THE BEST OF — EPISODE 334

Justin Whiting

Co-founder, North of Normal

On episode 334 of the Digital and Social Media Sports Podcast, Neil chatted with Justin Whiting, co-founder of sports creative agency North of Normal, whose career in sports content spans GoPro, Adidas and Sixt.

What follows is a collection of snippets from the podcast. To hear the full interview, check out the podcast on all platforms and at www.dsmsports.net.

Background and Career Path

“I’m originally from California. I grew up in the Bay. I went to film school in LA and worked in Hollywood for a bit. I tried to cut my teeth. I wanted to get into movies, but kind of ended up more in reality TV and commercials, where I learned a lot. But I was working in singing competitions and just that 2009, 2008 reality TV world, which was not the most exciting. We called it trainwreck TV.

“So, doing some of that, and I was working on one show and I started getting into sports content on the side. I was in the early days of branded content. I was working on a web series for AOL. I think that dates me a little bit, but it was a music show we did with AOL and AT&T as a big partnership.

“And while I was working on that, I got really into rock climbing, and I had a 5D Mark II [Canon camera], and I just started shooting climbing photos and climbing videos in my free time. And I got really into it. I had a buddy who taught me how to do the ropes, and I was hanging off the side of a mountain with a camera and kind of thinking, do I want to keep trying to do this Hollywood thing and keep pushing on this side? Or do I want to go make content that gets me excited, gets my blood pumping? And I was really enjoying the sports content, so I was doing a bunch of this on the side for fun anyways.

“And I got a pretty lucky break, where my EP on that branded content series I was working on ended up being the head of production at GoPro. So through that connection, I was able to get in pretty early days of GoPro. It was like 2012, the HERO2 days, and I moved up to San Francisco and started shooting content for them. Originally I met their producer, I met the team, and was like, cool, I’m here, I’d love to work on some stuff. I’m down in LA.

“I told the producer, basically, I’ve got a bag packed, I need four hours to get on a plane and I’ll fly anywhere you want me to. And I didn’t really think he was going to call me. But two weeks later they called me and they’re like, what do you know about motorcycles? And I’m like, not too much. And they said, do you want to go shoot a dirt bike race? And I went the next day and I shot a pro motocross race. And then I started shooting AMA Pro Road Racing and started full-time freelancing for them, and moved up to San Francisco. And then that turned into a full-time job with them soon after.

“I was working in their adventure vertical, doing a bunch of bike content, a bunch of kayak and mountain content, which is really close to my heart anyways, also climbing, and traveling around the world doing that. I did the international X Games. I did five or six of those. We were shooting some of the launch videos. I worked on the HERO3 and HERO4 launch, super cool projects. And then they hit me up one day and they’re like, have you been to Germany before? And I’m like, yeah, I went there once or twice.

“I was at a shoot there once and I went on vacation once. And they’re like, so we have an office over there and we’re looking to scale up the team. Do you want to go there for a year? And I was like, why the heck not?

“So I moved to Germany for a year and fell in love with being here. We had a small team. I was shooting all the different sports, doing all sorts of different projects and working with some really amazing athletes. The Alps are two hours away from Munich, where I’m living, and yeah, I decided not to go home. I also met my now wife, which was quite lucky. She helped bring me into the fold.

“And then I stayed with GoPro for a few years. And then in 2018, I went out to freelance for a while, which was great. I was directing and shooting action sports and a little bit of more mainstream sports content, small crew stuff, not really large ones, but doing some fun content, doing a bit of TV as well. And then Covid happened and freelance got weird.

“It got to that point where I would be working nonstop in the summers, and then as soon as it got cold out, everything would stop and you would do nothing. So I’d have six months of traveling, 80 days, and working nonstop and not sleeping, and then sitting around in the winters doing nothing; just a bit difficult.

“So I decided to start looking for a full-time gig, and I ended up going in-house at Adidas, or ‘AH-dee-dahs’, as we say in Germany. I still have to think the American way versus the German way of saying it. I ran the creative production team for the Adidas sports apps, which is the running and training apps, which was quite cool, because I had a pretty big team there, and we got to do all of the content for inside the apps, but also all the global campaigns. So we got to come up with some wild ideas and shoot running and training and leverage some of Adidas’s big partners. We got to shoot with some football clubs and just started doing the bigger productions.

“And I was directing projects, I was leading the team and really having a lot of fun with that.

“But Adidas hit a bit of a rough point, and some budgets changed and things changed with that, and I ended up moving to Sixt. I took a break, or thought I was taking a break, from the sports world and went to Sixt. But basically about the same time as I moved over there to run the global content team, they started sponsoring NBA teams. So they sponsored the LA Lakers and the Chicago Bulls.

“[Sixt] is one of the biggest rental car brands. They’re much bigger in Europe than they are in the US, but they’re really taking the US market by storm. They have some super funny commercials and are also leaning into the sports world. So I was there for a couple of years, and then I was looking back at my time at Adidas and what we were doing at Sixt, and before that at GoPro even, and just looking at all the external agencies we worked with.

“And at this point we were working with some super big agencies, especially on the Adidas side. And while they were doing amazing work and making amazing content, the projects took a long time. It was always really slow working with big agencies, and we thought we could do something a little different and kind of turn the agency world upside down. So my senior creative producer from Adidas and I left the day job grind to start something a bit different.

“So we started North of Normal. We’re a full-service creative and production agency working fully in sports, and what we do differently is we build a custom team for every project. We have a big roster of creatives across different regions and different sports, and we custom pick them based on their sport expertise to match them to the brief. So if I’m working with an NBA team, I get a creative director that’s worked with some of the top teams, a copywriter that’s worked with the NBA, etc. , and get a team that lives and breathes basketball, knows what’s cool, doesn’t need to research it, and have that core team that can work fast, efficiently and super authentic. And if we’re doing something in Europe, I can get a local copywriter that knows the local culture and language. Combine all that together to make something amazing.”

Behind the Camera: Shooting Action Sports for GoPro

“A little bit of everything. For the motocross stuff and a lot of that, it is a POV camera, so you’re mounting it on the rider and you’re setting it up there. But from shooting motocross events, we normally had two filmers and we’d split the responsibilities. One is mounting the cameras on the riders, making sure that’s perfect, and the other is essentially standing on the jumps with the camera on a stick and hoping the bike doesn’t land on you. And we kind of took that same approach to a whole bunch of different sports. You used to have really amazing ski follow cam guys. There’s some dudes in Europe who are hitting the huge ten meter jumps right behind them with a camera on a stick. It’s kind of been replaced by racing drones now. And I never hit the jumps like that.

“But I was working on a lot of those projects, and sometimes I kind of looked back at the places I climbed onto or went to go put a camera or held a camera on, and I’m like, that was not the safest thing to do. But in the moment you’re like, I gotta get that shot, and you don’t care. And if that means you’re dangling off a waterfall holding a camera, or off a cliff, or you’re standing on the knuckle hoping the motorcycle lands there, you just kind of do it. And sometimes it doesn’t go perfectly, but luckily nothing too bad ever happened.

“I think probably my favorite GoPro project. We shot climbing icebergs for the HERO4 launch. This was probably like 2013, 2014, and it was like being part of the adventure. I had to get crampons and ice gear and ropes and everything, and I went out onto an iceberg with these two professional climbers to hold the camera next to them, and just was in the Arctic in northern Greenland standing on an iceberg. It was like, you’re part of the adventure. I think the behind the scenes videos for that, I love as much as the actual documentary we made. So that was the kind of moment where you’re really in it.”

Polished vs. Authentic: From GoPro's UGC Program to Today

"I'll start with the early days. The best place to look at that is my early time at GoPro, because at that point it was a smaller team and they were still producing pretty much everything themselves. Almost all the content was shot by the GoPro team alongside their athletes. And as they started sponsoring more athletes and scaling and needing more and more content, we realized that it doesn't make sense to be sending — there's only so many of us to send around the world to be filming with these athletes.

"So what we started doing is athlete training camps, where instead we'd say, okay, we're going to take 200 of the best action sports and racing and motorsports, whatever, athletes in the world, and take them to Hawaii or Australia and give them a crash course on the camera.

“And then instead it turned into, we’re going to give you a shot list, or we’re going to give you this. And we talked to the athletes and said, okay, here’s your ten big trips for the year. One of them, we’re going to send a team with you to make sure that we get top level content. For the other ones, we’re going to give you a brief and just say, get these shots and we’ll edit it.

“And then as that started really turning on and working, we were seeing that there were consumers making amazing content as well, not as polished. And then we started building internally a UGC team, where their whole job was reaching out to those people and saying, oh, you did something amazing, can you either recreate it or can we license the footage? And we started working with some of these individual creators, and this was like 2013, so kind of before the creator economy was a thing. And we were sending loaner gear out and finding this crazy stuff of, oh, someone water skied behind a Lamborghini. We need that.

“Send them a camera, have them reshoot it or shoot something a little different. So we got some amazing content. And that was some of the most viral stuff, because it was authentic. It wasn’t professionally shot. It was edited in a way so it had the GoPro feel, it had the music, it had enough that you recognized the brand, but it wasn’t a professional athlete. It’s not Travis Rice snowboarding. It’s some kids in Finland who are just doing awesome stuff. And it also broadened it and led to something called the Million Dollar Challenge, where they would give away a bunch of money, essentially, for people to share their best clips ever. And that was what made it into launch videos, made it into viral videos, and really became a huge part of their marketing.

“And I see that now, currently, very much the split between authenticity and premiumness. I see a lot, especially with a brand. You look at something like Adidas. Adidas wants to be high end. They want their content to look amazing.

“You don’t want something to look like it’s made by someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing. They don’t like that style. But the authenticity, especially around an athlete or a personality, gets the views and gets people watching it and gets way more of that interaction. So you have to kind of walk this thin line of where does the super high end, polished campaign content go, and where does this raw content go?

“And sometimes it’s just a channel decision. We used to do a lot of sponsored content where it’s like, okay, if it doesn’t feel premium enough, we’d rather put it on the influencer’s channel or on a creator’s channel or license it somewhere else, and we keep the really polished content. Or sometimes we would shoot a campaign with an athlete and say, okay, we’re going to shoot the TV spot or the global campaign, but we’re going to have someone walk around with the phone and capture some real moments with you in between, whether it’s a behind the scenes. We got some cool stuff of just people riding bikes around in the background in the production. Sometimes that was the coolest content, and that can go as stories or on their channels, and it gives the authenticity, but from the same moment. So you can watch the crazy expensive production, but then you can see something authentic from what happened behind it.”

Planning 360 Campaigns Across Platforms

“Long gone are the days of, we’re going to have one hero, highly produced piece of content and you’re done, and you wash your hands and you’re on to the next one. It really is, you come up with a concept that can live on multiple platforms. And the most important thing, I think, for a great campaign is having that through story, where a piece of content that is shot on a phone that lives on TikTok for an athlete, all the way through a TV spot, can live in the same story and feel like it’s coming from the same thread, but they can be shot in completely different ways. And a lot of that is just coming up with those ideas which match everything. And the Nike and Adidas examples you mentioned are perfect for that, because they have the huge campaign behind it, and then they have what’s still produced for the athletes. But then that same thing can be activated in so many ways on different channels.

“So it really is thinking multichannel, and also within the limitations of having to think, okay, if we have two days to shoot something, it’s not like we pack ten hours straight of shooting hero films. It’s, okay, these shots can be here, and a lot of times you’ll have a second or even third unit. I remember there was one drifting video we did at one point, and we were shooting the main video, and then when we were shooting the story bits, we had a social media filmer and a drone pilot just with the driver, getting pickups and getting other social media content, getting funny little one off videos, because we knew we put a lot into that campaign, so we wanted to get the most out of it. And we wanted to make sure we had 10 or 15 different assets that could live at different times on different platforms, but still in the same world.”

“When you’re working with an amazing talent like [a Messi or Ronaldo], you’re on a very tight time schedule. You’re not going to get a ten hour day with an A-list athlete. So you really have to plan. Okay, if you’ve got an A-list footballer, you’re going to say, okay, we need this shot, this shot, this shot. You have four minutes for a photographer to run in and take a photo. You have two minutes for the iPhone guy. You really have to time it down to the minute, because their contracts are bulletproof, and they know that, okay, unless you’re doing the biggest global campaign for an Adidas or Nike, their time is gold. So you don’t want to waste it. They’re never sitting, they’re never doing nothing on set.”

Why Chasing Virality Is a Gamble

“I think it doesn’t make sense to chase virality, because it’s so random. A lot of times what goes viral and what blows up with 100 million views is not what you would expect. I’ve produced pieces of content where I’m like, 100%, that’s going to get millions of views. That’s the winner. And it gets nothing. And then you shoot something on a whim as a last minute idea because you had a little bit of time, and that’s the one that gets amazing traction.

“So what I think of when I approach these projects is really coming up with the best story for the brand that’s going to resonate with their target audience. And it’s a lot of strategy discussions in the beginning and really understanding what they’re looking for, what they need, what’s the point of making the content.

“Because they normally don’t hire an agency like us for your daily content, just to populate the channels, to keep people engaged. We more come in when there’s a campaign with a goal. And if that’s brand awareness, if that’s to sell a kit, if that’s to sell season tickets, if that’s to announce a sponsorship, whatever that goal is, you have to tell the story around that, and you have to find a way to make it entertaining. And as long as you’re making entertaining content in sports, it’s going to get traction and it’s going to perform. And a lot of the partners have a distribution network already, so it’s mostly about focusing on that.

“And if you can find a twist that has potential to go viral, great. But whenever people are going to sell, okay, we make viral videos, it’s like, no. We make amazing content. We make great campaigns that are going to tell a brand story in an innovative way, and sometimes that’ll go viral. But it’s such a gamble that you’re gambling with your reputation if you promise someone that you can make a video viral.”

Metrics, Analytics and Storytelling

“It really goes project by project, because like you said, every project has a different metric which it’s being rated against. Some people want views, some want follows, some want comments, some want to sell things at the end of the day, obviously. So some of those are easier to quantify than the others. And we spend a lot of time looking through the analytics and the data to try to make content smarter, not just come up with the ideas that we think are amazing, but see what’s performing, especially on the social media side, of what’s going to get people to continue to watch it.

“But the metrics, what’s important changes all the time, and also in the algorithm. I see so much, you scroll through LinkedIn and every week it’s like, now reshares are what’s most important. Now comments are what’s important.

“Now having this type of content is way more important than this. So at the end of the day, you have to look at that, and you have to pay attention to the metrics and be smart about it. But quality content and good storytelling is going to cut through more than trying to chase metrics as well.

“So it’s a bit of a give and take, and toeing the line, because you don’t want to be sitting there spending 100 hours looking at, okay, how can I get 10,000 more views? But also, especially on something like TikTok, you can take a very analytical approach to TikTok and look at, okay, here’s my last 25 videos. These ones performed, these ones didn’t. Why? What happened at this point? What happened at this point? And really craft the beginning of your content for shareability and for the hook at the beginning, and really perfect those first couple seconds for social media shareability. And then you do the same storytelling after that. So it’s a little bit of both.”

How Platforms Changed the Craft

“100%, it’s changed. If I remember back to even before I was at GoPro, YouTube was king. Making long form content, and if you were one of the guys making really nice cinematic content at that point, not everyone had a camera that can shoot amazing content, or knew how to color correct in a great way, or was really thinking that you could make that type of content without spending 50 grand. I remember we kind of called it, in LA, the 5D Mark II revolution, because all of a sudden everyone was like, oh, we don’t need a production company anymore. A kid with a 5D can shoot this for five grand. Of course, it’s not going to be as good, but you could get an amazing image out of that camera and basic lighting and decent lenses. You could get something really good for a fraction of the cost.

“So coming in at that point, half of what it took to make a great piece of content was just make it look amazing. If you made something that looked amazing and put it on YouTube or even early Instagram, you’d get a ton of traction and do well, just because it’s like, wow, you’re such a good filmmaker, how did you do this? How did you get the bokeh on this? And these days, you have 15 year old kids shooting on a RED with a Steadicam, and you have drone pilots that are doing amazing things, and it kind of democratized cinematic content.

“So it’s not enough to just look beautiful anymore. The travel content got elevated so much. I remember early Instagram days, I was like, oh, Iceland’s the best, look at these amazing places. Now everyone’s been there. There’s these places in Bali and Iceland that are Instagram famous, so you almost never want to film there, because it’s Instagram famous. So it’s kind of changed that. And then it’s become the story and the entertainment. It’s not just about something to see anymore. It’s become entertainment in your pocket. So now a TikTok video or an Instagram video is competing against a Netflix show, in a way. So it really is about entertaining and capturing the attention for that 10, 20 seconds.”

Conveying a Brand Through Video

“I think the best way to look at this is to look at the companies that do it the best. If you look at the Nike or Adidas or some of those huge sports brands, if you watch a piece of Adidas content or a piece of Nike content and you don’t know what channel it’s on, if you just watch a video and you put your thumb over it so you can’t see that it’s on that channel, you know it’s Adidas, you know it’s Nike. You can tell by the tone, you can tell by the look and the feel, the color correction, the videography. Everything screams that brand. From the way it’s lit — and those are huge, well-established brands, so they’ve had years and years of amazing agencies and creatives and internal teams building that. But we had the same thing at GoPro. You watch that content and you know it’s GoPro. It has the music, it has the look, it has the feel, it has the color correction.

“And a lot of that is just building the brand in the beginning, experimenting a bit. Sometimes you try different things, or sometimes you come out of the door shooting and you say, okay, we’re going to be the challenger brand. We’re going to be the funny brand. We’re going to be the serious, intense brand. We’re going to be the urban brand, etc. And know that, and then build the voice around it. And when you do that authentically and you lean into it, it performs really well. You see some of the ones on social, even outside of sports, like a Duolingo. They’ve mastered the commenting and just being snarky and being able to poke fun at everyone else. Same with a Ryanair, poking fun at themselves. And then all the other brands start to copy you, but they don’t do it authentically and in their own style, and it kind of is a bit of a me-too tag-along. Like, you’ll see a viral video will pop up and there’s 25 brands all trying to joke on it, because they know it’ll get them engagement. And yeah, some do it really well, and some, it’s a bit of a me-too.

“But it’s really just identifying what that is in the beginning and then thinking about how that plays in video. I remember first going to Adidas and making some of my first content, and they’re like, yeah, it’s an amazing video, but if you took the logo off the end, does it say Adidas? And I would argue it all did, but you really have to think about it and look at where the brand’s going, especially with something as diverse as that, because Adidas has so many business units and so many different things they’re touching. They’re doing football, they’re doing streetwear, they’re doing music, they’re doing digital stuff, they’re doing esports. How can that brand live across all of those and be instantly identifiable, but yet live in that world? And you have to have that built brand, and it takes time. It takes a lot of time and a lot of experimenting and a lot of seeing, okay, this is what works, this is what differentiates us, and really leaning into it.”

Strategy First: Finding What's Special About a Brand

"So at North of Normal, we're full-service creative. We're not just a production company, so we're developing the concepts as well. And a lot of that is really leaning into the strategy. We work with some really amazing content strategists and creative strategists across sports. And we sit together with the brand, when it's a big enough project, of course, and we really identify what's special about this brand. And a lot of it is just a discussion, because sometimes a brand isn't developed enough to do that. But kind of, what's important to you? What resonates with the CEO, what resonates with the executives, what resonates with the team or the people working on it? What's important to you, what's important as a brand? And you learn a lot about the people that way, and what's important to them, and you also get a feel for what they're like.

“Because if you have super serious, never joking around kind of people running a brand, and you’re trying to create snarky, joking outward content, there’s a disconnect there. It has to really match the people, and we really like to work with the people to identify that. And sometimes you also have to figure out what to leverage. Sometimes if it’s a team, you’ll say, okay, is it the city? Are you the newcomer? Do you want to be representing this group in the city? Because there’s a lot of cities where they have multiple clubs in one city. And identifying what that is, that’s going to build your strategy.

“And then once you have a strategy which everyone’s on board with, it’s easy to build a campaign around that, because you can say, okay, we’re a challenger. Okay, we’re funny. Okay, we’re the best at sports, so we need to be showing off this. And then you can build a campaign around that, and it makes sense to the brand. And then it’s going to feel authentic, because it came from those conversations and that work.”

The Value of Brand: Building a Culture People Want to Join

“I think the brands that do it best, and show you where the value is, are the ones who build a culture around it, where their brand is not just, you buy it because the shoe has this feature, or you buy a drink because it tastes like this. There’s a culture built around it. Having worked so many times with Red Bull and done so many projects, the perfect example is, yeah, it’s brand affiliation. You see a Red Bull helmet, you know what’s coming. And yeah, they work a drink shot into most of their videos, but you don’t feel like you’re watching an ad when you’re watching a Red Bull event or a Red Bull piece of content. I produce tons of content for them, and it never feels like I’m producing a Red Bull ad. You’re producing amazing sports entertainment in the world of Red Bull.

“And they do the same thing with a lot of other brands. We did the same thing at GoPro, and we’re building content now where we want to do the same thing with brands. And I think that’s the power, to really get people to want to be part of that culture. It’s going back to the Be a HERO slogan from GoPro and that type of thing. You’re really building that brand affinity of, I want to be part of that. I want to be a part of that culture. I want to be involved in that. And that’s why I’m going to buy the product.

“And while that exists, there is a performance element that has to fit in. But I feel that there’s different pieces of content that live in different places. You’re having brand campaigns for a piece of sporting equipment that’s going to show you, okay, this is why the brand is cool, this is why you want to affiliate with it. But then you’re also going to have the performance side that’s more driving the features, and it’s normally where that lives.

“I’m not going to want to watch a feature video on Instagram, but if I’m looking at POS or something there, there’s going to be a reason to buy this football boot over this football boot. There’s going to be a reason for that, on the one side of it. But also, if I’m a 12 year old kid who loves watching this team play, I’m going to buy my favorite player’s shoes. And that’s building that community.

“So both sides of it have value, and it depends on what type of brand you are. There are brands that are very driven by performance and very driven by features, and there are brands that build a community around it. I personally feel that the community ones are my favorite and have the most fun on the creative side, but both have a lot of value.”

Know Who It's For (and Who It's Not For)

"We really dive into that in the strategy at North of Normal. When we're building that strategy out, we want to know for each campaign, what's the goal of this and what's the target audience? And then you have to build the campaign around that. That's partly on platform, partly on the style of content, partly on who you put in front of the camera, how you shoot it. But there's very little content that's going to be universal, unless it's something like, you can say the World Cup is universal, the Super Bowl is universal. But in brand content, you're not going to hit everybody with something. So you really have to say, okay, what is needed in this? Who's the one buying the product? Who are we really selling this to? Who do we need to do this?

“Because you could make a piece of content on TikTok that gets millions of views but doesn’t turn into a single sale, if your target consumer is a 50 year old guy and you’re targeting 12 year olds because you know you’re going to get the numbers. So you really have to think about that.

“And that’s part of the strategy, saying, okay, are we trying to sell a kit? And who’s buying that? Is it an international team? Is it a local team? Why are they buying it? Why would they buy your kit? Is it because they love the brand? Because it’s their hometown team? Is it because you won this? Is it because you have this player? And then leaning into that. And then a lot of those decisions are going to say, okay, this leans towards, we have to hit Gen Alpha, we have to do something crazier in their style. Or we have to do something more legacy, like, okay, we need more of a throwback. This is for the guys who remember baseball in the 70s, and we want to hit them. What did the game used to be like? What did it feel like to sit in the infield and eat hot dogs back in the day, before all of this fancy stuff? It’s a completely different style and market. So you really have to identify that in the beginning, before you get into any of the campaigns, or especially before you start a camera running. That’s one of the first steps.”

Participation: Inviting Fans and Creators In

“I think this is really where TikTok has blown up, and the power of TikTok with a brand is that you can get people to engage in it. You can make a song and have people use it on their own Reels. They can do a mashup. They can do so many different types of things. And we’ve experimented a good bit with some contest style, where it’s, okay, show us how you would do this take. Here’s the highly polished video we did with a well-known creator influencer. How would you do this? Do your version of this and show it to us, and whoever does the best one wins X, Y, Z. That type of model works really well, because the type of content that’s going to be most cool for a lot of people is what someone else makes. And if you can get enough people involved in it, it just starts snowballing.

“We had a phrase back at GoPro: they called it the virtuous cycle. You make amazing content, so someone buys a camera, goes out and makes amazing content, inspires someone else to buy a camera, and so on and so on. It just keeps going. And you don’t need a camera anymore to do that. That can just be on TikTok, having an amazing idea in a campaign and getting a brand that’s willing to take a chance and give something away. It has to be somewhat worthwhile. You can’t say, okay, I’m going to give $20 to the winner of this. It has to be a real experience or something worth doing. But then people will do amazing stuff. They’re so creative on there. And it’s some of those guys who don’t have the huge following who are making such cool content, that if you can get them involved in that, or if they randomly find it, you get something super special. And sometimes those are even better than the creator video you spent all the money on, but you would never get that without doing the campaign.”

Owned Channels vs. Creator Channels

“I think it’s a balance of both, because there’s a huge amount of value in having that spot where someone can learn everything about your brand and see amazing content that’s on brand, that’s interesting, and that tells that story anyways. So you definitely don’t want to neglect the company’s own channels, because that’s essentially your billboard going out there on social media. But you can definitely get way more traction, and you can be more bold and crazy and try different things, by leaning into a creator, because there’s things that would never make it onto a brand’s main channel. But if you get a crazy creator who wants to make something, it could be a weird sense of humor. Of course, you don’t want it to be dangerous or too extreme, but something which doesn’t quite fit on brand.”

“There is a funny line, as a brand ambassador sometimes, with the social media people, of how much freedom do you give them. But if you’re just doing a partnership with someone to do something wacky, there’s enough guys doing super cool stuff and people out there making hilarious and amazing and great cinema content that you can find someone who can do something for their audience and introduce them to your brand. And sometimes that’ll do more for brand awareness. It’s not going to build your channels. Yeah, you’ll have a tag in it, but you’re not going to get tens of thousands of followers because someone tags you in it. But people will remember the brand and remember, oh, these guys did something really funny with Adidas, really funny with this football club. They took a chance and they brought someone totally random to a game and they made something great. That type of stuff can really bring in a whole new audience and a whole new fan base.”

“We really like to do 360 campaigns, where we can come up with an idea which can live in a whole bunch of different places in different ways.

“And if that can be across out of home, social media, TV, creators, experiences, the more things you can plug into that that tell the same story, the greater effect it’s going to have, and the more people. If you see something like, okay, I saw the social media thing, then I see a billboard the next day, then I’m going to a game and there’s this awesome experience that I can have, that’s going to really click in your head. It’s kind of like they say, if you see a brand enough times and then you see it on the shelf, you’re going to pick it up because of the retention, or that you recognize it. It’s kind of the same thing when you’re hitting them with this. But if it’s an entertainment thing, it’s something they like. If it’s a cool experience at a football game and fun content with your favorite player and a billboard on your way to school or on your way to work, you’re going to remember that, and it’s going to resonate with you.”

Lightly Branded Content and Sponsor Integration

“I think there’s potential in that, but it has to be at the right point in the brand journey. You don’t want to do that at the very beginning, because no one knows who you are, and you don’t want to do that too much. I mean, maybe some people can get away with it, but if you’re a global, hugely renowned brand, it has to make sense. I guess you can, but I don’t feel like it would be pushing the brand and pushing new fans if you’re doing something completely off the wall that’s loosely affiliated with that. But there’s other times where they’re just finding a pop culture niche where they can kind of drop a logo in the background, and that’s enough, to a point.

“I think it’s much better to weave the brand into the story. Personally, I like it more when I can see a brand. I see this all the time in Formula One.

“It’s like, okay, how do you combine cloud security with Formula One racing in an engaging way? And sometimes they just do the standard, okay, high performance, high performance. But you can find some where it’s really high storytelling, and there are a few examples of that. And it makes a really interesting piece of content, because you learn a tiny bit about the brand, but you also learn about what you care about in F1, and you learn about your racer or something. It gives you some value. So as long as the content is giving you value, whether that’s entertainment or making you laugh, I guess it’s all entertainment, as long as it’s entertaining you to a point and can bring the brand in in an authentic way, then I think it can totally work. But you can’t force it, and you can’t do it when no one knows what your brand is.”

“That’s the broadcast direction, I think, a lot, because that really feels like watching racing or baseball back in the 90s. It’s like, brought to us by our sponsors. And it works because you’re getting the entertainment.

“I think in a social world, it’s a bit harder, because they’re going to click off at that point. The second the entertainment’s done, no one’s going to sit there and listen. It’s kind of like, if you think ten years ago, every brand had the big logo board at the end. You’d shoot a sports video, and at the end, okay, we need the logo lockup and the tagline, and nobody watches it. You look at the analytics and it’s like, cool, sports, sports, sports, sports, done. 0.1% of people are looking at your logo at the end. It’s kind of the same if you’re just saying, we brought you this cool content. It’s like, okay, we don’t care, because we watch the content and scroll to the next thing. So it needs to be integrated.”

AI, Authenticity and Advice for the Next Generation of Creatives

“I think AI has revolutionized a lot of things already. And it’s great and scary at the same time, because it has a ton of potential, but also it changes a lot, and change can be good and change can be bad. It helps a ton on the back end of running a company and doing the admin work and cleaning up emails and things like that. But it can’t replace human creativity, at least not in the foreseeable future, in my opinion. I don’t see it completely taking away the need of someone coming up with the ideas, someone writing really great copy, someone making an amazing film that really needs the human creativity and idea behind it still.

“And I’m seeing a lot of oversaturation with AI content, because it’s so easy and so fast and so many people can produce it.

“There’s AI influencers, there’s brands pumping out hundreds of thousands of social media ads for Amazon products. I see that type of stuff just getting churned. You just get the same content over and over again, in slight variations. And especially in the sports world, I think it makes authenticity and real stories way more important. It kind of aligns also with one of our biggest values at North of Normal, which is authenticity, telling the real story and getting what’s true to the sport. It’s the same as what resonates with people in the sports world, because they want to see something real.

“I don’t think we’re at a point where you’re going to see an AI Messi in a commercial anytime soon. Maybe the next generation, who’s 12, 13 now, when they’re up being professional athletes, maybe it’ll be a completely different approach to it. But there’s so much of things being real. From having worked in the action sports world, if someone does a triple cork on a snowboard and doesn’t land it, you can’t show the trick and cut the landing. That would be terrible to do in a video. You would get slammed for that.

“So you can’t fake that, in a way. So AI-ing something like that in proper sports content just doesn’t really work,

“I think as a tool to help in your post-production or help in some ways, it speeds things up, and it’s amazing as another thing in your quiver, but it can’t replace the creativity yet. And same with generative AI. It’s great for storyboarding and coming up with how you want things to look, but at least in the authentic sports world where we like to live, I don’t see it replacing us on brand campaigns on a mass scale anytime soon.”

“I guess I’ll take this question as, what advice would I give to someone coming into it? And that’s, learn how to do it the long way, so it makes sense to do it the fast way. Because my fear with AI is it’s going to eliminate junior positions in a lot of the creative world. I see this in post-production. You’re not going to need an assistant editor anymore in a couple of years, because a lot of their job is doing the string outs, organizing the content.

“They’re already having macros that can start doing that, and the AI is getting so good that essentially, in a year or two, it’ll be able to fully replace that job. But that’s how you learn how to do a lot of that stuff.

“So I would suggest anyone who wants to get into the creative world still do it the old fashioned way, and learn how to do it that way and get the experience with it, because then you understand what the AI is doing and why, and you understand how to use it better. Because if you just lean into the AI, you’re never going to build that creative power. When it first came out and I was writing emails with it, it was so easy to just be like, write an email in ChatGPT and send this to someone. And you start losing your voice. You start losing the way to think of how to actually say things. And I had to make a conscious decision to step back from that, like, okay, I don’t need AI to do that. I can spend two minutes writing an email, even if it saves me a bit of time.

“But using that creative muscle is super important, especially for people early in their careers, because that’s where you learn taste and learn style. And that’s the thing. Someone who has 20 years of experience in the creative industry can do amazing stuff with AI, because they have that creative muscle built. They know what looks good, they have their own style, they have the look and feel. Anyone can make something which looks cinematically good now with generative AI, so that’s not special anymore. But having taste, having great storytelling, and knowing what’s good and what’s bad is what people need to learn still.”

“I don’t really see it as quantifiable that way, because if you gave me more time to shoot, I would fill it, as a director. And that’s probably not an amazing approach with everything, but I want to try, and I would love to have the ability to try 15 different angles for a shot or 25 different takes. If I have time, you could always keep going with it, but you don’t always have time or budget with that.

CUT: 63:12 (Jevons Paradox insertion)

“And with AI, it makes things way faster. But I think it’s even harder in a way, because then you have to keep regenerating it to get a performance you want, when it’s a lot easier with an actor or with an actual camera. So in some ways that’s faster. I do think it will speed up a lot in pre-production organization. It can build storyboards way faster than having an artist draw them. You can pre-vis things, you can mock things up really fast. And in post-production, it speeds up a lot of the VFX kind of things. So there are things which can be much faster. But I think real creativity still takes time. And maybe that’s me being a little bit naive and coming from having done this for so many decades, but I think true creativity always takes the time to put it in there. And even if things can be created faster, even if you’re generating the entire thing in AI, still coming up with the ideas and doing the creative and putting it all together takes a decent amount of time, and takes effort to do something good.”

In-House Content Teams vs. Agency “Spike” Content

“I see more and more brands and teams and leagues building internal production capabilities. I see some of the big clubs in American sports and in European football that have 20 people on their content team. Sometimes they have a team of editors and filmers and photographers, and that type of approach. Or even if it’s just a social media person with their phone, that’s great for always on content.

“So that kind of fills the always-on content, and I feel that there’s a good balance, depending on the brand, of the fast social content that’s very social first versus the more polished.

“If you’re a football club, I see the social media team with their phone capturing the real moments with the players before the game, or something funny happening on the sidelines, while the production team is capturing the super slo-mo, high quality, okay, there’s the best shot of the game, here’s the best block, etc. The best moments of sport to share as well. And I think that the teams handle that really well on their own. That isn’t something where they need to bring in the extra help, maybe if it’s a super small team or if it’s a really big event.

“But when it comes to taking it to the next level, that’s where an agency like North of Normal fits in really well, to come up with a creative idea that’s beyond the daily content. I used to call it a spike piece of content, because that’s where you can do something amazing and bring in a bunch of new fans and followers that then will stay for the daily content, because they like the brand. And that could be a campaign, it could be a creator piece of content, but something with just that extra creative firepower.

“And also, even if there are super creative people working in there, but someone who has the capability to stand next to the people who are already creating content and do something completely different. Because it doesn’t make sense, your guy who’s there filming the pitch during a football or soccer game isn’t going to take 20 minutes out to go shoot with a creator to make a funny video on the side.

“So bringing in someone to do that type of content, or to produce a bigger campaign, or shoot something very specific, has that moment where it’s needed. And you don’t need to bring in an agency like ours for every single game. But it’s those special moments where you want to tell a bigger story, you want to involve a bigger audience. It’s obvious around something like season tickets or a kit launch, a jersey launch. But also just fits of, okay, we have a fun game and we want to do something bigger for the mid-season and the doldrums. We want to bring a crazy creator. We want to do something unique. We want to shoot a video with our players that’s something totally different. That’s where it makes sense to bring in that external perspective, to make something that’s totally unique.”

European Football Content vs. U.S. Sports

“I look at some of the Premier League clubs in the UK. They’re producing high level Netflix series that are getting tens of millions of views, and they’re producing storytelling that is comparable with NFL Films or some of the stuff out of the US teams. And I think they’re a little more storytelling focused. I think the US teams do a great job of producing content in general around the teams, but not that many are getting deep into the story side. While a lot of the big clubs, especially the ones that have the huge budgets, if you look at a Liverpool, Arsenal, Barcelona, Madrid, they have the sponsor money that they can really make that type of content. But then the sponsors are also getting a lot more value out of it, because they’re doing ten part series around all these different things. And it’s taking a Drive to Survive kind of approach, but doing that fully in-house, which very few companies in the world can do in-house like that.”

Favorite Pepperdine Athletics Memory

“Yeah, so I actually went to Pepperdine to play sports. I was a water polo player, and they had one of the best water polo teams. Terry Schroeder was the coach there. He was the Olympic coach. And sadly, I had a pretty big injury my last year of high school. So while I tried to get over it fast enough, I wasn’t quite to a point of playing for one of the top teams in the world. But I did get to see a lot of fun moments, and I followed the team pretty closely. So I’d say probably my favorite ones were just the short time I got to play with the team there, and play with Olympians, and play under Terry Schroeder.

“And I did get to see the men’s volleyball team. Less than watching them play, after I stopped competing in water polo, I played a lot of pickup basketball, and the men’s volleyball team would come to our pickup games and just demoralize us, because they were all six foot ten and just catching alley-oop dunks and 360 dunks. They can jump higher than anybody in the world. And they weren’t shooting great jump shots, but they’d come out and, it’s probably the only time in my life I really got repeatedly posterized over and over again.”

Favorite and Most Viral GoPro Content

“My favorite piece of content is actually the one I mentioned earlier, where we shot the documentary on the boat in Greenland, where we were climbing icebergs. And my second favorite piece of content was the most viral, which was a video we did with Danny MacAskill, the trials rider, across the rooftops in Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands. He rode his bike from rooftop to rooftop, jumping around, from the top of the city all the way into the ocean. And it got something like 150 million views for a six minute long YouTube video. So it was pretty amazing. That was one of the biggest projects, probably, from when I moved over to Europe. So yeah, that was the most viral and the second favorite.”

Content Production Tech Stack

“The tech stack on the production and post-production side really depends on the project and on the editor. We partner with a lot of editors. Most of them use Adobe Premiere and Adobe software. We’ve done a couple in DaVinci, but that’s kind of the industry standard with that. On the company side, we do use a lot of AI tools on the day to day admin side. We use ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, mostly on just organizing and researching and dumping all of my free form notes into there. And on the technical side, on shoots, we love to get the crazy toys. We love to get the huge camera arms. I think some of the most fun ones are when we’ve had a big camera arm off a car, shooting stuff, or using little race drones. I love the technology and the different ways in which people can get amazing shots, so that’s always really fun for me.”

Favorite Adidas Campaign

“So we pitched one around global football, European football, on how to leverage some of Adidas’s really big partnerships to bring new fans to the Adidas apps, because I was working mostly with the Adidas Running and Training apps. And what we did for that is we partnered with four football clubs. We had Bayern Munich, Manchester United Youth, Arsenal Women’s and Olympique Lyon Women. And we shot a documentary series for YouTube with each of them, short form, like 3 to 5 minutes. But we really talked to the coaches and filmed their practices and got to see what it looked like to train with some of the top athletes in the world. And then we got the coaches and players to actually do workouts, which we filmed and then put into the app. And we leveraged the teams there, so we put it on some of their social media, some of the players on that. So all these people would see, okay, if I want to work out like Arsenal Women’s, I’m going to go to the Adidas training app and see some of those workouts. And we got some really cool workouts, some really great coaches as well, and had a lot of fun just filming with different clubs across Europe.”

Brand Content He Admires

“That’s a hard one. I probably should have prepared a bit better for this one, but it’s tough. It’s a bit of a cop out, but I’m going to say F1 on this one, just because they produce so much amazing content and experiences. I think it’s more the experiences they build around the races. And again, it’s a bit of a cop out because it’s kind of broad, but what the different teams are doing, of what you can do to go to a race. And those booths they have set up next to the paddocks are incredible. I know it’s a sales tool, because they can do all that, but the experiences you get for that are so much more than just watching the racing. It’s so cool for people. I think they’re crushing it.”

Biggest Lesson From Co-Founding North of Normal (and the Name)

“I think the biggest thing is you can’t rely on what worked in-house or as a freelancer. Because I worked as a freelancer, I put together projects, I ran global teams at huge brands, and in my head it was kind of like, okay, starting your own company is going to be the same, it’s going to be like this. And the things that were easy when you have all that support became really hard, and the things that were really hard became really easy. Some things were super fast. You could prove things way faster. You want to spend money, you spend it. But at the same time, some things were really hard.

“And I think probably the hardest part of it, on top of all of that, is putting so much of it on our shoulders, on my co-founder’s and my shoulders.

“If something doesn’t get done, it’s not like, oh, if I’m too busy, someone else is going to pick this up, or, oh, I can’t, go do it tomorrow. If I don’t send this email, it doesn’t get sent. If we don’t finish this pitch, we don’t get the client, we don’t have that chance. So it’s all of that on your shoulders, which is incredibly invigorating, but also can be a bit daunting, because sometimes you’re burning the midnight oil and you’re trying to make sure everything’s perfect, and there’s no one else who’s going to come in and do that. So it’s on you, which is good and bad.”

“And the name, we spent a lot of time thinking about the name, and we kind of wanted to say that we’re doing something different and a little bit elevated and a little bit better, but not in an arrogant way. We didn’t want to come out and say we’re the best, we’re better than everyone else. But we want to say that you’re going to get a different experience with us. So it’s north of normal. You have what’s average, and we’re going to come in above that. And I think it’s the way in which we work with our clients, the way we set things up, the speed at which we can do it and what we deliver, is better than normal and better than you would get at a lot of other places.”

Staying Inspired and Keeping Up With the Creative Space

“I definitely like to be inspired and see what other people are doing. And I have a couple accounts, because I like to have different styles of things. So it’s like, okay, I have an account of what’s going to entertain me. I have an account for more sports driven stuff, just so I can see what’s trending, what’s working. And I have some for specific brands. If you need to get into a mobility or racing one, that isn’t really what comes up in my algorithm, so I would create an account to find that type of stuff. And I have a lot of creators I like to follow, but also it’s just seeing what’s performing really well. I follow a lot of the blogs and websites and see, okay, this is the campaign which did amazing, this was a great idea, these were the best spots, especially on the commercial side. Because I still am most inspired by the big global campaigns, the huge ones which have those budgets behind them, because those are kind of the most exciting, even though there is a much bigger opportunity sometimes on the more social first, agile content.”

Best Meal in Germany





“So if you come to Germany, I would suggest coming to Munich. That’s not just because it’s where I live, but it’s close to the mountains. We have an amazing football club here. It’s a very beautiful city. Great to spend a weekend here. And if you come, you go to a Bavarian beer garden. You’re going to get a stein of beer. It’s a liter of beer. It’s as big as your head. And I love it. The German beer is amazing. And you get a schnitzel. That’s the huge pounded piece of either veal or pork, breaded. It comes with potatoes.

“It’s really hearty. It’s going to help you with that beer, because the beer is strong here. If you find a good traditional beer garden, sometimes they’ll have a band, the traditional outfits. Hopefully you’re there in the summer, so you can be outside in the good weather, not in the rain or snow. But that’s definitely where to go for the food. And for visiting Germany, go to the Alps, go to the south. There’s some castles down here. There’s beautiful mountains, great skiing, great mountain biking. And just really, yeah, good life.”

Life as an American in Germany

“It’s funny now, because I feel like I’m living abroad, but I feel less American. I feel like I go home now and I’m still abroad a bit. And then I come back to Germany and I’m abroad. I feel less like I fit in in either of them, because I’m this mix in between. Part of that’s my own fault. I have not integrated to the level I probably should have. My German’s not amazing, and I have a very international community. We travel a lot. But also it’s just working in the international sports world. We’re in a different country all the time. We’re shooting in the UK, we’re shooting in France, we’re going to Dubai. We’re going to different places for different projects, so that has a whole lot of different cultures built in there. And also, living in a big city, it’s a melting pot. Munich is super international. It’s like being in Los Angeles or New York. There’s people from everywhere. There’s so many different languages.”

Germany's Most Popular Sports (and the NFL's Appeal)

"So basketball's been getting really popular here. The basketball league has been getting a lot more interest. I mean, we have NBA players that came from here, like Dennis Schröder's from here. So there is a really good development of basketball coming out of Germany. And there are a lot of other kind of startup sports. The outdoor sports are very big here. Handball is really big here. That was one I didn't know anything about from the US. I had never even seen it. But that's quite big. But basketball is probably the second biggest one. But football eclipses it. The Bundesliga is huge. International football is huge. That's what people care about and watch. The stadiums are 15,000 people for a secondary sport, while the main sport has 80,000 plus for a big football stadium.

“And for American football, for the NFL, people go crazy for it. I think because it’s a novelty. Because there are American football teams here that are pro that don’t get the same kind of interest. But when an NFL game comes, it’s insane. The last time we had a game in Munich, I remember walking around the old town, the city center, called Marienplatz, and everybody had an NFL jersey on. And it felt so weird. And it wasn’t all for the teams playing, because everyone just has a jersey and brings it. But people from across Europe, across the country, would come for an NFL game, because it’s just such a novelty. It’s such a big spectacle, and the teams do a really, really good job of making special experiences, special events. They do big activations in the middle of the city. They do activations around the games. So even if you’re not actually going to the game, you can still have a lot of fun around it. But people really get into it.”

Guiding Principle

“For mantra, I would just say story, story, story. Storytelling and strong brand stories really drive great content. That’s the first side of it. And the second one is to try to not get too niche, to make content which is very accessible. And for this one, I used to always use the line of, is this something I could send to my mom, and she would appreciate it and enjoy it knowing nothing? Especially when I worked in action sports, I would send her skateboarding videos, and she doesn’t care about skateboarding. She’s just happy I don’t ride a skateboard anymore, because I would hurt myself. So if I could send something like that to my parents and they would enjoy it and like the story, not just because I made it, then I think that’s a good piece of content. It also has to, of course, work for the core audience. If you could cross those two thresholds, have the aging parents love it and then have the core skateboarder or core, hardcore athlete, then you’ve made something which can be universally appreciated.”

All-Star Follow

“The dude I’ve been following the most recently is actually on LinkedIn. I’m going to go in that direction: a social media guy named Jack Appleby. Simply because he has really good opinions, but also I’m super inspired because he is becoming a semi-professional basketball player in his late 30s or something. He plays three on three. He just did something with the Warriors. He played a professional game in Brazil and somewhere in Asia, and he runs a social media channel around it called, I think it’s Hoop Forever. And as a dude who recently got into his 40s and still plays a lot of basketball and has knees that hurt, I’m inspired that someone can keep playing at that level, and it makes me want to get out on the court more and play. And on top of that, he’s got some really good takes on social media. So it’s a win-win.”

Where to Find Justin and North of Normal

Northofnormal.studio is the website. Find them on Instagram and LinkedIn by searching North of Normal Studio.

And find Justin Whiting on Instagram and on LinkedIn

THANKS

Thanks again to Justin for being so generous with his time to share his knowledge, experience, and expertise!

For more content and episodes, subscribe to the podcast, follow Neil on LinkedIn and on Twitter @njh287, and visit www.dsmsports.net.