

The future of sports reimagined with Alex Balfour and Andrew Cronyn - Part 2

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BRADLEY HOWARD (BH): Welcome back to the Tech Reimagined podcast with me, Bradley Howard, and my guests, Alex Balfour and Andrew Cronyn. In part one, we had an insightful discussion around the future of e-sports and the overall sports industry. Now I want to get more personal with my guests and get to know them a little better. I'm going to test their memories a little bit as we look back into the industry of sports from the last two decades and ask them more about the future of the industry. I know both of you are very passionate about the sports industry. So, how did you start your career in the sports industry, Andrew?

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ANDREW CRONYN (AC): Well, my first job in sports was with New South Wales Waratahs in Sydney. They are part of what's called the Super Rugby League down here in Australia. I think it was Super 12s at the time. I decided a couple of years before that that I wanted to work in the sports industry. At the time, I was actually running my own catering business in Melbourne—which translates into getting fellow students drunk. Decided that I didn't want to do that for the next 20 or 30 years. You know, a bit of soul-searching decided that an industry that I was passionate about and could see myself working in for a long period of time was the sports industry. At the time, I took a master's of sports management at Deakin University in Australia, and after the first year of that was lucky enough to pick up a role at the aforementioned New South Wales Waratahs in Sydney and took on that position. And that was the beginning of what, as I said before, has been the past 25 years.

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BH: And how did you end up working at IMG where we first met?

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AC: Yeah, so, after a couple of years with the Waratahs, I thought two things were sort of eating away at me. One was the desire to travel internationally, and the second was to complete the masters that I'd started in Australia. So, I was lucky enough to get accepted to a position to complete the master's in sports management at the University of Massachusetts, which is just outside of Boston in the US. And so, took off over there, did a year of study, finished off that master's, and then unbeknownst to me at the time when I took on that course, it actually gave me the opportunity to work for a year, get a visa to work for a year in the US, which about 20 years ago it was very difficult to get a visa to work in the US. So, I thought, 'I've got to take this opportunity'. I wanted to work with an organisation that was known in Australia, so when I returned to Australia, it would have some relevance. And thus, saw that IMG is a company to work for—one, to also work in sports and technology, as I saw that as the biggest growth area for the industry. And so it happened that IMG sport's digital business was headquartered in Boston, not too far from where I was studying. So, I begged them to give me an internship there and I was lucky enough to secure one. And that internship, after I think about four or five months, became a full time role and took off from there with the added bonus of getting to work with yourself, Bradley.

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BH: [Laughter] Thank you. How did you end up starting up your own business, FanHub?

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AC: Before I started in the sports industry, I was actually working for myself. Growing up a son of a farmer, I'd always sort of had that instilled as me as being a master of my own destiny, my own boss type thing. So, that was always eating at me at the back of my mind and it was always something that I aspired to do and what I saw myself doing in the long term. So, as it eventuated, I was working for WW in Australia. I was in the Sydney office and they were looking to move their Asian activities up to Singapore. I was looking to return to Melbourne, so that presented an opportunity for me to break out by myself. And it was the best thing that I've ever done.

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BH: Other than working with me.

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AC: That's true. That's true. Despite the many job offers that are given to you over the years, Bradley, it's great to see you remain loyal to Endava. I'm sure part of that factor is the offer of working for me for free is not that attractive.

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BH: And Alex, how did you get started in the sports industry? I'm particularly interested in your time at Cricinfo.

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ALEX BALFOUR (AB): So, I started out leaving university and attempted a brief career in journalism, but got distracted by finding stuff on the Internet which I wrote about and then ended up jumping on and getting involved with. The first of those was Cricinfo, which was a ragtag bunch of mainly Indian grad students in the US and others who wanted to exchange cricket information. And at the time that was mainly on chat channels, a thing called Internet Relay Chat, which still exists, which is pretty much what WhatsApp is today or messenger channels are today. And we were all vigorously exchanging cricket information and archiving it and then had a big and angry argument about whether we wanted to put all that on the web or do stupid things like serve images which took forever to load on the early-to-mid 1990s Internet. And then that became a business called Cricinfo, which went through various iterations and became part of the dot-com boom and bust and ultimately was sold to, well, first the Getty family and then to ESPN. And it's still part of the ESPN family today.

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BH: And what happened after Cricinfo?

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AB: So, after Cricinfo, I spent a short time in pure sports entrepreneurial activity, shaping a TV property—a kind of pop idol for cricket for Indian television—and then developed the first—a precursor to the IPL—the first ever international club 20/20 tournament with international champions from around the world, which took part in Leicester and was rained off, or half of it was rained off, and then was part of the team that put together the register on Royals, which is the first ever sort of foreign owned franchise in the IPL. But was really itching to get back into digital and had an amazing opportunity, which I jumped into, which was to run everything digital for the London Olympics, which I started as the 73rd employee of the organising committee for the London Olympics and ended up part of a £200,000 strong in 2012. And I suppose if my early career was spent in creating stuff and very much making it up as I went along, which I think has been a hallmark of my career, and to be fair, lots of people in digital, when I did that in a Olympic environment, I actually had to do it with proper accountability and stakeholders and complexity. So, it was a growing up period. You know, I think of my early years in dot-com as being like a in

vitro MBA where I learnt to make all the mistakes that I'm not really with anyone's money because we had no money. So, lots of things were begged and borrowed. But then I got to do it in a more grown up way, more like a finishing school where we actually got to deliver the stuff in a complex environment, accountable to a lot of people and ultimately servicing an audience of 150 million, which is just a fantastic privilege. And then since then, I actually spent three years on and off flying back and forwards from the UK to Las Vegas working to build a boxing property called Premier Boxing Champions, which is led by Al Haymon, who's Floyd Mayweather's manager. So, I went from the super regulated world of the Olympics to the insanely unregulated world of boxing. But it was an interesting experience. And in fact, my main takeaway was to learn an awful lot about digital marketing, because I had some money to spend across all sorts of different channels, particularly social media. And now I've arrived at a point—the last three, four years—I've been working as a roaming consultant, working for some great properties on the commercial side. So, I think it's taken around most of the time of my career for, in my view, at least, digital to hit top table in commercial discussions. It's always an important part of the mix. It was always an important part of the consumer experience. But quantifying and qualifying the commercial role for digital is something that's only really come to maturity in the last few years. Whether that's through OTT and services delivered, where video is delivered through digital, or whether it's actually understanding what digital inventory really looks like and is worth the sponsors. And I still think it's fairly early days for that, and I think that the current climate will potentially massively accelerate the relevance and role of digital commercially as we discussed. But I've been working for Champions League or for the agency that market and commercialised Champions League. Likewise, I have been working for CAA Eleven, who commercialise Euro 2020, which has obviously now been suspended until next year. Had an interesting time putting together a technology and innovation strategy for the—to give it that full title—the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy for the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup. And I'm also in the middle of developing and maturing a digital strategy for the Commonwealth Games Federation. So quite broad-based stuff, but I kind of feel that after all this time, digital is finally considered an important seat at the top table in sport, where in the past it was often an ex officio, but not always welcome guest.

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BH: So, Andrew, have you had any mentors along the way. Do you still have any mentors at the moment?

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AC: I wouldn't say I have any officially—no one that I formally lean upon—but I think there's a lot of people who played that role unofficially for me without them probably even knowing it through the years, and that's been a variety of different bosses and also colleagues. So, I think in my earlier years, certainly my father was a mentor. And mostly through actions rather than words, his ethic and hard work and never giving up and toiling extremely hard on the farm in good times and bad, that's stayed with me a lot. And then individuals, Bradley, that you'd be well versed in, such as Richard Fitzgerald and Todd McCormick, you know, past bosses of mine, who I'm both still in contact with. Again, not necessarily official mentors, but people that I've learnt a lot. And now it's probably more colleagues. We've got a great senior management team at FanHub, and I rely on the guys in that team. Ali Tavallai, who you know well as well from IMG days, Bradley. But the other guys in the team, Matt, Phil, and Ryan who I lean on for advice and their opinions as we try and decide as a group on what the best direction is for the company.

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BH: And Alex, have you had any mentors along the way? And also, I'm intrigued to know what was it like working alongside Lord Sebastian Coe?

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AB: I think the hallmark of good digital people, and I've been lucky enough that I got into digital before there were any rules, so I've never considered constrained by any discipline or activity. And when I was lucky enough to hire a team from scratch for the London Olympics, the best people I had—and they were all great—their characteristics were curiosity, intelligence and capacity for hard work and in that mix technical skills weren't really that important, because things change. You just need to be open minded and thoughtful. And I suppose in terms of mentors, I'm not sure I've had people who've given me direction in terms of, you know, “This is how you should approach problems”. But where I've had enlightened leadership were open mindedness to allowing me to do things and sometimes, frankly, to tolerate mistakes, sometimes horrible mistakes that I've made. You know, that's been really rewarding. So, I think of, particularly in the Olympic context, actually, my immediate boss was Jackie Brock-Doyle, who still works with Seb Coe at the, what's now called World Athletics, what was the IAAF. Paul Deighton, now Lord Deighton, who was our chief executive, who was extremely good at letting people do things within a structured environment. Our outstanding chief executive has now just been asked by the UK government to manage the delivery and supply of PP for the health service so it couldn't be a more important role at the moment. I think laterally I learnt a lot from colleagues all along the way. I really enjoyed the last few years working with TEAM, who I think are an outstanding commercial outfit, and Simon Crouch, who's the COO there who brought me in to support things digital, who thinks extremely smartly around commercial issues and problems.

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AB: And to your question on Seb, working for, effectively for me, at home games and any Olympic Games is a fabulous experience and anyone's lucky to be able to have that experience. Seb's an impressive operator. As one of the guys who work with him said, you know, he's been public speaking since his early 20s. And, you know, there's not many people who are public figures for that long unless they're members of a royal family. But to be doing that that long and on merit and taken seriously is quite a unique set of skills. And he is actually a very personable, approachable guy. And I remember once I was up in Edinburgh where my folks are and was in the airport and I'd forgotten that it was the same weekend that there was the international cross-country event being held there as it was at the time, IAAF International Cross-Country. So, Seb was there and he saw me at a distance across the airport and bounced over to say hello. And I introduced him to my dad. And that's kind of the guy he is. He's really straightforward. And I think also, I remember from a year before the Games, we had a little Q&A with the communications team. Maybe there was a hundred of us with Seb in the chair in that sort of, you know, closed session. And I asked him—this is like nine, 10 months out—“What do you think the Games will be remembered for?” and he said, “Oh, the atmosphere”. And he was completely right. And he completely understands that actually the value of a huge event is more about the orchestration of emotion than anything else. That's often a tough thing to sell in advance, is the really tough thing to sell to a taxpayer who is being asked to fork out a few billion to put something together. But really, that's what a big event does. It brings you all together. That, of course, is what we're all—many of us are waiting for at some point in some way after we get a hold of how we're going to live with this virus. And that's what sport will mean to many of us: A big emotional outpouring. But, you know, he's a super guy and, you know, in pursuit of a goal, he's a very impressive character.

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BH: It's so funny that you have a story about him in an airport, because the last time I saw the Lord Seb Coe, it was about two or three weeks after the Olympics had finished and he was a national hero—and still is to a certain degree. I was waiting at Heathrow Airport for a flight to New York. And I always wait until the queue has gone to board the plane, and he appeared. He was the last passenger to board. So, I was sitting there watching the BBC News. He appeared and I

went over to him and I said, “Oh, well done, because I thought you put on an amazing Olympic Games, it being so successful, etc.”, and he stood and talked to me for a bit. I didn't actually have the guts to ask him for a selfie. I was a bit starstruck at the time. But he did stop and he talked and I gave some feedback on the Games. So, I agree, he was such a personable guy. Really amazing.

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AB: In Canary Wharf where our office to after the Olympics, we were in a few floors of the Barclays tower and a few others, there's a big John Lewis there with a Waitrose at the bottom. And back in those days there was a cafe in the back of the Waitrose where you could get various cooked meals and occasionally we'd go down there and eat. I remember being down there when Seb was with one of his assistants and they used to do a rotisserie chicken. So, he sat down and had—got a tray, had his hot chicken food—and then said to his assistant, when he'd finished, “We'd better take the trays back and put them away”, and she said, “No, don't worry. They come round and clean up. I wouldn't worry. I would just go back to the office”. He said, “Yeah, but I wouldn't want anyone to think that I was too grand not to be able to put my own tray away”. And that's very much the way he thinks about stuff.

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BH: And finally, Andrew, what does your daily routine like nowadays that now that we're in lockdown at the moment. And what's lockdown like in Australia?

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AC: So, I'll answer the second part first. I think pretty similar to where it is everywhere else. It feels quite draconian at the moment. But despite our perceived larrikin nature in Australia, our inner convict has come out and we're obeying orders very well and staying in our quarters and it's seemingly worked quite well for us down in Australia in terms of containment. The virus, the economic impact is clearly going to be devastating, but, you know, if that's for the greater good of the health of the community, I think we've achieved so far what's necessary on that. So, yeah, life is much simpler, as Alex said before—people mostly behind closed doors. The big difference for us is coming into winter soon and just coming out of summer now. So, it'll be interesting to see what that means for as getting out and about for a walk and doing things outside that give you some sort of relief become less attractive in the colder weather.

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BH: And what does your routine look like?

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AC: My routine, I've tried to keep it as normal as possible, and it's probably been easier for me than most. I've spent a lot of the past 10 years working from home, so I'm used to that routine and working remotely. And our company is quite dispersed. We're a small business of about 50 people spread over six offices, so I can never be an all of those offices at one time anyway. So, it hasn't from a work perspective been too disruptive to me personally. And I think that the biggest thing is that sort of trying to avoid going stir crazy with instead of where I was maybe working from home 60-70% of the time, it's now obviously 100% of the time. So, finding ways to break up that monotony a bit used to be achieved by going into the office or going to meetings now needs to be achieved in different ways. So, as Alex pointed out, that probably means more exercise and more runs at the moment.

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BH: How about you, Alex?

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AB: Well, especially for the last few months I've been like Andrew, mainly working from home. So, actually, there's not a huge amount of change for me. You know, I took a decision—I moved out to London halfway through the Olympics in about 2010 to the south coast of the UK, just outside of comfortable commuting distance, which was quite painful for me at the time. But since around 2013, I've actively pursued work opportunities where if it involves going to an office, that office isn't in London, which I've been very lucky to do. So, a lot of plane travel—environmentally not very sound—but much better for me than a daily commute on a train or a car. And increasingly, I've been working more and more from home. So, actually, my regular routine is not much changed, but I'm now starting like everyone, I think, to feel the weight of the monotony. I've got teenage kids at home who are not used to being at home 24/7 and are finding it difficult. So, I think it's something to reality bites. It's interesting to hear from Andrew that, of course, he's approaching winter while we're approaching summer. So, I think I'm out in the country with green fields and as long as we have sunshine, life is pleasant. But if we continue being, as I assume we will be, unfortunately, in on-off and partial lockdown for many months or even small numbers of years, then as winter bites, things are going to get interesting.

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BH: Any top tips for those in lockdown, especially with teenage kids?

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AB: I think I got lucky that mine are semi-autonomous but encouraging them into activity and routines is the best thing possible. But I have to say it has at least been nice to have—even if the pain of making meals 24/7 is tough—having family meals and sit downs and conversations which was becoming unfamiliar is a nice bonus.

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BH: Thank you both for spending some time with us to reimagine the relationship between people and technology in the sports industry. I hope you will join us next time for another interesting discussion on the Tech Reimagined podcast. Please remember to like this podcast and hit the subscribe button.