

Information Technology

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Colleges Too Small for Prime Time Take Sports Online

Webcasting brings untelevised games to loyal fans

By DAN CARNEVALE

Karen DiFelice is a huge Bobcats fan. Not the NBA team in North Carolina. Not the Ohio University team. Not even the Bobcats of Montana State University. No, Ms. DiFelice is a devoted follower of the little-known Bobcats of Georgia College & State University, in Milledgeville, Ga. She has been watching every baseball game she can catch this season.

The games, however, are not on television. And because she lives 800 miles away in Philadelphia, she cannot get to the stands in person.

Instead, Ms. DiFelice watches the games on her computer screen as they are Webcast by the university. So do more than 300 other rabid Bobcats fans. She has a personal reason to watch, too. Her son, Brett, is a freshman outfielder.

"For us, not to be there is just killing us," Ms. DiFelice says. The Webcasts are "our only link."

Many small colleges have a dedicated fan base for their sports, yet ESPN won't be coming to places like Milledgeville anytime soon. The solution for some has been Webcasting.

And they have found an audience. Faraway alumni are able to reconnect with their alma maters. Parents get to watch every time young Billy goes up to bat. And high-school athletes can determine if this is the team they want to play for.

Large universities have been Webcasting for years. But officials say even small colleges with tight budgets can afford to do it. At Georgia College & State, as many as 400 viewers at a time have tuned in to the Webcasts. Now Stan Aldridge, the university's athletics director, is hoping to raise money through advertising as the audience grows.

Another Georgia institution, Armstrong Atlantic State University, was an early Webcaster of its sporting events. Eddie Aenchbacher, athletics director at the university, says Armstrong Atlantic started covering basketball in 2001, and soon expanded to other sports, including volleyball, baseball, softball, and soccer. "We even did a tennis match one time," Mr. Aenchbacher says. "But I got a little scared because I was standing on top of a building holding a camera."

The Webcasts had their bumps. High-speed Internet cables do not run to the athletics fields, for instance. Eventually the university installed wireless access points to carry the signal back to the broadband connection.

The Webcasts have proved popular. At times several people in a neighborhood will gather to watch a game from afar. Troops in Iraq who have ties to the university have been known to watch. Even players' family members in Australia have gotten up at 3 a.m. to watch the Webcasts, says Mr. Aenchbacher.

In addition to connecting distant fans, the Webcasts act as a great recruiting tool, Mr. Aenchbacher says.

Showing high-school prospects games online gives the university a competitive edge over other similar institutions, he says. It even nudges the parents into preferring Armstrong Atlantic if they know they can watch their children play online.

"Who can say that, at our level?" he says. "Division II doesn't get as much exposure as Division I gets."

Webcast Guru

These universities, as well as several others, credit their ability to Webcast to one man. James Leonard, professor of information technology at Macon State College, has been helping colleges Webcast sports for 15 years — starting first with audio-only transmissions and more recently getting involved with video. Any college, he says, can Webcast sports events without breaking the bank.

Colleges would need to buy one to three cameras and some electronic equipment. Students can run the Webcasts, sometimes even just for course credit.

The start-up costs can run to about \$30,000, using top-of-the-line equipment. But getting a decent Webcast up does not have to cost that much. Armstrong Atlantic spent only about \$5,000 for its start-up equipment.

"In the next few years, every college, to remain competitive, will have to Webcast its sports," Mr. Leonard says. "This is just a natural evolution."

Mr. Leonard has incorporated his video Webcasting project into an academic program at Macon State. Students from various disciplines, including broadcasting, communications, and computer science, enroll to get experience covering live sporting events. They have done such great work, he says, that he does not have to boss them around much anymore.

"Lately I've been more of a grunt person," Mr. Leonard says. "I switch batteries when they go bad, I get water for people — because the students really do a good job with it."

Rising Demand

Some colleges have sought help from companies to set up and deliver their Webcasts. Nada Usina, network president at XOS Technologies Inc., a company that provides Web services to athletics teams, says the demand for Webcasting games is growing. Last year the company had 40 clients and Webcast 7,000 games. This year XOS has 150 clients and plans to handle more than 12,000 games.

Ms. Usina says large sports powerhouses in the Big 12 conference and smaller institutions in the Big South may have different demands from the company, but both kinds of institutions need to keep their fans interested in their sports through online interactivity. "It's not that the fans are any less rabid," she says. "It's just a smaller fan base."

The University of Central Oklahoma is one of XOS's clients. Largely a commuter institution, with about 16,000 students, Central Oklahoma is smack-dab in between the state's two powerhouses — the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University.

"Our institution is probably not somewhere where a lot of kids say, 'This is where I want to go,'" says James M. Downer, the assistant director of athletics media relations. "We seem to be a fallback school."

Working with XOS, he says, the university has been able to develop an athletics Web site fit for a Division I program. Central Oklahoma pays \$10,000 per year for XOS's services, he says. In addition to showing live games, the site includes audio and video clips of games, up-to-date statistics, and interactive features.

The university's video Webcasts are pretty bare-bones, Mr. Downer says. Fans see multiple camera angles of the football games, but no graphics splashed on the screen. And the audio commentary is taken from the local radio broadcast.

Some institutions have gone so far as to make fans pay to watch the games online. Abilene Christian

University, in Texas, charges \$89.95 for a year's subscription, or \$8.95 per month for those who, say, care only about football.

The number of subscribers varies by sport. Football gets 60 to 75 subscribers, says Jared Mosley, Abilene Christian's athletics director. Baseball gets about 30.

"For the most part, it's been well received," Mr. Mosley says. "We have a pretty loyal alumni group. They enjoy watching the games even when the teams are struggling through a season."

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