



SPORTS BUSINESS

HYPE MAN

Jon Morgan's St. Louis-based Ryval Studios has emerged as a major player in sports video production.



By James Drew – Reporter, St. Louis Business Journal

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When Jon Morgan started his company, JM Film & Design in 2015, he had no experience running a business.

He had taken some digital media classes through his Columbia, Missouri, high school as a sophomore, but “never with the intention of doing anything with it,” he said. His Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and minor in Christian Studies from Mississippi College trained him for a career in ministry and counseling. When Morgan moved to St. Louis in 2014 to join his fiancée, Linsey, he got a job at a plastics manufacturing company but it ended with an employee downsizing. It became clear Morgan's career path would be changing.

“With no funding or business plan, I decided to strike out on my own and start my own company. It was initially to be a stopgap until I found the next opportunity, and the next opportunity never came along,” he said.

Eight years later, Morgan has built a company – rebranded as Ryval Studios – that has become a national player in the sports video production arena. Ryval most recently shot a video featuring bluesman Marquise Knox, a St. Louis native, that plays at Enterprise Center before St. Louis Blues games, hyping the crowd with its homage to the musical roots of the team’s name.

Ryval Studios took a major step forward last month when the Madison Square Garden sports and entertainment divisions chose it to be among their preferred production companies.

“It’s a huge honor for our quality of work to be recognized by a world-renowned sports organization like Madison Square Garden, and we are excited to begin this new relationship,” Morgan said in a statement following the announcement.

The opportunity to do in-venue videos at MSG follows work that Ryval has done for the University of Illinois, Duke University, North Carolina State University and NHL franchises including the Carolina Hurricanes and the Edmonton Oilers.

But the journey to this point is one that demonstrates how hustle, and tackling opportunities when they arise, are keys to success as a first-time entrepreneur.

Honing in on a specialty

When Morgan started his company, he tackled every job he could get – from graphic design, video, photography and even some web design.

“Six months in, I realized it was going to be a race to the bottom in the marketplace if I was going to try to do everything,” he said.

Morgan said he was most skilled in video production. When he scanned his competitors in the St. Louis area, he discovered most weren’t offering video. So in early 2016 he shifted his focus exclusively to video, picking up work from weddings, small businesses and nonprofit groups.

But it hasn’t always been “glitz and glamor and roses,” Morgan said. “The real side of entrepreneurship is not all record-breaking revenue and awesome clients. The real side is there are plenty of times of hardship,” he added.

Morgan said he had been through a bad month or two, but never four in a row. At the start of 2018, his wife was pregnant with their first child and there was no business. He took a second job, waiting tables for six months to help pay the bills. After that job ended, Morgan began to drive with Uber and Lyft on late-night weekends for a year.

He had a desire to do something different and decided to pursue his interest in sports to carve out a niche in video production in college athletics and professional sports.

“It was similar to how I started the business. I didn’t know if it was possible. I didn’t know if that was an industry or how to get into that,” he said.

In 2019, Texas Filmworks, a production company in College Station, Texas, affiliated with the recruiting publication TexAgs, found Morgan’s company through a web search. The company was producing a video about Antonio Johnson, a star cornerback from East St. Louis, committing to play for the Texas A&M Aggies, and it needed a local production crew.

Morgan shot the commit video and did his own edit to compete for other business. He made a list of the major college football programs in the Midwest and sent the video to the recruiting departments. He got one response – from the University of Illinois.

His company, JM Film at the time, was then hired to produce a “hype” video featuring various stylized shots and scenes of current players that the U of I used for recruiting, as well as two other videos about its athletics performance and academic offerings.

“After that project was done, that’s when I knew I had found my niche. I took my success model with how I got Illinois and multiplied it across the country. I began to contact every college football program in the country,” he said.

The ‘break-out year’

Due to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, getting into the sports market proved difficult, but Morgan said he was determined to make it a success when the fans were able to return.

In 2021, Morgan retired the JM Film name and fully rebranded as Ryval Studios. He referred to 2022 as the “break-out year,” landing video work from the Carolina Hurricanes, the Blues and Saint Louis University men’s and women’s basketball programs.

“Wolf Attack,” this year’s intro video at North Carolina State football games, is a prime example of Ryval Studios’ creativity. An NC State football player runs through an eerily-lit forest, interspersed with marching band drum beats and game highlights. It ends with the entire team and cheerleaders running out of the forest into the stadium, culminating with a wolf’s howl.

Morgan connected with the Blues through a friend at church, Stephen Kruse, an employee in the finance department. This is the second year Ryval Studios has worked with the Blues’ production company, Blue Note Productions, which came up with the idea of featuring Marquise Knox in a nightclub playing his song, “Are you ready for the Blues?” Ryval Studios shot the video and Brian Santa Maria of Blue Note Productions was the main editor.



Image: SLBJ

A video board displaying Ryval Studios' work prior to a St. Louis Blues game at Enterprise Center.

“Where Jon plays a big role is in the images that we are going to capture, like the high-end, cinematic, dramatic lighting and the use of different lenses and whether we’re going to crane or dolly the camera,” said Trevor Nickerson, vice president and executive producer of Blue Note Productions.

Morgan initially used a business credit card from U.S. Bank to fund his business. Now, he has a line of credit with BMO Harris.

“He has a very unique business and we helped him get off the ground with some small purchase items early in his journey; that helped us to be able to give him a yes for him to continue to grow,” said Brett Millecker, a vice president with BMO Harris and manager of the Ellisville branch who met Morgan at a West County Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Ryval Studios had annual revenue “just under” \$750,000 last year. Morgan said because of an industry slowdown over the first six months of this year due to higher interest rates, revenue likely will come in at \$400,000 to \$500,000. The goal is to reach \$1.25 million in 2024, said Morgan, whose titles are founder and executive producer. The company is located in downtown St. Louis at 611 N. 10th St.

Ryval has two contractors whom Morgan refers to as “team members.” They are Courtney Hoff, who leads sales and has helped Ryval grow its brand in the sports market; and Lynn Taylor, who handles accounting and bookkeeping. The rest of the team consists of local and national freelance production and post-production crew members.

Morgan said Ryval’s focus will continue to be exclusively on the sports and entertainment industry. The company recently won work with Major League Baseball club Tampa Bay Rays for its spring training media day shoot for the 2024 season.

“It’s extremely humbling to think of where the business started and how God has blessed it into what it has become today,” he said.