

Interview With Josh Krulewitz, ESPN Vice President, Communications

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ESPN Vice President of Communications Josh Krulewitz started his ESPN career immediately after graduating from the University of Connecticut in 1992. Krulewitz was a 2008 Katha Quinn Award recipient for the service he provided to the U.S. Basketball Writers Association media members. He is also a member of the V Foundation Committee. The V Foundation is a foundation dedicated to the fight against cancer, and it honors the life of former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Championship men's basketball coach and ESPN commentator Jim Valvano, who lost his life to cancer. Krulewitz has held his current position since 2006. He is ESPN's point person when it comes to communication issues related to studio programming and personnel. Krulewitz's work with studio programming communications includes media inquiries tied to everything from news programs, like SportsCenter, to special events, like the National Football League (NFL) draft. His work touches a tremendous number of the ESPN and ABC sport properties, including hundreds of annual college sport events, ESPN's broadcasts, sport news programs, and issues related to ESPN News. Krulewitz's communications work with personnel keeps him busy handling media inquiries tied to ESPN administrators, like President Jimmy Pitaro, as well as on-air talents, like Scott Van Pelt and John Anderson.

Hanna: When did you start planning for COVID-19 and its impact on ESPN programming?

Krulewitz: If you look at what we do for (NCAA Basketball) Championship Week in mid-March every year, the jigsaw puzzle that is Championship Week is one of the most elaborate programming things we do because there are so many different rights holders piecing together games all day long. So contingency planning had already been discussed, as news of the virus and the impact of the virus was starting to spread. We saw some things with events considering cancellation, postponement, different rules—so we had already begun some contingency planning conversations prior to the NBA postponement.

Hanna: How did the NBA postponement change things?

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Krulewitz: We were on the air, obviously, doing NBA games. Clearly, that was an enormous tipping point. We had already begun planning, but when that moment happened, it takes things into a much higher gear, and you are immediately sitting down, saying we have so many different live events that are on our air over the course of all of our platforms over the course of a given week—particularly in this busy time of the sports season. That immediately shifted the contingency planning to a much faster overdrive, and we had to plan for the most extreme scenarios, including what if there are no live sports at all from an events standpoint. Quickly, we realized that is what is going to be the most likely scenario. We had a programming war room that next day, including people for each sport category interacting with the rights holder and league to figure out what their plans were, what their thoughts were, and what potential contingency plans we can come up with in the event there were not any live games for an indefinite period of time—and that’s what obviously has come to pass.

Hanna: Was there ever a mood of panic caused by the substantial nature of the changes?

Krulewitz: I would describe it more as a focused effort of heightened importance to figure out what we were going to do. I don’t think there was ever a moment of panic. I think, obviously, concern might be a better word, given what sport fans look to us for each day and given the importance of live events and sports to our culture and to ESPN. Of course, it should go without saying, but everyone’s health and well-being is our first area of concern—including that of our own employees. So that was the immediate focus of everybody: How can we best protect the health and safety of our workforce? As people are trying to navigate through the changing sports decisions from a professional standpoint, they are also dealing with school closures and relatives and mitigating their personal risk.

Hanna: Does ESPN play a role in the national morale during times like these?

Krulewitz: I think it is a fair consideration. It is not something necessarily that we sit around and strategize about in those terms, but I think it is a residue of what we do, and we are proud of that. We have a mission to serve sports fans wherever they are and whatever sports they are consuming—that is sort of our basic mission of the

company. We feel like there is an obligation there and a promise there, and we take that responsibility very seriously. At times, we can be a lift in terms of a positive distraction. It is not necessarily why we are doing what we are doing. It ends up being a byproduct, and we are very proud of that. It is our mission in good times and bad to be the definitive spot for sports and entertainment, and in this particular environment, there is a heightened importance of that.

Hanna: Senior Night (a SportsCenter segment focused on high school seniors who lost the end of their senior athletic seasons due to the pandemic) has resonated with viewers to the point that ESPN's Senior Night athlete stories spur coverage of the ESPN segments in the athlete's local newspaper or on their local TV station. Did you foresee the possibility that ESPN SportsCenter's Senior Night segments would be echoed in these young athletes' hometown newspapers and television news broadcasts?

Krulewitz: The reaction has been great. Every community has been impacted. We all know people who were experiencing the last year of something, and they were looking forward to that. That is a natural human emotion. In the big scheme of things, there are more significant challenges that people are facing more directly with health, but we also wanted to acknowledge that we know that there are so many impact points of the virus. But from a sports standpoint—from a human standpoint—that opportunity to have that last whatever in whatever sport you play . . . I feel badly for some 12-year-olds who did not get to have their last year of Little League. It is the one time in your life you will have that last year of Little League. There is an emotion attached to that. The idea behind Senior Night was to acknowledge that. And you hit it right. People rallied around it and—by us showcasing it—that gives it a bigger stage, and it becomes a local story. It really is a nice thing. Our ESPN president, Jimmy Pitaro, likes to say programming with heart is a distinctive part of ESPN. I think that's a wonderful example of it. The reaction tells the story. What ESPN SportsCenter host Scott Van Pelt particularly did with Senior Night—showcasing so many different people—gives a silver lining to what otherwise would be a dark cloud in terms of the sports aspect for those senior athletes.

Hanna: Is the mood at work normal, or a new normal, or not normal at all?

Krulewitz: Like many other businesses, the vast majority of people are not physically in the offices. That is obviously a safety concern. We do have a very bare bones crew of people responsibly social distancing and obviously wearing masks. The people who are most essential for putting the shows on the air are in. It is a small fraction of what normally is in our workplace. I am an example of somebody who is more of a behind-the-scenes support function, and I have not been in the office since the day or two after the NBA season was postponed. The vast majority of people are in the same situation as me. That is when they said if you do not need to be in the office, then you should not be in the office. What we've done is used conference calls and Zoom to stay connected. It's a different mood, with different companywide calls in which people from different parts of the company share updates. Now we're about 40 days in, and there is a little bit more of a rhythm

established. There's nothing normal about it, but there is a rhythm, nonetheless. The mood is generally positive under the circumstances.

Hanna: ESPN has aired eSport before, but it seems like the amount of time dedicated to that is beyond the normal programming content. You've also added a NBA HORSE tournament. Is all of the new content just seen as filler, or has anything done well enough that ESPN decided we need to keep this up after the pandemic passes?

Krulewitz: You're right about the way you're looking at things. We definitely had used eSport content before, but not at this level. I just was reviewing our schedule for the weekend, and it is filled with various eSport opportunities, from soccer to auto racing to NBA to the Madden Tournament—we have a lot of stuff. It is doing pretty well. It's hard to know—when positioned against actual real live games—how that will do, but I think it's certainly something that a large part of our audience is interested in. I think it is something you will see going forward, as it has been in the past. Will it be more than it was in the past? It is hard to say because our fall schedule might be nutty with events that have come back. But, yes, we might learn some things that help us serve fans in the future. There is no question we're keeping an eye on that now. We also have a very close eye on international sports and leagues in the event they may return a little earlier than the events here in the United States. It is safe to say live events are important, and whatever live events we can acquire that might be ready to play, we're open for business for that programming. Who knows? That stuff, to your point, might actually take off in a way that we might learn some things and, when the dust settles on this period of time and we return to more normalcy, we learn some things about that stuff too. The HORSE thing is a great idea of us collaborating with a league. The NBA obviously played an active role with us to organize that event. It is such a cool thing to have NBA and WNBA players, and who hasn't played HORSE? So, it is relatable. It is simple. It is low risk in terms of everyone doing it at their house—social distancing safe. You have some star power. Of course, the production quality is not going to be the same as people are accustomed to in an NBA Finals game—everybody realizes that. But it is a creative way to do something fun.

Hanna: How has (ESPN president) Jimmy Pitaro steered the organization through these challenging times?

Krulewitz: He has been at ESPN a couple of years now. His influence has been remarkable. He is engaged. He is so smart. He has a presence with everybody. He is a great listener. He collaborates with his team in terms of hearing different opinions and making informed decisions. Those are some of his strengths, and they are all on display. I feel like he has communicated very regularly with the teams. He just posted a video this week. He was at home with a beard—no one has seen him with a beard, but there he is, laying it out there for everybody. He is apparently dyeing his a little gray, as I am—joking there, not dyeing it. He is very human, but extremely strong in terms of the way he presents his leadership. He is somebody you want to get behind and rally around. He is pushing us to keep focused, but also be very supportive of each other. He has been at the Disney company for a while, but only at ESPN for 2 years, and just by talking and hearing him, I know that one of the

things that stands out to him is how special the ESPN culture is. He sort of knew it before, but now he's discovering it first-hand and now is leading it.

Hanna: How has the virus impacted you in your work?

Krulewitz: A lot of my work is focused on media relations, so I deal with a lot of press all day long. Because that communication is often on the phone, email, text, and social media, that just continues regularly. There are a lot of announcements that we have made that I have been involved in. I have been talking to media people every day for weeks in terms of all the various questions, announcements, and issues and things we are doing that are of interest to the external public. I am in a lot of meetings to keep informed with our programming team and production team and the company-wide meeting every day. I have meetings with our staff about the things they are involved in. I have a group that works with me that is focused on NFL public relations, and they have been doing tons of draft stuff. We just had two press calls this week—one of them had 110 writers, and another one had 180 writers on it. So, there is obviously a lot of interest in the Draft. I have a daughter who is in high school, so she is being schooled from home. So, if you go upstairs, it is high school with my daughter on the left—my son is in middle school, so it is middle school classes on the right. My wife is a special education teacher, so downstairs in the basement is her classroom—she is conferencing into her students. And then, out on the porch area is my office. All four are working all day, and then we meet up for dinner at the end of the day and try to get a little walk in at night and do the best we can.

Hanna: The UFC intended to broadcast its mixed martial arts event UFC 249 through ESPN+ on April 18 despite the onset of the coronavirus and various closures in the United States. However, ESPN opted not to broadcast the event due to the pandemic. This led to UFC's postponement of the event. Was ESPN's decision to deny UFC the opportunity to air the broadcast on ESPN+ a challenging verdict? Have you had similar challenging decisions to make with other ESPN partners?

Krulewitz: You probably saw our public position on it, and essentially, it came down to this: We were in constant contact with UFC regarding 249. I think it is clear from this conversation, but just your general knowledge—which is high—that nobody wants to see sports come back more than ESPN. That is one of the more obvious statements. Nobody wants to see sports return more than ESPN. But we just did not feel that was the right time.

We were in regular contact with the UFC, as we are with all of our partners about what their plans are, and there are so many different conversations that you would not even imagine. The head of our programming, Burke Magnus, does a great job simplifying the situations we are in, but we have deals with everybody. We're in contact with so many different rights holders—they fall into four categories. One is those who just packed it in for 2020, and they canceled their event, and they are not going to have it until 2021. An example of that is Wimbledon, which we have the rights to, and we do all of Wimbledon. There are others like that in that bucket. The second is events that are postponing, but already have dates for 2020, like the

Masters. The Masters is usually in April, as you know, and they are saying they are going to have it in November now. Do we all know for sure it is going to be November? Nobody knows. But that is what they are targeting. So that is another bucket—people who have postponed. Several of the golf events are of this ilk, but certainly the Masters is notably one of the majors we broadcast. We had rights to the PGA Championship this year, too, for the first time . . . so those events get postponed, and that is another bucket. The third bucket are sports that were in the middle of their seasons or have already had part of their seasons impacted as a result of this, which I would count NBA and Major League Baseball in that category. They are really hard at work to try to figure out when they can return and when they can begin. And then the fourth bucket is sports that have not started yet that do not know what the impact is going to be, but they hope to start on time—which includes the NFL and college football.

So, the four buckets of rights holders—and there are many examples that go in each bucket—we have been in touch with all of them. Those conversations focus on a couple of things. One is they want to build a bridge to when their season returns or their event returns. How can they stay relevant in sports fans' eyes now when there are no sports going on? What is the best bridge to do that? In the NBA's case, it is a HORSE game. It is an NBA 2K video game tournament. In the case of the Masters, they gave us the opportunity to televise some of Tiger Woods full final round telecasts. It was great—during what would have been Masters' week. NCAA, for the women's Final Four, we televised some old women's Final Four games that were classic events. Major League Baseball—there are a number of examples of things we are doing with them. The conversations have largely focused on that.

In the case of the UFC, they were obviously targeting that date, and we ultimately expressed that we didn't feel it was the right time. We fully support UFC. Our partnership has been nothing short of spectacular since we signed that deal. It has been great for them. It has been unbelievable for us. They have a large, passionate fan base and a great audience demographic. They are loyal fans. They are ESPN consumers. They have bought into the platforms we show UFC on so regularly, not the least of which is ESPN+, which has been buoyed by great UFC programming. But we felt that that wasn't the right time, and we expressed those concerns, and they ultimately understood.