

HOCKEY

FIH and Nagra's 'bold' OTT play could be template for rights-holders, tech companies

By Frank Dunne

- FIH, Nagra launched D2C platform Watch.Hockey in September
- Tech company will shoulder costs in early years with view to longer-term revenue share
- Leagues, federations stand to earn from sponsorship deals through greater global exposure

Watch.Hockey, the direct-to-consumer OTT service recently launched by the International Hockey Federation (FIH), in collaboration with tech company Nagra, represents a new commercial model that could encourage more mid-tier sports properties to develop state-of-the-art D2C platforms.

The platform, [which went live in September](#), is the centerpiece of a [10-year agreement that will see Nagra](#) deliver digital products for the FIH. The deal removes three burdens from the federation that deter many second- and third-tier rights-holders from launching D2C platforms: start-up costs; marketing costs and associated human resources; and the handling of advertising sales.

Nagra will set up and run the platform free of charge in return for a share of future revenues. Start-up costs alone, even for basic platforms, can run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. Nagra will also be responsible for advertising sales. Together with the FIH, it is currently in talks with several digital advertising specialists to collaborate on those operations.

Watch.Hockey will carry the FIH's main men's national-team property, the Pro League, but it will also be a content hub for all field hockey, not just FIH events. The governing body is currently talking to its five member confederations, its national federations and local leagues about populating the platform with their content. This means that the FIH does not need to create a specific marketing department or allocate budget for the process. Its members and their leagues provide it with an organic marketing platform.

Thierry Weil, the chief executive of the FIH, told *SportBusiness Media*: "I am 100-per-cent sure that other sports federations will knock on Nagra's door and ask: how does this work?"

One production expert called the deal “a bold play”. Peter Angell, principal of the Ten City Media production consultancy, said: “I can’t remember another pure-play tech company launching a service and sharing the commercial risk with a rights-holder. A common problem across the industry is that the start-up costs can spin up very quickly for a federation if they do it as a standalone venture.”

The FIH’s motivation for creating a D2C offering was the same as that of most second- and third-tier rights-holders. Weil, who joined the federation in 2018 from football’s world governing body Fifa, where he was director of marketing, said: “There are a lot of middle-tier sports like ours who do not have extensive exposure on TV. Hockey has it in some countries when the national teams are playing. There are hockey clips and highlights on 137 channels, but not usually live games. Hockey fans tell us they never know where and when they can watch the sport. And broadcasters [with the rights] often decide at the last minute whether to show it or not; so we decided to create a hockey platform.”

Weil said that the FIH had held discussions with other sports federations about trying to create a broader multi-sports OTT portal. By leveraging the combined fanbases of three or four mid-tier sports, audiences could be reached that would be interesting to major sponsors. Weil added: “To be able to deliver a full-year calendar of different sports with global appeal to a sponsor sounds attractive. But it’s very complicated.”

The FIH and Nagra discussed creating a fully-fledged joint venture but opted against it due to legal complexities that would have slowed the launch process down.

The federation last year agreed a [five-year deal](#) with streaming platform MyCujoo to distribute its content using the latter’s digital architecture but it withdrew from the contract when it decided to launch Watch.Hockey.

Field hockey is generally ranked third or fourth in terms of the size of its global supporter base, after football and cricket. This is driven primarily by its huge popularity in India, with its 1.4 billion population.

Revenues

Watch.Hockey access will initially be free of charge, with FIH hoping to drive advertising revenues once audiences start to build. If the platform proves successful, it could eventually become a subscription offering. Experts say the service is unlikely to have enough viewers to earn any revenue for at least three years.

Hockey leagues and federations providing content will not share in direct advertising revenues earned by the platform, which will be divided solely between the FIH and Nagra. The financial benefit to other content providers is the additional exposure, which can be leveraged toward improving sponsorship rights fees or attracting new sponsors with a global, rather than national,

footprint. Content providers will also be given user data around the consumption of their events, including demographic and geographic breakdowns of their viewership.

Weil said: “Most of them have small broadcast deals in their own countries. We are giving them an extension around the globe, for no additional costs. And, at the moment, most of them get no data on their user viewing habits.”

According to Weil, trying to agree revenue-share deals for the content providers would be too complicated and potentially controversial, but the idea could be revisited if the platform proved to be successful.

He added: “We don’t have the financial resources to make a global marketing push. In the Pro League there are 11 different nations. We have asked all those national associations to promote the Watch.Hockey platform. Once the leagues and federations have content on the platform, they will automatically want to promote it to their fans. That’s the best promotion.”

Challenges

However, creating a multi-property platform, with potentially hundreds of content partners, throws up some big logistical challenges. These include:

- the creation of a regular and frequent flow of content that avoids too many clashes and overlaps;
- the provision of a detailed calendar of events well in advance;
- enabling fans to find what they are looking for very quickly; and
- ensuring no conflicts between brands offered visibility on the platform and the content providers’ sponsors.

Building a proper schedule is one of the immediate priorities. Weil said: “Our goal is to have a schedule so you can see what is coming up. It will be complex. We are having discussions with leagues and federations, where they give us the timeframe for the season. It’s fundamental that fans can see what’s coming up and can get, for example, push notifications reminding them their team is going to play in, say, two days.”

The FIH is also prioritising high-quality video with easy navigation rather than adding lots of interactive fan engagement tools.

According to Weil: “You need to start somewhere. Easy navigation is important. There is nothing worse, when you are looking for something, if you have to click 55 times to find it. But enhancements are envisaged in a second phase. These things are all on the to-do list. We have to keep it attractive and engaging and it has to be a communication tool between us and our fans.”

Enter Nagra

In addition to future revenue-share, the motivation for Nagra in the deal is that it gives it a foothold in a competitive market. There are many companies positioning themselves as end-to-end OTT platform providers, and who have the technical capabilities to do so. But in practice, the market is dominated by a small handful of players, including companies such as the Infront agency, Endeavor Streaming, Deltatre and StreamAMG.

Ten City Media's Angell, who held senior production roles for Team Marketing, Lagardère Sports and HBS, the Infront subsidiary which host broadcasts the Fifa World Cup, told *SportBusiness Media* that it was highly unusual for tech companies to adopt an entrepreneurial approach to deals for the provision of OTT platforms, as they usually just looked for a fee for a service delivered.

He said: "Hockey is a relatively niche sport but it's a summer Olympic sport and this gives Nagra a seat at the table with Olympic federations. If they can make economies of scale across more than one platform, it starts to get interesting." [o](#)