



Award Designation and Category:

Entertainment & Sports

Campaign Title:

The Last Dance

Year the campaign took place:

Brand: ESPN

Creative Agency:

Media Company/Agency:

Research Company:

Additional Affiliated Companies: The Shop, Boomshot, Art Machine, Starcom, Hypothesis, Hart Research

Summary of the marketing challenge, methodology, insight discovered, creative execution and business impact.

The Last Dance is the highly acclaimed ten-part series which chronicles one of the greatest icons and most successful dynasties in sports history: Michael Jordan and the 1990s Chicago Bulls. Anchored by more than 500 hours of never-before-seen footage from the team's last championship run in the 1997-98 season, The Last Dance had the full participation of Jordan and other key figures from the Bulls' championship teams, as well as dozens of other luminaries from basketball and beyond.

These details are what made The Last Dance ESPN's largest original content initiative to date. An event that was originally planned to air on the off nights of the 2020 NBA Finals, the documentary was predicted to be a slam dunk for ESPN's ratings, sales goals and brand health. This is the reason that we treated the marketing execution as a feature film – similar to the likes of Star Wars or Marvel franchises – and debuted our first spot 18 months out

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on Christmas Day 2018 during the high-profile slate of NBA on ESPN games. This fueled intense anticipation from basketball lovers, '90s era and nostalgia-seeking audiences across traditional and digital/social platforms for nearly a year and a half.

And then the sports world stopped in March due to COVID-19. With the halt of live events, especially the NBA season, we knew these extraordinary circumstances would completely disrupt not just the marketing of the film, but the release date and distribution as well. We moved quickly to scenario plan all possible roll-out options, pivot from planned on-site activations, and completely re-evaluate our media mix.

The growing demand from fans was amplified when the pandemic hit, and we closely tracked through social media and consumer research. Ultimately, the fans' voice was heard, and we were excited to announce the decision to move up the release date. The early release announcement results spoke for themselves: ESPN was getting credit for the rights to the film, the announcement overwhelmingly drove positive impact for the ESPN Brand, and people were gracious for ESPN making the decision to move up the release date. And this was only the start as the series went on to be ESPN's most successful documentary in history.

Consumer Insight

To grow ESPN's connection to younger audiences (via Story Seekers), lift awareness of ESPN Films overall, and provide relief during the pandemic, we had the opportunity to bring fans in to the biggest thing ESPN has ever done: The Last Dance

Marketing Challenge

Market The Last Dance like a new Star Wars film. The Last Dance is the largest original content investment the organization has ever made, which led to us fundamentally adjusting our marketing approach. Because the quality of the content was akin to a major Hollywood Blockbuster, we looked within the organization to the experts: the marketing team behind Star Wars. We set up time two years prior to the release of The Last Dance and asked them squarely how they approach timing and messaging when it comes to a new Star Wars film.

Focus on the storylines and individual personalities. The Star Wars team also recommended pulling out the characters and personalities from the film, to spotlight the various interpersonal themes. We had multiple ways in, leading to an exercise of defining the most relevant and convincing storylines for our targets (e.g., The Rise of MJ, the real stories of these mythical figures, GOAT Debate, MJ as an icon for greatness, the business around Jordan and the Bulls, and the impact of their success on society and culture).

This subsequently impacted how we planned a variety of [advertising tactics](#) specific to Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Dennis Rodman, Steve Kerr, Phil Jackson and Jerry Krauss.

Planning activations through 2020. We then spent the next year working through our entire marketing plan. We debated, discussed, and aligned on what success would look like (e.g., tune-in, social conversation & digital consumption, buzz and word-of-mouth about our content, belief that ESPN is indispensable for bold story-telling, credit for ESPN having it first).

We also worked diligently to identify any hurdles in our way:

- Content choice paralysis
- DMVPD behavior including bingeing, waiting, no ads
- Potential for not knowing when or where to watch, release cadence, etc.
- Confusion over linear vs. binge messaging; also ABC vs. ESPN
- It's unexpected from ESPN; this isn't how fans typically engage with us
- ESPN is associated with linear, antiquated distribution of content

Throughout all of our planning, we were methodical with properly identifying the total audience opportunity and then segmenting them with individual communication plans. We always felt comfortable about leveraging the incredible scale of ESPN, The Walt Disney Company, and the NBA, so we

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strived to broaden the audience opportunity outside of the sports world; looking into TV & Pop Culture, Fashion and Gaming. We knew we wanted the majority of our media off these platforms to gear at fans that might not necessarily watch ESPN, the NBA, or be interested in a sports documentary.

Methodology

There were three key phases of research executed over the course of a year in order to guide all steps from the creative brief through to execution and measuring impact.

1. Brand Audit: We performed an extensive analysis of our Brand Tracker data which consists of a nationally representative sample on a rolling 12-month basis that is fielded by our partners at Hart Research. The tracker enables us to measure overall brand awareness, usage, and affinity across our master brand and sub-brands along with a number of key brand attributes. We identified a discrepancy in awareness and affinity for both the master ESPN brand and the ESPN Films/30 for 30 sub-brands among the younger cohort of fans compared to older fans. These findings were only reinforced in an additional brand health audit with our brand measurement partners at BAV in which we measure our portfolio of brands across 48 different imagery attributes that ladder up into our overall Brand Strength and Stature. We found that our Films brand underperforms among the 18 – 24 year old demo on key attributes that drive high brand positioning among the general population.

2. Fan Segmentation: In order to communicate to this younger consumer, we developed a Fan Segmentation in partnership with research and strategy firm Hypothesis. Our segmentation enabled us to understand fans attitudes and motivations – and resulted in six segments of fandom. Three core phases of methodology included:

- **DISCOVER:** Interviews with key stakeholders, context immersion, and deep-dive into past ESPN research
- **SEGMENT & PROFILE:** Online survey and data analysis to create segments dimensionalized by robust profiling
- **ILLUMINATE:** In-depth interviews with fans who embody target segments

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We determined through our work that the “Story Seeker” segment – fans that are drawn to the stories around sports connect to players, especially through their phone and social media – presented the greatest opportunity to grow *The Last Dance* success via overall consumption, engagement and brand connection. They are among the youngest, most diverse fan bases out there. They also represent the largest fan segment.

3. Social Listening: Using NetBase as our primary social tool, we built out tracking of all organic and owned social conversation relating to *The Last Dance* to help guide messaging, targeting, and content decisions. Upon the start of the pandemic in early March, we gleaned the insight that fans across the board voiced their desires for ESPN to move up the launch date from June 2020. This insight fueled agile decision-making internally which resulted in listening to our fans and showing them we care.

4. Measuring Impact: As is the case for each of our ESPN promotional campaigns, we built a measurement framework around the two primary goals for all of our marketing:

- Driving consumption
- Positively impacting brand perceptions

To measure impact on consumption, ***The Last Dance* was included as part of a holistic media mix modeling project undertaken with Nielsen to quantify ESPN and ABC viewership attributable to exposure to each of our marketing campaigns and tactics.** To measure impact on brand, **we implemented another holistic attribution modeling study with Kantar to measure impact of marketing on brand perceptions,** using an advanced methodology that incorporates Kantar’s sample of Samba TV households to survey those exposed to TV promos, and digital tagging to identify those exposed via on- and off-channel digital, so that the appropriate control vs. exposed survey respondent groups can be identified and their results analyzed.

Creative Execution

When we learned that the date was moving up and being announced on March 31st, we knew we wanted to make this a big moment - "ESPN fans, NBA fans, Michael Jordan fans, Bulls fans, and fans in general across the country, we have *heard* you." We created a [:60 hype trailer](#) over one weekend and worked in partnership with all teams across the company to debut the trailer on GMA on the morning of March 31st, and then simultaneously blast it out on ESPN and ESPN talent owned social handles. From April 9th through May 17th, we had continuous support across ESPN and the Walt Disney Company in the form of [linear TV spots](#) and drop ins across ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNNews, ESPNU, ACCN, SECN, Longhorn Network, FX, ABC, Freeform, Nat Geo, and ESPN and the NBA's affiliated networks. We also had digital support across ESPN.com, the ESPN App, ESPN's Fantasy Apps, NBA.com and the NBA App. We tapped into 1st party databases, sending out millions of emails to ESPN and NBA fans. During the flight, we updated all of this creative so it was fresh for the next week's episodes. Leading up to and throughout the five week airings of The Last Dance, we were constantly listening to our fans and adapting our marketing plans. After we saw critic reviews and initial ratings after the first week, we created a [brand new set of creative](#) that touted how The Last Dance is the #1 program in America and listed off some of the amazing reviews we received from major news outlets like The Washington Post, The New York Times, Vanity Fair and USA Today.

We also thought outside the box, creating partnerships with lifestyle and music brands such as [Peloton](#), [Spotify](#), and [Jordan Brand](#) to continue extending the reach of the film outside of sports fans. We had a Last Dance playlist on Spotify, created a Last Dance themed ride with Alex Toussaint leading into the Finale and continuously shared our trailers and art with Jordan Brand over the five weeks to share on their massive social handles. After the live airings concluded on May 17th, we were not finished. Our original objective was to gain as much brand credit for ESPN for The Last Dance throughout the full duration of our rights. Through June 14th, we continue to run [creative](#) across ESPN and synergy networks, ESPN.com and the ESPN App. This messaging continues to tout the ratings and reviews on The Last Dance, while simultaneously stating that all 10 episodes are available to binge on ESPN and the ESPN App.

Business Results/Lessons Learned

RECORD BREAKING CULTURAL EVENT

The Last Dance was a cross platform success that transcended the sports world to become a part of the cultural conversation and the most watched ESPN documentary of all time. Engaging content and an escape from reality led to record audiences, massive social conversation and overwhelmingly positive fan feedback.

1. HISTORIC NUMBER OF FANS TUNED IN. 37 million Americans or 12% of the US population tuned into any episode of The Last Dance on TV. On digital, 7.3 million unique viewers have streamed The Last Dance on ESPN access points and select MVPD mobile apps, with 82% of those viewers streaming on demand.

2. CAPTURED MASSIVE AUDIENCES. Since sports halted in mid-March, The Last Dance was the #1 program in America among key male demos (M18-34, M18-49, M25-54) and was responsible for 9 of the top 20 telecasts among adults 18 to 49.

3. RETAINED HUGE AUDIENCES. The Last Dance finale averaged 97% of its viewership from Week 1, which is an incredibly high retention rate for a film series. About two thirds of viewers for Episode 10 watched Episode 1 and nearly one third watched all 10 episodes, which rivals other major cable series such as The Walking Dead.

4. MOST ENJOYED ESPN MARKETING CAMPAIGN OF ALL TIME. The film's trailers rank as some of the top scoring creative we have ever tested among enjoyment, improving perceptions of ESPN, and making fans feel that ESPN "understands and cares" about them.

4. FILLED A VOID FOR SPORTS FANS. All 10 episodes rank among the 15 most viewed sports telecasts since sports halted. The same day audience also rivals top sporting events such as the MLB ALCS, NBA Eastern Conference Finals and NBA All Star game.

6. CAPTIVATED THE COUNTRY. The Last Dance was the #1 trending topic on Twitter every Sunday and garnered more social conversation on a per episode basis than any TV series in 2020. The conversation expanded beyond sports (ex. fashion, music, memes) into traditional morning shows and news outlets.

7. ENGAGED VIEWERS. On ESPN, the average viewer watched 44 of 60 minutes per episode, the highest rate of time spent ever for an ESPN

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documentary. Engaging content led to high enjoyment with 96% of fans surveyed saying the film was very or extremely enjoyable.

8. CREATED A SUNDAY VIEWING "EVENT". Households came together to watch The Last Dance week after week. More than half of viewers (53%) watched the original episodes with someone else in the room, rivaling the best co-viewing rates for ESPN in 2020.

9. BROUGHT A YOUNGER, MORE FEMALE VIEWER. The average age of The Last Dance viewers was 43 years old, 7 years younger than ESPN's 2020 pre-COVID average. Females made up 34% of the audience and helped ESPN rank as a top 3 network in prime among F18-49 every Sunday.

10. BRAND HALO. In ESPN's recruit to view, 74% of fans said that The Last Dance made them feel more positive about ESPN. On social, ESPN was the most mentioned brand and drove nearly 18X the amount of conversation compared to Netflix.

Contributors

1. Laura Gentile – ESPN, SVP Marketing
2. Cary Meyers – ESPN, SVP Research & Insights
3. Flora Kelly – ESPN, Sr. Director, Strategic & Brand Insights
4. Kevin Hack – ESPN, Manager, Brand Insights
5. Lauren Keiling – ESPN, Director, Strategic Insights
6. Claudia Baim – ESPN, Assoc. Manager, Brand Insights
7. Ricky Cedrone – ESPN, Assoc. Director, Marketing Insights
8. Steven Brown – ESPN, Analyst, Marketing Insights
9. Matthew Rutigliano – ESPN, Analyst, Brand Insights
10. Seth Ader – ESPN, VP Brand Marketing
11. Inna Kern – ESPN, VP Media
12. Peter Mulally – ESPN, Director, Brand Marketing
13. Jeff Zeller – ESPN, Director, Brand Marketing
14. Patricia Yáñez – ESPN, Associate Director, Brand Marketing
15. Allie Murphy – ESPN, Associate Director, Media
16. John Lobo – ESPN, Manager, Brand Marketing
17. Hannah Beir – ESPN, Associate Manager, Brand Marketing
18. Annie Hayes – ESPN, Coordinator, Brand Marketing
19. Spencer Shaev – ESPN, Coordinator, Brand Marketing
20. Miles Bonomo – ESPN, Coordinator, Media