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ATHENS COUNTY'S ONLY LOCALLY OWNED NEWSPAPER

Former sportscasters create hot new Web sit

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By Erik Johns The Other Paper, Columbus

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In an unassuming building on Kinnear Road sits an unassuming office. Various college banners hang from the ceilings, there are no cubicle walls, computers sit atop plastic folding tables, and rows of wires make rolling chairs nearly useless.

But this office is home to the Palestra, a network of collegiate reporters from 72 schools, which has grown into one of the hottest online media outlets on the Web.

Student reporters from around the country file digital video news reports on topics such as sports, college life and music. The Web site has the look of a TV newscast -- a reporter holding a mic in front of a camera -- but it is decidedly young and hip in its presentation: no ties or over-hairsprayed anchors. Think YouTube meets MTV.

Less than a year ago, thePalestra.com launched with a network of only 10 colleges. By this fall, that number will jump to 134.

It's hard to believe this whole operation was the brainchild of a group of middle-aged guys from Columbus. Former Channel 4 sports reporters Joe Weasel and Dave Maetzold created Palestra along with business guru John Olvey.

"We originally had the idea of putting mostly sports audio content on cell phones -- audio reports of a football coach or whatever," Maetzold said. But the technical jump to high-quality online video happened so fast that the audio idea was quickly scrapped.

Weasel, who still co-hosts the morning radio show on CD101, dreamed up the idea to offer journalism students an opportunity to learn their trade in a fast-paced setting. "Palestra," after all, is the Greek word for training area.

"The nice thing with Palestra was that we actually got paid," said Laura Neal, who recently graduated from Oklahoma University where she was a student reporter. She now works full-time as a producer at the Columbus office, along with about 15 other full-time staffers.

With television news ratings and newspaper subscriptions going down, Neal said it was a necessary career decision to embrace new media.

"It's not like TV news," she said, "where you worry about getting fired all the time."

Weasel had no way of guaranteeing this online venture would work -- just ask anyone who invested in Pets.com or Prodigy. Nonetheless, he was able to secure funding from private investors in Ohio and New York to get the Web site going.

Meanwhile, they had no problem attracting students to work on the site.

"We got applications from more than 600 kids before we even had a Web site," Maetzold said.

Palestra's growth hasn't gone unnoticed by media titans. Earlier this year, CNN approached Weasel to use the Palestra's music programming on its Web site.

"The demographic we're reaching is obviously something CNN wants," said Nick Jones, a 2005 Otterbein grad and music producer. At 24, Jones considers himself one of the elders at the Palestra.

In Columbus, "Music at The Palestra" airs at 12:30 a.m. Sunday on Fox 28 and features performances by bands from across the country.

"It's crazy," Jones said. "People in the industry are now contacting us and giving us the heads-up on up-and-coming bands."

Despite the unexpected success, Maetzold said his crew will never forget its guerilla-style roots.

"We're working on tables from Wal-Mart. There's no mahogany desks or big chairs around here," he said. "We'll always have Wal-Mart tables."