

COMMISH 2019

Fan Engagement a case study:

NBA #RefWatchParty

Halfway through the 2017-18 NBA season, amid rising tensions between the sides, both the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) and the National Referee association (NBRA) sent three representatives each to a meeting held out of the spotlight during the All-Star break to tackle with problems and find a common ground. According to sources, league offices were not involved, but the NBA had already carried out a comprehensive and thorough program to address the issue.

However, the multipronged press release published a fortnight before the aforementioned meeting did not anticipate the initiative which was organized on the eve of **such a pivotal match as Game 3 of the NBA Finals** series in **June 2018**. At that moment, reigning NBA champions Golden State Warriors were leading 2-0 against the Cleveland Cavaliers, stakes were high, and the perfect stage was set for the roll-out of a new ambitious plan. Throughout the game, right from the tip-off till the final buzzer, **NBA referees were available to interact anonymously and in real time with fans and insiders on Twitter** via the official account of the referee union. Users could tag @OfficialNBARefs and submit their questions via the hashtag #RefWatchParty.

On the whole, as reported by ESPN, feedbacks were positive and timelines went wild thanks to the lively Q&A. The test-run exceeded expectations and thus, **during this season, the NBA and its pool of referees have doubled down the effort** to make a step further. Starting from the marquee matchup between LeBron James' Los Angeles Lakers and the Golden State Warriors on Martin Luther King Day — January 21, 2019 —, the #RefWatchParty was scheduled twice a week on a larger amount of regular season as well as postseason games. What is more, referees got **green light from the NBA to embed in tweets footage of live games stored in the Replay Center** located in Secaucus, New Jersey, in order to provide fans with an in-depth analysis of specific calls. Furthermore, users who interacted were challenged every now and then to watch videos and answer some trivia questions with two main purposes. The former was to test fans' knowledge and possible interpretation of some grey areas of the rulebook (continuation, travel, goaltending). The latter was to enhance a debate within the community by using the hashtag #YouBeTheRef.

Strength in numbers

According to metrics collected by socialblade.com, a website that tracks social media stats and analytics, in the last month or so, through the first two rounds of the Playoffs (April 13 – May 14, 2019), the account has gained roughly 3500 new followers. In that 30-days span the **peak growth rate** (highlighted in orange below, +977) coincided notably with the debut of the #RefWatchParty in the current postseason run on May 5-6, 2019, during Game 4 of the Eastern Conference 2nd round series between the Boston Celtics and the Milwaukee Bucks. As an aside, over the last few years, the league has strengthened its position worldwide as the leading sport brand – by a mile – across social platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, along with the Chinese ones (Tencent and Sina), by breaking the barrier of one billion followers and likes combined, including all its players' accounts.

USER STATISTICS TABLE FOR OFFICIALNBAREFS (APR 13TH, 2019 - MAY 14TH, 2019)							
DATE		FOLLOWERS		FOLLOWING		TWEETS	
2019-04-13	Sat	-9	104,410	--	472	+4	3,129
2019-04-14	Sun	+90	104,500	--	472	+9	3,138
2019-04-15	Mon	+21	104,521	--	472	+1	3,139
2019-04-16	Tue	+12	104,533	--	472	+3	3,142
2019-04-17	Wed	+54	104,587	--	472	+1	3,143
2019-04-18	Thu	+26	104,613	--	472	+1	3,144
2019-04-19	Fri	+44	104,657	--	472	+2	3,146
2019-04-20	Sat	+33	104,690	--	472	+1	3,147
2019-04-21	Sun	+63	104,753	--	472	+1	3,148
2019-04-22	Mon	+68	104,821	--	472	+1	3,149
2019-04-23	Tue	+63	104,884	--	472	+4	3,153
2019-04-24	Wed	+10	104,894	--	472	+3	3,156
2019-04-25	Thu	+23	104,917	--	472	+4	3,160
2019-04-26	Fri	+10	104,927	--	472	+1	3,161
2019-04-27	Sat	-6	104,921	--	472	+1	3,162
2019-04-28	Sun	+7	104,928	--	472	+2	3,164
2019-04-29	Mon	+342	105,270	--	472	+1	3,165
2019-04-30	Tue	+161	105,431	--	472	+5	3,170
2019-05-01	Wed	+240	105,671	--	472	+3	3,173
2019-05-02	Thu	+27	105,698	+1	473	+2	3,175
2019-05-03	Fri	+30	105,728	--	473	+1	3,176
2019-05-04	Sat	+226	105,954	--	473	+4	3,180
2019-05-05	Sun	+278	106,232	--	473	+2	3,182
2019-05-06	Mon	+977	107,209	--	473	+33	3,215
2019-05-07	Tue	+296	107,505	+1	474	+42	3,257

When asked to assess the overall spike, NBA commissioner Adam Silver used a sharp analogy to make his point sound clearer. Here is an excerpt of the interview he gave to strategy+business.com last spring:

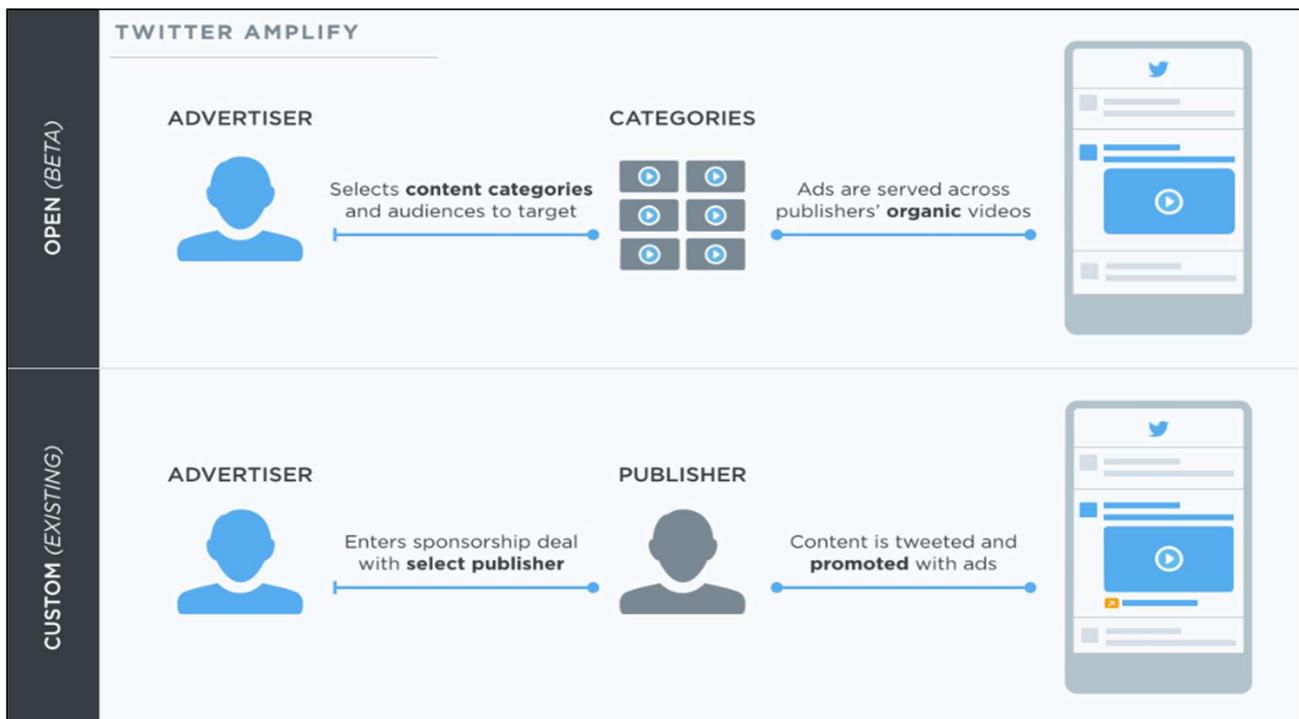
"We analogize our strategy to snacks versus meals. If we provide our snacks [highlights] to our fans on a free basis, they are still going to want to eat meals – which are our games. [...] We believe that greater fan engagement through social media helps drive television rating."

How is it possible to replicate the model in Italy?

In its early stages the project is fairly simple and budget-wise it is not as burdensome. Either the league or the National Referee Committee (Italian acronym CIA) just need to choose and **set up a new verified account on whatever social media** (e.g. Twitter) **for free**.

As for future updates or developments stakeholders might have to strike a balance and one may argue that our league, unlike the NBA, is not as willing to allow deliberate sharing or embedding of its branded content (e.g. real-time footage, highlights etc.).

Having said so, to cope with the problem, the selected and properly verified account could join **Twitter Amplify ad program** as a publisher. Available in Italy since 2015, Twitter Amplify is a valuable tool to monetise on premium content thanks to a handful of different plans. For instance, it is possible to opt for pre-roll or mid-roll video ads — 3" to 10" — around premium in-stream content; what is more, publishers are granted 70% of the shared revenue (Twitter takes 30%).



Credits to blog.twitter.com

Enough referees?

37 referees have been selected to call games during the 2018-19 LBA season. At the moment, 16 teams compete in the top tier of Italian pro basketball in a round robin format, for 30 weekly fixtures, to earn a Playoff spot.

As a result, eight games are scheduled every week, which means that 32 referees out of 37 are always on the floor (three officials, one backup). However, the #RefWatchParty will be limited to a set of chosen games and that reasonable margin should do the trick as one of the remaining officials will anonymously be in charge to moderate the conversation on Twitter. A suitable occasion to introduce the new digital experience would be the Italian Super Cup, which marks the opening of the next basketball season (Bari, late September 2019).

A boost to fan engagement is paramount to **add value to whatever brand** and our league is well aware of that. Once its previous licensed broadcasting rights deal expired on June 30, 2017, LegaBasket Serie A, the governing body of the main basketball competitions in Italy, negotiated the terms of the new three-year agreement. Guidelines were introduced by a detailed market report assigned to the Demet & Company S.r.l. The survey clearly pinpointed a significative shift within viewership habits as most fans leaned towards computer/mobile-centric and second screening experience of live events. The ever-changing viewing trend pattern urges a solid digital strategy to target a wider audience and reach other potential content consumers.

Generally speaking, the #RefWatchParty represents one of those low-risk-high reward situations: no matter what, referees are always under scrutiny, and this is indeed an opportunity to eventually bridge the gap between officials and fans. The latter are often biased whenever they react to possibly wrong or missed calls against the team they root for and such a platform will help preserve the **integrity of the game** and favour a **positive dialogue**.

Couple of days before the start of the postseason, Michelle Johnson, Senior Vice President and Head of Referee Operations in the NBA, gave a brief and compelling overview of her role as a supervisor. In the wake of her upbringing in the Air Force, she easily drew a parallel worth reflecting upon:

"[The union] is like a big airplane with multi-crew members. [...] Once you get in the air, once you start going three-hundred miles an hour - it feels that way with these players these days -, you have to make decision in a moment."

Are we ready for takeoff?