

Marissa Banu-Lawrence

Head Of Content Acquisitions, Fox Sports Commercial Sports Team

Matt Salgo, legal counsel for The Wiggles, talks to **Marissa Banu-Lawrence**, Head of Content Acquisitions in FOX SPORTS' Commercial Sports team, about Marissa's career to date, the Australian sports media landscape and the position of women in sport, on and off the field.

Marissa has been a part of Fox Sports' Content Acquisitions team for nearly a decade, since first joining as a team assistant. Today, her role as Head of Content Acquisitions involves advising and negotiating with domestic and international sport organisations, agents and distributors for sporting content at Australia's largest sports broadcaster.

MATT SALGO: Thanks, Marissa, for joining us. You have a position which is both unique and, one imagines, highly sought after! What was the career path that led you to this role?

MARISSA BANU-LAWRENCE: I have always had a passion for sport, in particular the power of sport to bring people together. I initially studied a Bachelor of Business at UTS, including a major in Sport Management, but I wasn't quite sure what area of the sports industry I wanted to pursue. I started at Fox Sports, now part of the Foxtel Group, almost ten years ago on a six-month, part-time contract as the Team Assistant for Content Acquisitions. At the time, I was finishing off my Honours thesis in Sports Management and also starting a part-time Juris Doctor degree, so the flexibility of the role was key. As time progressed, my contract kept getting extended and I subsequently took on a full-time, permanent position. Since then, I have held a number of different roles in the Content Acquisitions team, expanding my skill set and taking on increased responsibilities, before landing my current role as Head of Content Acquisitions.

MATT: And what does a day in the life as Head of Content Acquisitions look like? Is it all bidding wars and tense negotiations?

MARISSA: Thankfully it is not all bidding wars and tense negotiations, which form just one part of our role in content acquisitions. While the strategy, negotiation and acquisitions of sports content is a core function for our team, a typical day is spent managing relationships with hundreds of sports partners, agencies and internal stakeholders, ensuring we deliver the best experience for our subscribers and commercial outcomes for our business. Our team works across an incredible breadth of sport, including AFL, NRL, cricket, netball, motorsport and golf, among others. It means there is never a dull moment, and we are always learning.

MATT: What are your interests outside of work? Are you a diehard sports fan?

MARISSA: I thought I was a diehard sports fan when I joined Fox Sports, however, my passion pales in comparison to some of my colleagues. I am, however, a long-standing St George Illawarra supporter who is hoping that 2024 being Year of the

Dragon will deliver a change in fortune! I am also known to enjoy (as a spectator) a game of AFL, netball and cricket, as well as the occasional UFC event. Beyond sport, I am hugely passionate about music and the arts, so you'll often find me at chamber music concerts and gallery openings.

MATT: The Australian sporting media has splintered in recent years, particularly with several subscription streaming platforms entering the market for rights. Has that changed the strategy behind acquiring content?

MARISSA: Australia has a lot of players in the sports media landscape for such a small population and as a result, consumers are spoilt for choice. Increased competition has encouraged innovation, and we are really proud of the products and content we offer. Splintering in the market hasn't forced us to change our strategy as such, but rather focus on those premium and often uniquely Australian sports that our subscribers know, love and have come to expect of us. For our sports partners, it has also been about valuing the power of the Foxtel Group to deliver better outcomes for their sports and fans.

MATT: Do you think, in time, we will see a re-consolidation to a smaller number of platforms, or are these changes here to stay?

MARISSA: We are already seeing a re-consolidation of sports rights in international markets, for example, the shutting down of single-sports apps like GOLFTV and WWE Network, and I expect we will see some of these trends spill over into the domestic market as consumers become unwilling to pay for multiple different subscriptions and platforms look to control their costs. As a result, we are seeing the return of platform aggregation to address the explosion of choice in streaming apps. Foxtel will be launching Hubbl to take the frustration out of streaming by bringing together paid and free streaming apps into the one user interface.

MATT: In terms of the content itself, we've seen unprecedented growth in the popularity of women's sport in recent years. What do you think has driven this change? And how directly has this growth been reflected in the value and competitiveness of acquiring women's sporting content?



MARISSA: At Fox Sports, we very much believe that "you can't be what you can't see" and increased coverage of women's sports inevitably leads to increased popularity. Streaming is playing a significant role in the growth of women's sport audiences, and we've seen year-on-year growth in streaming audiences across key domestic properties, being AFLW, NRLW and WBBL. It is also important to acknowledge the success of the Matildas in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, which has helped to 'unlock' broader interest in women's sport among both fans and sponsors. As a result, we're seeing audience lifts in sports outside of football. These athletes are helping to change the script for women's sport.

There are many different considerations when looking to acquire sports content, with one of those being sponsorship revenue. It is our experience that sponsors don't buy sports, they buy audiences, and over the last twelve months, we have seen a 20% increase in the proportion of Australians who are sports fans and watch women's sport, and what we are seeing locally is that the majority of women's sport audiences are actually men. This is quite an important message for sponsors and broadcasters alike and bodes well for increased value and competitiveness for women's sport content.

MATT: The 2023 International Women's Day campaign theme is 'Inspire Inclusion'. Stereotypically, the sports industry can be quite male-dominated – what has your experience been of inclusion in your work? Are there particular areas where you think there is scope for improvement?

MARISSA: I have been extremely fortunate to have great leaders and advocates, both female and male, within the Foxtel Group and also externally. As a result, my experience of inclusion has been overwhelmingly positive, and I think the experience of others in the sports industry has improved in this area over the last five years. There is always room for improvement, whether it be women