



# The Realtime Project

## Idea Paper 1: Realtime Sports

Giving athletes a more powerful voice.

### Part 1: Twitter Mania

Scott Harrower, October 2009, New York

Thousands of tweets heard round the world announcing player transfers and locker room secrets herald the new reality in the sports arena. The opportunities for live, continuous engagement with the realtime stream of information, content and data is transforming the sports world.

The dynamic of relationships among professional athletes, professional media organizations, and fans is shifting. Most obviously, social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook give rabid fans a window into the daily lives of their heroes. However, beyond micro-blogging, the entire value chain of spectator and mass participation sports is being disrupted by Realtime technologies. From live video mobile apps to location-based services in the stadium, sports industry players have an explosion of opportunities for new value creation.

In this two-part **Idea Paper**, The Realtime Project takes a look at the commercial and social impact of these new models of engagement. In **Part One**, we'll focus on the most highly visible consumer trend of high-profile athletes and their interactions with fans via micro-blogging and social media platforms. In **Part Two**, we'll talk about the potential for Realtime technology applications and location-based services in sports venues and during live events to enhance fans' and spectators' engagement with their favorite sports.

## New arena: the micro-blogosphere.

### Who's tweeting? And who cares?

As usual, one of the loudest voices is that of Shaquille O'Neal, the All-Star center for the Cleveland Cavaliers. Shaq's legion of followers number over a million<sup>1</sup>. That's right, 1 *million* people reading how Shaq is stuck in traffic or how his pants no longer fit. And if Shaq decided to tweet about how obsessed he was over the new Volcano Burrito from Taco Bell? Would 1 million people instantly make a run for the border?

Psychology professor at Indiana University, Edward Hirt, notes that sports allow people to "bask in reflected glory" and that the behind-the-scene glimpses offered through 140-character tweets strengthen the bond between athlete and fan. If Shaq is a winner, and I emulate Shaq, then I am a winner also.

<sup>1</sup> [http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/the\\_bonus/06/05/twitter.sports/1.html](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/the_bonus/06/05/twitter.sports/1.html)



On the flipside, however, when fan engagement shifts to this authentic, unmediated ‘conversation’, how credible is an athletes’ ‘official’ voice as spokesperson for a brand of deodorant, an energy drink, or athletic gear? Prominent sports journalist and author, Gary Poole<sup>2</sup>, believes no matter what the relationship, *winning* trumps everything in terms of maintaining the athlete’s brand image and hero status.

However, in the modern age of sports, that hero needs to be accessible and ‘real.’ Poole states: “Our culture wants to know celebrities as real people, and Twitter allows an athlete to foster a direct relationship with an audience.” He further posits that intimate details add to the back-story of the game, athlete and sport, thus creating more drama and on-field excitement. “Watch the Tour de France and you will get a 30 second interview with Lance Armstrong, go to his Twitter page and you will find out some more of the intricacies of the race, and how he is feeling and other interesting bits of information, which make the race more dramatic. I often wonder what Ali would have done in the Internet Era.”

## Out of bounds in realtime?

*“You know, it’s funny - I like it. I like it because it gives me the opportunity to reach out to thousands of people at one time. I’m using Twitter during games, during halftime, after the games. I’m going to be taking it to the next level.”*

- Chad OchoCinco, Wide Receiver, Cincinnati Bengals on KGOW Radio in Houston

Probably the most controversial figure in NFL Football, Cincinnati Bengals’ Wide Receiver Chad OchoCinco sparked the league to release a new policy regarding social media sites during game day.<sup>3</sup> At the moment, tweets and updates are restricted to 90 minutes before and after the game, but this restriction is arbitrary, and depending on how various individuals use and/or abuse micro-blogging, it may ultimately extend to practice or training camp or workouts.

Let’s face it, there is really no way to curtail an athlete from talking altogether. In fact, OchoCinco has “taken it to the next level” by publicly launching a contest via UStream<sup>4</sup>! OchoCinco will select a fan to fly to the games every Sunday and tweet on his behalf as he communicates via hand signals.

However, most sports advocates, media and organizations realize that this shift in behavior and the changed athlete/fan dynamic is here to stay. Though the tools or applications of Realtime engagement will evolve and morph over time, this more immediate and personal interaction will only reinforce peoples’ passion for their favorite sports and their identification with their favorite athletes.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Andrew Poole is the author of *The Galloping Ghost: Red Grange, an American Football Legend* (Houghton Mifflin), the definitive biography of one of America’s most important athletes. Poole has written about sports for major national publications including *TIME* Magazine and *USA Today*. In addition, he is a veteran technology journalist and has covered tech for the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, and *Wired*, among many other publications.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sportsin140.com/?m=200908>

<sup>4</sup> <http://mashable.com/2009/08/26/ocho-cinco-tweets/>



Media owners like ESPN and Sports Illustrated are not afraid of no longer “breaking the stories” themselves, but rather have integrated twitter applications into their websites allowing direct access straight from the source. Leagues and rights owners will soon follow suit, with the NBA soon to unveil a new branded application aggregating Twitter streams into a user-friendly and accessible package.

For “long-tail” sports franchises that don’t have the visibility afforded by television and other mass media distribution, Realtime engagement is a way of directly connecting with fans that they would not otherwise reach, and in a way that is unique to the medium. The Women’s Professional Soccer league is actually encouraging athletes to *tweet* during the game stating: “We are a grassroots league” and “we want to give fans the special opportunity to hear right from the players about their thoughts in real time via Twitter<sup>5</sup>.” - WPS Commissioner Tonya Antonucci

## Goal: a business model.

There’s money to be made in the stream if we innovate.

At the time of this writing, Twitter is not embracing an ad-based revenue model<sup>6</sup>, and clients are eagerly looking for new ways to monetize the phenomenon of the live stream. One innovative solution is an aggregator model in which live streams from individual athletes are supplemented with stats and related player information from disparate sources. Sites like SB Nation can take a storystream – for example Allen Iverson’s recent trade to the Memphis Grizzlies and tie-in his stats from *Sports Illustrated*, a profile from ESPN and even his Reebok commercial from YouTube<sup>7</sup> into one neat little package.

Swimmer Dana Torres, the 41-year-old Olympic phenomenon with over 300,000 Twitter followers, often tweets seeking parenting tips. Again, direct engagement ‘flips the script’ on the ‘celebrity-fan’ dynamic. Whether or not she generates the content is irrelevant. Even the illusion unmediated access, of being able to lend Dana a helping hand and to give her some meaningful advice is compelling and addictive. Imagine that a recommendation engines instantly coupled these tweets with a link to Amazon for *The Happiest Baby on the Block* DVD and book set or to Pampers’ online store. These opportunities for direct, immediate contextual marketing and commerce are unlocked in Realtime.

So, before you dismiss the power of Shaq’s junk food addiction or Dana’s baby tips, as the meaningless minutiae of sports’ personalities (or their publicists) think broadly about the potential for new forms of contextual advertising and commerce. Athletes, sports marketers, and sports rights and media owners all have the opportunity to re-write the rulebook based on delivering fans and audiences what they now demand. 140 characters are just the beginning.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.findingdulcinea.com/news/sports/2009/march/Can-Twitter-Help-Women-s-Professional-Soccer-Find-Fans.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.statusmediapl.com/blog/2009/09/11/twitter-advertising-changes-to-terms-of-service/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2009/09/10/sb-nation-launches-real-time-updates/>