

# The best

**W**e all know sports is big business—and not just for the athletes. As broadcasters, big bucks are paid for rights to games. But it only makes sense to pay those bucks if people are watching.

It used to be that sports was sports and the sports fan would watch. Well, competition and specialty channels have changed that. People are still watching, now they can pick and choose where.

Sports, like any other programming, has to be sold. Hence, the pressure falls on the unsung heroes of broadcasting—the on-air promo department. It's your job to create the energy, excitement, drama and suspense of that "big game". How do you convince me why I should watch the *World Figure Skating Championships* over *WWE Smackdown* or, better yet, *Grey's Anatomy*?

"The best thing you can do in sports promo is to not think of yourself as being in sports promo," says Robert Gottlieb, Vice President/Creative Director of on-air promotions at Fox Sports. "It can be limiting creatively to think of yourself as selling sports. It can be all testosterone. You end up recycling the same ideas. If you think you're selling comedy or drama, or adventure or action, you'll be more creative that way."

Not to mention having your promos cut through the clutter.

"Telling a story is essential because that's how you draw someone in and evoke emotion," adds Gottlieb, whose team routinely turns out award-winning spots from their studios in L.A. "Without a story, it's like Charlie Brown's parents or teacher talking (wawawawa)."

So here, in a nutshell, is the process they go through at Fox Sports when creating their "big game" work.

"The first place we start is with the tone," explains Gottlieb. "Is it supposed to be funny, dramatic, life and death, irreverent, or hip? We want a direction about the desired result. We do that either formally through creative brief or through discussion. You always start with the tone. What you want people to feel when they watch the spot. Once you have that, we start to explore ideas that can support that tone. Once the tone is set, it opens us up to really exploring ideas."

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BY JOHN McGRATH



Then it's free reign on ideas. Any idea that supports the tone is entertained. And in the true spirit of sports: "the best idea wins." And where does the inspiration from those ideas come from? Anywhere, says Gottlieb, but not usually from the world of sports clichés, unless that's the tone.

"You can get your inspiration from so many places—fashion magazines, Web sites, other on-air work, art galleries," notes Gottlieb. "There's inspiration everywhere."

With tone and idea in place, they move to a storyboard phase. On a more expensive film-type shoot, they may bring in a sketch artist to draw up a formal board to organize the shoot. They then go into production mode and shoot the spot and then into post, where music is matched with the pace of the edit and voiceover puts the final touches on the "story".

But what if I'm just pulling clips from existing footage because I have no budget, you ask?

"A good idea has a thousand executions," Gottlieb says. "Even if you don't have the budget or resources to execute the way we can, there's always ways to execute without time and budget with a little creativity. Smaller scale promos are not as involved, but the process is still the same. What is the tone? What are we trying to do with this thing?"

"Even if it's just a clip-based spot going into the edit bay, having a game plan when you walk in is essential. Having the music, sound design, the script and the graphic design figured out before you walk into the bay is what we try to do here."

Bottom line, just as the pro athlete does 90% of his prep work off the field before the big game, a great sports promo requires a lot of pre-production. See it in your mind first and then make it materialize (apologies to Yoda or whoever I paraphrased that from, but you get the point).

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