



It All Starts With Home Plate in Lava Studio's 'MLB Tonight' Open

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When New York- and Miami-based Lava Studio was recreating the open and overall graphics look for MLB Network's flagship show, MLB Tonight, it wanted to start in a place that was recognizable to any fan. It didn't take long to land on home plate.

"We always want to do something new and fresh," said David Woodward, creative director at Lava Studio. "Conceptually, what I wanted to do was have a very strong visual motif. The shape of home plate is something that's very unique to baseball. I'm not sure there are other sports that have such a shape that explains the sport immediately."

Home plate operates as both the start and the end point for the open, sending the viewer on a journey of baseball-related visual elements, whether that's fiery baseballs coming at the viewer or animated in-studio shots. And there are plenty of meaningful objects to distract true fans along the way.

"The viewer moves through that home plate shape to reveal all of these different environments," said Woodward. "We created very rich themes so that every time you see the open you see something different."

MLB Network plans far ahead in order to best monetize its creative, so the MLB Tonight open and graphics package needed to be able to maintain its fresh feel for several years, according to Christopher Mallory, senior vice president, creative services, MLB Network. To assist with that, Lava made sure there were many of elements that could be switched in and out.

"We built it so that it had a modular component to it," Woodward said. "We can update different rooms in the open to reflect different times of the year and we can customize certain moments without having to re-do the whole thing."

For example, as the baseball season moves from the return from the pandemic to playoffs to the World Series, some of the original 45 graphics elements can be changed to highlight certain teams or moments.

Lava also intends the home-plate shape to become an identifier for the whole show, not just the open. "Beyond just the on-air graphics, on set MLB Tonight has this same look and shape that populates the whole broadcast," said Woodward.

Lava Studio also included a package of motion-graphic elements based on the open.

The overall concept was the result of Lava turning a limitation into a creative advantage: the studio couldn't use any player footage due to how long MLB Network wanted to keep the package in play. By only using animation and motion graphics, the finished package offers MLB Network much more flexibility.

"[Using player footage] does get problematic," Woodward said. "These run for such a long time that the footage gets dated and it starts to become a burden to keep things fresh. That added to the creative challenge to come up with something that would work."

"Something we did talk about at one point was maybe shooting some of these rooms that we move through, but there started to become budget and time considerations so we came up with solutions that were more graphically driven. We have a great team of artists here so we knew we could pull it off," he continued.

Work on the redesign was started and completed prior to the pandemic, but with the delay of the baseball season, the reveal was also delayed. In the end, though, the choices were prescient: baseball offers a feeling of nostalgia and home to many fans. When they could finally watch games again, it made perfect sense to embrace home plate as the symbol of home.

"I don't think it was necessarily intentional at the time. Graphically, we're speaking to home plate as a unique symbol that is specific to the sport," said Premier Maldonado, creative director, MLB Network. "We didn't think about baseball being the first sport that would come back from this pandemic or the duality of the meaning in that it's not just home plate, it's that we're literally coming home to live sports."

Said Lava owner and founder Robert Kirkpatrick: "In an unintentional way, the open felt COVID-ready. We're all connected even though we're not together."

CREDITS

Client: MLB Network

Design and Animation Agency: Lava Studio

Creative Director: David Woodward

Art Director: Kyle Reynolds

Sr. Designer/Animator: Carlos Velasquez

Producers: Robert Kirkpatrick, Maria Hill, Susie Shuttleworth

Animators: Andy Fernandez, Olive Welsh, Abraham Torna

MLB Network:

Exec Producers: Robert McGlarry, Dave Patterson

SVP, Creative Services: Christopher Mallory

Creative Director, Creative Services: Premier Maldonado

Art Director, Creative Services: Jeffrey Boccia

Director, Creative Services: Rob Quist

Managers, Creative Services: Kaitlin Riccardi, David Corrado

Graphic Artists: Daniel Muhr, Jessica Desmond, Kellie Sing, Matthew Carlyle, Alex Falconi, Marissa Juzefyk, David Wendl, Alyssa Buckter, Brian Ho, Corey Sider, Dante Cassano, Will Mach, Sam Fuller, Mike Farris, Bob Brower, Anthony Kounouklos, Steve George, Richie DeAngelis, Jill Santasieri, Aby Michael, Brent Philhower

Sound: Rick Van Benschoten

Music: Helmut VonLichten