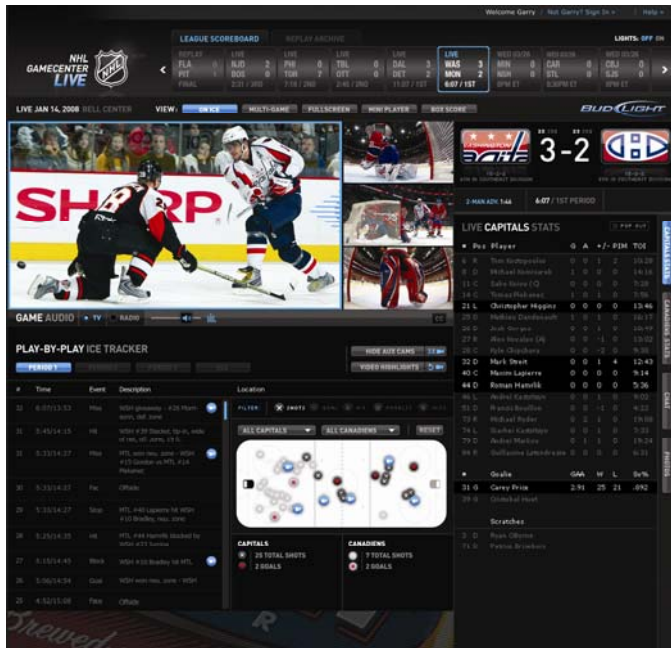


NHL Makes Online Push

By Stephanie Kang

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Professional hockey, long overshadowed on television by the likes of the National Football League, is making an aggressive push online, introducing a service that allows subscribers to watch nearly every game live on its Web site.



The National Hockey League sees the new service, called GameCenter Live, as a way to serve its young, tech-savvy fans, many of whom don't live in the hometown of their favorite hockey team, and can't catch its games on television.

Furthermore, the league says its TV revenue are so much smaller than those of giants like the NFL that it has the freedom to experiment with online video without the risk of angering its television partners. The NHL's national broadcasts in the U.S. are carried on the relatively little-known cable channel Versus; fewer than a dozen hockey games a season are televised on NBC Universal's NBC network.

The NHL's GameCenter Live will allow users to watch up to four games at once or one game from several different camera angles.

"We're not encumbered by big national rights," says John Collins, the NHL's chief operating officer. Aggressive

moves in digital, he says, are "essential to our success. We have a lot of active avid fans that are looking for very specific information."

Still, the NHL won't be flooding the zone with free games. The league plans to charge online subscribers a relatively steep \$169 a season year for the streaming-video service.

League executives say they can justify that price because of the large number of out-of-town fans who follow its teams and are desperate for the chance to watch their favorites play.

Even so, Major League Baseball, whose fans are also known for fierce team loyalty, has been streaming most of its games online for several years -- and now charges about \$120, for more games.

Last season, the National Basketball Association showed games on nba.com as part of its \$179 NBA League Pass subscription for digital cable and satellite-TV customers.

The NFL has been more conservative in its approach to the Web, partly because of the huge size of its TV contracts. This season, for the first time, it is streaming its Sunday Night Football game on its site and that of broadcast partner NBC free of charge.

Sports leagues are taking advantage of better video technology and see live streaming as a way to bring in more advertising revenue as users spend more time on sports Web sites. What isn't clear is whether advertisers will spend less on television as online video grows, cannibalizing the overall sports market. Online video is still a small market, with less than \$1 billion in revenue, according to Jupiter Research analyst Bobby Tulsiani.

GameCenter Live will stream as many as 40 games a week starting in October. Subscribers can watch as many as four games at once, or watch a single game from several different camera angles. The league will offer free preview nights Oct. 10-12.

The Web makeover is one way the NHL is trying to rebrand itself after a debilitating lockout that forced it to cancel its 2004-2005 season. Along with the subscription service, the league has signed a deal with [Yahoo Inc.](#) to launch a new game that allows users to create their own fantasy hockey teams and see video of the players.

The NHL also has spruced up its free online-video features. It now offers real-time video highlights and more online programming before and after games, as well as a feature that lets users chat with other fans during games. Digital agency AKQA, which has worked with [Nike](#) and [Walt Disney Co.](#)'s ESPN, helped revamp the Web site.

The NHL is hoping for an overall increase in digital traffic. Its Web site received a monthly average of 2.4 million unique visitors for the year ended in July 2008, according to independent Web-measurement firm comScore. That puts it behind not just the MLB, NFL and NBA, but even behind sports-entertainment properties like [World Wrestling Entertainment Inc.](#)

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