

Pro athletes use new platform to reach fans—and make news

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To announce his retirement, Kobe Bryant published a poem on The Players' Tribune, a website that is offering professional athletes a new way to communicate with fans—and avoid thorny questions from reporters

US basketball superstar Kobe Bryant didn't turn to a traditional media outlet to announce his retirement.

The 37-year-old Los Angeles Lakers guard published a poem on The

Players' Tribune, a website that is offering professional athletes a new way to communicate with fans—and avoid thorny questions from reporters.

The site, founded by retired New York Yankees great Derek Jeter, is just about a year old. But Bryant's use of it to call time on his storied 20-year NBA career after this season went around the world in minutes.

In March, two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Steve Nash announced his retirement on The Players' Tribune. Baseball slugger David Ortiz, who helped the Boston Red Sox to three World Series titles, did the same last month.

Observers say the site is changing how sports news is conveyed.

"In the past, athletes would generally have to go through the [traditional media](#) to get their messages out to the general public," explained Paul Pedersen, an expert on sports communications who teaches at the University of Indiana.

"Now, athletes can simply bypass the media and can get their own messages out to their fans and stakeholders," Pedersen told AFP, signaling a "major shift" in the communications landscape.

For traditional media, "their gatekeeper powers have been curtailed and they now have to look at the various [social media](#) accounts, blogs, and websites in order to get information that in the past they would be presenting to the public."

Most US professional sports leagues still offer journalists broad access to players both before and after games, as well as during practice sessions.

"The interviews won't go away entirely as sport organizations and

leagues—and athletes—benefit from the media coverage and attention," Pedersen predicted.

"That said, I can certainly see more and more athletes bypassing the media or only giving limited access and information."



Retired New York Yankees star Derek Jeter, pictured September 1, 2015, launched The Players' Tribune in October 2014

Athletes as shareholders

Unlike social media sites, the content of which is not monetized by players, The Players' Tribune is a site in which several athletes are shareholders including Bryant.

When Jeter, the former Yankees shortstop, launched the site in October last year, he brought together an array of stars from the US sports world.

The site's president Jaymee Messler declined to disclose the ownership structure but confirmed that the company had raised \$18 million from investors.

The Players' Tribune aims to be "the go-to platform for athletes to connect with their fans," Messler told AFP. More than 350 players have already published content on it.

The direct nature of the first-person posts on the site offer a stripped-down, more down-to-earth view of the athletes.

"When Kobe puts it out individually on his social media and a website he has an interest in, that's probably seen as more authentic," said Kirk Wakefield, a professor of sports marketing at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

"When it comes to a team or a league, you see it as more orchestrated or controlled by them and not so much by the player."

All content on the site can be accessed freely and there are no plans for now to change that, according to Messler. Advertising is limited, and profit is not the company's short-term goal.



Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers avoided a massive media scrum like the one he faced here on September 28, 2015, by announcing his retirement on The Players' Tribune

"Year one was about proof of concept, building a content strategy, and finding our voice. Year two will be about scaling and revenue. We're not close to thinking about anything else," said Messler.

The Players' Tribune says it does not seek to become an exclusive communications conduit for pro [athletes](#).

"We encourage TPT contributors to work with other media outlets. We are not here to replace traditional media. We are simply adding another element," said Messler.

All in the planning

While the retirement of the five-time NBA champion Bryant was not wholly unexpected given the host of injuries nagging him, his presentation of the news may not have pleased the National Basketball Association.

"I'm sure from the league's perspective and from the team's perspective, they would have liked to have it planned out," said Wakefield.

If Bryant had announced his retirement before the start of the season, it would have boosted ticket sales for a team that is struggling.

"Imagine that they had said: it's Kobe's last season. The fact that they're not any good—they probably could have overcome that when selling season tickets and good tickets in the beginning," Wakefield said.

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