



Hot on Heels of Twitter, NBA Players Make Lifecasting 'Next Big Thing'

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By Nate Jones

The 2009 NBA season could be considered the season of Twitter, as the NBA was at the forefront of the explosion of the micro-blogging service. Twitter became the go-to communication tool for many NBA players because of its ease of use and because it enabled them to reach their fans without the help of mainstream media.

But if the 2009 season was the season of Twitter, then the 2010 season might be the year of Ustream. Ustream (and competing services such as Justin.tv) is a web platform that allows for "lifecasting" and streaming of live events via a web cam or some high-end phones.

Although Ustream has been around since 2007, NBA players have just now started to make use of the platform. As with Twitter, its popularity is spreading because it allows for players to easily communicate directly with fans without any mainstream media barriers.

Ustream's initial introduction to the NBA world got off to a somewhat rocky start. Eddy Curry and J.R. Smith started a Ustream channel that broadcast the duo getting pulled over by a police officer. Soon after that, Milwaukee Bucks rookie Brandon Jennings saw his image take a hit after a private conversation was unknowingly streamed by his "friend," rapper Joe Budden.

And then, of course, there's Stephon Marbury, who took things to a new level with a 24-hour webcast marathon last weekend, followed by near-constant broadcasting all this week, prompting some to question whether or not we're witnessing a mental breakdown.

Not all NBA players have had trouble with Ustream. Players such as Kevin Durant, Chris Bosh, Dwight Howard and Jason Thompson have used the platform to communicate with fans and have done a pretty good job so far.

The mistakes made by Marbury, Smith and Curry while lifecasting might cause some agents and league officials to become wary of the platform. The missing ingredient in all of their mistakes, though, has been professional consultation and supervision. Marbury doesn't even have an agent (he was quoted as saying they're a waste of time), and it was obvious that J.R. Smith and Eddy Curry didn't have their representatives consulting them on their actions.

As with Twitter, the key for NBA players on Ustream is to be strategic. Yes, it's an open

platform that enables players to control the message and connect directly with fans. But NBA players must remember that we're still living in a society that can be very unforgiving of mistakes by professional athletes. Despite Charles Barkley's "I am not a role model" message 20 years ago, society still holds athletes to a higher standard.

Many of us grew up with the manicured, on-point public persona of Michael Jordan. But times have changed, and fans these days expect more unfiltered access to athletes than ever -- even if the rest of mainstream society is waiting to pounce on their mistakes, immature acts, irrational behavior, and/or just plain weirdness. We want our athletes to be open and real, but we also want them to be good, rational people (and maybe not eat Vaseline).

With all of the downtime that traveling NBA players have -- and with the video recording capabilities of smart phones like the iPhone 3GS -- Ustream, Justin.TV and lifecasting in general will only continue to grow in popularity amongst players. But it will be up to the players, their business representatives and league officials to ensure that they follow the Ustream successes of Dwight Howard and Chris Bosh, and not the Ustream failures of Starbury and Eddy Curry.