

JACK CRAIG

ABC passes ball over to Raycom

College hoop deal the way of the future?

ABC IS PULLING OUT OF COLLEGE BASKETBALL next season and instead selling air time to Raycom to televise 11 games over six successive Sundays beginning Feb. 2. It is a unique arrangement that may foretell the direction of network sports.

ABC has sold 22 hours for some \$1.8 million, an average of some \$80,000 that is about 25 percent of the market price. But the issue came down not to how little ABC would make on the deal, but how much it would lose if it continued to underwrite college hoops.

ABC's high-profile hoop broadcast teams, Keith Jackson-Dick Vitale and Brent Musburger-Jim Valvano, are under contract, so they will work, but take orders from Raycom, which will regionalize most of



BRENT MUSBURGER
Big bucks, low profile

its schedule among schools in the Big 8, Atlantic Coast, Southwest, Southeastern, Midwest and Pacific-10 conferences.

Raycom will employ mostly free-lance production crews and comparatively anonymous announcers, thrilled to be working on a network, even for cheap money. In contrast, ABC only a few years ago paid \$500,000-\$1 million a year to top producers-directors and in the range of \$400,000 to sideline reporters. Things are coming down from those heady days, and the Raycom deal speeds the process.

Musburger is earning in excess of \$1 million, but his assignments recently have included the Little League World Series and the unwatched Pan American Games. After college football, his principal assignment will be Raycom's telecasts.

Raycom also has purchased three hours of prime time from CBS on Dec. 28 to show the Blockbuster Bowl and in the past has bought time from ABC for the Kickoff Classic and NBC for the Freedom Bowl. But this is the first time an entire series has been bought independently to place on a network.

"What the networks do best is serve distributors - they are conduits," explains Ken Haines, executive vice president of Raycom, leaving aside the networks' marvelous gains in recent years in sports production.

Haines sees everyone winning in the new deal. ABC will make a little money. Regionalization of up to four games, prohibitively expensive for a network, will give more colleges exposure and rights fees, and will please sponsors by raising the size of the overall audience.

Len DeLuca, CBS Sports vice president and architect of its huge college basketball schedule, rejects the notion that the deal is a glance at the future.

"It shows only that ABC could not make money covering basketball," he said. "We will make a lot of money this winter after paying \$10 million in rights fees and producing and staffing every game."

But Mark Mandell of ABC Sports disagrees. "We think it does foretell the future of network sports and we are proud to be there first," he said.

Meanwhile, Channel 5 programmer Paul LaCamera is amused by ABC's deal because the network had pressured him in the past to pick up the schedule and he expects to hear again soon, even though the network, in effect, has bailed out itself.