

NFL ready for new season with updated digital offerings

By ERIC FISHER

Staff writer

Published August 16, 2010 : Page 03

The NFL this month is unveiling an array of new digital products, including live streaming of out-of-market preseason games, expanded in-game highlights on NFL.com and NFL Mobile, and a number of relaunched team sites.

The moves represent essentially the third phase of an internally driven digital content strategy for the league, a plan it launched publicly three years ago. The NFL elected to retain most of its digital rights as opposed to pursuing a licensing-driven model. The plan started with the more basic elements of the online space, such as integration with the NFL Network. Now, the league is working to more fully exploit its digital rights.

Also among the new digital products are a previously announced NFL.com fantasy football game that will include video animation, data and performance projections from partner EA Sports; a redesigned, video-centric NFL.com home page, which debuted late last month; and mobile distribution of the RedZone channel through the league's new wireless deal with Verizon.

Under development for later launch are applications for the iPhone and iPad that will contain content and functionality not tied down within the Verizon pact.

"We're now to the point where we can get very aggressive and release a bunch of products we believe will really drive consumption," said Brian Rolapp, NFL senior vice president of digital media.

The fantasy push is among the chief efforts in the broader digital strategy as it directly boosts traffic and usage of virtually every other portion of NFL.com and the league's team sites. League officials declined to disclose registration numbers to date, but the strong expectation is that NFL.com will become the fourth truly major player in the fantasy football industry, along with Yahoo!, ESPN and CBS Sports.

The fantasy game efforts will be supplemented by a new, online 90-minute show devoted to fantasy football that will run live on NFL.com each Sunday from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. The preseason game broadcast package, priced at \$39.99, is also geared largely to fantasy players.

"Fantasy's a tough business — very data- and traffic-intensive — and definitely not for the faint of heart," Rolapp said. "But we obviously have assets that nobody else does and really want to take our slice of that pie."

The NFL now operates 21 of its 32 teams' websites on a common, recently rebuilt technology platform. The other 11 team sites are expected to roll into the program over the next year. The league handles the back-end and technical aspects of the sites, while the clubs retain the ability to create a distinct design and feel for their online destinations. They also retain some ad inventory for locally driven sales.

Club sites most recently relaunched include those for New Orleans, Tampa Bay, Cleveland, Green Bay, Denver, Pittsburgh, Kansas City and the New York Jets.



The NFL also has deepened its alliance with video partner NeuLion heading into the 2010 season. The company had been powering Game Pass, the NFL's international live game package; Audio Pass, the live online radio product; and Game Rewind, an online replay service. Those products will return with higher video resolution and expanded multiview capability in the case of Game Pass and Game Rewind, and enlarged social-media functions and interactivity. NeuLion is also supporting the preseason game package, having built the video player.