



Welcome to New Year's Day, 2009. In years past, baseball fans would mark the change of the calendar as a milestone on the way to getting their baseball fix in a few short months. That all changes today at 6pm ET, when the **MLB Network** debuts to an audience of approximately 50 million households, the largest cable channel launch in history. From now on, baseball fans will have a location to turn to year-round to watch all things baseball.

([see a listing of MLB Network channels](#) , along with a *Zip Code locator to find out of MLB Network providers for your exact location*)

The network, long desired by Major League Baseball, came to be as part of the negotiations for MLB Extra Innings with DirecTV, and cable consortium, iNDemand as partners in the new network in 2007.

In April of 2008, former Executive V.P. and Executive Producer for CBS Sports, **Tony Petitti**, joined MLB Network as President and Chief Executive Officer, where he oversees all day-to-day operations.

Interview: Tony Petitti, President and CEO, MLB Network

Written by Maury Brown

Thursday, 01 January 2009 13:20

Petitti originally joined CBS Sports in February 1997 as Senior Vice President, Business Affairs and Programming, in which he played a key role in negotiating contracts for continued coverage of the PGA Tour and the network's re-acquisition of the NFL. In August 1999, he became the Vice President and General Manager of WCBS-TV in New York before re-joining CBS Sports in 2002. The six-time Emmy Award Winner was named Executive Producer in July 2002 and later appointed Executive Vice President in December 2005. In 2000, Sports Business Journal honored Petitti as part of its "40 Under 40" top executives in the industry.

With less than 24 hours before MLB Network's launch, we caught up with Petitti, a man diligently monitoring the goings on at the net's new home in Secaucus, N.J. The sound of a walkie-talkie buzzing occasionally in the background, Petitti explained how the network grew from approx. 20 to well over 150 today.

Topics for the interview include the process leading up to the channel launch, whether Bob Costas is being considered for the MLB Network, how Petitti is approaching programming direction as MLB Network competes with MLB's broadcast partners, what the new network is doing to approach advertisers during the recession, where negotiations are at on bringing MLB Network to Canada and other international markets, whether there will be fantasy baseball programming coming to the new network, and what the long-range forecast is for MLB Network.
- *Maury Brown*

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Maury Brown for the Business of Sports Network: *Taking the helm of the largest cable channel launch in history must be quite exhilarating. What was involved in the initial inception phase of MLB Network when you arrived at the former MSNBC studios in Secaucus?*

Tony Petitti: One key part of it was really already in place was the distribution arrangement. That was a really important thing that had been done by Tim Brosnan (Executive Vice President, Business for MLB) Chris Tully (Senior Vice President of Broadcasting for MLB), and Bob DuPuy (president and COO of MLB) of the Commissioner's Office to basically secure distribution. So, when I came on board, the challenge was to really build out the network, build the staff, build the facility, build the programming plan and concept, and really sort of get it going from the ground up. Knowing that with that great distribution we were really going to have a viable business really to reach people, so that was the thing that made it really exciting, which was that we were heading towards this day. That was the thing that made it really exciting is

that 50 million homes that MLB Network will reach is what gave us the resources to build a plant the way we wanted to build it.

Bizball: *What has been the primary focus in the final days before the launch?*

Petitti: The final days have been focused on production and technical rehearsal. So we've got two types of rehearsing going on: One is in terms of the facility, being able to perform, having all the systems come up. And the second piece is the content rehearsal, getting our talent together going through mock shows and just getting everybody in the production team running through their paces. We have been doing that basically all day every day for the last couple of weeks as the videos were completed.

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Bizball: *There has been a flurry of on-air talent additions leading up to the channel launch, including Mitch Williams, Greg Amsinger, Jon Heyman, and Tom Verducci. There had been reports that contact has been made with Bob Costas about joining MLB Network. Can you comment on whether Costas might possibly be part of MLB Network in the future?*

Petitti: What Bob has done for us is he is hosting the Larsen-Berra interview that you'll see in our debut tonight as part of the 1956 World Series Game 5 between the Brooklyn Dodgers and NY Yankees featuring Don Larsen's perfect game (airs at 7pm ET). And that's really where that stands. I mean, obviously there were discussions with Bob, but right now the focus is on the first show.

Bizball: *You have been a key figure at both ABC and CBS Sports. MLB Network is different in that it is a league-based channel, and therefore is competing on some level with MLB's broadcast partners in ESPN, FOX, and TBS. As President and CEO of MLB Network, how have you approached programming that could influence negotiations when these broadcast agreements come up for renewal?*

Petitti: Well, the first thing important in programming is that people are going to want to watch. That's the first thing. So that the network is a viable place, where baseball fans come and it's a destination that they're aware of and a resource that they will use when they're watching baseball. That's the way the goal is initially is to build a programming stable that appeals to baseball fans on all different kinds of levels. Whether it's video programming, gaming programming, historical programming -- it's really a mix of everything. In terms of the future and in terms of negotiations, the bottom line for the network is we want the network to grow and we want it eventually to grow beyond 50 million homes. So whatever content is out there we would be like to be perceived as a viable place for that content to be, whether it's additional games or other packages. But having said that we are building it around studio programming and the kind of great tape programming that we have on but I think the key is that we're prepared to take on anything that could come our way in a few years, in terms of more content...

Bizball: *Could that include playoff games?*

Petitti: ... Now whether that means that baseball wants to move more content here, that'll be up to you know the Commissioner's Office and we'll sit there like any other bidder hoping we can come up with some more.

Bizball: *The economy has impacted all businesses, and television is no exception. MLB Network has been working with existing league sponsors, and reportedly, integrated on-screen sponsorships is being explored. At launch, what key advertisers have you, Bill Morningstar, and John Brody with MLB been able to land?*

Petitti: What you'll see in the initial telecasts you'll see the corporate sponsors of baseball will be participating in the telecast. There are ongoing discussions didn't get in place until late in the fall, we're out there with plans and contest rules, and all different kinds of advertisers. That was the primary focus initially, was the corporate sponsors of baseball, they will participate in the

beginning. It's an evolving process. Since we are a start-up the sales side will continue to grow. The numbers in this economy is more challenging. It was an easier in sales a year ago, to be honest, than it is now. Having said that, we feel confident that we'll be where we need to be by the end of December, 12 months from now.

Bizball: *So you're feeling confident in the number of your subscriber fees coming in basically bolstering things as you start to work towards a larger advertising base?*

Petitti: Right, it's the luxury of having the dual revenue stream and what that means for cable network and how we're built.

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Bizball: *Currently, MLB Network will not be available in Canada and other international markets. How far along are talks with carriers outside of the US to bring MLB Network to these locations?*

Petitti: We had some discussions early on. There are some program issues you have to get through – there's different rules – but ultimately our goal is to have MLB Network distributed as widely as possible. There are places outside the United States that are very passionate about baseball. Canada, obviously, was an easy one as there's not necessarily a language issue. I anticipate in time, we'll be able to be broadcasting there.

Bizball: *MLB Productions has provided nearly 30 World Series films, with all retransferring to high definition for the first time ever to take advantage of MLB Network's HD transmission format. What are some of those films that might interest viewers?*

Petitti: It's an ongoing thing (**Editor's Note:** [See MLB Network's schedule listing](#)). We were planning out which ones run at which times and different things. To just generally talking about production... [MLB Productions] is going to locate in this building in February. The archives of baseball will be out here. We'll have them as our production partner. The way we built our staff, we built it knowing we were going to have the great talents of MLB Productions, as part of what we're doing here. So we've been relying on them to be doing all different kinds of stuff for us as we run up. So it's been very, very collaborative. Dave Gavant (VP, and Executive Producer, MLB Productions), and the rest of the staff over at MLB Productions have just done a great job for us. That will continue, we think; it's just a great resource to have. It allows us to focus on other things and they can focus on what they do best.

Bizball: *Fantasy Baseball is a popular pastime for many fans of MLB. Has there been any consideration to adding any content that may approach the fantasy baseball at any level?*

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Petitti: There's two ways to look at that. First, in terms of specific shows prior to the season that will air before people draft their teams and get involved with that. We're definitely going to do something there. The second piece is that I look at it almost as you are providing information in somewhat of a passive way. All baseball fans care about numbers, it's just part of a way the game is watched and understood. It's the way it's measured in a lot of ways. So numbers are important to all kinds of fans, whether you play fantasy or not. Our show, MLB Tonight, is going to be able to put a lot of those numbers into context. We will have a lot of times stuff like league leaders, and who's done and what trends there are. So the way I look at it, you'll get that information and if you care about fantasy that will be important to you and you'll realize you're getting it. On top of that, whether you play fantasy or not you'll still get it. It's sort of done to include all views of the game. And then from there we'll see if we need specific segments on fantasy within the course of an MLB Tonight show. I think that our show will provide so much in-depth information that fantasy players will realize and will see that their information is coming.

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Bizball: *Finally, what are some of the long range aspirations for MLB Network?*

Petitti: Long range aspirations are that we're sitting here a year from now, that we've done our job, that baseball fans and viewers really view us as an important destination to get baseball information. [That] they realize that what we're providing; that we really complement the way they watch their local broadcast, which we recognize is the way most fans connect with the game, is through their local team. And that we're viewed as another resource, that we compliment that viewing. And that they've found that this is a consistently great place for baseball programming. And that on the production side that people feel we're really putting out a quality product every night.

- Interview conducted by Maury Brown on 12/31/08
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