TNT Sports and Its Talent Follow the Inside the NBA Playbook Into the Future

When Warner Bros. Discovery took a reduced role in the upcoming 11-year NBA rights deal, the company's sports future looked a bit shorthanded. The point was recently underlined at WBD's upfront event, when TNT Sports chairman Luis Silberwasser noted what the company's sports rights looked like a year ago before displaying what they look like today.

The NBA wasn't a key player.

Despite that change, this year's board still had a veteran lineup including NCAA men's college basketball March Madness, the National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Baseball (MLB), while adding the College Football Playoffs (on a sublicence from ESPN), Big 12 college football and basketball (also licensed from ESPN), Big East college basketball, Unrivaled women's basketball, NASCAR, Roland-Garros (aka The French Open), the FIFA Club World Cup soccer tournament, and other collegiate events.

However, beyond its sports broadcast rights, TNT Sports' true strength—and what's driving it into the future—is its people. As its lineup of sports partners changes, the company is leaning into its familiar roster, presentation, and its comforts that defy media rights.

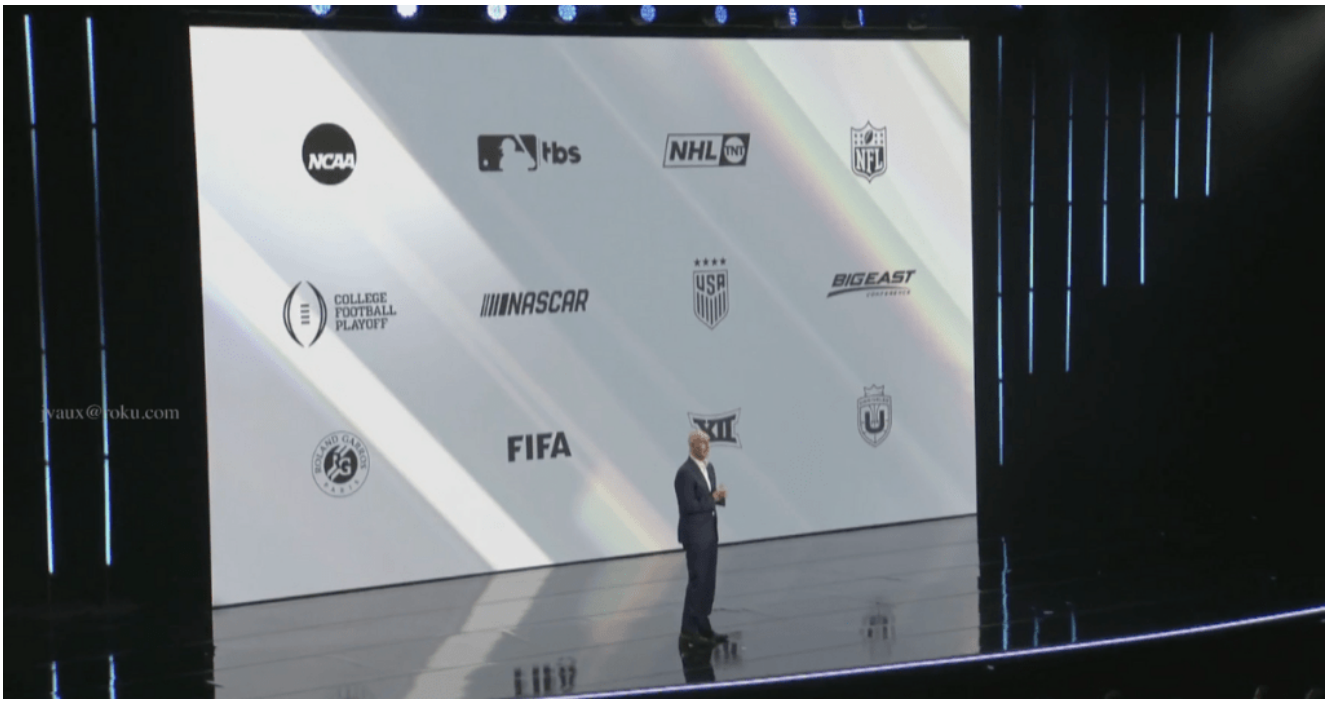
The value of that formula is evident in TNT Sports continuing to develop content for the NBA beyond its previous rights deal. Among those opportunities, the company will continue producing Inside the NBA for ABC and ESPN.

Craig Barry, TNT Sports' evp and chief content officer,

credits the company’s people-first culture for its resilience.

Barry, who has been with TNT Sports since serving as a production assistant for then-Turner Sports in 1989, said consistently values are why he’s able to look around various shows and divisions and see more than a dozen people—including Inside the NBA hosts Ernie Johnson, Kenny Smith, and Charles Barkley—who’ve stayed for more than 20 years.

“Even though we’ve gone through five mergers and acquisitions, at our very core, there is a little of that maverick Ted Turner spirit. It certainly lives in most of us who have been here a long time,” Barry said. “If you want to work in a place where it’s okay to do things a little differently, where it’s okay to take chances and be applauded for it, and have opportunities that extend past what the job description might be, then you’d be very comfortable here.”



Chairman and CEO Luis Silberwasser walks buyers through TNT Sports’ more robust 2025-2026 partnership lineup.*Courtesy of Warner Bros. Discovery*

TNT Sports doesn’t make the Inside the NBA hosts sit in on production meetings and tries to build in more organic conversation across each show. It focuses on each host’s

particular base of knowledge, lets the rapport develop on its own, and refrains from lengthy missives directly into the camera.

As ADWEEK found in speaking to several members of TNT Sports' broadcast team, a combined respect for their abilities, time, and outside lives makes it easier to get the desired result—and more certain they'll stay with TNT Sports long term.

"You want it to be natural, you want it to be spontaneous," Barry said. "The first take is always the best take, so we sprinkle that DNA on all of our shows… all of our talent in front and behind the camera, we give them that space to plan."

And though its roster varies across properties, the similarities among the marquee names at TNT Sports are what make it uniquely suited for the turbulent sports-media future ahead.

Adam Lefkoe, Inside the NBA

At this year's WBD upfront event, Adam Lefoke was ad buyers' guide through TNT Sports as he introduced Champ Bailey and Grant Hill during a college football segment, handed fellow Inside the NBA host some rhetorical flowers during an Unrivaled recap, and familiarized the room with both his newest gig at Roland-Garros and new colleague Sloane Stephens.

That's a long way from spitting Seinfeld, wrestling, and hip hop references at a local affiliate in Louisville. Lefkoe has now been with TNT Sports in some capacity for more than a decade since leaving his gig with a local television affiliate in Louisville for a position with Bleacher Report in 2014.

According to Lefkoe, his first days with TNT Sports felt like he "was on a rocket ship" with Bleacher Report and its NFL Draft coverage earning millions of views.

“I remember very vividly that first week we got Adrian Peterson on as a guest, and some of the producers at the time were like, ‘Hey, man, this is a big one for us,’ and I got him to say that he could guarantee 2,000 yards the following season, and that went everywhere,” Lefkoe said. “It was the first time I had seen the machine that was Bleacher Report push a piece of content and the world, and that’s when you begin to realize my work here can matter.”

During a Coaches vs. Cancer tournament in Lefkoe’s first college basketball season with Bleacher Report, he hosted a pregame show, and some of the crew in the production truck who worked on Inside the NBA complimented his performance. From there, he’d receive opportunities to host a show with former NFL quarterback Chris Simms, and then a chance to co-host The Match golf challenge between Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson in 2018 led to a palpable on-screen chemistry with co-host Charles Barkley.

After that came a chat with former TNT Sports president David Levy and an invitation to co-host Inside the NBA on Tuesdays in 2020.

He’s credited Inside the NBA’s improvisational approach—which let him come up with intros for Parker and Dwyane Wade on Day 1, fist-bump co-host Shaquille O’Neal, and absorb O’Neal’s jokes about the “bullet hole” flowers on his jacket—as key to his initial success.

Since settling in, he still favors riffing to working off of the teleprompter, but is in constant contact with producers during the week and, after observing co-host Ernie Johnson, focusing on stories of the day, statistics, graphics, video assets, and the “sweet spots” of his analysts—knowing Parker’s defensive acumen, O’Neal’s superstar psychology.

As he returns for the newest incarnation of Inside the NBA,

new coverage of Roland-Garros, and his The Big Podcast with O'Neal, Lefkoe observed that TNT Sports executives "are not rooted in ego and just want to make good, fun content." Watching colleagues on other TNT Sports shows express themselves, and seeing the division's focus on him and his colleagues as people—whether he's filling in so Johnson can go to a graduation or he's taken off the schedule to go to his one-year-old's birthday party—Lefkoe doesn't get the sense that the grass (or clay, or hardwood) is necessarily better-tended in other corners of the industry.

"I've been working with Shaq and Candace now for five years, and when we're up there, all the fear is gone, all the love is there," Lefkoe said. "Now it's a little bit of, 'How much fun can we have? How crazy can we get? And how many references can we mention while we're up there?'"

Lauren Jbara, Unrivaled/NBA on TNT/NHL on TNT/MLB on TBS

Ten years ago, Lauren Jbara was working for the State Champs Sports Network in Michigan, interviewing a high school pitcher after a no-hitter, when the Gatorade bath his teammates prepared for him missed almost entirely and landed squarely on Jbara. The on-air personality told ADWEEK that, at MLB on TBS—one of Jbara's several homes at TNT Sports—commentator Brian Anderson "still makes fun of me for it."

"I asked him one question. I'm like, 'How'd that feel?' and he's like, 'Great,' and I go, 'Love it,' and he just walks away," Jbara said of the high school Gatorade incident. "So it's just really cool to see, full circle, being able to do MLB Postseason this year. I was like, 'Wow, we have come a long way in the last 10 years.'"

A graduate of the University of Michigan, stints as an arena host for the Detroit Red Wings and reporter for the Detroit Pistons and Oakland University eventually led Jbara to Denver

to serve as a host and reporter for the NHL's Colorado Avalanche and Major League Soccer's Colorado Rapids. In 2021, she joined Bally Sports South in Atlanta to expand her repertoire with the NBA's Atlanta Hawks and MLB's Atlanta Braves—but also to be closer to TNT.

That paid off when she began freelancing for NBA TV, which led to an offer from TNT itself. When Jbara noted she could cover almost anything, NBA TV coverage led to postseason baseball, then to Olympic coverage of skateboarding, BMX, 3-on-3 basketball, and, notably, breakdancing.

"It was front and center, and Raygun from Australia stole the hearts of so many around the world," Jbara said. "I got to see her in person, and I'm like, 'Oh, is that what break dancing is like?' and I'm like, 'Oh no, that's not what breakdancing is.'"

The opportunities have kept coming for Jbara, who just wrapped up her first season of Unrivaled coverage with Olympic gold medalist Candace Parker and Atlanta Dream co-owner Renee Montgomery. But she noted that TNT Sports combination of confidence in her range of abilities and respect for her family life—when she had to take time off for her wedding and honeymoon last summer and "they were like, 'Done, say less, tell us the dates, and we'll make it happen'"—will likely make it a long stop on her career path.

"It is family first to TNT, and I feel like it starts with the guys that are at the head of the whole thing, especially when it comes to talent like Ernie and Chuck," Jbara said. "It all trickles down just the way that they treat everybody else. Inside those walls, everyone's looking out for each other, and then outside the walls, everyone has their own lives and their own families too, and everyone at Warner Brothers at TNT does make that a priority."

Jimmy Rollins, MLB Tuesday/MLB on TBS

A three-time All-Star and 2008 World Series Champion, Jimmy Rollins may have had some baseball left in him when he retired in 2016 at age 37.

After he called it quits, he contacted another former player, his Tampa neighbor, Gary Sheffield, and got an audition for the MLB on TBS postseason show. While Rollins had always looked up to Sheffield, played with co-host Pedro Martinez on the Philadelphia Phillies in 2009, and had deep knowledge and strong opinions about the game, he felt himself holding back out of concern that he'd offend someone he might be in the clubhouse with a year later.

Producer Tim "TK" Kiely took Rollins aside and encouraged him to speak up and jump in if he disagreed with a point being made. Rollins also started watching film of himself on camera: "It looked like I just had some AirPods in my ears. I'm rocking back and forth to my own little rhythm."

The surrounding environment gave Rollins the space to learn on-camera etiquette from Sheffield and Martinez, who sat more stoically when listening to other hosts. By the time TNT Sports launched MLB Tuesday in TBS in 2022 and gave Rollins more opportunities to be on camera—and his contemporaries some time to leave the game—he'd grown comfortable in the chair.



Rollins and the MLB Tuesday crew are spending more time away from the desk doing baseball demos as younger viewers embrace the game.*TNT Sports*

“TK would always say, ‘We want to feel like we’re on a couch in the living room watching you guys do the show. You don’t have to teach us what’s being shown on the screen,’” he said. “‘If they want stats, they can Google those things, but give us that inside edge: What are you guys talking about? What are your thoughts? Point out things that we don’t see.”

Rollins and his team on MLB Tuesday are making these observations at an interesting time in baseball, when league efforts behind the pitch clock, larger bases, youth sports, and “let them play” elements like celebrations and colorful mitts and cleats are bringing new, younger fans to the game. With MLB Tuesday producer Daniel Eisner’s blessing, Rollins is increasingly meeting that demand by joining Hall of Famer Martinez and fellow 2007 20-20-20 (20 doubles, triples, and home runs) hitter Curtis Granderson in getting out from behind the desk and filming more hitting and pitching demos that live on as social media clips.

“Baseball has always been the laggard—basketball leading always in the social area and in the community, and then

football, then baseball follows," Rollins said. "Everybody doesn't have 60 minutes total or 30 minutes to dedicate to a pregame, but if they can click on 15 minutes if they have to run, find a demo they missed on the show, and there's a place for them to live, let's give them what they want."

Paul Bissonnette, NHL on TNT

Known as Biz to colleagues and BizNasty to trolls on social media, Paul Bissonnette spent 12 years playing professional hockey and six seasons in the NHL between the Pittsburgh Penguins and the Phoenix Coyotes.

After his career ended in 2017, he did some radio work for the Coyotes but made a name for himself both on social media and on the Barstool Sports hockey podcast Spittin' Chiclets. Reflecting on when he received an email from TNT Sports in 2021 asking him to join NHL on TNT, he told ADWEEK, "I thought I was being pranked"—considering the show's reserved tone compared to the podcast.



Bissonette went bowling with his deskmates before his first NHL playoffs on TNT.*TNT Sports*

He wasn't, and was immediately placed on a desk with 11-season NHL veteran Anson Carter, three-time Stanley Cup champion

player and coach Rick Tocchet, and hockey icon Wayne Gretzky. But TNT Sports gave him rides to where he needed to be, while his new teammates on the desk went bowling with him before NHL playoff coverage began. As Bissonnette observed, TNT Sports "makes your job very easy in terms of little detail," and "they don't take the traditional broadcasting to heart… they want it to be fun."

Wrapping up his fourth season of the NHL on TNT, Bissonnette's repeatedly lost deskmates to NHL coaching jobs—Tocchet to a three-year stint in Vancouver and Craig Berube for a short shift in 2024 between jobs in St. Louis and Toronto—but has watched NHL fixtures like Vezina Trophy winning former goaltender Henrik Lundqvist take their place.

He said the space given to announcers and their treatment by TNT Sports has helped create a strong hockey culture that was at its best this season when Gretzky relinquished his career scoring title to the Washington Capitals' Alexander Ovechkin.

"Now you get to cover it. They fly you in; they put you into the Four Seasons—sounds like a pretty sweet gig, doesn't it?" he said. "Then, when the Finals come around, the Stanley Cup, being a hockey player who maybe thinks he left a little bit on the table in a sense of a career, I get to establish a second one and try to work hard and thrive in this one."

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