

UFC and ESPN+ the big winners as fight night kicks off relationship with the Worldwide Leader

January 28, 2019



BY JOHN OURAND

Endeavor President **Mark Shapiro** was holding court in the VIP section of Brooklyn's Barclays Center on Jan. 19 in the middle of UFC's fight night.

Shapiro was enthused. This was the first UFC card in ESPN's five-year deal, and Shapiro was blown away by the level of commitment he had seen from both Bristol and Burbank. ESPN President **Jimmy Pitaro** was in the VIP area just minutes earlier before taking a seat ringside to see the fights. **Kevin Mayer**, Disney direct-to-consumer and international chairman, was texting Shapiro throughout the fight. The next day, Disney Chairman and CEO **Bob Iger** personally communicated the results from the fight night.

"When you have that kind of attention and that kind of engagement, it sure bodes well for the future," Shapiro said.

As coverage on ESPN's linear TV channel was about to end, Shapiro made his way ringside and sat next to Endeavor CEO **Ari Emanuel**. The final fight on linear TV, before the **ESPN+** streaming service carried the night's main events, became an entertaining brawl, with **Donald**

Cerrone, a UFC fighter who goes by the nickname “Cowboy,” knocking out **Alex Hernandez** in the second round of their match. Shapiro turned to Emanuel and said, “We’ve got magic here. We are cooking.”



Donald “Cowboy” Cerrone (right) and Alex Hernandez provided an entertaining brawl that led to main event coverage on ESPN+.

Photo: ESPN IMAGES

For Shapiro and ESPN executives, such an exciting fight was the perfect way to end the linear stream. ESPN signed up more than 525,000 new subscribers on that Saturday — a figure that exceeded expectations. Shapiro said the way the linear feed ended — with the exciting Cerrone-Hernandez fight — helped push those numbers higher.

“In our best-guess estimates, we thought we’d pull in 300,000 subs for ESPN+,” Shapiro said. “To do roughly double that is really an astonishing accomplishment.”



ESPN executives viewed the UFC event as a chance to demonstrate ESPN+, the streaming service that launched last April. ESPN+ branding was throughout the arena.

Fans were given black ESPN+ shirts as they entered through the turnstiles. Huge ESPN+ signs were positioned around the octagon. It was a big part of the fan festival outside the arena where fans could test their punching power and create a personalized walkout video.

“This was the big launch event in New York; I don’t think you’ll see that level at other events,” said **Russell Wolff**, executive vice president and general manager of ESPN+. “It’ll depend on the marketplace.”

ESPN rented out a suite to give the press a taste of what life with the UFC would be like. Inside the suite, it had ESPN+ on a mosaic mode via Apple TV that carried the UFC event alongside live video from the Australian Open, a Lakers-Rockets game and different college basketball games.

Throughout the day, ESPN+ users were alerted to the upcoming UFC fight card. On television, ESPN viewers were given instructions for how to subscribe to ESPN+. Wolff was enthused by the seamless marketing and programming between the two.

“That is the power of the four letters of ESPN,” he said. “When we signed off from the 8-to-10 p.m. window with **Stephen A. Smith** and **Dana White** telling viewers what was coming next on ESPN+ with a video of how to subscribe and how to use it, that was the moment when I was like, ‘We’ve got this right.’ We helped fans navigate. We’ve helped fans understand and we’re using the big commercial window of ESPN to drive people to try the brand-new products in ESPN+.”



Connor Schell, ESPN’s executive vice president of content, did not make it to Barclays Center for the UFC event. He opted to stay home and monitor how ESPN was producing the event both on its television network and streaming service. From his home, Schell was able to keep in constant contact with television producers and ESPN workers programming the app.



ESPN+ signed up more than 525,000 new subscribers on the day of the fights, nearly double expectations.

Photo: ESPN IMAGES

“We were firing in a lot of different directions on a lot of different properties,” Schell said, referencing the NBA games, college games and Australian Open on ESPN+. “We were launching the UFC on ESPN+ in the middle of that. We spent months having conversations around how we are going

to integrate content that is relevant to our audience and accessible to more casual fans.”

Schell oversaw how UFC storylines became part of “SportsCenter” and other digital outlets.

“It was cool to see all of those assets moving in the same direction, and all of the planning come to fruition to make that happen,” Schell continued. “Fairly seamlessly we moved a lot of fans. We did a big linear TV rating [just under 2 million viewers], and we moved a lot of fans to ESPN+ to experience the main events.”

It’s that kind of marketing power that has Shapiro and the rest of the UFC’s executives excited to see how this deal progresses.

“We are realistic that the marketing power that they put behind the first fight will not be sustained across the rest of the year,” Shapiro said.

“ESPN’s marketing power for just a middle-of-the-year event will still be five times what we received on **Fox**. We are fishing where the fish are biting. This is where the sports fans are. They are at ESPN. Fox draws them in. But they live and breathe on ESPN.”

John Ourand can be reached at jourand@sportsbusinessjournal.com.

Follow him on Twitter [@Ourand_SBJ](https://twitter.com/Ourand_SBJ).